

# PRESIDENT REAGAN'S POLICY TOWARD EL SALVADOR: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

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*In 1981, the Reagan administration took office pledging to restore America's global influence, especially in Latin America, where administration officials blamed former President Carter's policies for leading to the near-victory of a Marxist-Leninist insurgency in El Salvador. Michael A. Hammer, in a series of interviews with key American and Salvadoran officials, details how circumstances forced the Reagan administration's policies to change, and even to resemble those of his predecessor. In protracted warfare, Hammer argues, executive policy must reflect congressional consensus or lose funding. In El Salvador the result has been an American foreign policy that seeks to promote progressive change rather than reinforce the reactionary status quo.*

## INTRODUCTION

On April 7, 1987, *The New York Times* reported:

As thousands of government troops swept northern El Salvador . . . seeking leftist rebels who destroyed one of the army's most important bases last week, the guerrillas themselves nonchalantly held a town meeting . . . just four miles from the devastated fort.<sup>1</sup>

This portrayal of a defiant and confident guerrilla movement illustrated the uncanny ability of an insurgency to affect the perceptions of those observing an ongoing, low-intensity struggle through one well-executed attack. Months of persistent work by a government to create a semblance of stability and progress was shattered within hours by a daring strike by the opposition.

However, such an attack does not necessarily demonstrate the insurgents' strength and the inability of the ruling government to maintain its control. Such a raid could also indicate the inability of a guerrilla movement to achieve a decisive victory.

Although the situations and conditions are vastly different, much of the discussion about El Salvador has focused on whether or not the United States has learned from its mistakes in Vietnam. The Salvadoran rebels have drawn at least one invaluable conclusion from the American experience: it is not

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1. James Le Moyne, "Just Miles from Ruined Base, Salvador Rebels Defy Army," *New York Times*, 7 April 1987.

necessary to defeat America militarily in order to win. Sometimes the war can be waged as effectively on Capitol Hill as on the battlefield. The Department of State recently noted:

As part of the 'prolonged popular war' strategy, the FMLN [Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front] and its political arm, the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), have mounted a sophisticated campaign . . . to spread disinformation about the Duarte government's human rights record and U.S. policy. The goal of this campaign is to erode the democratic government's international recognition and reduce the assistance that helps it defend itself against the guerrillas.<sup>2</sup>

In order to win, leftist insurgents know they have to cut off American support for the government of El Salvador. Their task would be greatly facilitated if they were able to convince the American people that the United States is involved in a losing and costly battle.

The FMLN/FDR propaganda campaign, however, has achieved only limited success. Those calling for an American withdrawal from El Salvador find themselves on the fringe of the policy debate. By late 1983, consensus had been reached on Capitol Hill regarding America's continued role in El Salvador. Even former Representative Clarence D. Long, (D-Md.) an outspoken critic of the Reagan administration's policies in El Salvador commented, "We made a mistake in becoming involved. But we are involved and it would be a mistake to pull out."<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, U.S. policymakers have provided continued support while exerting pressure on the Salvadoran government to bring about needed reforms. The Salvadoran and United States governments have gradually developed a comprehensive political, economic and military strategy which has prevented a guerrilla victory and set El Salvador on the path to democracy. While initially the Reagan administration was not as concerned for human rights as President Carter had been, gradually, through interaction between the executive and legislative branches, human rights issues were again placed on the agenda.

The following analysis of the situation in El Salvador will be used as a case study of a U.S. attempt to defeat an armed, leftist opposition through progressive reforms intended to build a democratic political system and society. From the findings in this paper, recommendations will be made for dealing with present and future insurgencies.

In order to evaluate the successes or failures of the Reagan administration's policy toward El Salvador, it first will be necessary to examine the situation when President Reagan came to office in 1981. Without reviewing El Salvador's entire history, references will be made to past events which have served

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2. Department of State, *Report on the Situation in El Salvador, Oct. 1, 1986 — March 31, 1987*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), p. 3.

3. Martin Tolchin, "Working Profile: Representative Clarence D. Long, Shaping a Response to the 'Mistake' in El Salvador," *New York Times*, 22 April 1983.

as precursors to the current crisis. The focus here will be on the period beginning with the 1979 coup and leading to the present.

### THE 1979 COUP

El Salvador in the 1970s was plagued by social and political instability. In 1972, a military coup overthrew the democratically elected President, Jose Napoleon Duarte. For the rest of the decade the country was ruled by a series of increasingly repressive military juntas. In addition, El Salvador's economy was set back severely by the global economic crisis commencing with the oil shock of 1974.

By 1979, conditions in El Salvador had reached a boiling point. On October 15, a group of young reformist officers, very much aware of the Sandinista coup in neighboring Nicaragua, and with the explicit support of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), overthrew the repressive regime of General Carlos Humberto Romero.

The coup and subsequent junta represented a desperate attempt to prevent a further breakdown in Salvadoran society. On the day of the coup, the new junta publicly stated that it had seized power in an attempt to end government corruption and human rights abuses. Blame for the situation was placed on Romero and "antiquated economic and social structures." Romero was also blamed for damaging "the prestige of the country and the noble institution of the armed forces."<sup>4</sup>

But the young officers failed for several reasons. First, their efforts illustrated the shortcomings of most coups. Political theorist Mark Hagopian has written that coups differ from revolutions in that they seek to remove the leadership while trying to preserve the existing institutions, whereas revolutions are intended to bring about radical change in the basic institutions of society.<sup>5</sup> It soon became clear in El Salvador that a simple change in leadership was insufficient to address the growing needs and demands of the people. The country needed substantive change. At the time of the coup, the ratio of landless peasantry to total population in El Salvador was the highest in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the tremendous inequality of land distribution coupled with a high population density created an environment ripe for violent revolution.

### 1979-1980 JUNTAS: UNANSWERED HOPES FOR REFORM

American policymakers have often failed to respond to a nation's needs until that nation finds itself in a crisis situation. This is hardly surprising. It would be unreasonable to expect the United States to anticipate and avert all regional crises. However, as political theorist Hans Morgenthau notes, Amer-

4. Phillip L. Russell, *El Salvador in Crisis* (Austin, Texas: Colorado River Press, 1984), p. 87.

5. Mark H. Hagopian, *The Phenomenon of Revolution* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc. 1974), pp. 1-38.

6. Roy L. Prosterman and Mary N. Temple, "Land Reform and the El Salvador Crisis," *International Security* 6 (Summer 1981): 59-60.

ican inaction can often be attributed to a national preference for conservative forces in global politics:

We (the U.S.) have preferred the stability of the status quo, the stability of yesterday and the day before yesterday, to the stability of tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. That is to say that we have almost instinctively sided with forces throughout the world who have been against change, let alone in favor of radical reform or revolution.<sup>7</sup>

But the combined impact of the 1979 Salvadoran coup and the 1979 Sandinista takeover in Nicaragua forced U.S. policymakers to focus on the unraveling situation in El Salvador. In examining U.S. policy toward the region, Latin American specialist Cynthia Arnson asserts "El Salvador became of interest to U.S. policymakers when societal breakdown raised the specter of leftist revolution."<sup>8</sup>

The governing junta formed immediately after the 1979 coup was an attempt to represent the different sectors of the Salvadoran population. Although the makeup of this first junta seemingly favored those wanting dramatic reforms, it quickly became evident that rightist elements would prevail. The Carter administration, however, interpreted the formation of the new government as a step toward democracy and away from the authoritarianism that had plagued El Salvador's history.

Previously, the Carter administration had tacitly indicated to Salvadoran groups that, of the wide range of political alternatives to the Romero government, it preferred a left-of-center progressive coup.<sup>9</sup> Publicly, however, the American Ambassador to El Salvador, Frank Devine, claimed that the United States favored "fair and honest elections."<sup>10</sup> Either way, the United States was ready to support any effort toward reform and legitimization of the government. President Carter recognized the junta and proceeded to provide El Salvador with "direct and indirect foreign assistance, as well as a \$5.7 million package of 'nonlethal' military equipment."<sup>11</sup>

The initial goal of providing American aid was to enable the new junta to implement the reforms necessary to bring stability to the country. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance said, "We believe that the reform program of the revolutionary junta offers the best prospects for peaceful change to a more just society . . ."<sup>12</sup>

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7. Marvin E. Gettleman et al., *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War* (New York, NY: Grove Press Inc., 1981), pp. 84-85.

8. Cynthia Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1982), p. 8.

9. Steven W. Schmidt, *El Salvador, America's Next Vietnam?* (Salisbury, NC: North Carolina Documentary Publications, 1983), pp. 102-103.

10. *Ibid.*, 101.

11. Kevin Harris and Mario Espinosa, "Reform, Repression and Revolution in El Salvador," *The Fletcher Forum* 5 (Summer 1981): 297.

12. James Dunkerly, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador*, (London: Junction Books, 1982), p. 132.

American support for the junta continued despite the failure of the Carter administration to attain its reformist goals and the dissolution of the Majaro group in January, 1980. It soon became clear that neither the conservative faction of the army nor the landed oligarchy was ready to relinquish any power. The inclusion of rightist elements of the Christian Democrats in the second junta led Steven W. Schmidt to observe:

One thing is clear from the events unfolding in El Salvador in 1979 — reconciliation, reform, and peace were unacceptable by both the extreme right and extreme left. In either case, politics was considered an 'all-or-nothing' proposition.<sup>13</sup>

The Salvadoran right was regaining the control it had briefly lost after the initial coup. The United States, already politically and financially committed to the junta alternative, downplayed the transition as a "cabinet crisis" that had been smoothly resolved.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION REACTS: HUMAN RIGHTS AND LAND REFORM

The Carter administration, however, sought to manipulate its political and financial investment in El Salvador to push forward its reformist agenda. The appointment of Robert White as the new ambassador sent a clear signal to the junta. White had become known for his strong, pro-human rights stand while serving as ambassador to Paraguay.<sup>15</sup>

The Carter administration was as fearful as previous administrations of a possible communist takeover in El Salvador. Upon appointment to his new position in El Salvador, Ambassador White recalled his working orders: "Washington wants something to the right of Nicaragua, my job is to make that happen."<sup>16</sup>

President Carter believed that by emphasizing human rights and pressing for changes in El Salvador's societal structures, civil strife might be prevented and political stability might return. The administration hoped to instill in the Salvadoran military the view that respect for human rights was essential to counterrevolution, and would reduce the guerrillas' appeal. As the U.S. military commander based at the Embassy in El Salvador in 1980 relates, the message the United States attempted to convey to the High Commands was that "they are defaming the very institution they are trying to preserve."<sup>17</sup>

The second major policy objective in the Carter years was to encourage widespread reform through land redistribution. The agrarian reform program espoused by the administration was designed by the American Institute for

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13. Schmidt, p. 112.

14. Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution*, (Boston: South End Press, 1982), p. 131.

15. Schmidt, p. 115.

16. Arnson, p. 50.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Free Labor Development (AIFLD). T. David Mason, an expert on land reform in El Salvador, described the program as:

. . . a preferred middle ground between repression and revolution in that it remedies the gross inequalities of wealth and power inherent in the status quo while building a direct popular support for the regime in such a way as to 'innoculate' the rural population against appeals for revolutionary change.<sup>18</sup>

Land reform was considered to be more than simply an economic tool; it was also intended to have a strong political effect. Agrarian reform is an attempt to prevent people from losing belief in a governing regime's willingness and ability to produce positive change. Given a stake in the system, the willingness of peasants to join a revolutionary movement would be greatly diminished. As one scholar notes:

President Carter was quite candid as to the purpose of the agrarian reform which he sent White to promote, stating that the agrarian reform 'has not only served the cause of social justice; it has also been an effective instrument to counter radical Marxism that would replace an old tyranny with a new one.'<sup>19</sup>

The pursuit of land reform has since become a fixture of American foreign policy toward El Salvador with undeniable bipartisan support. Land reform is an attractive solution for both hawks and doves. It can be used both to combat an insurgency and to advance social justice. The essential feature of land reform is that it is a peaceful means for counteracting revolution.

The Carter administration responded enthusiastically to the junta's call in 1979 for land reform. It immediately sent technical advisers to El Salvador to help draft the land reform law and began to pressure the Salvadoran government to put it into effect.<sup>20</sup>

Land reform in El Salvador was divided into three phases. Under Phase I, which began March 6, 1980, all estates larger than 1,235 acres (500 hectares) were confiscated and redistributed. Phase III, known as the "land-to-tiller" program to transfer additional lands directly to cultivators, was implemented concurrently.<sup>21</sup> Combined, AIFLD estimated the two phases redistributed 22 percent of agricultural lands to 25 percent of rural poor.<sup>22</sup>

The delayed Phase II began in 1983. Under this phase, holdings in excess of 605 acres (1,294 hectares) were to be expropriated by the government and placed in a land bank for redistribution to the peasants. As of this writing,

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18. T. David Mason, "Land Reform and the Breakdown of Clientelist Politics in El Salvador," *Journal of Comparative Political Studies* 18 (January 1986): 488.

19. Russell, p. 121.

20. Interview with John Heberle, Director, Information Services, American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), 7 October 1987.

21. Roy L. Prosterman and Mary N. Temple, "Land Reform and the El Salvador Crisis," *International Security* 6 (Summer, 1981): 61-62.

22. Heberle, 7 October 1987.

Phase II, which was scheduled to be completed by 1985, has yet to be fully implemented.<sup>23</sup>

### EL SALVADOR'S VIOLENT RIGHT

The Salvadoran establishment met land reform with vehement opposition. The landed elite saw it as a direct threat to its supremacy; the military viewed it as a concession to the communists that could ultimately lead to loss of power. An exiled oligarch commented angrily: "Jimmy Carter did what the communists couldn't do. He brought socialism to El Salvador."<sup>24</sup>

The strong emotions surfacing in response to land reform were not unexpected given El Salvador's history. In January, 1932, Indian and peasant discontent in the coffee growing regions of western El Salvador was sparked to rebellion by the inspiration of the leftist Farabundo Marti. The rebellion was brutally put down by the military with the execution of 15,000-30,000 rebels in the *Matanza*, or massacre, that followed. Marti himself was captured and shot.<sup>25</sup> The experience of the rebellion cemented the understanding between the landed oligarchy and the military that communist agitation would not be tolerated in El Salvador. With the oligarchy's cooperation, "the military remained in power for the next fifty years, convinced that repression was the best guarantor of the social order."<sup>26</sup>

The situation in 1980 undoubtedly brought back memories of Marti's challenge of the early 1930s. It was perhaps inevitable that advocates of land reform would become the target of violent attacks by the Right. On Jan. 3, 1981, (AIFLD) land reform advisors Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman and the Salvadoran leader of the largest democratic peasant organization (the Union Comunal Salvadoreña), Jose Rodolfo Viera, were assassinated in the Sheraton Hotel in San Salvador under the suspected orders of members of the oligarchy. This, coupled with the murder of the Maryknoll churchwomen one month earlier, produced a shift in tone for American policy toward El Salvador.

The Salvadoran right, drawing on the lessons of the past, opted to protect its interests through violence. It drew encouragement from Ronald Reagan's election victory in November, 1980, and the candidate's well-known East-West view of the Central American conflict. One analyst noted that during the transition period, Reagan representatives and "unofficial supporters" actually traveled to the region to announce that Reagan favored a rightist solution.<sup>27</sup>

Thus it is not surprising that "the Salvadoran military interpreted the Reagan Doctrine as a license to kill. The top United States priority, they reasoned,

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23. Ibid.

24. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, *Testimony by Martin Diskin*, 97th Cong., 2nd Sess., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 131.

25. Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 138.

26. Arson, p. 15.

27. Schmidt, p. 125.

was defeating the armed groups of the left."<sup>28</sup> The Salvadoran military figured that the United States would have to rely on it for waging the war and therefore, the Americans would necessarily have to be more tolerant of its behavior. Jose Napoleon Duarte, who later was to become President of El Salvador, comments in his biography that:

When Ronald Reagan was elected president, we did not know what to expect. The Right celebrated his election victory . . . They were sure that Reagan would sympathize with their preference for a strong, authoritarian government . . . The Right believed that Reagan would accept the need for a new military government . . ."<sup>29</sup>

#### EARLY REAGAN YEARS: EL SALVADOR SEEN THROUGH AN EAST-WEST PRISM

President Reagan launched a basic shift in the American approach to the Central American crisis. The new administration saw the situation in El Salvador as a crucial test of its policy to stem the expansion of Soviet-sponsored communism. On March 17, 1980, before an audience in Chicago, candidate Reagan had expressed his concern for the evolving situation when he declared:

In El Salvador, Marxist totalitarian revolutionaries, supported by Havana and Moscow, are preventing the construction of a democratic government . . . Must we let . . . Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, all become additional 'Cubas,' new outposts for Soviet combat brigades? . . . These humiliations and symbols of weakness add up."<sup>30</sup>

In his campaign for the presidency, Reagan also asserted, "We are the last domino."<sup>31</sup> He thus cast the debate on policy toward El Salvador in terms of containment, declaring the United States could ill afford to stand idly by while the Soviet Union actively promoted the spread of communism throughout the hemisphere. Once in office, President Reagan's views became official policy when Secretary of State Alexander Haig, addressing the NATO ministers in February of 1981, announced: "We consider what is happening [in El Salvador] as part of the global Communist campaign coordinated by Havana and Moscow to support the Marxist insurgency."<sup>32</sup>

The focus of American foreign policy thus shifted from reform to pursuing a military solution in the context of an East-West confrontation.<sup>33</sup> Under the new policy, the administration announced that U.S. aid to El Salvador was

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28. Arnson, p. 15.

29. Jose Napoleon Duarte, *Duarte: My Story*, (New York, NY: G.B. Putnam's Sons, 1986), p. 157.

30. Arnson, p. 63.

31. William LeoGrande, "A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador," *International Security* 6 (Summer 1981): 45.

32. Arnson, p. 70.

33. Russell, p. 150.

no longer contingent on reforms or human rights.<sup>34</sup> The Reagan administration in part justified its shift in policy as an effort to avoid a repeat of Jimmy Carter's 'loss' of Nicaragua.<sup>35</sup>

This shift in policy was also encouraged by the fact that between the time that President Reagan was elected and the day he took office, the left had dramatically escalated the conflict by launching its first major offensive. The threat from the guerrillas had become so grave that the Carter administration felt compelled to supply the Salvadoran government with military assistance, despite El Salvador's failure to improve human rights and institute sufficiently far-reaching reforms. Given the deteriorating military situation, Reagan could more easily justify his policy shift to one favoring a military solution.

#### EL SALVADOR: A SYMBOL GONE AWRY

Reagan administration officials hoped success in El Salvador would project the image of a revitalized superpower. El Salvador was to become a symbol of American commitment to the containment of communism and the promotion of democracy. William LeoGrande summarized the Reagan administration's rationale as follows:

Because the war in El Salvador look[ed] like an easy victory, it provide[d] a perfect opportunity for the new administration to demonstrate its willingness to use force in foreign affairs, its intent to de-emphasize human rights, and its resolve to contain the Soviet Union. In short, the conflict in El Salvador [was] a splendid little war, made to order for an administration determined to repudiate much of its predecessor's foreign policy.<sup>36</sup>

As has become evident over the past seven years, the situation confronting the Reagan administration in El Salvador proved more complex than it initially had envisioned.

The defeat of the FMLN's January, 1981, "final offensive" was a small beginning in an effort to bring stability to El Salvador. But both Salvadoran and American officials were concerned that American attention would wander elsewhere, leaving El Salvador to face its problems alone. Both had a vested interest in keeping El Salvador on the front pages of American newspapers. As the fighting subsided, President Duarte, then a member of the ruling junta, reminded the United States that:

This is not the end . . . We cannot call this victory. The revolutionaries have their machinery established. Their leaders are trained. They have support from abroad. They have thousands of active supporters.<sup>37</sup>

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34. LeoGrande, p. 44.

35. Russell, p. 122.

36. LeoGrande, p. 27.

37. Arnsion, p. 71.

The administration wished to continue and, if possible, increase military assistance to El Salvador. The focus throughout 1981 and into 1982 became the extent of outside involvement of the Sandinistas, Cubans, and Soviets in the training and arming of the Salvadoran rebels. The State Department came out with the now famous "White Paper" which outlined the external support provided to the FMLN.<sup>38</sup> The report declared "the insurgency in El Salvador ha[d] been progressively transformed into a textbook case of indirect aggression by communist powers."<sup>39</sup> Christopher Dickey noted:

Even if it [the White Paper] was tainted with exaggerations . . . there is no question that supply operations and planning generally were facilitated by the Salvadoran rebels' ability to maintain offices, residences and perhaps military facilities in Nicaragua.<sup>40</sup>

The administration argued that aid to El Salvador had to be maintained in order to counteract the outside support received by the Salvadoran rebels. With authority granted under Section 506(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act, President Reagan sent \$20 million in military assistance in March, 1981, thereby quadrupling the amount of military aid previously sent under President Carter.<sup>41</sup> The Nicaraguan "contra" policy was also justified using this rationale; American support for the contras was a way to interdict the arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador.

While the war in El Salvador "cooled down," the battle over aid to El Salvador in the U.S. Congress intensified. Critics said the Reagan administration was unable to provide a "coherent strategy for victory."<sup>42</sup> At the same time, early Salvadoran victories on the battlefield had changed the terms of war in El Salvador.

Faced with a devastating conventional military defeat, the rebels returned to more "conventional" guerrilla tactics. This involved a shift in strategy to strike economically important targets in the countryside such as powerlines or cropdusters.<sup>43</sup>

The Salvadoran army's victory resulted in a conflict that was harder to control and quite expensive. As a result, the Reagan administration's "splendid little war" turned out to be a difficult and draining struggle with no quick-fix solutions. For counterinsurgency to be effective, a multi-frontal assault using political, economic, psychological, and military means must be implemented. U.S. policymakers under Reagan, however, were slow to embrace a comprehensive approach. In part this was due to their early failure to properly identify the causes of the conflict, and to determine what changes should follow in order to rectify the existing conditions.

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38. Gettleman, p. 230.

39. *New York Times*, 20 February 1981.

40. Christopher Dickey, "Central America: From Quagmire to Cauldron?" *Foreign Affairs* 63 (1984): 676.

41. Gettleman, p. 228.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Colonel John Waghelstein, *El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1985), p. 17.

## THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION LEARNS

The Reagan administration's preoccupation with Soviet expansionism led to its initial failure of perception. Ambassador White summarized the U.S. policy toward Latin America as "fear of revolution."<sup>44</sup>

We must back economic, social and political change before it is too late . . . U.S. policy however, has been consistently counter-revolutionary because there has never been an effort on our part to find a non-communist model for profound and radical economic, social and political change.<sup>45</sup>

White's observations suggest that where appropriate, the United States should be at the forefront of bringing about this change peacefully and through democratic means. American policymakers must thus be more receptive to countries' needs for reform and work to encourage budding democracies, not only rhetorically but in actuality.

The first year of President Reagan's El Salvador policy was reactive. It lacked coherence and focused on El Salvador's immediate military needs rather than seeking to promote social and political reforms. However, beginning in 1982, Congress imposed a certification procedure that pressured the administration into adopting a comprehensive policy. El Salvador's feeble attempt to curb human rights abuses by the right wing and its failure to bring to trial those involved in the killing of the American churchwomen and land reform advisers, prompted harsh criticism in the U.S. Congress and led to the creation of Section 728 of the International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1981. Section 728 stipulated that:

. . . in order to supply aid to El Salvador the executive branch would have to certify that: 1) the Salvadoran government is making a concerted effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights; 2) is achieving substantial control over all elements of its armed forces to prevent their torturing and murdering Salvadoran citizens; 3) is making continued progress in implementing essential economic and political reforms, including the land reform; and 4) is committed to the holding of free elections at an early date.<sup>46</sup>

The certification process provided a basic framework for U.S. policy. It "helped show the American people that we [the Reagan administration] were making an honest attempt."<sup>47</sup> The Salvadoran leadership also became keenly aware that it had to comply, or else face a cut-off in aid. George Talbot

44. "Perspectives on El Salvador: an interview with Ambassador Robert E. White." *Fletcher Forum* 5 (Summer 1981): 383.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

46. Russell, p. 123.

47. Interview with Ralph Novak, International Affairs Specialist, Inter-American Region, at the Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., 11 March 1987.

commented that initially, "Their hearts may not have been in it, but they realized that if they were to receive aid they would have to sign on to the program."<sup>48</sup>

#### 1982 ELECTIONS: SALVADORANS RESPOND

The Salvadorans took a first step toward democracy by holding elections on March 28, 1982. By most accounts, the elections were free and fair. Congressman Robert Livingston, a member of the U.S. observer team, said: "The procedures that were implemented were as fair as any I have seen in any election."<sup>49</sup> The report issued by the OAS Election Observers noted:

The Salvadoran people have voted massively . . . Orderly and free casting of ballots without any trace of repression. The experience of these elections . . . shows that elections are possible even under the most difficult circumstances . . . A great triumph . . . The people have chosen the democratic path.<sup>50</sup>

The elections were a clear signal that the majority of the population repudiated the guerrillas and sought peace. They served as a great encouragement to U.S. policymakers by showing that there was real hope for democracy in El Salvador. And there was a high degree of American influence on the events that followed.

The '82 elections resulted in a constituent assembly in which the modern, Christian Democratic Party achieved a plurality. This led to the possibility that the right-wing "Arena" party might forge an alliance with other right-of-center groups to elect Roberto D'Aubuisson as president. D'Aubuisson, a known opponent of economic and political reforms and a supporter of right-wing extremism, was clearly an unacceptable candidate in Washington. The ensuing debate in the constituent assembly reflected intense United States pressure to select a more moderate president. U.S. congressional representatives threatened to cut off aid. In addition, U.S. Ambassador Dean Hinton "was very active in pressing for someone perceived as progressive."<sup>51</sup>

While U.S. pressure was sufficient to block a right-wing coalition, it was not sufficient to determine the outcome. Alvaro Magana, the constituent assembly's selection, was relatively unknown in U.S. circles. A former State Department official elaborates: "the day we found out the name, we were tasked to find out who he was . . . we did not set Magana up."<sup>52</sup>

48. Interview with George Talbot, Assistant for Special Planning, at the Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., 11 March 1987.

49. U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, *Presidential Certification on El Salvador*, 97th Cong., 2nd sess., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), p. 501.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 502.

51. Interview with William Wood, former El Salvador Desk Officer, Department of State, Washington, D.C., 17 October 1987.

52. *Ibid.*

## REAGAN'S "4-D" APPROACH

Continuing pressure from Congress through the certification process led the administration to declare a comprehensive strategy for El Salvador. On April 27, 1983, in a speech before a Joint Session of Congress, President Reagan outlined a plan that constituted a major turning point in American policy based on four principles: democracy, development, defense, and dialogue.<sup>53</sup>

The promotion of these four principles was consistent with American values, in tune with the problems in El Salvador and therefore acceptable to Congress and the American and Salvadoran peoples. As envisioned by the President, "democracy" would be advanced through elections and the protection of basic institutions; specifically, labor unions, the judicial system, and the press. "Development" would address socio-economic problems to provide greater government legitimacy through an elimination of structural inequalities. "Defense" would ensure that the armed opposition would not disrupt the transition to democracy or interfere with national development. Finally, Reagan proposed "dialogue," aiming at negotiations with the opposition in an effort to arrive at a peaceful settlement.

Candid admissions by Reagan administration officials, however, indicate that the fourth principle was only intended to be employed in the unlikely event that the Left decided to abandon its armed struggle and indicated a readiness to participate in the political process.<sup>54</sup> "Dialogue" would incorporate the opposition only if it wished to form a part of the existing political system. It was not a process through which to achieve peace.

But the recent Oct. 4-6, 1987, negotiations between President Duarte and the FMLN/FDR contradict this view. While observers claim the talks produced nothing new,<sup>55</sup> President Duarte announced an agreement to establish two negotiating bodies: one to continue discussion on a cease-fire; and a second to monitor compliance with the Central American peace plan signed in Guatemala two months earlier.<sup>56</sup> While negotiating positions have remained widely disparate, the two sides have at least recognized the need to institutionalize communication.

## BUILDING BIPARTISANSHIP

President Reagan's 4-D program was an attempt to remedy an initial policy failure — the neglect of a comprehensive strategy. Once Congress asserted its ability to tie aid to human rights and political progress, the president was forced to address the concerns of Democrats and Republicans alike in order to pursue his goals in the region.

A second element to achieving bipartisan support for President Reagan's new policies was his establishment of the National Bipartisan Commission on

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53. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Central America: Defending Our Vital Interests*, by President Ronald Reagan, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 4.

54. George Talbott, 11 March 1987.

55. William Branigin, "Salvadorans Negotiate for a Second Day," *Washington Post*, 6 Oct. 1984.

56. *Ibid.*

Central America in November, 1983. Headed by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the Commission's purpose was to determine the roots and nature of the problems in the region and to "provide advice" on how to best approach these issues.<sup>57</sup>

Ironically, the administration's new policy included most of the elements advocated by the Carter administration. In the words of former Ambassador Frank McNeil; "Former Ambassador Robert White innovated the policy the United States is now pursuing, however neither [White nor the Reagan administration] will admit it."<sup>58</sup>

The resurrection of President Carter's policies provoked significant resistance by conservatives in the United States. Between 1981 and 1983, bitter political battles raged within the executive and legislative branches and within the Department of State. When Stephen Bosworth and Thomas Enders, the State Department's Assistant Secretaries for Inter-American Affairs, pushed for reforms they were eased out of their jobs despite the fact that they had largely been the architects of many Salvadoran reforms. Even Reagan's appointee, Ambassador to El Salvador Dean Hinton, came under heavy criticism from conservatives for pressuring the Salvadoran military to improve its human rights record.<sup>59</sup>

He aroused the anger of some conservatives by putting strong pressure on the army to curb its involvement in killings by the death squads. In one blunt speech . . . Mr. Hinton called the judicial system 'rotten' and said that 30,000 Salvadoran civilians had 'been murdered — not killed in battle — murdered.'<sup>60</sup>

The same article continued, "After the speech, which caused an uproar in El Salvador . . . the activity of the death squads diminished noticeably during his term . . ."<sup>61</sup> The efforts of individuals such as Hinton, Enders and Bosworth contributed to a better American policy toward El Salvador. But in addition to their efforts, "The sophistication of U.S. policy [toward El Salvador] was due to Congressional and public pressure."<sup>62</sup>

#### EL SALVADOR'S NATIONAL PLAN

The birth of a comprehensive strategy with bipartisan support in 1983 had tremendous impact in El Salvador. General John Galvin recalled "The message was becoming clear. The Salvadoran government was viewing it in its best

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57. *Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984) pp. 3-4.

58. Frank McNeil, Former U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica, interview with the author, Boston, MA. 26 March 1987.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Stephen Kinzer, "Ex-U.S. Envoy to Nicaragua may go to Costa Rica," *New York Times*, 25 April 1987.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

interests to pursue those policies created in Washington."<sup>63</sup> Even the Salvadoran right saw the efficacy of catering to the new consensus in Washington.

In an attempt to demonstrate that it was willing to move forward and leave its circumspect past behind, the Salvadoran government announced a new policy: the National Plan. Rather than attempting to overwhelm the rebels militarily, the government and military now sought to erode the guerrillas' support through a joint campaign that would demonstrate to the peasants that they were working to protect and advance their interests.

The strategy underlying the National Plan was to secure given areas militarily and then, in a joint effort with relevant civilian ministries, strengthen local authorities and help them restore public services and promote development.<sup>64</sup> This included four essentials necessary to achieve government legitimacy amongst the peasantry: agrarian reform, increased employment, restoration of vital services, and humanitarian assistance.<sup>65</sup> The program was to be carried out by the National Commission for Area Restoration (CONRA), which would coordinate the civilian and military plans with the local authorities.<sup>66</sup> For the first time the military and the civilians would integrate their efforts to combat the leftist insurgency.

Despite initial enthusiasm, observers noted that the initiative soon lacked money. "Salvador's economic plight, the elections, shortages of U.S. funds and U.S. trainers have conspired against full implementation of the plan."<sup>67</sup> But there was also much optimism. ". . . real progress has been made and the Salvadorans remain committed to . . . [its] spirit"<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the National Plan reflected sound counterinsurgency strategy. With persistent application it may bring benefits for Salvadoran democratic stability.

#### THE 1984 ELECTION: DUARTE EMERGES AS NATIONAL LEADER

The Reagan administration followed the lead of Congress and became interested in human rights. Vice President George Bush was sent in December, 1983, to denounce human rights violations. "Bush spoke harshly, without any diplomatic cushioning about the appalling number of killings."<sup>69</sup>

Thus through conflict and dialogue, the executive and legislative branches had arrived at an understanding. The certification procedures had satisfied most of those concerned with America's role in supporting the Salvadoran government. Those calling for a complete withdrawal and suspension of aid were now on the fringe. The Salvadoran presidential elections in 1984 confirmed to many that continued U.S. backing of El Salvador's effort to bring democracy to its people was worthwhile. Held on March 25, 1984, the

63. Interview with General John Galvin, Commander of U.S. Southern Command, Boston, 24 April 1987.

64. *National Plan/Unidos Para Reconstruir*, provided by the Salvadoran Embassy, (Washington, D.C., 1987), p. 1.

65. Waghelstien, p. 52.

66. *National Plan/Unidos Para Reconstruir*, p. 1.

67. Waghelstein, p. 57.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Duarte, p. 176.

elections resulted in the emergence of a charismatic, centrist leader: Jose Napoleon Duarte.

Duarte's political career in El Salvador has been long and turbulent. In 1972, he was elected President only to be deposed and exiled in a subsequent military coup. He returned to the limelight of national politics as a member of the second government junta in 1980. By 1984 his moderate views and commitment to democracy had established him as the favorite in Washington and his election convinced many skeptics on Capitol Hill that El Salvador deserved American aid.<sup>70</sup>

While Duarte was initially accepted by the Salvadoran military, it was largely because of his ability to keep American money flowing. Ambassador White referred to Duarte as: "An extremely clever politician, although he is not a master in his own house."<sup>71</sup>

### IS DUARTE IN CONTROL?

President Duarte's relationship with the military is worrying. The military still can restrict Duarte's ability to push for dramatic reforms, and can make it difficult for Duarte to govern. There are some indications, however, that the military is glad to see a return to civilian rule. U.S. Colonel Joseph Bream asserts: "Officers . . . are relieved of not having to fight an insurgency while trying to run the government."<sup>72</sup>

There seems to be a growing understanding between the military and the civilian government. Bream believes that the military is content to refrain from overt political interference as long as it is given a relatively free hand in military affairs.

. . . the longer this relationship lasts, the more comfortable the military and civilians will feel with each other. There is a need to develop mutual respect, and this process takes time.<sup>73</sup>

The current Salvadoran Ambassador to the United States, Ernesto Rivas-Gallont, concurs:

Because of the historical role of the military in my country, President Duarte has been careful not to step on its toes. Little by little he has made his presence felt. Now, there is mutual respect between the two.<sup>74</sup>

70. Interview with James Callahan, El Salvador Country Desk Officer, Department of State, Washington, D.C., 19 March 1987.

71. Interview with Robert E. White, President, International Center for Development Policy, Washington, D.C., 11 March 1987.

72. Interview with Colonel Joseph Bream, Policy Planning Staff, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Pentagon, Washington, D.C., 10 March 1987.

73. *Ibid.*

74. Interview with Ernesto Rivas-Gallont, Salvadoran Ambassador to the United States, Salvadoran Embassy, Washington, D.C., 12 March 1987.

No doubt the military understands that if it attempts to overthrow the democratically-elected government, the United States will reconsider its aid program.

A main point of contention between Duarte and the military has been the extent to which judicial reforms should proceed and how officers found guilty of past abuses should be punished. Both Duarte and the United States believe that it is essential to build a proper judicial system in order to have a sound foundation to guarantee human rights and legitimacy to Salvadoran laws. Progress has been slow. Human rights offenders in the military are assigned to posts overseas in a form of exile, or are asked to retire.<sup>75</sup>

This accommodation is insufficient if El Salvador wishes to develop a strong democracy free from fear of military takeovers. Military officers must be held accountable for their actions; they cannot be allowed to go unpunished.

The United States has sought to help El Salvador's judicial Reform Project with its own Administration of Justice project. Through this program, the United States has allocated funds for a Special Investigative Unit (SIU). The SIU was designed to help El Salvador develop more sophisticated investigative procedures, as well as basic evidence-gathering techniques.<sup>76</sup> The United States has had to struggle with its own domestic laws which previously forbade providing assistance and training for foreign countries' internal security forces.

In order to reduce right-wing violence and enhance the judicial system, Congress has consented to provide funds for the SIU. Much still needs to be done to eliminate corruption and injustice in the Salvadoran judicial system. Judicial reforms must be perceived to be an important counterinsurgency tactic if El Salvador is to have a real chance at establishing a democratic state.

#### U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY MEASURES IN EL SALVADOR

U.S. counterinsurgency polices are undergoing their first test in El Salvador since their failure in Vietnam. Military experts agree that the United States has learned several key lessons from its experience in Southeast Asia. Most importantly, policymakers now realize that to remain involved in a protracted struggle, intervention must have the support of Congress and the American people. This is easier to accomplish with a clearly defined policy outlining specific goals and objectives; to wit, Reagan's 4-D plan. A second lesson is that a policy must rely on the people of the contested country to be successful. If the indigenous population is not willing to fight then there is little the United States can or should to do to affect the ultimate outcome.

Acting on this lesson, the U.S. Congress has placed a 55-adviser limit on the U.S. military, thereby ensuring that Salvadorans, not Americans, do the fighting. Beneficial effects have resulted from this stricture. First, limiting U.S. direct involvement has forced American trainer/advisers to search for the most efficient means of fighting an insurgency. Second, the limit has greatly

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75. Ambassador Rivas-Gallont, 12 March 1987.

76. U.S. Department of State, "Briefing Paper on the El Salvador Special Investigative Unit," 27 February 1987, p. 1.

reduced the chances of American soliders being killed in hostilities. Third, the integrity of the indigenous Salvadoran military has been maintained by minimizing direct American management of the conflict.

The United States has made significant progress in its ability to comprehend the roots of conflict. Economic disparities, corruption, repression, and basic lack of political, social and economic freedoms can contribute to violent uprisings. The complex nature of revolution makes it impossible to create a model that accurately predicts when a revolution will take place, or for that matter what can prevent one from occurring. As the Reagan administration painfully discovered, a simplistic explanation is rarely sufficient.

The study of revolution and counterrevolution is best conducted on a case-by-case basis. Counterinsurgency strategy cannot be seen merely as a military task. Colonel Mauricio Ernesto Vargas, Salvadoran military commander in the Eastern Department of Morazan Province notes:

You can see a qualitative change in the components of the armed forces. For the first five years of the war, our efforts were 80 percent military and 20 percent political. Now that's reversed. If we don't attack the causes of the insurrection, instead of only the communists, the problem will last forever. The priorities are the peasants displaced by the war, agrarian reform and human rights.<sup>77</sup>

Such comments indicate that Salvadoran and American decision-makers have become aware of the need to develop a multi-pronged counterinsurgency policy. It is not necessary to physically eliminate the guerrillas. Instead, the government can attempt to erode their support and encourage rebels to abandon the movement. Colonel Wahgelstein remarks:

Fortunately for El Salvador the degree of popular support for the guerrillas remains low, due primarily to the alternatives provided by agrarian and other reforms as well as the beginnings of a real democratic system.<sup>78</sup>

Intelligence is essential to combatting a guerrilla group. This holds true particularly when the opposition is losing and thus forced to carry out carefully planned "high impact" strikes which rely heavily on terrorist-like methods.<sup>79</sup> The military also has to keep the rebels on the defensive. Without a permanent base of operations, it becomes extremely difficult for insurgents to operate. The chaos that results from continuous mobilization complicates communication and undermines a group's ability to coordinate and execute strikes against key economic or military targets. In El Salvador, the military has gradually been improving its intelligence capabilities and has made efforts to secure areas while trying to keep the guerrillas on the move.

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77. Bennett, p. 1.

78. Wahgelstein, p. 60.

79. Interview with Colonel John A. Cash, Latin American Division, Defense Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense, 9 March 1987.

Also essential to effective counterinsurgency is discipline among government troops and a clear understanding that they are working to protect the people from the enemy. American emphasis on providing Salvadoran soldiers with human rights training is vital to this effort. The *Boston Globe* reports:

U.S. pressure has been credited for greater professionalism in the armed forces reflected in a reduction of human rights abuses, a military advantage against the guerrillas and the apparent support of democracy by officers.<sup>80</sup>

Yet, as Colonel Bream indicated, such changes are incremental:

People are not going to change overnight. There is . . . a generational problem. That is, although today military men are being taught to respect human rights, there are many out on the field that have not received this training. However, they are coming to understand that it is in their best interest to curb human rights abuses.<sup>81</sup>

Although officials may counsel patience, the certification process which attempts to ensure that progress is made must be applied rigorously. The overall counterinsurgency strategy in El Salvador is one which tries to reduce the guerrillas to ineffectiveness while absorbing the moderate opposition into the political system. The Salvadoran government is interested in luring away the FDR (the leftists' political wing) from the FMLN (military wing). However, even if it is successful, the fighting will not stop immediately because the FDR does not control the more radical FMLN. If the split does take place, the FMLN may lose legitimacy and hence support. Revolutionary movements are heavily dependent on ideology for recruitment. Thus, without a political agenda, the guerrilla group would be reduced to its fanatical, hard core members.

#### WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR EL SALVADOR?

Ambassador Rivas recently remarked, "Without U.S. aid, El Salvador would not have been able to accomplish a fraction of what it has."<sup>82</sup> American aid, however, has yet to bring an end to insurgency, nor is it likely to do so for some time to come. In the immediate term, El Salvador's future remains uncertain. Economic and political goals have yet to be achieved.

On Oct. 10, 1986, a major earthquake caused great damage to the Salvadoran economy. This, combined with continued guerrilla attacks on the nation's fragile economic infrastructure, led one regional expert to remark, ". . . our ability to win in El Salvador will be determined by whether or not the economy can be restored."<sup>83</sup> Adds the current Salvadoran Desk officer at

80. Bennett, p. 1.

81. Colonel Joseph Bream, 10 March 1987.

82. Ambassador Rivas-Gallont, 12 March 1987.

83. General John Galvin, 24 April 1987.

the Department of State, "Politically, one can be optimistic because El Salvador is on the path toward democracy. However, the economy may be the problem, and the guerrillas will exploit it."<sup>84</sup>

If the economic development of El Salvador is to continue, tactical counterinsurgency measures must place the rebels on the defensive. This will require continued American aid, including military advisers. In addition, land reform must continue. Phase II must be fully implemented and the gains of Phases I & III must be consolidated.

The able and charismatic leadership of President Duarte has been crucial to the democratic progress of the last eight years. But the Salvadoran Constitution stipulates that the president is not allowed to hold consecutive terms. Thus, Duarte will have to step down at the end of his term in 1988. Who will emerge as the nation's new leader? Duarte, with his limited power, has been able to pull his nation together during difficult times. He has managed almost single-handedly to convince the U.S. Congress that the Salvadoran quest for democracy is genuine and worthy of American assistance. Will his successor have the same commitment and ability?

American pressure has been sufficient to move Salvador in the direction of moderate progressive solutions. The forces of reaction, the land owners and right wing elements of the military, have acquiesced in this change out of necessity. They believe that much needed aid is, and will continue to be, contingent upon progress on the economic and democratic fronts. American policy should seek to reinforce this belief. The Presidential certification process must continue to be a vital part of U.S. policy.

But progressive change in El Salvador will be made only as long the Salvadoran elites feel that American aid is essential to their survival. Ideally, El Salvador will someday achieve sufficient stability to allow it to function without U.S. aid. On that day, the progressive changes of this decade will be put to the test. To ensure that gains will be enduring, the U.S. must continue to bolster moderate civilian leadership and economic and judicial reforms; Salvadoran leaders must come to believe that such changes are essential to long-term economic health and political stability.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

The transition from President Carter to President Reagan was accompanied by an abrupt change in American foreign policy toward El Salvador. Hindsight reveals the short-sightedness of President Reagan's attempt to achieve a quick victory over the insurgents by providing massive military aid and removing contingency restraints from the military. The Reagan administration, in seeking to reverse the relative decline in U.S. power that began with the defeat in Vietnam, fell into the Cold War trap of emphasizing regional stability over economic and social justice. The failure of this initial policy demonstrated the

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84. James Callahan, 9 March 1987.

fallacy of the administration's perception that conflict in El Salvador had external rather than internal roots.

Protracted conflict, as well as substantial prodding from Congress, removed the ideological blinders from administration policymakers and allowed local needs to be addressed. In subsequent policies, Reagan has borrowed from the Carter administration, ensuring a moderate political center, human rights and agrarian reform through stipulations that have made U.S. aid contingent upon progressive structural improvements. The result has been a comparatively more successful synthesis of the Reagan and Carter approaches.

Historians might draw several lessons from the American experience in El Salvador. First, they will quite likely affirm the American political truism that in costly, protracted conflicts where continued funding requires Congressional approval, consensus cannot be ignored. As happened during the Vietnam War, the American political system has worked to bring foreign policy in line with consensual political wisdom.

Second, historians will note the growing maturity of Congress and the American electorate as they have come to reenvision American foreign policy as a tool for non-violent progressive structural change rather than a fund for the maintenance of an oppressive status quo. American idealism has always been a rhetorical component of foreign policy. In El Salvador, however, this rhetoric has been given life, for it is through its actualization rather than its frustration that U.S. security objectives are being achieved.

Such a congruence of idealism and security, however, must be noted with one caveat. Americans like to think that their ideals are universal in nature; that their implementation will meet with a warm reception anywhere in the world. In El Salvador, however, implementing American ideals has required the application of an inordinate amount of influence in local political and economic affairs. So far, the interests of Salvadoran democracy have largely matched U.S. interests. When these interests diverge, however, U.S. policymakers must act with restraint if they are to maintain the cooperation and friendship of the Salvadoran people.

