

FORUM INTERVIEW

Perspectives on El Salvador: an interview with Ambassador Robert E. White

The current situation in El Salvador is still in a state of violent turmoil. The Honorable Robert E. White, who has held many diplomatic posts including Deputy United States Representative to the Organization of American States, U.S. Ambassador to Paraguay, and, until the beginning of this year, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, agreed to talk to the FORUM about El Salvador and current U.S. policy toward that country. This interview complements the Harris-Espinosa study which appears on pp. 295-319 of this issue. Ambassador White defines U.S. objectives in El Salvador and argues that any imposed solution to the present crisis which does not take cognizance of the political realities in El Salvador and which is not founded on the moral element of foreign policy which the American people demand, will only exacerbate the conflict. Mr. White graduated from The Fletcher School in 1954 and is presently Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

FORUM: Could you outline the U.S. role in Central America, our national interests in the area, and the objectives of U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador?

WHITE: The U.S. is a world power and power is not something that can be turned off or on. Power is something that is reflected in action. We have always played a role in the countries of Central America. Through our economic assistance, we have helped create an economic elite of great power. Through military assistance we have helped create a powerful military machine with the capacity to kill. At this point, having established these power centers, we cannot abandon such countries to the control of those elites and the control of the military. I would say it is inevitable that the U.S. is going to play a role in El Salvador and in Central America simply because the historical relationship which has built up between the government of the United States and the governments of Central America. However, there is a crucial difference be-

tween an Administration which emphasizes human rights, which withholds military assistance because those human rights standards are not met, which urges a negotiated solution between the factions, and an Administration which specifically states that counter-terrorism is taking the place of human rights and a military solution is the only answer to the problem of factions.

In foreign policy, you are trying to affect the margin, not the whole society. Failure to keep this in mind leads to the mistakes we made in Vietnam. What we should be trying to do is assist a Salvadoran leadership in setting up a government where pluralism and democracy have an opportunity to function. This seems to me a perfectly legitimate role for us. The fact is that our actions do influence them, and if we don't take an active role, and are not successful and positive in that role, then another sector of U.S. opinion which believes in what Stanley Hoffman called the "high-noon school of international diplomacy," is going to take over our policy. The Third World must accept as a fact of life that U.S. influence and Soviet influence affect the internal dynamics of their countries. Unfortunately, they must get used to this fact and find a way to live with it. We *do* influence them and, moreover, the fact that we can stimulate progress makes international diplomacy so fascinating and important. The U.S. has tremendous influence in El Salvador, and tremendous influence in Central America, but what we lack are choices. A realistic policy for the United States must be based not only on the security interests of the U.S., but also on the idealism of the American people which insists on a moral element in our foreign policy.

I would maintain that the real problem of trying to chart a course for the United States is that Americans have a tend to look for slogans instead of solutions and we don't expect complex problems to have complex answers. We think that complex questions are going to have simple, easy answers. I support the thesis that the Carter administration developed a sophisticated and intelligent policy toward Latin America which marked a departure from the policies of previous administrations. With the honorable exception of the Alliance for Progress, U.S. policy towards Latin America can be summed up in three words: fear of revolution. Because we feared revolution, we consistently opposed the forces of change while uncritically supporting dictatorships, and small economic elites. We blinked at repression and participated in the perversion of democracy throughout the hemisphere.

FORUM: Are the experiences of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the present situation in El Salvador comparable? What policy proposals would you advocate to avoid a similar outcome in El Salvador?

WHITE: We must back economic, social and political change before it is too late. There exists an extreme reaction in Nicaragua today because the country

has suffered for fifty years under an oppressive, odious dictatorship, held in place for the last twenty to twenty-five years by American support. Therefore, it is inevitable that the Nicaraguan people and their young leadership are going to feel very anti-American. It is also natural that they will feel very pro-Cuban and pro-communist because those are the people who helped them in the crunch.

My point is that in El Salvador there is still time. Despite the abuses of the security forces in El Salvador, we are not supporting an odious dictatorship. We are supporting a government that with men in it who have authentic democratic credentials and who want to bring about profound change. We should supply them, but we must realize that the military assistance we send to this government is simultaneously undercutting the civilian leadership. It increases the importance of the military leadership, makes the civilian leadership irrelevant, and causes a general shift to the right. We are going to be successful in El Salvador to the extent that we back revolutionary change. When we stop backing revolutionary change, we will start to lose, because the people are then going to perceive the government as a facade for reinstating the old order. If the scenario of Nicaragua is to be avoided, we must keep this in mind when determining how we lend our support.

FORUM: Could you explain the contrast between the Carter and Reagan Administration foreign policies toward El Salvador, in particular the new portrayal of El Salvador as an arena of East-West confrontation?

WHITE: I believe the Reagan Administration thought there was no easier place than El Salvador to demonstrate its virility. They wanted to demonstrate to the world the difference between the "soft" human rights-oriented Carter administration, and the new, "tough," dynamic Reagan Administration which explicitly divorced human rights from military assistance. Since the Reagan administration has taken office, we have had South African generals, Chilean generals, Guatemalan generals, and the new president of Argentina visiting Washington; yet, a democratic leader from Latin America has yet to darken the door of the White House. I think that the new Administration is very busy sending messages to the world about what kind of governments they are comfortable with.

At the recent non-aligned conference in New Delhi, the U.S. escaped criticism almost entirely while the U.S.S.R. came under very heavy attack primarily because of its invasion of Afghanistan. The U.S. performance looked good to the non-aligned countries, in contrast to the Soviet Union, because over the past four years we had safeguarded our security interests without finding it necessary to inflict a U.S. military presence on any third world country. In that area of diplomacy, we have done a creditable job over the last four years.

The Soviet Union has not responded to its national security problems in a comparable way. Compare the problems we face in Latin America to the problems the U.S.S.R. confronts in Eastern Europe as a dramatic illustration of the contrast.

FORUM: What impact does this U.S. idealism have on the prospects for revolution in Latin America in general and El Salvador in particular?

WHITE: The fact that we have an open society, that so many Latin Americans come here to study — any number of considerations that you can list for yourself — has had a tremendously important impact. For example, the only real revolutions that have occurred in Latin America have taken place in countries close to the U.S.: Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua. This is because American democracy has had a greater impact in our “neighborhood” than it has had in Argentina or Paraguay. The most subversive doctrine in Latin America is not communism, but democracy. The military dictators of the world fear democracy more than anything else, and this is why they were so opposed to our human rights policy. The human rights policy acted as a litmus test to distinguish between people who said they were anti-communist only to gain our backing in order to stay in power and leaders who were anti-communist but shared authentic Western values. U.S. policy, however has been consistently counter-revolutionary because there has never been any effort on our part to find a non-communist model for profound and radical economic, social and political change. Naturally those who had been persecuted in and exiled from their own countries turned to Cuba, because there was nowhere else to turn. The problem I see in the new Administration’s response to El Salvador, is that it does not — or does not want to — understand the nature of revolution. It views all problems in the East-West context and seems to have no idea that revolutions would occur whether the Soviet Union or Cuba existed or not.

FORUM: Could you explain the decision-making dynamics of the Salvadoran junta, specifically by elaborating the relationship between the civilian and military members and describing the ability of the civilian leadership to enact socio-economic reform over military opposition?

WHITE: The civilians run the government on a day-to-day basis. But, if, for example, the civilians wanted to put into effect the second stage of the land reform, they would have to request the military to approve the initiation of the second stage of the land reform. The military do listen to the civilians and they often consult the U.S. ambassador or the Venezuelan ambassador, who also is an important supporter of the government. But in the end, the military makes the decision; and if the military decided that they could not back the second

stage of the land reform, it would not be initiated. Basically, the military, specifically the rank and file military officers, are very reluctant revolutionaries. They are unwilling to accept a total break with the past particularly at the pace at which the civilians want to put it into effect. The efforts at socio-economic reform by the first junta were founded on the naiveté, innocence or inexperience of the civilians. They really believed that they could change the reality that had been sustained for over fifty years in two and a half months. Somewhat more realistically, the Christian Democrats understand that it will take years, not days and weeks, to change the reality of El Salvador.

FORUM: It has been reported that the Carter administration knew as early as summer 1980 that Nicaragua was being used as a transshipment point for Soviet arms to El Salvador. However, the Nicaraguan role in arms supplies did not become widely publicized until the beginning of the Reagan Administration. Could you explain this differing treatment of the same phenomena by two different Administrations?

WHITE: First of all, those reports are not all that accurate because they are based on military intelligence which has a talent for discovering military equipment at various stages on its way to a destination, but which rarely finds these weapons actually arriving in a country. We had these reports constantly, but never any proof that it was more than a trickle, and not enough to distort the fact that the Salvadoran conflict was essentially domestic. Unfortunately, in December, the Sandinistas of Nicaragua thought they could consolidate their revolution by presenting the new Administration with not one revolutionary country in Central America, but two. They listened to and believed the claims of Salvadoran insurgents that the people were ready to rise up and seize power. This capacity for self-deception among revolutionaries is infinite, and that is why I believe that the captured documents are really little more than an exercise in leftist self-deception. I'm not really sure how much reality is reflected in those documents although I do believe that Libya, Ethiopia and Viet Nam have contributed importantly to the rebel cause.

FORUM: How much credibility do you give to the reports which state that as much as four-fifths of the arms being funneled to the left come from gun runners in Florida, California, and Texas?

WHITE: I believe that this country is clearly the most important supplier of arms to revolutionary movements. But the problem is not where to get the arms, but how to get the arms in. It is common knowledge that arms may be purchased here in the U.S. and shipped out of the country in trunks. This is done all the time; it's very simple to evade the Federal restrictions unless you're

talking about huge commercial quantities which require State Department licenses. It's still relatively easy to buy arms not only in the U.S., but also in Costa Rica, which has become, in effect, the arms merchant of Central America.

FORUM: A number of people have suggested an historical analogy between our involvement in El Salvador and the events that lead to our involvement in Vietnam. Is this analogy fitting?

WHITE: No, the scenario will not develop in the same way. I think that the Vietnam analogy holds in the sense that, as in Vietnam, there is an authentic revolution going on in El Salvador, and the United States believes that it can impose a military solution on that complex problem. Unless we are careful we could be dragged down into a quagmire. The situation in El Salvador has to be solved by the Salvadorans themselves. We can help, but we can't impose a military or any other kind of solution on them. However, El Salvador will not become a "Vietnam" simply because the logistical problem is far less complex. It's much more likely to become our Afghanistan than our Vietnam.

FORUM: In April, Secretary Haig speculated that "the facts are not in" on the American nuns that were murdered. Could you share with us your personal reactions to Haig's statements?

WHITE: References by Secretary Haig to running of roadblocks by the American churchwomen bear no relationship to the known facts. In the first place, those women would not have been running guns. I knew them and that was absolutely the last thing in the world that they would have done. Secondly, any references to pistol-packing nuns, to me, is in bad taste. Everyone in El Salvador knows what happened. The security forces were looking for Sister Ita Ford. She was a Maryknoll nun who worked in Chalatenango, one of the provinces where the revolution is hardest fought. She had gone to Nicaragua and that in itself proved her to be a communist. The security forces were waiting for her to come back, and the other three had the bad luck to be with her. It would take the wildest imagination to think it was anyone other than the security forces who intercepted them. The funeral of the slain leftist leaders, Enrique Alvarez Cordoba and the others, was scheduled the next day, and large contingents of foreigners were coming to pay their respects. Security all around the airport area was very tight. What happened was clear: the security forces ran these people off the road, put them into their vehicle, carried them about an hour away from the airport to a dead-end road, and shot them. The farmers I talked to, said that they heard shots around midnight. At 6:00 a.m. the next morning the security forces had already organized a burial detail made up of

campesinos. Then, two days later the security forces told us that they had no idea where these people were. It's simply idle to think that there is any investigation. The authorities know who did it. It would be easy to ask four enlisted men to take the blame and ease public opinion but the problem is that higher level persons are almost certainly involved. I really doubt there will ever be a serious investigation or any credible results.

FORUM: How moderate is the junta, and what fundamental policy differences separate it from the opposition?

WHITE: I think that if you're speaking in terms of reform, that this is not a moderate government; rather it is a very radical government. This is a government that has taken the land away from the fourteen families that held it for a century and driven them into exile. There is nothing moderate about a government that takes away the power of the economic elite and nationalizes the banks and the export sector. Those actions are not ordinarily considered moderate actions in the context of the kind of government the U.S. would support. You have to recognize that there is little difference between Guillermo Manuel Ungo and Jose Napoleón Duarte. If Ungo and Duarte would sit down together, and each one were in total control of their respective group, this thing could be settled very quickly. They are both committed democrats and men of good will, but there are several factors that must be taken into consideration. The security forces have a propensity to kill. All the people who are part of the Frente who are not armed have to live outside El Salvador for their own protection. Ungo and his group are outside El Salvador for fear of assassination. The leftist guerrillas who are inside El Salvador are really not under the command or control of the Frente. These people are revolutionaries in the sense that they believe that to achieve social regeneration you must take power by violence. They reject politics as a means of solving community problems. But, politics is a necessary part of the machinery of civilization. This is the essential similarity of Ungo and Duarte: they both have terrible problems with their respective military machines which presently overshadow their mutual commitment to democracy.

FORUM: Some analysts are saying that with Colonel Gutierrez serving as commander-in-chief of the military, Duarte is nothing more than an adornment to the junta. Would you agree with that point of view?

WHITE: The political history of the government of El Salvador for the last year or so has been one of struggle: struggle of the civilian component to gain some kind of ascendancy, some kind of control over the military. Now, to some extent this was accomplished during the Carter administration. It is difficult to

assess, but you can clearly say that the influence of the civilians was increasing. The problem with sending in military assistance and advisors is that both Duarte and the Minister of Defense explicitly stated they did *not* want such assistance because it undercuts the civilian component of the government and the moderate military officers, while appealing to the very sector which commits most of the human rights violations. When you're talking about Latin America and its ultimate power centers, you do well to think of the military as a separate political party which speaks not with rhetoric but with guns. Some key military officers are willing to give up political power. But they're not going to do it unless we press them by helping the civilians and the moderate military officers, the few that are left, to achieve this end. I'm not at all confident that this end is going to be achieved, but I think that when we linked human rights performance to military assistance, the possibility of achieving this objective was greater. As soon as you remove this linkage, you seriously undercut the authority of the civilians.

FORUM: Presently, there are over one thousand refugees in El Salvador requesting temporary political asylum in the U.S. until the situation in El Salvador clears. The Reagan administration has been very slow in processing these requests. They have indicated that they may be opposed to such asylum. Is this due to the fact that they are afraid of a situation akin to the Cuban exodus, or are they afraid that offering political asylum would undermine U.S. support of the junta?

WHITE: I wish I knew how to answer that. I know how to criticize that policy but I don't know what a correct policy should be. A criticism of this policy is that anybody who comes from Cuba is automatically a *bona fide* political refugee and hence, a political weapon to turn against Cuba. But, if you're fleeing El Salvador, you are considered an economic refugee with no political significance. Clearly, that is an unfair measuring stick. On the other hand, it is true, that a great many Salvadorans are trying to get to the U.S. not only because there is political violence, but also because economic opportunity is diminished and they want to emigrate to prosperity here. How do you come up with a rational way of handling politically inspired immigration into the U.S.? I know that in the long run, the answer must get back to the reasons why we have to exercise our power and influence events. The answer in the long run is to drop tariffs and give special access to the products of developing countries so that their economies can grow. We must export prosperity from the U.S. to the near neighborhood and stop importing poverty in the form of illegal immigrants. But that's not going to happen overnight and in the meantime, you have this terrible problem to which, frankly, I have no adequate answer.

FORUM: Could you comment on what the future will bring to the present situation in El Salvador?

WHITE: I think that the outcry of the American people against the placing of military advisors in El Salvador has had the effect of dramatically changing the original plan of this Administration. To the extent that the American people keep pressure on their elected representatives, and on the White House, to keep the U.S. military out of Central America, the future could be encouraging. We must let the Central Americans solve their own problems, while lending our economic assistance and encouragement for democratic solutions. This optimism, however, cannot be maintained as long as the Reagan Administration emphasizes a military solution. It cannot go on rejecting calls from groups such as the Democratic Socialists of Europe which have offered to act as intermediaries to bring about a negotiated solution. Unfortunately, the Administration's record thus far does not suggest that things will change. The record of the last two months speaks for itself: to a government pleading for economic assistance to carry out reforms, we are providing unneeded arms; to people crying out for a negotiated solution to a horrifying violence, we have furnished military advisors; to a moderate, civilian/military leadership desperately trying to contain the excesses of their security forces, we have offered the abandonment of our human rights policy; to a weakening left that continues to demonstrate its weakness by both political and military failures, we have presented a propaganda victory by magnifying their potential threat out of all proportions; to a disbelieving world, we have trumpeted a "textbook case of indirect armed aggression by communist powers;" and to world leaders who believed that the U.S. had finally learned that counter-revolution is no answer to the complex and tragic dilemma of a people determined to transform their country, we have responded with cold war rhetoric and big stick diplomacy.