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Lessons From El Salvador

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Serving in El Salvador was prestigious duty. In fact it was downright exciting. For some periods of time during the American involvement there, from 1981 to 1992, it was the only war in town, so to speak. US Army Special Forces officers and NCOs stood in line to sign up for positions as military advisors. Hundreds did sign up. Unaccompanied one-year assignments brought a nonstop flow of volunteers.

The tempo of controversy was equally fast-paced. Despite White House attempts to downplay the threat to the military advisory mission, 20 American military and civilian personnel lost their lives in service there, including one Special Forces NCO who died from enemy fire in an obscure corner of the country when his base camp was attacked by guerrilla sappers.¹

It was a fact of life for those who served there that danger lurked around every corner. Standard “defensive” issue for all military advisors included a Colt CAR-15 5.56mm assault rifle, an H&K MP-5 9mm submachine gun, a Colt .45 caliber or Beretta 9mm pistol, and M-67 fragmentation grenades. All military advisors were assigned an official vehicle, normally an armor-plated, bullet-proof Jeep Cherokee. A personal bodyguard also came with this security package, along with the requirement to monitor a Motorola hand-held radio 24 hours a day. Since the term “advisor” carried connotations of Vietnam, the term “trainer” was used instead—it seemed less menacing, more benign. Even at the height of the conflict, “hostile fire pay” was referred to as “imminent danger pay.” For political reasons El Salvador was never declared a combat zone.

Away from the battlefield bigger battles raged. Every year, heated congressional debates erupted over the certification of Salvadoran government improvement in human rights as a condition for the authorization of higher levels of military assistance. Outside, opponents of US policy defiantly

screamed from the Capitol steps, protesting US support to an alleged corrupt government and a foreign military accused of war crimes. The specter of another Vietnam became their rallying cry.

Politically, the region was in turmoil. Fidel Castro was actively fanning the flames of discontent generated by years of political abuse and social neglect. But the United States stood firm in support of more constructive change. The Reagan and Bush Administrations were committed to the idea that revolution would not be exported from Nicaragua. The line against communism in the Central American region was drawn in El Salvador.

Interestingly, by 1990, with the conflict in its tenth year, El Salvador began to lose its US media appeal. With the war virtually stalemated, the number of exploitable news events declined. As a result, El Salvador faded from the attention of the American public. Only during brief, sporadic periods, generally when the peace accord was breached by the Marxist FMLN (*Frenti Farabundo Marti de Liberacion Nacional*) or the Salvadoran government, did public interest refocus on this country.

Why 1990? Although a devastating FMLN urban campaign, followed by the Jesuit priest murders in November 1989, propelled El Salvador back onto the front pages, these events were short-lived. Operation Just Cause, which began just one month after the murders, replaced El Salvador in the media's focus. Then, before war stories from Just Cause had even had a chance to make their rounds, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm moved into the limelight. From there the media's attention has panned to operations involving Kurds, Haitians, Los Angelenos, Floridians, Hawaiians, Iraqis, Kuwaitis, Somalians, and Bosnians. Events in El Salvador wound up in Section B, if they were reported at all. Quiet progress didn't make the front page. Effective counterinsurgency doesn't sell newspapers.

Lessons From 12 Years of Conflict

The Salvadoran conflict may fade quickly from public memory. The entire experience could easily get archived in the annals of history as just another American military intervention in Latin America's internal affairs. Before this occurs, we ought to assess carefully what lessons from this involvement—political and military—are worth recording. After all, in terms

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of US regional objectives, El Salvador presently appears to be an unqualified success. What good has come from this \$6 billion US venture?²

What follows is not an inclusive study or in-depth analysis of what was achieved. That work needs to be done. What follows, rather, are largely observations drawn from personal experience, supported primarily by notes from a weather-beaten pocket notebook carried while assigned to El Salvador. In light of the latest trend to portray US service members as the Marvel Super Heroes of the 1990s, some of these observations may be worth noting early in the assessment process, especially with problems in Bosnia, Iraq, or North Korea looming on the horizon.

The El Salvador experience generally validated the US Army's Foreign Internal Defense doctrine in countering insurgency: El Salvador demonstrated the merits of relegating US involvement to a strictly supporting role. In this business, success is not measured by what we do, but by the initiatives taken by the host government to end its internal conflict. Although it is tempting to take credit for success, US military and economic assistance did not win the war in El Salvador. US military assistance helped to create stable political and social conditions in which the leading actor, the host country's government, could function productively. In turn, that promoted public confidence in the government's ability to govern well.

A case in point regarding these roles is worth mentioning. The US government initially expressed reservation—sometimes outright apprehension—over the 1989 Nationalist Republican Alliance (Arena) presidential candidate, Alfredo Cristiani, who represented a political party historically linked with ultra-right-wing extremists and death squads. His election, however, proved to be the most important catalyst in initiating talks between the guerrillas and the government, an outcome that far exceeded the expectations of US political analysts. Cristiani's effective and moderate leadership style proved to be decisive in ultimately bringing the war to a negotiated settlement. Had the US government taken a stronger or more active role in opposing his candidacy, El Salvador might have floundered for an indeterminate period of largely inept and US-backed Christian Democratic Party politics.

This point reminds us that the supported government and its people must be allowed the freedom to shape their own future. Although laden with political conditions, assistance—military or economic—does not give the United States the right to govern the host country. US policy conditions inherent in military assistance may be used as political leverage, but only when both parties agree to the conditions set forth. Most important, US military assistance is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The US political objective should be clearly articulated and must be in line with the host country's own goals and objectives. From this standpoint US military assistance serves as another foreign policy option available to the President.

Additionally, the Salvadoran experience is testimony to the importance of resisting the temptation to try to solve the problems of the world through direct US military combat intervention. The no-combat-involvement restriction placed on US military trainers and the 55-man limitation placed on the overall US military advisory effort by Congress proved to be judicious in the long run and should be studied as a model for future interventions of this nature.

We need to understand that in an insurgency every participant suffers. In El Salvador, 12 years of conflict left about 10,000 Salvadoran military dead, 25,000 wounded, and 7000 permanently disabled. FMLN combatant deaths are estimated in the tens of thousands.³ And approximately 15,000 unexploded FMLN antipersonnel mines remain buried throughout the Salvadoran countryside. That fact will doubtless add to the estimated total of 75,000 Salvadoran deaths from this conflict.

Despite the highly restrictive nature of the US military advisory and training role, we took casualties. If US military advisors had been permitted to more actively pursue their roles and missions in direct support of the Salvadoran armed forces on the battlefield, this casualty count could have been dramatically higher.

If any single piece of advice can be extracted from the Salvadoran insurgency, it is this: Direct US combat intervention in foreign civil wars should always be the last option exercised. As demonstrated in El Salvador, there are other novel uses of military assistance which may take longer but may benefit all parties in the long run, and may far outweigh the risks incurred from direct US combat intervention. This point is hardly new. It echoes from Vietnam. The loss of life entailed in trying to use direct US combat intervention to speed up the course of events must not be overlooked. Nor can we allow that lesson to be blurred by our current affinity for high-tech hardware.

US experience in Beirut and Somalia and the potential involvement of US forces in Bosnia illustrate this lesson from El Salvador. The obverse of the US experience in El Salvador may be represented by the ill-fated US peacekeeping operation in Beirut in 1983. There feuding sides were still at war and had no intention of negotiating or bringing the conflict to a peaceful settlement. The hopeful US view of politico-military conflict settlement, we discovered to our dismay, had no productive application there. A comparable situation may exist in the former Yugoslavia and in any number of other regions where long-suppressed nationalist, ethnic, religious, or cultural issues have provoked conflicts of varying intensity.

Both the United States and the United Nations need to spend some time sorting out the conditions for interventions in such conflicts. And while the Gulf War demonstrated the merits of coalition warfare as perhaps the most palatable form of future conflict, the scale of coalition warfare doubtless exceeds most if not all of these regional challenges. On the lower end of the

scale, military assistance and support may be the least bellicose of all alternatives and the only form of direct military intervention which keeps the burden where it belongs, on the shoulders of the host country.

Assessing US Military Advisory Effectiveness in El Salvador

How effective was US military assistance in improving the Salvadoran armed forces (ESAF)? The answer depends on the level of assistance being assessed. At the basic level, US military assistance vastly improved the ability of the ESAF to use their equipment and perform combat operations: zero M-16s, conduct patrols, and command battalion-sized units. The US contribution clearly resulted in putting an improved Salvadoran military on the battlefield. In turn, ESAF combat and civic action performance improved sufficiently to undercut FMLN combat capabilities and popular support.

The greater contribution of the US military advisory effort, however, must be measured by a different set of standards. A case can be made that it was the ESAF's institutional conversion to a professional military and the dramatic improvement of its human rights record that constitute the most dramatic success story of this conflict. These two radical changes affected how the populace, the international community, and even the FMLN ultimately viewed changes in Salvadoran political conditions. The ESAF's professionalization served to legitimize the gains made by the Salvadoran government in its creation of a climate in which the political left could voice opposition without fear of military reprisals or death-squad murders.

The Salvadoran government's own reform in shaping this new Salvadoran political reality was remarkable. The year 1984 was pivotal in the development of the new political climate under the leadership of democratically elected President José Napoleón Duarte. By 1987 the two most important figures of the FMLN's political wing, Guillermo Ungo and Rubén Zamora, had left the *Frente Democrático Revolucionario* (FDR, or Democratic Revolutionary Front) to reestablish their residences and political practices in El Salvador. This represented major progress in enhancing the government's credibility, and a tremendous blow to the FMLN. Ungo and Zamora astutely recognized that the FMLN could no longer maintain its military campaign and popular support; both conclusions depended on the belief that political conditions in El Salvador were still stuck in the climate of the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁴ Ungo and Zamora's message to the FMLN command was clear: The FMLN was seriously mistaken if it still believed that by 1987 no significant changes had taken place in El Salvador. The government had reformed to a degree that permitted the leftist opposition to have a place at the political table. The FMLN military leadership, meanwhile, either failed to recognize or refused to acknowledge that the government and its military had undercut the FMLN's own popular support through government reform. Although the handwriting was on the wall, the FMLN needlessly

continued the armed struggle for another four years. Government reform while under direct attack, thought to be an unattainable goal by most political analysts, had become a political reality.

This point is key and worth repeating. For although improving the combat capability of a foreign military is an important reason for providing military assistance, the long-term goal of this effort is to legitimize, institutionalize, and professionalize the host country's military organization. Improved combat performance on the battlefield is one indicator of success; it should not, however, become the only measure of effectiveness. Military assistance must be packaged in a way that not only guarantees an improved combat capability for the host country, but also institutionalizes the values that personify the US armed services as guardians of democratic principles.

This point leads the discussion back to an assessment of the US military advisory effort in general and the measurement of its true effectiveness. Without taking anything away from the ESAF's own institutional and organizational improvements, the US military advisory and training program should be credited with improving the basic combat skills of the ESAF. Far more important, however, was the influence—direct and indirect—of US advisors in guiding the professional transformation of the ESAF. Viewed from this perspective, US military trainers may have been the most positive and effective part of the US military assistance program to El Salvador. It appears that the day-to-day exposure of the ESAF to US military professionalism, respect for human rights, and apolitical attitudes may have had a lasting influence on ESAF behavior. Unfortunately, no studies have been conducted to assess this seeming transfer of values, so it is difficult to prove.

Interestingly, the FMLN appears to have a similar view of the US military presence. During initial meetings and discussions with American Embassy and US Military Group personnel before the signing of the peace accords, one FMLN *Comandante* commented that it was the presence of US military advisors throughout the countryside that made the difference in the improvement of the ESAF's human rights record and professionalism.⁵

Until the military history of the Salvadoran conflict is written, it may be too early to assess the extent of the US military advisory influence. The level of performance of the military advisory effort was not consistent enough to warrant taking complete credit for the improved ESAF, and it would be wrong to suggest that the ESAF had no desire to become more professional other than that derived from US pressure or influence. Indeed, many ESAF-proposed initiatives reflected their own desire to develop into a professional organization.

The ESAF received some high-quality US military advisors and trainers. However, they also got some marginal performers whom they openly criticized. Many self-sacrificing professionals totally devoted to the advisory effort served there, but the US team also contained over the years some

self-serving individuals whose motives were questionable. The conclusion is that the ESAF got some of the best and worst that our profession had to offer. ESAF officers who served during the war almost invariably can rattle off the names of one or two military advisors they especially remember, American officers and noncommissioned officers who gave it their best, who contributed heart and soul toward improving the ESAF. It was such men who delivered whatever successes the US military advisory effort achieved.

It may be obvious that the only way to get the best performance is to choose the most qualified and motivated. Early in our involvement in El Salvador, duty there attracted some of the most capable US military advisors and trainers. Most went back to serve a second time. Unfortunately, as the war dragged on and less recognition was bestowed on those who served, enthusiasm began to wane, as did the quality of the volunteers. Midway through the conflict, when the pool of volunteer field-grade officers began to dry up, many who served in El Salvador were not given the option to turn down the assignment. The results of such personnel policies were quite damaging to the general effectiveness of the advisory program.

That opinion is consistent with one of the most controversial assessments of the US effort in the Salvadoran conflict, *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador*.⁶ Because of its four military coauthors, this study has come to be referred to as the "Four Colonels' Report." Although it is highly unpopular within the ESAF and generally critical of the US military advisory program, this report focuses on some of the key issues that characterized the US effort in El Salvador. The uneven quality of US military advisors is one of the issues it discusses, and in terms similar to the above observations.

Strategic Vision: Fact or Fancy?

Another key point made in the Four Colonels' Report is the criticism that US policy lacked any strategic vision. If one were to believe, as suggested in a recent *Parameters* article, that in reality "there was never any comprehensive national strategic plan developed as a result of close coordination between [Salvadoran] civil and military leaders,"⁷ then this may reflect a failure by the United States to clearly articulate its own strategic vision to the Salvadoran government and its military.

If any one aspect of US involvement in El Salvador deserves criticism, it is the failure to integrate US political and military objectives into a coherent and feasible strategy. The hallmark of US policy was durability—if we threw enough money at it long enough, eventually the problem would go away. Luckily, it did. Although resolve is certainly an important aspect in supporting counterinsurgency, it is no substitute for strategic planning.

This lack of a clear US national strategy impeded ESAF planning by forestalling the unity of effort necessary to plan and carry out militarily

significant actions. Rarely were long-range military plans developed that incorporated strategic goals and objectives. Consequently, for want of strategic guidance the prosecution of the war was left in the hands of the infantry brigade commanders. For the most part each operated independently within his own military zone (there were six), except for the occasional times when the Salvadoran Joint Command Headquarters supported a military zone with an Immediate Reaction Infantry Battalion.

Because of the development of an improved, more efficient, and militarily stronger ESAF, the FMLN was not able to achieve its strategic objective, that of toppling the Salvadoran government and assuming power through purely military means. This problem for the FMLN was compounded by the fact that, as previously mentioned, its political window of opportunity closed by 1987. Despite many tactical military successes, the FMLN could never exploit them strategically. If it had, today we might be assessing the El Salvador experience as a US policy failure.

On the other hand, although the ESAF was not defeated on the battlefield, it never achieved military victory either. Without a negotiated settlement, the best that either side could hope for was the prolonged stalemate that in essence characterized the war after 1987. In effect, both prize fighters fell in a heap from exhaustion. We in the United States now regard this draw as both a US and a Salvadoran military success resulting from effective US policy.⁸ But in the eyes of some international groups, the failure of the US-supported ESAF to defeat the underdog FMLN made the guerrilla movement the undeclared winner of this bout.⁹

Had the Salvadoran Joint Command prepared a strategic plan that integrated strategic, operational, and tactical objectives, coordinated into multiple inter-zonal operations, the military might have defeated the FMLN on the battlefield. Part of the blame for this shortcoming must be shared by the US military advisory mission for not providing more professional advice at the operational and strategic levels. For whatever reasons, training and advice remained predominantly tactical. The military advisory mission might have influenced ESAF attitudes in this respect through more aggressive support at the level of national and military strategy.¹⁰

Conclusion

Among the many slogans generated in protest of the US involvement in El Salvador, one bumper sticker proclaimed that "El Salvador is Vietnam in Spanish." But if our involvement in El Salvador was at times extremely controversial, highly unpopular, and largely misunderstood, for much of the American public the war in El Salvador came and went without much notice. Perhaps that is because most of what the US military achieved there was kept relatively low key, accomplished behind the scenes, and carried out with little media fanfare.

When the Reagan and Bush Administrations focused on Grenada, Nicaragua, and Cuba, El Salvador became the showcase of US government resolve and commitment to the region. But the end of the Cold War also seems to have signaled the end of US involvement and interest in El Salvador. The Clinton Administration will be challenged by other threats, as El Salvador briefing charts and maps are replaced by new Bosnias and Somalias.

Unfortunately our experience in El Salvador may be forgotten before its significance for future US military assistance missions or interventions can be fully absorbed. We should guard against that. El Salvador was not "Vietnam in Spanish." There is much to be learned from our good efforts there.

NOTES

1. William Branigin, "American Killed in El Salvador," *The Washington Post*, 1 April 1987, pp. A1, A18. Staff Sergeant Gregory Fronius gave his life in service to his country on 31 March 1987, while assigned as a military trainer to the Salvadoran 4th Infantry Brigade in El Paraiso, Chalatenango Department. He was killed while attempting to rally Salvadoran military personnel in defense of the brigade compound during the FMLN attack. This surprise attack resulted in 69 Salvadoran military dead and approximately 79 wounded.

2. Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1991), p. 2.

3. The figures of total Salvadoran military casualties during the 12 years of conflict were released by the Salvadoran Ministry of Defense following the 16 January 1992 signing of the peace accords between the FMLN and the government of El Salvador. Because of sensitivities to human rights violations and media criticism of the prosecution of the war by government security forces, the actual number of FMLN dead and wounded during the conflict remains a mystery.

4. The author obtained this statement from Dr. Rubén Zamora during an interview sponsored by the American Embassy in June 1992 at the Hotel Presidente, San Salvador.

5. Lee Hockstader, "US Envoy, Colonel Meet Salvadoran Rebels," *The Washington Post*, 13 September 1991, p. A33. It was during this first historic visit to Santa Marta, Cabanas Department, on 31 August 1991, that Colonel Mark Hamilton, US Military Group El Salvador Commander, first met with FMLN *Comandantes*. During this first encounter and subsequent meetings with FMLN military representatives, Colonel Hamilton learned that the FMLN assessed the US military advisory effort as having had a most positive influence on the ESAF.

6. A. J. Bacevich, et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988).

7. Michael J. Hennelly, "US Policy in El Salvador: Creating Beauty or the Beast?" *Parameters*, 23 (Spring 1993), 66.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

9. The insurgents continue to receive support from a host of internationalist, socialist, religious, or radical organizations. Read J. Michael Waller, *The Third Current of Revolution: Inside the North American Front of El Salvador's Guerrilla War* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1991) for a more detailed and intriguing account of this support structure.

10. Some sporadic, inconsistent efforts were made to correct this. The US military assisted in the development of one long-range strategic plan. The 1983 *National Campaign Plan* is one example of these efforts. Beginning in San Vicente Department, this plan called for a concerted counterinsurgency effort, one department at a time. The key to success was to focus valuable resources, while each department was cleared and brought under government control. However, in executing the Plan, the ESAF failed to coordinate with the various governmental support agencies necessary for success. By the end of 1984 the plan was already dead. After the National Plan came *Unidos Para Reconstruir* (UPR) in 1988. In essence this operational concept gave each Salvadoran military zone commander the latitude to conduct his own counterinsurgency operations and programs separately from those of other zone commanders. Consequently, six separate programs were in effect, while the FMLN continued to operate and cause havoc among the military zones. Limited resources were further spread thin among the military zones as each commander competed for success. Like the National Plan, UPR slowly died from lack of interest.