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Michael J. Hennelly

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US Policy in El Salvador: Creating Beauty or the Beast?

MICHAEL J. HENNELLY

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On 16 January 1992, the president of El Salvador and Salvadoran communist leaders sat down together in an ornate conference room in Mexico City and signed a peace agreement for their war-ravaged Central American country. The conflict in El Salvador, which began in 1980 and is thought to have cost more than 75,000 lives, was one of the longest episodes of political violence in the Western Hemisphere. The presence of US Secretary of State James Baker at the peace agreement highlighted the American involvement in that Latin American conflict.

Indeed, the military and political role played by the US government was one of the most significant aspects of the Salvadoran war. Shortly after the inauguration of President Reagan, the United States began an ambitious program of security assistance to El Salvador that continued into the Bush Administration. During this period, the United States provided hundreds of military trainers, tons of military equipment, and over \$4 billion in assistance to help ensure the survival of the Salvadoran government. On average, El Salvador received about one million dollars a day in US assistance from 1981 to 1992.¹

American involvement in El Salvador and the results that were achieved have generated a great deal of controversy. One of the most common themes has been the "failure" of US policy in El Salvador. The signing of the Salvadoran peace accord is an appropriate juncture to examine whether that judgment is valid.

For 12 years, the United States walked a policy tightrope in El Salvador. One US goal was to stop communist expansion and defeat the military aims of the leftist guerrillas. To that end the United States generated one of the greatest military force expansions in Central American history. However, the other major US goal was to foster democracy in a country that

had been ruled for most of the 20th century by a repressive military regime. The challenge facing US policymakers was to develop the Salvadoran armed forces in such a way that they became both militarily effective and politically inactive. The primary thesis of this article, contrary to most analyses, is that the United States was reasonably successful in meeting this difficult policy challenge. I will argue that US success was based on the development of a policy that proved to be flexible, effective, and durable.

Additionally, I believe that our role in the transformation of the Salvadoran armed forces may be instructive as we seek to influence the course of political change in other countries. In the 1970s and 1980s, the United States was concerned with authoritarian regimes in Latin America. Now our concern has shifted to political development in the countries of Eastern Europe and what used to be the Soviet Union. As the example of Serbia clearly illustrates, the process of political change is often significantly affected by the behavior of the armed forces. Specifically, the case of El Salvador provides insights into the capability of the United States to foster democratic development and American concepts of military professionalism elsewhere.

The Origins of US Military Policy in El Salvador

The political conflict in El Salvador developed rapidly as a prominent foreign policy issue for the United States government. For most of the 20th century, the United States paid little if any attention to this small Central American country of five million people. The rapidity of the rise of El Salvador as a foreign policy issue is clearly illustrated by examining *New York Times* coverage. During the first year of the Nixon Administration, the *Times* carried seven articles on El Salvador. During the first year of the Carter Administration, the level of coverage on El Salvador had risen to 45 articles. By contrast, during the first year of the Reagan Administration, the *Times* carried 543 articles on El Salvador.

The most important context that shaped Reagan Administration policy in El Salvador was the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. The foreign policy of the Reagan Administration has been accurately

Lieutenant Colonel Michael Hennelly is currently an assistant professor of international relations and Latin American politics in the Department of Social Sciences at the US Military Academy. He is a 1973 graduate of the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service and holds an M.A. in international relations from the University of Chicago. He is also a graduate of the Army Foreign Area Officer course at Fort Bragg and the Army Command and General Staff College. Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly is a field artillery officer who has served in a variety of command, staff, and foreign area officer assignments in the United States, Germany, and Central America. Prior to his assignment at USMA, he served as a political/military analyst, J5, US Southern Command, Quarry Heights, Panama, with responsibility for El Salvador.

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described as “ideology in search of a policy.”² US policymakers felt driven to reassert US influence because of Brezhnev’s massive military modernization efforts and because of Soviet ventures in the third world. In a regional context this meant that Administration policy was significantly influenced by the actions of states perceived to be Soviet clients. This would include a newly Sandinista Nicaragua and Fidel Castro’s Cuba, both of whom were instrumental in supporting revolution in El Salvador. One of the earliest foreign policy priorities of the Reagan Administration was the desire to demonstrate to the Soviet leadership in arenas such as El Salvador that a newly assertive Administration was in control of US policy. Statements by President Reagan and senior Administration officials made it clear that a very different prism was now refracting Salvadoran reality.³

The Reagan Administration became focused on El Salvador because of the purpose it could serve in US-Soviet relations. However, the military component of Reagan’s policy was significantly influenced by the course of events within El Salvador itself. During the 1970s it became clear that the Salvadoran government was incapable of managing internal pressures for political and economic change. By 1980, El Salvador, historically a violent society, had become the killing ground of Central America. The most striking example of this spiraling level of violence was the March 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. It is estimated that the rate of political killings that year was between 700 and 800 a month.⁴

Five different Marxist guerrilla groups emerged in El Salvador during the 1970s. By 1980 they had achieved a loose sort of organization which became known as the FMLN (Frente Marti de Liberacion Nacional). The military evolution of the FMLN was vividly demonstrated by its “final offensive” which erupted ten days before the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in January 1981. Although this offensive was ultimately a failure, the Reagan Administration responded to the crisis with a massive infusion of military assistance. During the eight years of the Reagan Administration, US military assistance averaged \$107.5 million per year. For almost a decade, El Salvador was the recipient of one of the largest US military assistance programs in the world.⁵

As the overall foreign policy framework of the US government began to change in the 1990s, US policy toward El Salvador became less ideological and more pragmatic. Heeding the lessons of the Iran-Contra scandal, the Bush Administration was determined not to get caught in the Central American quagmire that had done so much damage to the Reagan Administration. The lower profile given to El Salvador was also the result of US preoccupation with the transformation of Eastern Europe, the implosion of the Soviet Union, and events in the Middle East. It is not surprising that in his first telephone call to President-elect Alfredo Cristiani, President Bush expressed strong support for a Salvadoran peace agreement.⁶

The interesting thing about the Salvadoran policy of the Bush Administration, however, is the durability of El Salvador as a policy issue. Aid levels for El Salvador displayed remarkable resilience. During the first three years of the Bush Administration (1989-1991), military assistance averaged \$85.9 million per year, which was only a 20-percent drop from the Reagan Administration assistance levels. It took the advent of the drug war, the fall of communism, and the passage of several years for the focus of US regional policy to shift away from El Salvador.

Tangible Results of US Policy

One of the most significant and controversial aspects of US policy in El Salvador was the expansion of the Salvadoran armed forces. This expansion fundamentally changed the nature of the armed forces as well as the nature of the political process in El Salvador.

Long before the United States became entangled in El Salvador, the Salvadoran armed forces had faced two challenges that shaped their sense of mission and their force structure. Their political role was formed by the peasant uprising of 1932. The long-term consequences of this abortive uprising centered on the transformation of the Salvadoran political system. The army gained control of the government, and for the next 50 years military officers ruled the country. The military role of the Salvadoran armed forces was shaped by the four-day war with Honduras in July 1969. During this conflict, which produced approximately 6000 casualties, Salvadoran ground forces invaded Honduras on several fronts. This brief conflict greatly influenced the subsequent size, force structure, and training of the Salvadoran military. During the 1970s, the Salvadoran armed forces consisted primarily of a small conventional army organized into five infantry battalions, an artillery group, and an armored cavalry group.⁷ The rise of a formidable communist insurgent movement in El Salvador by 1979 caught the Salvadoran military off guard and unprepared.

The worsening political situation led to the overthrow of the repressive military government in October 1979 by young, reform-minded officers

and civilian supporters. This new Salvadoran government actively sought the advice and assistance of the United States. In 1981, a small team of American military personnel went to El Salvador and within a short period of time produced a strategic plan that called for larger, better-trained, and better-equipped forces. Over the next ten years, the Salvadoran military establishment would be transformed beyond recognition.

Throughout Salvadoran history, the army has always been the most influential element of the armed forces and, not surprisingly, much of the American assistance effort centered on it. During the decade of the 1980s, the army expanded from 6500 to 38,650 soldiers.⁸ In other words, in a country the size of Massachusetts, with a GNP smaller than the annual sales of Apple Computer, we see the development of an army that was larger than the armies of five NATO countries.⁹

During this period, the Salvadoran armed forces also became a more complex organization. An extensive military construction program was initiated, with airfields, depots, and barracks being built all over El Salvador. A national military training center capable of housing, feeding, and training 9000 recruits a year was rapidly constructed. Regional intelligence centers were built at all six brigade headquarters to provide timely collection and analysis of intelligence. Military hospitals and a medevac system were set up, drastically reducing the mortality rate of wounded Salvadoran soldiers.¹⁰

The Salvadoran armed forces also made progress in their counterinsurgency efforts. It has been pointed out by many military analysts that the struggle for popular support is one of the key elements of a successful counterinsurgency program.¹¹ The armed forces accomplished a variety of tasks that fostered popular support for the government of El Salvador and eroded support for the FMLN guerrillas. First, the military served as the shield of the democratic process in El Salvador during the 1980s. It acted forcefully on occasion to ensure that national election results were honored. It also undertook military operations to minimize FMLN interference with the electoral process. Second, the Salvadoran armed forces served as an extension of the government in providing basic services to the people of El Salvador by developing a sophisticated rural civic action program. Third, the military undercut the popular support of the FMLN by denying it success on the battlefield. The primary evidence of this progress is that the FMLN guerrillas never achieved a significant combat victory after they overran the 4th Brigade Headquarters in Chalatenango on 31 March 1987.

Another striking development has been the fall in the level of political violence in El Salvador. It should be noted that making conclusions based on human rights reports is problematic at best, but it is clear that the human rights atmosphere has been transformed in El Salvador. Until the mid-1980s many members of the Salvadoran armed forces resisted the prospect of evolutionary

political change, and this attitude was a factor in the widespread death-squad activity of the time. Traces of this barbaric behavior have persisted as recently as November 1989 when military officers were implicated in the wanton murder of six Jesuit priests during the battle for San Salvador. In general, however, the human rights situation has improved in El Salvador; the political spectrum has widened, and assassination is no longer the distinguishing characteristic of the political environment.

The Implications of US Policy

American policy in El Salvador has generated a great deal of controversy since the beginning of the Reagan Administration. As noted earlier, if any consensus can be identified in the literature on this subject, it would be the theme of US policy failure in El Salvador.¹² Articles have tended to make liberal use of the terms “quagmire” and “stalemate.” One of the more well-known studies of US military policy in El Salvador (written by four US Army colonels) was particularly scathing. It accused the US government of lacking any “overarching strategic vision” and repeatedly asserted that the United States had little impact on contributing to the end of the Salvadoran war. It concluded—this in 1988—that “by most estimates, the war in El Salvador is stuck. Unhappily, the United States finds itself stuck with the war.”¹³

A major flaw in most of these analyses is that they failed to take into account the circumstances and nature of the FMLN guerrillas. The lack of a threat-based analysis led some analysts to underrate the precarious strategic position of the FMLN. In addition, an unwarranted emphasis on the cumbersome nature of the US assistance system led many critics (especially the four military authors) to an unnecessarily pessimistic view of the situation in El Salvador. In order to produce a more balanced assessment, two major points should have been taken into account. First, most critics failed to appreciate the unwieldy nature of the process in which two countries, both having different sets of values and interests, attempt to achieve mutually acceptable political goals. The second point is that fighting guerrillas is usually a long-term process. The British fought in Malaya for 12 years. It took almost 19 years before the M-19 guerrillas in Colombia agreed to lay down arms and participate in politics. Peru has been plagued by Sendero Luminoso since 1980. The Salvadoran political system only began to exhibit fundamental reform in 1984 with the election of President Jose Napoleon Duarte. To express criticism of the pace of the war in El Salvador in the late 1980s betrays a puzzling inability to grasp the long-term nature of this political-military process.

In the wake of the January 1992 peace accords, it no longer appears that the war is “stuck,” but we still need to reach some conclusions about the impact of US policy on the course of events in El Salvador. The Salvadoran

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government agreed to peace terms that can only be described as astonishing, occurring as they did in a country that had been dominated by a fiercely anti-communist military establishment for most of the 20th century. In a January 1992 national address, President Cristiani told the Salvadoran people that the armed forces would be reduced by approximately 50 percent over the next two years. The Salvadoran armed forces also agreed to return their units to garrison so that UN peace-keeping forces could help FMLN guerrillas reintegrate into Salvadoran society.¹⁴ During the entire process of negotiating these remarkable terms, the Salvadoran government had the backing of the military leadership. The day after the peace accord was signed, the armed forces Chief of Staff remarked in a public military ceremony that the armed forces were “duty bound to abide by a political solution.”¹⁵

One sign of institutional growth was that the Salvadoran military was able to preserve unity within its ranks during negotiations with the guerrillas. This cohesion occurred in spite of widespread expectations to the contrary. The FMLN leadership was still expressing hopes, as recently as 1989, that political developments would create splits within the armed forces.¹⁶ Another sign of growth was that the armed forces demonstrated the ability to maintain a cooperative relationship with two very different sets of civilian leaders over the last ten years. These relationships, first with President Duarte and then with President Cristiani, have not always been smooth and on occasion have been marked by episodes of strong policy disagreement. However, the most important point is that the Salvadoran government and the armed forces demonstrated a much greater degree of unity than did the FMLN guerrillas and leftist political leaders. The clearest example of this contrast occurred in the 1989 presidential elections. The Salvadoran military, for its part, supported the elections. The result was the first peaceful civilian transfer of power in El Salvador since 1927. This was in sharp contrast to the policy split among the left. After bitter dispute, leftist politicians participated in the 1989 elections while their supposed allies, the FMLN, attempted to disrupt the elections by threatening to kill voters.¹⁷

Many of the actions taken by the US government during the last decade contributed to the vastly improved state of civil-military relations in El Salvador. Both the Reagan and Bush administrations consistently made two

messages quite clear concerning civilian government in El Salvador. The first message was that the US government strongly supported the democratic process. One vivid example was the May 1984 election of President Duarte. Within five days of winning the election, Duarte was on an official visit to the United States and meeting in the Oval Office with President Reagan. The second message was that the presence of a civilian government in El Salvador was an essential precondition for US assistance. The long-term nature of US support for the Salvadoran government gave Salvadoran presidents a powerful source of leverage in their relationships with the Salvadoran military.

The United States also worked to help shape the composition of the Salvadoran military's leadership. US policymakers vigorously supported the moderate officers who emerged in the 1980s, such as General Vides Casanova, the Minister of Defense, and General Blandon, the armed forces Chief of Staff. These officers realized that the Salvadoran armed forces had been badly split by the 1979 coup and by the subsequent course of Salvadoran politics. On several occasions in the early 1980s, military hard-liners sought to undermine the Duarte administration. The actions of Vides Casanova and Blandon during these potentially divisive times demonstrated their commitment to a more moderate and more unified Salvadoran military.

Putting all of these achievements into the context of Salvadoran political history, it would certainly be safe to describe US policy as successful. However, it is not an unqualified success. There are still some potholes on the road to democracy that have to be safely negotiated.

One strategic pothole is that the United States has had great difficulty in fostering a close working relationship between the Salvadoran government and the Salvadoran military. For example, several observers of the war noticed that the Salvadoran government never developed the Salvadoran equivalent of a National Security Council.¹⁸ It is clear that this deficiency hampered the ability of the Salvadoran government to carry out the war. There were several so-called "National Plans" developed during the war, but there was never any comprehensive national strategic plan developed as a result of close coordination between civil and military leaders.

A political pothole is the issue of defense spending. Over the last decade, the Salvadoran government was highly successful in obtaining military assistance from the US government. But during their spectacular military buildup, the Salvadoran armed forces and the Salvadoran government never had to face the problem of sustaining an armed force primarily based on Salvadoran resources. In 1990, El Salvador spent only about 2.8 percent of its gross domestic product on its defense budget. Many developing countries spend much more. By comparison, the United States spent 5.4 percent of its GDP on defense during the same period.¹⁹ There are two certainties concerning the issue of military funding. One is that US military aid to El Salvador

will be substantially reduced or eliminated in the near future. In fact, the handwriting is already on the wall. For over a decade (from 1981 to 1992), El Salvador received more US military assistance than any other Latin American country. That changed in the FY 1993 budget, however, with the Bush Administration providing Colombia more military assistance than El Salvador.²⁰ The second certainty, as noted above, is that the Salvadoran government and the armed forces have no recent experience with making tough budgetary choices about sustaining a military establishment based principally on Salvadoran resources. It is likely that this issue will be a source of friction between civilian and military leaders in the future.

The long-term significance of the development of the Salvadoran armed forces is not entirely clear at the present time. In late 1992, the peace process hit a snag when the FMLN temporarily halted their demobilization program. Guerrilla leaders were reacting to an increase in political tension between the army and the government that occurred over the issue of which officers would be "purged" from the army. According to published reports, the names of the Minister of Defense, General Ponce, and his Deputy Minister were included on the list.²¹ Although the peace process resumed in December, the episode symbolizes the problems that might occur in El Salvador as it faces the political, social, and economic costs of large-scale military demobilization.

Conclusion

Many of the recent political events in Central America would have seemed improbable several years ago. In 1989 the United States invaded Panama with such overwhelming military force that F117-A Stealth aircraft were used to bomb Panamanian Defense Force barracks. In 1990 the Sandinistas held open elections in Nicaragua and voluntarily ceded power to a 14-party political coalition headed by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. For sheer political improbability, however, the events in El Salvador rival those of Panama or Nicaragua. Based on recent developments in the relationship between the civilian government and its military leaders, there is reason to be optimistic about this aspect of politics in El Salvador.

The signing of the Mexico City peace accords was a powerful symbol of the success of US policy. Put plainly, what the United States set out to achieve in El Salvador was, in large part, accomplished by January of 1992. Previous attempts to negotiate peace agreements had been strongly opposed by members of the Salvadoran armed forces. This was not the case in 1991 when senior military leaders clearly and publicly supported the peace negotiations. There now exists in El Salvador a much stronger degree of military support for civilian leaders than has existed at any other time in the last half century. Another cause for optimism is that the armed forces have become

more supportive of civilian government without splitting into antagonistic factions. The example of the rebellious *cara pintadas* in Argentina (who staged an uprising shortly before President Bush's state visit in 1990) clearly illustrates the danger of military factionalism during times of political and economic turmoil. This danger was highlighted even more dramatically during the attempted coup in Venezuela last February, when President Carlos Andres Perez barely escaped with his life.

An examination of this decade of American involvement presents some interesting lessons for future US administrations. One is the durability of US policy. US policymakers succeeded in crafting a Salvadoran policy that was both long-term and expensive without the benefit of widespread support from the American public. Another interesting characteristic is the policy's effectiveness. Some may argue that US policy would not have been successful if the Soviet Union had not collapsed, thus reducing US policy from a causal to a coincidental factor. However, as Stalin once said, "Quantity has a quality all its own." There was a great deal of "quantity" in the Salvadoran policy of the Reagan Administration. The US government devoted money, materiel, and the attention of its policymakers to the conflict in El Salvador. The Salvadoran military establishment was transformed. It became more combat effective, and this gave Salvadoran politicians time to become politically flexible. Salvadoran soldiers also stayed out of the Presidential Palace, and this gave Salvadoran politicians room to be politically flexible. It is remarkable, given the context of Salvadoran history and the blunt nature of US policymaking tools, that the US government was able to successfully navigate its policy between the Scylla of a rightist military coup and the Charybdis of FMLN military victory.

With the end of the Cold War, American interest in El Salvador will fade. The United States was willing to help El Salvador confront a communist insurgency and begin the democratic process. The policy objectives that the US government set for itself in January 1981 concerning El Salvador were in large part accomplished by the time of the January 1992 peace accords. The future challenge for US policymakers will be to understand and apply the lessons of El Salvador. The future challenge for the Salvadorans will be to win the long-term struggle of making democracy work.

NOTES

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1. Data on security assistance are derived from a variety of sources. Data on FY 1981-87 are compiled from Congressional Research Service, *Inter-American Relations*, 100th Cong., 2d sess., 1988, p. 984. Data on later years were provided to the author by the Security Assistance Operations Directorate of the Defense Security Assistance Agency.

2. Raymond Aron, "Ideology in Search of a Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, 60 (America and the World 1981), 504.

3. For examples, see US Department of State, "Secretary Haig News Conference," *Current Policy*, No. 258, 28 January 1981, and US Department of State, "Central American Review," *Current Policy*, No. 261 (5 March 1981)
4. Richard A. Haggerty, ed., *El Salvador—A Country Study* (Washington: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), p. 235.
5. Information on the comparative size of the Salvadoran security assistance program is taken from *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, Vol. 45, 101st Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1989), p. 783.
6. US President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1990), George Bush, 1989, I, 299.
7. Howard I. Blutstein, et al., *Area Handbook on El Salvador* (Washington: GPO, 1971), pp. 198-99.
8. These figures are taken from *Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook, 1980* (London: Copley and Associates, 1980), p. 177, and *Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook, 1990-91* (Alexandria, Va.: International Media Corporation, 1990), p. 297. For information on force levels of the 1970s see Blutstein, et al., pp. 198-99. For more information on force levels of the 1980s see Haggerty, pp. 213-17 and 268.
9. According to figures in International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1991-1992* (London: Brassey's, 1991), the Salvadoran army is larger than the armies of Canada, Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, and Portugal. According to "44th Annual Report on American Industry," *Forbes*, 6 January 1992, p. 113, the sales figures for the last 12 months for Apple Computer Company was \$6.3 billion. According to US Department of Commerce, *Foreign Economic Trends and Their Implications for the United States, "El Salvador"* (prepared by American Embassy, San Salvador, July 1987), p. 2, the Salvadoran GDP in 1986 was \$4.58 billion.
10. US General Accounting Office, *El Salvador: Military Assistance Has Helped Counter but Not Overcome the Insurgency*, GAO report to Senator Edward Kennedy, GAO/NSIAD-91-166, April 1991, pp. 22-23.
11. One excellent example is Bard O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism—Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington: Brassey's, 1990).
12. For example, see the following: Charles Lane, "The War That Will Not End," *The New Republic*, 16 October 1989; James LeMoyné, "El Salvador's Forgotten War," *Foreign Affairs*, 68 (Summer 1989); Morris J. Blachman and Kenneth E. Sharpe, "Things Fall Apart: Trouble Ahead in El Salvador," *World Policy Journal*, 6 (Winter 1988-89); William M. LeoGrande, "After the Battle of San Salvador," *World Policy Journal*, 7 (Spring 1990).
13. A. J. Bacevich, et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988), p. 6.
14. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, LAT-92-004, 7 January 1992, pp. 11-18.
15. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, LAT-92-012, 17 January 1992, p.16. Remarks by armed forces Chief of Staff General Gilberto Rubio.
16. In this regard, see Joaquin Villalobos, "Popular Insurrection—Desire or Reality?" *Latin American Perspectives*, 16 (Summer 1989). Villalobos is commander of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), one of the guerrilla groups that comprise the FMLN.
17. Jose Z. Garcia, "Tragedy in El Salvador," *Current History*, January 1990, pp. 9-12, 40-41.
18. See interviews with Colonel John Ellerson, former US MILGP commander in El Salvador, contained in *El Salvador at War: An Oral History of Conflict from the 1979 Insurrection to the Present*, ed. Max Manwaring and Court Prisk (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 472-73, and interview with Colonel Oscar Casanova-Vejar, former Second Brigade Commander and subsequently director of the Salvadoran Military Academy, *ibid.*, pp. 478-80.
19. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1991-1992* (London: Brassey's, 1991), pp. 212-15. For example, Peru spent 3.7 percent of its GDP on defense, the Republic of Korea spent 4.4 percent, and Egypt spent 5.6 percent.
20. US Department of State and Defense Security Assistance Agency, *Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance, Fiscal Year 1993* (Washington, undated), p. 9.
21. Shirley Christian, "Former Rebels in El Salvador Halt Demobilization," *The New York Times*, 27 November 1992.