

The Continuing Calamity of El Salvador

The citizens are caught in a merciless crossfire between left and right. And by providing arms and military advice, the United States seems intent on making the situation worse.

By ANNE NELSON

HAD OFFICIAL WASHINGTON been looking, it might have found the signs of the coming civil war in El Salvador in the Hispanic neighborhoods a few miles north of the White House. Of the area's 20,000 or so Salvadoreans, most were members of the landless rural poor who, afflicted with their country's special brand of economic hopelessness, came to the capital of the United States to find menial labor. But Washington has also been haven and audience for El Salvador's politically dispossessed. For years they have come in a long dreary string—professors, priests, businessmen, labor leaders—first to plead and harangue a city already hardened to generations of exiles, then to seek refuge from the persecution they've aroused. Finally they settle in to dull little jobs in the international bureaucracy that mark time and pay the rent, but have nothing to do with burning injustices remembered, and continued, at home.

El Salvador: The smallest and most densely populated country in Central America, with an embarrassingly wealthy and tiny elite and grinding pov-

erty for everyone else. Known for its exports of coffee and cotton, it is the sort of place Washington has always laughingly dismissed as a "banana republic" and ignored as long as it didn't try to nationalize anything. About a year ago that began to change. Even before the civil war in Nicaragua had run its long and bloody course, word had it that El Salvador would be next, and that its struggle would be even longer and bloodier. Last October 15 a coup overthrew the figurehead leader of the military government, Carlos Humberto Romero, but it became increasingly clear that the junta that replaced him could not hold the country together. The junta itself, a political makeshift composed of quarreling factions, fell apart in January, only to be hastily reassembled as the last hope for an official peace.

But it has been a horrible peace. Although the ruling junta includes representatives from the country's armed services, it does not control the paramilitary organizations. Under the old regime these groups enjoyed semiofficial status and close links with the regular armed services, which they greatly outnumbered. Their style, however, was and is sanctioned terrorism: threats and tortures without legal recourse for the victims, mangled bodies discovered at

the roadside with no possibility of explanation or redress for their kin. Although ORDEN, perhaps the cruelest and decidedly the largest of these groups—with its 50,000 to 100,000 members—was officially dissolved by the new government, its founder publicly boasted that the organization was merely undergoing a name change. The violent left has responded with kidnappings, building occupations, and vengeance killings. The Salvadoran Catholic Church has estimated that, as a consequence of El Salvador's first three months of "peaceful transition" in 1980, more than a thousand people have died as a result of political violence. This is ten times the number of victims in the last year of Romero's administration.

In the last week of March this violence reached a new and obscene height. On March 24 the country's archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was assassinated in a hospital chapel while conducting a funeral mass. Romero's homily had called for an end to the right-wing repression, and a month earlier he had made headlines in the United States by warning Washington not to send military aid. "The contribution of your government," he wrote to Carter, "instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, undoubtedly will sharpen the repression." In return, the archbishop received a letter from Secretary of State Vance assuring him that the United States intended to contribute *peaceful* military equipment—jeeps, walkie-talkies, tear gas, and masks—which could only "enhance human rights in El Salvador." The supreme irony of the archbishop's death may be its eventual use by the United States as justification for the kind of armament the prelate feared most: It is now becoming clear that the Carter administration feels that the best way to secure peace and prop up the staggering Salvadoran junta is through the classical American solution of sending arms.

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Somehow it all has a familiar, homey sound to it: a U.S.-recruited and -supported centrist government, designed to hold the communists at bay but lacking popular support of its own; U.S. arms and military training; and a regional domino theory to heighten the suspense. The administration has been stung in the recent past with what are perceived as setbacks in Afghanistan, Iran, and Nicaragua, in many respects paying dearly for the sins of previous administrations. The case of Nicaragua has been especially haunting for those stumbling through the formulation of a policy for El Salvador, and many of their efforts have been devoted to avoiding a repeat of mistakes made there. But the provision of arms will make a political solution even less likely than it now seems, and it could easily pave the way for more serious forms of intervention.

"The United States government is saying, 'We can't allow another Nicaragua,'" a Salvadorean warned an audience in Washington last month. "But we in El Salvador say to the United States that you must allow another Nicaragua, or you will have another Vietnam."

In the past few weeks the United States has been rushing through the necessary government channels a \$50 million aid package for El Salvador of which roughly 10 percent is for military aid and training. For once, the White House, the National Security Council, the Department of State, and Congress appear to be acting in concert, and they have been under heavy pressure from the Pentagon and the intelligence community to forget partisan haggling and budget restraints on this issue.

El Salvador serves as a bogeyman for everyone. For the liberals, it is the gruesome body of human rights violations committed by the paramilitary organizations at the instigation of the Salvadoran oligarchy, and the possibility of right-wing military forces being drawn in from Guatemala and Honduras in their aid. For the conservatives, it is the specter of Cuba once again, a paranoia that has been unscrupulously fed by State Department testimony that Cuba is providing men and arms to the Salvadoran left, even though the State Department itself is sharply divided internally as to the credibility of these charges. Almost two years ago the sides drawn up over the case of Nicaragua were the same, with the Brzezinski foreign policy faction and the congressional conservatives pushing for a hard-line approach, and the human rights contingent at State and the liberals in Congress

pressing to oust Somoza as quickly and peacefully as possible.

In hindsight, the Carter administration is keenly aware of the golden solution that it bypassed in Nicaragua. In 1978 a group known as the Twelve formed to represent a broad coalition of anti-Somoza interests ranging from mili-

hands of a few landowners and industrialists, many of them descended from the Spanish colonial hierarchy, and more than half of the country's population lives in depressed rural areas, earning the equivalent of two to four dollars a day.

In 1932 El Salvador experienced the

If we don't want El Salvador to be another Vietnam, we may have to accept it as another Nicaragua.

tant Marxists to moderate businessmen. The administration now believes that had it eased Somoza out and encouraged the installation of a government made up of the Twelve, a full year of warfare and tens of thousands of deaths could have been averted, as well as the eventual takeover by the Sandinista left. The administration threw away its chances of facilitating this transition by insisting up to the last moment that the Twelve renounce the Sandinistas, who by that time had won considerable popular support.

IF THE UNITED STATES has been guilty of any glaring miscalculation so far in El Salvador, it has been that of equating the situation with that of Nicaragua two years ago. Undersecretary of State John Bushnell has defined the country's political makeup as consisting of a tiny extremist left and a tiny extremist right, with a large and somewhat apolitical center represented by the junta and the Christian Democratic party in between. The current U.S. policy would be much easier to defend if this were true.

Unfortunately, compared to El Salvador, the politics of Nicaragua's revolution were relatively simple and palatable, easy for even a gringo to understand. The Somoza dynasty was loathed by the entire country because it closely guarded its absolute power, and because it was installed and maintained for decades through a foreign power—namely, the United States. The Sandinista revolution could be described as democratic and nationalist from its inception in the 1920s up to the present, and as such, it could unite diverse ideologies.

In El Salvador, however, political and economic repression cannot be pegged to one man, as the flight of General Romero in October proved. The wealth of the country is concentrated in the

first communist revolution in the hemisphere; known as the Matanza, it was the first peasant-instigated communist revolt in the world. Led by Farabundo Martí (who fought alongside Sandino in Nicaragua until he was dismissed for insubordination), the Matanza was one of the bloodiest revolts in history: Once the oligarchy marshaled military support to put it down, no mercy was shown. More than 30,000 peasants were put to death, and the oligarchy set about consolidating its power through a perpetual military reign. The entrenched ruling class, actually numbering several hundred, came to be known as "the fourteen families" after an article in *Time* magazine on Salvadoran millionaires.

The power of the Salvadoran elite, with the support of the small mercantile and technical classes and its utter control of the military, went virtually unchallenged until the late sixties and early seventies. At that point the Christian Democrats began to make inroads in El Salvador, under José Napoleon Duarte, as they had done in Chile under Eduardo Frei and in Venezuela under Rafael Caldeira. Duarte and his party presented a modest plan for land reform in El Salvador in 1969 that inspired a new interest in political activity throughout the countryside. Duarte was elected mayor of the capital, and then, in 1972, president.

The possibility that Duarte might try to implement his party's land reform program was too much for the oligarchy to stomach, and the military was dispatched to accuse Duarte of leading a military coup—supposedly after he'd won the election. Duarte was arrested, and then expelled. During his years of exile the Christian Democrats lost much of their membership and most of their credibility as the party that could break the oligarchy's hold on the country. "Popular organizations" began to form in the countryside, pressing for reforms,

offering political education, and organizing protests. By the early seventies they were joined by reformist wings of the Catholic church, attempting to realize the principles of the "theology of liberation." In 1977 the leftist organizations and the liberal clergy won an important ally in the person of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Romero was re-

appeared modest enough, more of an effort to end the repressions of the previous government than to effect any kind of widespread social or economic change. The early promises were to free political prisoners and to account for some two thousand "disappeared" (most of whom were in fact dead); to dissolve ORDEN and the other paramili-

trolling interest in all privately owned banks. This policy, which Washington had recommended in the hope of placating the left without incensing the right, immediately failed on both counts. Salvadoran businessmen at once flew to Guatemala to publicly lambast both the prospective reforms and the American role in their formulation; the left maintained a wait-and-see attitude. The early reports were dismaying. In a mockery of its proclaimed intent, the land reform program was effectively taken over by the paramilitary organizations, primarily ORDEN. The first stage of the "reforms" was to forcibly evict squatters from the holdings of absentee landlords. The next step was to divide the estates into 250-acre plots and distribute them among the rural supporters of the paramilitary groups.

If the early stages were a mockery, the next were a nightmare. We do not know exactly what has been going on in the countryside in the name of agrarian reform because the government has instituted heavy news censorship within El Salvador, forbidding the publication of "reports on political violence or leftist propaganda." But refugees have reported that, in the words of UPI reporter Demetrio Olasiregui, "Government troops sent . . . to help carry out new land reforms have slaughtered peasants and destroyed hamlets in a purge of leftists." Olasiregui himself was kidnapped at gunpoint by right-wing forces and evicted from the country the day after his account ran on the wires, but his story has been confirmed by other eyewitnesses, and the brutality they describe is blood-curdling. The paramilitary organizations have embarked on a campaign of orchestrated terror. Among the atrocities they practice are cutting the faces of their victims and raping mothers in front of their children. They go out to the countryside equipped with lists of those suspected of participation in leftist organizations and exterminate all possible opposition. News of these acts has filtered out of the country, but no one inside or outside El Salvador knows how widespread the atrocities are.

Beside these grim tales, El Salvador's economic troubles pale in significance. Nevertheless, the junta must try to deal with the economy. The near state of siege has had disastrous effects. The violence in the countryside seriously threatens both the country's food supply and its agricultural exports, which account for more than two-thirds of its total exports. Foreign capital has been

Troops sent to help with 'land reforms' are destroying hamlets and slaughtering peasants.

garded as a political and theological conservative at the time he became archbishop. But shortly thereafter, Father Rutilio Grande, a well-known and well-liked Jesuit priest, was assassinated by a paramilitary unit; this had a profound and radicalizing affect on the archbishop.

Shortly before the Carter administration took office in 1977, the Christian Democrats were defrauded of yet another election. The country, undergoing rapid polarization, was further unsettled by the revolution beginning in Nicaragua. Later that year El Salvador joined Argentina and Guatemala in refusing U.S. military aid in order to protest Carter's human rights policy, and relations between Washington and San Salvador grew increasingly strained until the coup of October 15, 1979, that overthrew Carlos Humberto Romero.

Although the State Department denies any kind of complicity in the October 15 coup, the U.S. embassy in San Salvador was in constant consultation with a number of opposition groups, including the young and supposedly progressive military officers who engineered the coup. As one government source carefully put it, "We didn't discourage them," and, upon reviewing the junta's plans for reforms, he acknowledged, "We liked what we saw." Once the United States had bestowed its blessing, there were a number of attempts to assure the junta's survival. International Development Bank loans that had been blackballed by the United States for years were suddenly available, as was \$5.7 million in military assistance credits left over from 1975.

The military officers and the slate of civilians who made up the junta knew they had to convince the left of their good faith in announcing reforms and persuade the right that the changes were inevitable. At the outset the reforms

tary groups and remove the hard-core right-wing elements from leadership positions, bringing proven assassins among them to justice.

The junta might have been able to put these remedial reforms into effect had it truly controlled the country. By January it was clear that it did not. The paramilitary organizations stepped up their violence in the countryside; the junta helplessly replied that the "isolated actions of certain officers" were not under the control of the government. On January 3 the civilian leadership of the junta, which had been drawn from a wide range of political and economic interests, resigned in frustration and protest over the bloodshed. With the other parties boycotting participation in the government, the Christian Democrats were resuscitated to fill the breach, although after a month of active recruitment the junta still had no secretary of agriculture or minister of economic planning.

THE POPULAR ORGANIZATIONS took the shape of three major groups—the Bloque Popular Revolucionario, the Frente de Acción Popular Unificada, and the Ligas Populares 28 de Febrero—each with a related underground organization. All of them engage in various levels of civil disobedience, and all have been subject to unimaginable repression on the part of the paramilitary organizations. Since January these three, along with some social democratic and Christian Democratic elements, have been working together, and the late archbishop was linked with them.

In early March the government, responding to pressure from Washington, announced plans to expropriate some two million acres of farmland, initially affecting only the estates of 1250 acres or more, and to give the government con-

leaving the country at a tremendous rate over the past few years. U.S. capital has long been scarce, and the Japanese and British capital that was a key factor in the country's respectable 5 percent growth rate over the past two decades is now nearly exhausted. Commercial credit has withered up, and the present growth rate is zero.

Although more than half the country's population lives in the countryside, most of the acreage is concentrated in the hands of a few feudal landowners whose holdings are devoted to export crops, primarily cotton and coffee; smaller farms, equivalent to oversized gardens, yield the country's own food supply. The flight of the country's small managerial and technical classes has left management of the large farms, expropriated or not, in disarray. Some 10 percent of the country's cotton crop has been burned by terrorists of unknown affiliation. A famine is unlikely (the government still has ample grain reserves), but luxury items and foodstuffs previously available to the middle class have been in short supply. This is partly due to the government's moves to limit the importation of goods in a desperate attempt to salvage something of the country's foreign exchange. Meat and milk, which were always beyond the means of the majority of Salvadoreans, are now unavailable to the middle classes as well, and luxury imports require a government deposit of two to three times their value.

The United States is trying to prop up the junta economically by extending some \$50 million in emergency aid and channeling other money into the country through international development banks. One measure of the U.S. com-

but they can't make them; the changes are neither permitted by the right nor accepted by the left. The United States talks about sending its millions, but when you consider the needs of the country, \$50 million is a drop of water in the sea. It wouldn't even begin to make a change in the situation."

The State Department has requested a total of more than \$10 million to be made available to the Salvadoreans in military assistance, including foreign military sales credits, military training grants, and the reprogramming of aid originally designated for other countries. The United States has staunchly maintained that these funds will be channeled toward "peace-keeping military equipment"—described by one U.S. embassy official as "clean"—but among the Salvadoreans the fear persists that given the weaknesses and ineffectuality of the current junta, the equipment is likely to fall into the hands of right-wing military elements. Despite the halt in U.S. government sales from 1977 to 1979, there has been a steady flow of arms into the country, much of it from Guatemala.

SO FAR THE ONLY direct arms sale the junta has publicly requested has been a \$200,000 sale of tear gas, gas masks, and protective vests last November; some maintain that further U.S. transactions with the junta would be the kiss of death. Around the same time as the tear gas sales, a six-man military training team was sent to El Salvador from Washington, and part of the military assistance funds now requested would be earmarked for a series of mobile training teams. The State Department is quick to distinguish between

guardsman tear gas and a bulletproof vest will make him less likely to panic and shoot someone unnecessarily," one commented recently. "But they are under orders to kill. The American equipment will just make them feel safer as they shoot." And should open warfare break out, neighboring Central American states may well be drawn in, with or without the tacit agreement of the United States, which could easily find such actions "unacceptable" while continuing to aid and support governments that engage in them. Since the fall of Somoza, El Salvador has been the buffer in Central America between Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua in the south, and the right-wing states, Guatemala and Honduras, in the north.

Guatemala has massed some twenty thousand regular army troops along El Salvador's border, and one U.S. spokesman describes the relations between the Guatemalan military and Salvadoran paramilitary groups as "close ties [which] operate openly and freely at mid-levels and probably the highest levels of both the government and the military." Honduras has also expressed a willingness to intervene in El Salvador. The three countries together—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—contain seven or eight thousand exiled members of Somoza's national guard, many of them eager to reenter military service as mercenaries.

As the rumors of war quickened in El Salvador in the past months, the line between peace and war blurred beyond distinction. The country is left with precious few options. "The only possibility of avoiding a war," said one exiled priest in March, "would be for the young military officers in the junta to try to unite with the popular organizations. And that," the priest said advisedly, "would be a miracle."

Time is running out for the United States to review its own options. There is a joke making the rounds in San Salvador: The October 15 junta was turkey being fattened for Christmas; it was carved up on January 3. The present junta they say, is fish for Good Friday—and every day it lasts beyond that is a miracle in itself.

The only sensible and appropriate path for the United States to take would be to immediately stop all military aid of any kind to El Salvador and to exert strong pressure on neighboring countries in Central America to do the same. There seems to be no way to avert the continuation of the calamity that is El Salvador. But there is no need to foster it. □

The State Department wants to give the Salvadoran junta millions in 'clean' military aid.

mitment to the junta is the fact that the \$50 million in emergency aid sailed through Congress with virtually no opposition, at a time when other parts of the foreign aid bill were being cut.

But a real question remains as to how much help any infusion of aid could be. "What you have there now is a total anarchy," one Salvadorean summarized in Washington recently, "an anarchy in which the government is not administering the country on a practical basis. They're trying to make some changes,

advisers and training teams; the former, they tell us, go out on mission with their pupils, and the latter hold classes.

The training conducted by these new units would supposedly include logistics, communications, and intelligence techniques. Many Salvadoreans, however, doubt that this aid has a truly humanitarian character, pointing to the current training team's concentration on riot control tactics and the use of modern American police equipment. "They are saying that giving a Salvadoran national

THE BRETHREN: Inside the Supreme Court, by Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong. Simon & Schuster, 467 pp., \$13.95.

Has the Supreme Court a right to privacy?

NAT HENTOFF

IN ONE OF MANY DISDAINFUL dismissals of this first hugely popular book on the Supreme Court, Anthony Lewis has noted in the *New York Review of Books* that since no corruption was found by these ardent muckrakers, *The Brethren* is a clear and shoddy illustration of what Earl Warren once called "exposure for exposure's sake." The implication is that the nation and the Court would have been far better served if Woodward and Armstrong had not chosen to try to bring this "lofty institution down to the unheroic level of all others in these inglorious times." After all, what did they find? No more than "that Supreme Court Justices are human in their faults and ambitions."

In her lead dissection in the *New York Times Book Review*, Renata Adler judged the book hollow and mocked these laymen (she is a journalist with a newly acquired law degree) for their inaccuracies, their bungling legal analysis, and for having disclosed "no important secrets" or "scandals" about the inner workings of the Court.

Like Anthony Lewis, Adler—and a good many other reviewers—scornfully attacked the authors for making all their sources anonymous. In *The Nation*, Aryeh Neier, former executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, ascribed errors he noted in the book to this massive use of faceless sources. But worse yet are "the moral implications of

soliciting betrayals of confidences on matters such as those reported in *The Brethren*. . . . Funny, isn't it," Neier added, "that many journalists attach great significance to protecting the confidentiality of their sources but think nothing of getting their sources to violate other people's confidences."

I would only note, as a journalist, that the primary reason we use confidential sources is in the knowledge that they *will* betray information that has been hidden, one way or another, from the citizenry. And we maintain the confidentiality of our sources so they won't get fired—as the Supreme Court clerks questioned by Woodward and Armstrong surely would have been if their

Liman's outrage. How would the justices ever again—or at least for some years to come—be able to engage in the wholly open exchange of views that is possible, in judicial matters, only when absolute secrecy is guaranteed? On the other hand, these are not cases at trial before juries, when "leaks" from chambers could prejudice other stages in the appellate process. At this ultimate level, fundamental principles of constitutional law are being decided that will affect not only the person whose name is on the case but thousands, maybe millions, more.

I will acknowledge that if I were a justice, I would not want my clerks circulating my preliminary drafts, intra-Court notes, or recollections of my characterizations of the other justices. But as a citizen, I can hardly censure Woodward and Armstrong for letting me know—for the first time, in any extensive sense—how decisions are reached on the High Court.

THERE ARE, TO BE SURE, inaccuracies in the book, but few are of any weight. And the authors' legal analysis does show, as I later confirmed in a conversation with them,

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names had been listed on a page of credits in this book.

But this is the Supreme Court, not the local waterworks or board of education. In a speech printed on the front page of the *New York Law Journal*, a distinguished attorney, Arthur Liman, attacked *The Brethren* as "the greatest assault in the history of the bar on [the] tradition of [lawyers'] confidentiality, and a threat to the deliberative processes of our courts. I refer, of course, to the wholesale disclosure by law clerks of the secrets of Supreme Court Justices' chambers."

Throughout the country, a sizable number of law professors have shared

that they lack, to say the least, a profound understanding of the history and continuing dynamics of constitutional law. But they are lucid reporters of the interrelationships among the justices during the terms of 1969 through 1975, as well as of the basic facts of the cases that reached the Court in that period.

And not even the most negative reviews of *The Brethren* have been able to successfully question the credibility of the book's foundation. The clerks did more than tell tales about the icons: They made available to Armstrong and Woodward "internal memoranda between Justices, letters, notes taken at

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