

# RISING TO REBELLION

Inside El Salvador

by T. D. Allman

**T**HE CAMPESINOS AROUND Aguilares, a dusty, terror-stricken little district town an hour's drive up the Troncal del Norte from the American-style shopping centers of San Salvador, have a saying. If Christ landed at El Salvador's new international airport on the Pacific slope, the maxim runs, He would be arrested before He reached Aguilares.

In this, as in many other things, the harassed and emaciated people I met there seemed preternaturally charitable toward their government, and filled with an optimism their circumstances hardly appeared to support. These days, any fate in El Salvador so civilized as mere arrest and detention must be counted a miracle akin to walking on the waters of Lake Ilopango, or land for the landless multiplying like loaves and fishes in the overpopulated, dirt-poor hills of Chalatenango and Morazan. More likely, if inquiries on the disappearance of the Messiah were made, the Salvadoran authorities would report that there was no record of anyone with the name "Christ, Jesus" even passing through customs.

The missing person, a member of the ruling junta would explain, had no doubt used a false passport to enter the country illegally, along with all the other communists, Jesuits, and Sandinistas who were out to destabilize progress in El Salvador, thus imperiling United States strategic interests in Central America and, of course, subverting the entire free world.

The International Red Cross would close its dossier, the State Department profess satisfaction with the junta's report. Only later would the body be discovered, beside the uncompleted airport superhighway, or in the parking lot of a Kentucky Fried Chicken stand in the capital. The victim's severed tongue and genitals and gouged-out eyes would take the place of a crown of thorns, the dismembered arms and legs would have been formed into a cross. The Gothic lettering on the sign attached to the body would be similar to the inscriptions left on thousands of other corpses all over El Salvador: "This is the fate of the communist subversives. Death to Cuba. Death to Russia. Death to the enemies of freedom."

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Behind the lines

IT WAS MY LAST full day in El Salvador, and I had traveled to Aguilares in hope of meeting some "guerrillas" and making contact with "the revolutionary front." It seemed my last chance to come face to face with that momentous struggle that makes front-page headlines almost daily now in the United States. Did the United States (as one American newspaper editorial put it last autumn) face the choice of either summoning "the will to counter Cuba's escalating intervention" or accepting "the tragedy, and the consequences, of a solidly Marxist Central America"?

Such were the issues of consequence that brought me to Aguilares, but the problem in Aguilares was the same problem as the problem in the capital and in the rest of El Salvador. However diligently one searched for significance, one found only terrorized, hapless people—abused, barefoot women with no food or medicine for their malnourished children; landless, jobless, illiterate men and boys fleeing for their lives from the "security forces" of their own national government; mutilated bodies beside the road. There, near the center of town, was the outpost of the Guardia Civil, which people passed hurriedly, their eyes averted lest some involuntary gesture excite the curiosity of the police and spell their doom. There was the dusty square filled with listless men; the few begging children; the "motel"—the Salvadoran term for the local brothel—near the main highway, with the Mercedes of one of the district notables parked outside. There was the ORDEN spy stationed outside the church, peering through black sunglasses, carefully noting those so

reckless as to compromise themselves in the eyes of the regime by attending Mass. On the outskirts of town stood a small wooden cross, marking the place where the local priest had been murdered when he tried to organize the town's landless farm laborers. After the priest's death, I was told, the cross had taken root, and then sprouted leaves; surely this, the campesinos agreed, bespoke the invincibility of faith, the inevitability of salvation, the certainty of resurrection.

We had abandoned the car in a blind of bamboo stalks, and were picking our way through a no man's land of felled trees and drainpipes laid across the dirt road, of punji sticks made of sharpened branches and planted, like some experimental crop, in shallow excavations. Anything they could find in their huts or fields, or take from the forest that might be of use, the campesinos had gathered together and attempted to interpose between themselves and the jeeps and armored cars of the soldiers who came, periodically, like blight on the coffee harvest or typhoons from the Pacific, to torture their lives at moments they could not predict, and for reasons of which they had no understanding. After a few minutes I could sense we were not walking alone. The rustling of the trees became a rustling apart from the trees; then the rustling became a series of shadows and the shadows grew into silent forms that appeared on the trail in front of us, behind us, on both sides. The "insurgent forces," as they are described in the official communiqués, had a few flintlocks among them, but their main weapons were machetes; and they seemed as thin as their own machetes. One youth had tried to fashion a kind of uniform from an old pair of khaki pants and a safari shirt. He wore a beret and had a crucifix strung around his neck. Like most of the others, he had no boots.



Susan Meiselas/Magnum

THE TRAIL LED to a clearing. At the head of the clearing, many years ago, during the time the Americans had said El Salvador must have an Alliance for Progress, the government had built a cinder-block one-room building there and called it a school. But it had been years since the government had sent books or teachers. All that remained now were a few broken school benches and a rusted plaque proclaiming the devotion of a forgotten dictator to the emancipation of his people. We sat and waited on one of the benches, and then, quite rapidly, the reverse of what happens when the Salvadoran army mounts one of its counterinsurgency offensives happened to us. Instead of

vanishing into the forest, a whole village—old men, grandmothers leading boys and girls, mothers carrying infants, more men with machetes—emerged out of the forest from every direction and converged around us. A few came on horseback. All the rest walked; most had no shoes.

“What is this thing you call a ‘guerrilla’?” one of the men wanted to know. When it was explained to him, he said: “I would like to become a guerrilla, and have boots, and a uniform to wear, and a gun. Then when the soldiers came, I could fire back. I would not have to run and hide in the forest.” Another of the men had heard that beyond the mountains where El Salvador becomes Honduras, beyond even the other sea on the other side of Honduras, there existed a country that might give them boots and uniforms and guns, called Cuba. But how could one get to that place? Even when one went to Aguilares to attend Mass, the Guardias took you, and tortured you, and killed you; and Cuba was much more distant—farther away than the capital, even than the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps our apparition here—the apparition of our shoes with their leather soles, of our clean, unpatched clothing, of our cameras and tape recorders—might be, like the leaves sprouting from the cross, the sign of a miracle. “Can you tell us, please, sir,” an old man asked, “how we might contact these Cubans, and inform them of our need, so that they might help us?”

So even here, in this clearing in the forest, there was nothing remarkable. Our *nada* which art in *nada*, *nada* be thy *nada* . . . . Wasn't that the way Hemingway once put it? Same language, another war; the dateline might have an exotic ring: BEHIND GUERRILLA LINES, SOMEWHERE IN EL SALVADOR. But this village was just another typical part of the country, like the university with its murdered rector, like the cathedral with its murdered archbishop, like all the towns and schools and hospitals everywhere in El Salvador with their murdered priests and teachers and doctors. Looted hovels, crops burned before they could fail; the child standing next to me was so blond I took him for the descendant of some conquistador from Castile, until I looked into his shrunken, dark eyes. Everywhere around us the forest was a profusion of stout-limbed trees and exuberant vines, of gaudy flowers preening themselves in the mid-morning sun; and it was a childhood of no meat, no vegetables, no milk—not even *frijoles*, only dry tortillas—that had turned his hair white at seven and given him the look of some grave little Bourbon duke peering out from a gilt-framed canvas hung on a Prado wall.

## A village of fear

THE MAN WHO WAS SPEAKING had been tortured twice, so his face had a tic. It was the tic that made me realize the only beautiful places I had seen in El Salvador were the graveyards. Whether they are the crypts of the murdered wealthy—as ostentatious as the fortified villas of the San Salvador oligarchs—or the wooden markers of the murdered poor, as humble as the shanties in which they lived in life, the cemeteries of El Salvador glisten with color and sparkle with life. The tombs are painted bright pink or deep green or pastel blue, and even the graves of the humblest peasants are blanketed in bright tropical flowers. In a land where death waits at the bus stop, sits next to you in darkened cinema halls, and rings doorbells every night, the graveyards had become celebrations of life—places where at last children could be near their fathers, and lovers lie together with nothing to fear from this world.

“The last time, they came in a helicopter,” a woman was explaining, “and used it to show the soldiers on the ground where we were. They also threw grenades out the windows, and pushed bombs that made the fields burn out the door of the helicopter.” Only the campesinos' poverty made them different from the well-informed sources of the capital; these people were the same as others everywhere in El Salvador, even those who owned automobiles and had university degrees. Outsiders might perceive some pattern in their catastrophe; they only knew that to be a Salvadoran was to be born with a ticket in a national lottery of death. One woman had given birth four hours before the soldiers came. She had hidden under leaves in the rain for three days without food, and the infant died. Another woman told about her sister, raped and mutilated before they let her die.

When I asked them if they were revolutionaries, the villagers all raised their hands. “To be a revolutionary,” one man explained, “is to fight against the soldiers who kill people who have committed no crime.” They were asked for a definition of social justice, and another person said: “With that thing, we would be paid for the work we do, and if we had to walk very far to work in some field, we would have some place to sleep there and something to eat, if it was too far to walk home again and back before the next day's work began.” “If we had a revolution,” a woman added, “even people like us could eat meat sometimes, on feast days or at weddings.” A young mother said that with a revolution

“To be a Salvadoran was to be born with a ticket in a national lottery of death.”

the hospital in Aguilares would be open to all children, not just those whose parents had ORDEN identity cards. "For example," she elaborated, "if your child had diarrhea, you could take him to the pharmacist, and the pharmacist could sell you medicine without getting beaten by the Guardias."

"That is why we would like to be guerrillas," the man with the tic concluded. Like so many other people in El Salvador, these campesinos had been pushed across a threshold. They had begun as a group of devout Catholic laity, organizing themselves into what in Spanish is called a *comunidad de base*, and might best be translated as a grassroots congregation, in order to pray, study the Bible, and use Christian principles to improve their lives. Using nonviolent methods, they had sought the objective, never attained, of a daily wage of \$3.50.

**A**T FIRST ONLY their leaders were harassed, beaten, and tortured. Then, as one of them put it, "the strict repression began." Whole families were driven from their homes into the marginal forest. Men who sought work, even at landowners' wages, were killed on sight. "At first we could still go into town," the youth in the beret explained, "to get food or medicine, but then they began killing any man who showed his face in the market, so we would send our sisters or wives. They started killing them, so we sent the children, and last week they killed an eight-year-old girl. Her brother was sick, and her mother had sent her to the market with the few coins she had left. She hoped to buy an egg."

"I saw it happen in Nicaragua too," a Catholic nun later remarked when I told her the story of the boy in the beret, the murdered girl, and the egg. "There is this myth that revolution is inevitable in Central America. The astonishing thing is that revolutions ever occur at all. The truth is that even the most oppressed people will do anything they can to avoid having to fight. I've heard peasants and university professors repeat the identical thing to themselves: 'There must be some other way, there must be some other way.'"

In the forest clearing, I asked the campesinos if they had not forsaken Christ, who preached peace and love, and embraced Marx, who believed progress could only come through violence and conflict. "I do not know what Marx did," one man replied. "I know Our Lord and Saviour drove the Pharisees from the temple when they desecrated it. Have we not the duty to imitate Him, even here

in Aguilares?" As I walked back down the trail, I had, for the first time, I think, not just the knowledge that there are people who cannot read and write but the sense of what it means to grasp the realities of the world as an illiterate understands them. "It is good that journalists come to El Salvador," one of the men with machetes said, "but you should not just visit our country. You should live here." I agreed that journalists wrote much better stories when they lived in the countries about which they wrote, but that had not been what he meant. "If you lived in San Salvador," he explained, "you could hide Christian people in your house and the Guardias could not find them, and you could bring us food and medicine and guns in your car."

What were the patterns I typed on pieces of paper, my faith that it was the moral duty of the journalist not to take sides? They were the same unimaginable abstractions to him that working eighteen hours in a canefield for a few dollars or being hunted down in the forest were to me. I said I regretted I had brought them no food or medicine. "It doesn't matter," he answered, "your presence here is proof we are not alone." But of course they were alone—figures turning back into shadows, and shadows turning back into rustlings in the forest even before our car jolted down the gravel road, away from them. We sped down the main highway back to the capital, to the hotel. There, safely before nightfall, I drank Scotch at four dollars a shot in the bar and listened to Salvadoran businessmen discussing condominiums and dollars—and then ordered a steak beside the swimming pool and watched plump, dark-eyed children splash in the water while they in turn were watched by older sisters, matronly, already wearing too much jewelry, dressed in pretty frocks bought on their last vacation trip to Miami Beach.

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### The face of Jean Donovan

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**I**HAD SUPPOSED at the time that the meeting in the forest would provide my most vivid memory of El Salvador, but I was wrong. Instead, now, when I consider what is happening in that country it is the faces of two women that return with photographic clarity. The first is the face of an American girl named Jean Donovan. As Terri Shaw of the *Washington Post*, a companion of mine on the trip to El Salvador, later wrote of Jean and her friend Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline nun: "As soon as I climbed into the van that sunny day in El Salvador last month, I knew they were from Ohio." We were jour-

nalists, late for an interview. Jean was a lay worker, but it was of much more consequence to us that she and Dorothy were driving a van that could hold us all. They used it to carry refugees, when they could, to the sanctuary behind the cathedral of San Salvador. They also used the van to meet coreligionists who arrived at the new airport near the Pacific, nearly an hour's fast drive from the center of town. All over the country the American nuns and their vehicle were a common sight—and a symbol. To the harassed, the persecuted, the wretched they were a symbol that, as the people in the forest had put it to me, they were “not alone.” And to the killers and the torturers and the spies in black sunglasses who watched, recorded, and reported the movements of the van wherever it went, they were another kind of symbol—that there were still a few people in the country who, whether because of their Christian faith or only because of their American passports, were immune to their terror. It took us only a moment to transform them into our chauffeurs.

Why does Jean's face remain so clear to me, I often wondered later. She was big and cheerful and blond, the kind of girl whom the boys in Ohio would have called bouncy or peppy, never fat. Her bulk, like her talk and gestures, conveyed buoyancy and vigor. Was it only later that I remembered her cheerfulness, the way I remembered the brilliance of those exuberant graveyards? In this land of despair she seemed made up of all the bright pastel colors, all the blankets of flowers one associates with that peculiarly Christian belief in the Resurrection. It was not the catastrophe all around her that Jean Donovan found astonishing. It was the possibility that she herself might actually be able in some way to help alleviate it that seemed to fill her constantly with amazement, and joy.

**T**HE SECOND FACE I remember belonged to the chambermaid. When I returned to my hotel room that last night in El Salvador, the maid was there. I had surprised her taking something from my desk. The little cash I had there, I told her, was of no consequence. But I wanted to see what she had slipped into the pocket of her skirt. If it was a notebook that might incriminate some of the Salvadorans I had met, she would have to give it back. She offered another solution. If I would not make her show me what she had taken, then she would compensate me for what she had taken by giving me herself. I took a step closer, and she, misinterpreting my gesture, began to unbut-

ton her blouse; then she burst into tears when she realized I had grabbed whatever it was from her pocket. I held up to the light the prize for which she had been willing to steal, willing to prostitute herself.

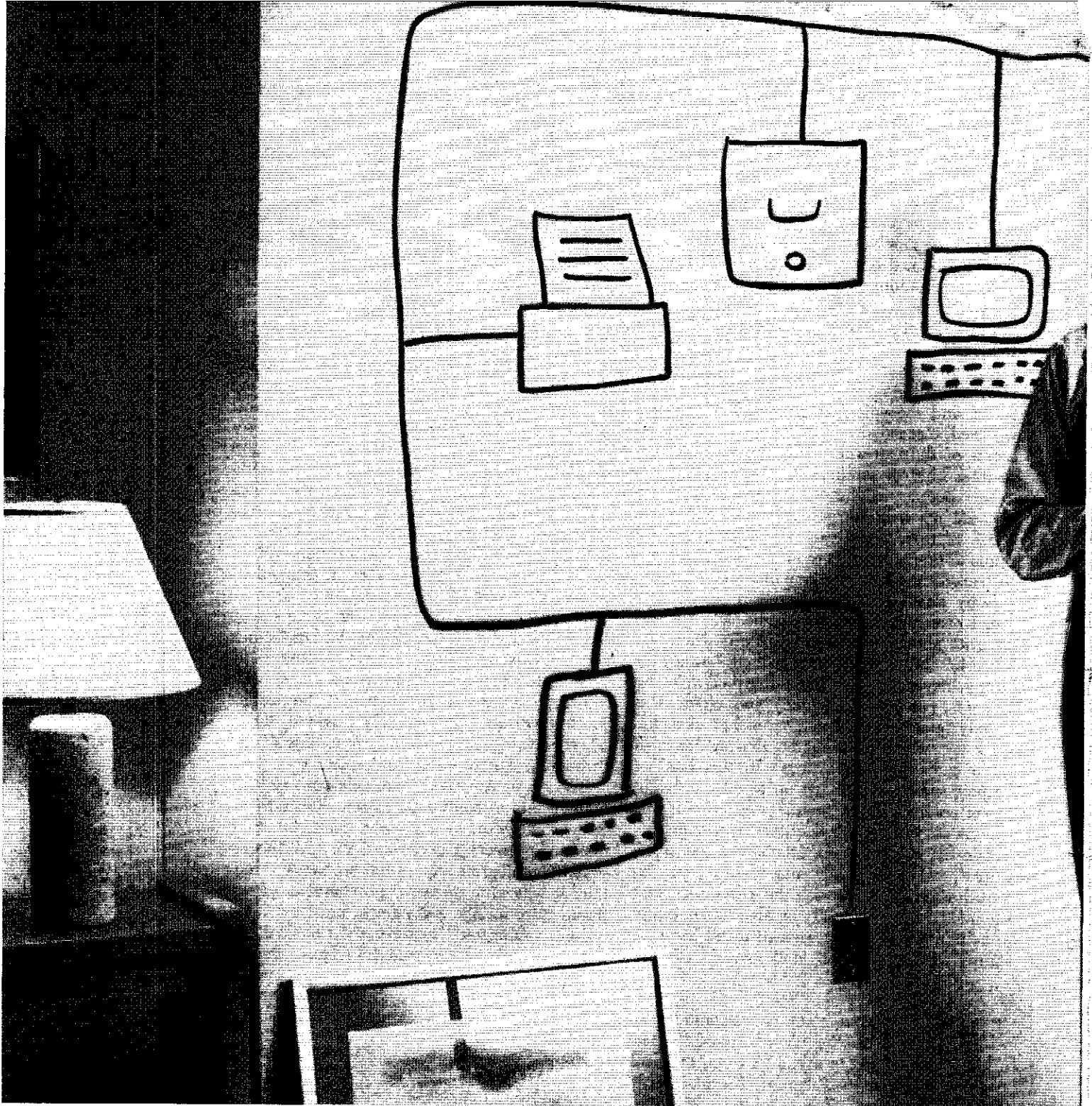
It was the engraved calling card of Colonel José Guillermo García, Minister of Defense and Public Security. By then I suppose I knew Colonel García better than I knew Jean Donovan. He was not the most feared man in El Salvador; that distinction belonged to Major Roberto D'Abuisson, leader of the death squads of the extreme right and generally considered, even by members of the country's reactionary elite, the author of the most sadistic tortures. D'Abuisson, against whom the Salvadoran authorities have never taken any action, is also widely believed to have been involved in the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. The primate of the Salvadoran church was gunned down as he said Mass in March 1980—the month after the archbishop had appealed to President Carter to help avert “worse bloodshed in this suffering country” by denying the junta U.S. aid. “Because you are a Christian and because you have shown that you want to defend human rights,” the prelate begged Carter not to intervene through “economic pressure, or give military support and assistance to the present junta government.” The only possible effects of such aid, the archbishop pointed out, “would be unjust and deplorable.”

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States had been less discreet than the archbishop in describing the activities of the regime Washington supported on the grounds that it was a progressive government of national reform. The Salvadoran military, it reported, committed “torture, and physical and psychological mistreatment.” They “maintained secret places of detention,” where the victims “were deprived of liberty under extremely cruel and inhuman conditions.”



Susan Melellas/Magnum

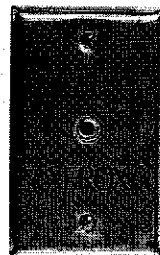
**“In this land of despair she seemed to be made of bright pastel colors.”**



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"Priests, members of religious orders of both sexes, and lay persons who cooperate actively with the Church," the OAS report added, "have been the object of systematic persecution by the authorities." The regime was violating "the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, the Charter of the OAS, Article 26 of the American Convention on Human Rights, and other international instruments."

After appealing to President Carter, Archbishop Romero continued to speak out against the actions of the junta from the pulpit of San Salvador Cathedral. He called on the soldiers not to "kill your own brother peasants," and to "obey the law of God first, rather than immoral command." To the junta, the archbishop addressed the following words: "In the name of God, then, and in the name of the suffering people, whose laments reach up to the heavens every day with greater intensity, I beg of you, I beseech you, I command you, in the name of God, stop the repression!" Would no one rid the colonels of their turbulent priest? The next morning, as the archbishop turned to bless his congregation from the altar, he was killed by a single shot fired by a single assassin. No arrests were ever made, no one was ever brought to justice; but less than forty-eight hours later, Congress, at the request of the White House, moved to provide the junta with the aid it sought.



Susan Meiselas/Magnum

IF COLONEL GARCIA was not the most feared man in El Salvador, he was generally reputed to be among the most adept at exploiting the mayhem created by the forces under his command. "García is much smoother and much more clever than people like D'Abuissou," a Salvadoran social democrat later told me. "Let us assume García, in his capacity as minister of public security, did not participate in the plot against the archbishop, that he only knew of it and failed to stop it, and after that only refrained from taking any action against the killers. Political subtlety in El Salvador," he explained, "often consists in letting others do the killing, then reaping the advantages for yourself." Not that anyone in El Salvador pretended that García's culpability stopped there. It was a simple fact that every soldier who raped a woman, every sergeant who tortured a campesino, and every major who ravaged a village was under what Archbishop Romero had defined as García's "immoral command."

Not that any of this prevented Colonel García from being a most gracious host to an itinerant journalist. In his fortified office he showed me his new Betamax—used more for recording political interrogations than taping soccer games. Like the spare parts for the helicopters, jeeps, and armored cars, it derived from the United States' "nonlethal" military assistance to the regime. "It is indeed regrettable," García agreed, "that so many murders occur and so few are punished. But what can I do?" The minister shrugged as he poured me some excellent Salvadoran coffee. "I urge you to voice these same concerns to the commander of the Guardia Civil."

A few nights later, our acquaintance became more intimate. Colonel García poured me some excellent French champagne at a reception at the presidential palace, while we discussed the junta's efforts to redistribute El Salvador's wealth through a "Land to the Tiller" campaign devised by an American veteran of the pacification campaign in Vietnam. As the reception drew to an end, the military band played flourishes, and the gold-braided Salvadoran officer corps gathered in the lobby under a crystal chandelier to reclaim the revolvers they had checked at the door, Colonel García grasped my hand and gave me his card—the card that the chambermaid had taken, and that I now held up to the light.

Why is the obvious only obvious after someone has pointed it out? "Tell me why you want it," I said to the woman, "and you can have it." Her reply was in better English than my Spanish: "When the soldiers molest me,"



she said, "I can show them this, and they will be afraid and leave me in peace." The humiliation and fear were gone from her face; in fact it was suffused with a serene composure as she left. It was the look of a woman who has suddenly had her faith in the possibility of personal salvation rekindled.

I never saw the chambermaid again, but I did see Jean Donovan's face once more, nearly a month later. I was standing in the lobby of the Hotel Lincoln in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, waiting for the desk clerk to give me my key, when I noticed a copy of *The Miami Herald*. Jean Donovan's face gazed up at me from the front page; the van had been ambushed by the usual unidentifiable, unpunishable men carrying American guns and wearing Salvadoran uniforms. It was now an empty, charred, burned-out shell. A little later, Jean's mutilated and raped body had been pulled from a shallow grave near the airport road, along with the bodies of Dorothy Kazel and two nuns I had not met. So, even in death, they and their van were still symbols—of the fact that no one in El Salvador was immune now; it was surely the most brilliant triumph for the anti-communist cause since the death of the archbishop himself. But I found myself thinking less of Jean and the political calculations that had led to her death than of the place names of El Salvador.

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### Torture as a way of life

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**O**NE TOWN WAS CALLED Libertad—"Liberty." Many provinces and towns in El Salvador, of course, were named after saints. The easternmost province is called La Unión, and the province where Jean and the others had died is named La Paz—"Peace." For that matter the name of the capital city itself means "Holy Saviour." If names on a map mean anything, El Salvador is indeed the kingdom of God.

The killings of the American nuns, along with the torture and murder of the moderate leaders of the opposition front, who were kidnapped from a press conference at a church school, provoked a political crisis in El Salvador. That is to say, the American ambassador became personally upset and the headlines in America were an embarrassment to the State Department's pretense that the junta was a progressive reform government. The cabinet was therefore reshuffled to appease the Americans, distract the journalists, and ensure the continuing flow of American aid.

To this end, a civilian graduate of the military's torture chambers, José Napoleón

Duarte, was made nominal president; an official communiqué made it clear that command of the military would remain in military hands. President Duarte of El Salvador lacks two fingers. They were removed when they became gangrenous in the course of interrogation. The absence of the fingers was evident every time Duarte gestured at a press conference, but I had no way of verifying something else I was told. According to a person who had known Duarte all his life, one could discover something interesting if one pressed the president's scalp in two different places: the skull moved in a kind of wiggle back and forth. The bones, this person said, had never fully fused back together after the beatings Duarte had received. Later, when he was returned from exile, at the insistence of the American embassy, in order to give the regime of his torturers a civilian legitimacy, Duarte, in a well-known incident, encountered the sergeant who had mutilated him, as he entered a government building in the company of some military men. He averted his eyes from his tormentor and said nothing, even though by that time he was one of the ostensible rulers of the Salvadoran state.

Shortly after his installation as president, with the colonels standing around him, Duarte announced that the great threat to El Salvador was communist subversion. No arrests were made in connection with the murders of the American nuns or the opposition leaders, but within days the ministry of defense announced another major offensive against the guerrillas. As for my friend García, he had emerged—as he had emerged from the archbishop's murder—even more powerful than before. In Washington, officials were gratified. Surely this was progress. El Salvador had a civilian president, which proved that the regime was not a military dictatorship after all but, as the State Department termed it, "a Christian Democratic-military coalition," and in this they were like the mapmakers who followed in the wake of the conquistadors during the Spanish conquest—happening upon the places of pillage, murder, barbarism, and degradation, and affixing to them the names of peace, union, liberty, salvation, and His love.

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### Jimmy Carter's cold war

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**I**T WAS ONE OF THE MANY ironies of ineptness infesting Jimmy Carter's presidency that in Central America he contrived simultaneously to pursue a policy of mechanistic anti-communism worthy of John Foster Dulles during the Cold War or Lyndon John-

**"No arrests were made, no one was ever brought to justice."**

son in Indochina, while at the same time managing to convey to millions of outraged Americans that he was compromising U.S. strategic interests for such frivolities as human rights. Perhaps Carter's undoing was his capacity for sounding sincere.

Relatively early in his presidency, for example, Carter alarmed many repressive regimes in Central America, as well as in other parts of the world (along with some Americans) when, at Notre Dame University, he announced that "an inordinate fear of communism" would no longer be permitted to dictate U.S. policies in countries like El Salvador. Instead, American might would be employed to foster progress and democracy and justice and reform.

Such pronouncements from the White House, of course, were hardly novel. Many of Carter's predecessors—Nixon in Chile; Johnson in the Dominican Republic; Eisenhower in Guatemala; and for that matter Herbert Hoover in Nicaragua and Woodrow Wilson in Mexico—had cloaked their interventions on behalf of repressive, exploitative, and reliably pro-U.S. Latin-American strongmen in similarly idealistic assertions. But their rhetoric had done nothing to compromise their standing as good, strong American presidents who were not about to permit America or its friends to be pushed around.

In Central America Carter certainly accumulated a record worthy of any hero of American foreign policy back before U.S. diplomacy ostensibly became all fuzzy-headed and idealistic, wishy-washy and weak. Even in the good old hard-nosed days of *entente cordiale* between Washington and Batista and Trujillo and Papa Doc and all the rest, it would have been difficult to find an instance of an American president standing quite so resolutely behind a regime that quite so shamelessly tortured peasants and castrated doctors of philosophy and disemboweled little children and raped nuns and shot archbishops dead while they celebrated Mass. But El Salvador was merely the diamond in Carter's glittering Central American stand against subversion, communism, and surrender on the installment plan. Emeralds green as unsutured wounds, and blood-red rubies I found in Central America too.

Take Nicaragua: though it was entirely Carter's achievement, that country was nonetheless a case study in muscular U.S. diplomacy in action fully worthy of the Nixon Doctrine. Had Carter not stood by Somoza in his Managua bunker as long, as pointlessly, and as destructively to both American interests and local life and limb as Nixon and Ford

had ever stood by Lon Nol and Thieu (and, of course, as Carter himself stood by the shah)? Had not the Carter administration counted as much on the Nicaraguan National Guard as Nixon had counted on ARVN?

As I journeyed the length of Central America, and then retraced my steps northward again, I happened upon equally convincing, if less glamorous, proofs that the growing doubts of the American people about the weakness of their president were unfounded. Jimmy Carter was heir to our oldest traditions in Central America—the tradition of lavishing every bounty we can on bad governments and destabilizing good ones through insensitivity, arrogance, and neglect as well. Indeed, a visit to Costa Rica, the region's model democracy, was reminiscent of visits to Thailand under Nixon or the Philippines under Johnson when they were still democracies—and America did not let that stand in its way.

**E**VERY MORNING, when I went to change money in San José, the local currency had collapsed a little more and the dollar was worth another Costa Rican colon or two. Inflation was going up and living standards were going down. People were buying guns and beginning to whisper about coups and revolution in that showcase of American-style liberties. The problem, it was explained to me, was that the Costa Ricans had been throwing their money away so irresponsibly. For years they had squandered the nation's wealth on schools for the young, health care for the poor, minimum wages for workers, and pensions for the old. The Costa Ricans stifled free enterprise by levying an income tax and hindered foreign investment by demanding not just that the multinational corporations take their bauxite, but build them an alumina smelter as well. Now coffee prices had collapsed, and already there were ominous signs of Marxist subversion, such as workers exercising their right to strike, the middle class exercising its right to complain, and the rich exercising their right to convert their colones into dollars—and Costa Rica did not even have an army to counter the threat.

The communists were reaping the whirlwind in Central America, the experts in Washington had decided. Only an abandonment of American naïveté could stem the tide, but, as I traveled from El Salvador, to Nicaragua, to Costa Rica and Panama, and then back to Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador again, and finally Belize, my most interesting discovery consisted in what I could not find. The head of the American military mission in San Sal-

vador—whom I had known when he commanded a similar operation in Indochina a decade before—could not help me. Nor could the Guatemalan intelligence officer whose help I sought there. It was the same in San José, in Panama, Tegucigalpa, wherever I went. They wished to be helpful, those colonels and generals, those attachés and chargés d'affaires. But not one could show me a captured Cuban adviser, or a single Russian gun, or even a pamphlet printed in Managua and exported by the Sandinistas, urging the oppressed masses to arise. But almost everywhere—from bankrupt boardrooms in skyscrapers to impoverished villages beside mountain lakes—I could see ample evidence of what I discovered when I returned home, that coffee on sale in New York was now as low as \$1.89 a pound. In Costa Rica, the small coffee growers—the country's historic and demographic backbone of democracy—were desperate. In Guatemala and Honduras, peasant landholders were losing their fincas or going deeper and deeper into debt. In El Salvador, the murders might be blamed on faceless terrorists, beyond the control of the U.S. embassy or even the junta. But the swollen bellies of the malnourished children of the coffee workers stemmed from a chain of cause and effect much easier to establish.

For more than a month I dwelled in hotels where the air conditioning rattled, and flew in airplanes that landed in slashing rain. Colonels with brilliantined mustaches became my confidants and embassy attachés took me to lunch. Shoeshine boys corrected my use of the subjunctive and mestizos in sombreros passed judgment on the current minister of the interior. The more I traveled in Central America the more clear it became that the American voter, so far as Jimmy Carter was concerned, had failed to give credit where credit was due. Other presidents had railed against OPEC and all the other Third World chiselers who were destroying the American way of life. But Jimmy Carter had really done it; he had smashed the coffee cartel.

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### A caricature of Honduras

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**I**F CARTER'S RECORD in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica was veritably Nixonian, he rose to the stature of a Johnson, or even a Kennedy, when his record in Honduras was inspected. Arriving in Tegucigalpa was an experience akin to traveling backward in time and sideways in space. The dusty back streets might have been the back streets of Vientiane, and the languorous bars,

the dance halls of Phnom Penh more than a decade ago. With its pastel-green ramparts and cartoon-strip half-scale turrets, the presidential palace looked like a Turkish bordello; but when the Praetorian Guard, in their dusty boots and cutaway coats and Napoleonic gold-braided caps, presented arms each morning, I could almost imagine it was some Asian seaglio, inhabited by its Oriental potentate.

Like the people of Laos at the beginning of the 1960s, the Hondurans at the beginning of the 1980s seemed too busy for the activities that filled their Salvadoran neighbors' lives. Indeed, the street festivals and carnivals and grand cultural manifestations in the soccer stadium which their military rulers were constantly sponsoring scarcely left the Hondurans time for the daily siesta, let alone such activities as political assassination or manufacturing homemade bombs.

As befits its reputation as the archetypal Central American right-wing military dictatorship, Honduras has no political prisoners, a degree of press freedom Americans might consider license, and when the generals held a free election recently, 95 percent of those eligible turned out to vote. If the most intricate folk art in El Salvador was torture, in Honduras the local imagination seemed to reserve its most baroque excesses for the political cartoon. Following yet another of the government's circuses—this one featured an imported Mexican acrobatic motorcycle team—a local newspaper ran its own front-page version of government-by-vaudeville. The parade, in the cartoon, was led by a jester named "unemployment." Children carried high-flying balloons labeled "inflation." As for the dancing lady, "prostitution" was her name. There was also a jolly carnival dragon, of the Chinese New Year type, whose segments were composed of hunger, shortages, illness, illiteracy, and drugs. Crime and alcoholism brought up the rear of this typically folkloric cavort, which is being watched in fuddled incomprehension by a pathetic little general with a question mark over his head. Says the circus barker to the Maximum Leader: "Welcome to the Festival of Reality!"

Every day I was in Honduras, His Excellency General Policarpo Paz García, provisional president of the republic and darling of the Carter human-rights policy in Central America, was held up to similar ridicule, and after a time it seemed to me that the Hondurans were seriously underestimating the statesmanlike qualities of their unelected head of state. Short in stature and dim of wit as he reputedly might be, General Paz—or General Peace, as his name would be if rendered into English—

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towered head and shoulders above the rulers of many another Central American state. A modest man of humble birth, whose sole diversions from the onerous burdens of dictatorship were getting drunk and stealing money, General Paz was accused by his detractors of illiteracy; even the president's most fervent admirers conceded they had never seen him read a book.

The truth was that Paz's achievements lay elsewhere. In the 1969 football war with El Salvador, he actually led his troops into battle, instead of fleeing to his estancia in his Mercedes-Benz. This baptism of arms on the battlefield had made him a national hero—and a regional curiosity. No other Central American general within memory—from Lucas in Guatemala to Torrijos in Panama—had ever fired a shot in anger, at least where there was the chance someone else might fire back. But what really made Policarpo Paz a phenomenon was his plan to willingly return power to the civilians—following an astonishingly brief, eight-year interregnum of military rule.

CYNICS IN HONDURAS might say this was an old Honduran military custom—handing the problems you have created over to the politicians after filling your Swiss bank account to overflowing, the better to discredit constitutional rule, and thus preparing the ground for another coup when a further replenishment of the coffers is eventually needed. But Washington knew better—and this was where the Carter policy in Central America transcended the Nixonesque and attained the heights of imaginative American statesmanship usually associated only with the Great Society and the New Frontier. When it became known in the White House that there actually existed a Central American dictator who did not beat his people with scorpions, General Paz was summoned to Washington to confer with President Carter himself. One Washington official recalled of the U.S.-Honduran summit: "Here at last was a leader who was both anti-communist and doing something for his people."

Not since Lyndon Johnson's heart-to-heart colloquies with Nguyen Cao Ky about the vital importance of hearts and minds had a U.S. president happened on a better example of his preconceived notion of what a good little Third World dictator ought to be. By the time I reached Tegucigalpa, of course, Carter had been voted out of office, and General Paz had long since returned to tend his apple monopoly on all the fruit stands of his nation and to oversee his ammunition monopoly in the munitions shops that stretched, like Central

American 7-11s, from the Gulf of Fonseca all the way to the Caribbean Sea.

One result of the general's benignity and Washington's firm but quiet support was that Honduras had attained the highest illiteracy and infant mortality rates in the region while achieving the lowest per capita incomes and life expectancies in Central America as well. Even without the benefits of terrorism and torture, a higher proportion of Honduran children were dying before their first birthday, and a greater percentage of Honduran adults would never see sixty, than was the case in El Salvador. Not that this kind of progress could be sustained by fond memories of chats about human rights in the Oval Office. I inquired of an American businessman what we were doing for Honduras now.

"Well," he replied, "the embassy has given the Honduran military all these helicopters." Jabs at an Exxon road map of the Pan American highway illustrated the geopolitical logic of the act. There was Honduras, strategic linchpin of Central America, with Nicaragua to the right of it, Guatemala to the left of it, El Salvador behind it—and storm clouds blowing out from Cuba in front of it. "That is Nicaragua," my informant explained. "They are Marxist and bad." Another jab. "And that is Guatemala. The Guatemalans are stoutly anti-communist. And that is El Salvador. It is embattled." And the helicopters? "If the bad Nicaraguans try to send outside agitators across Honduras into El Salvador or Guatemala, the Hondurans will notice them flying around in their helicopters, and let Washington know."

At the American embassy, I asked how the helicopter operation was going. "Well, the Hondurans haven't actually flown any patrols yet," a foreign-service officer replied. "They say the damn things keep breaking down." It all reminded me of the time America gave the Laotians T-28 trainers and unleashed them on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Might the United States, in spite of all its good intentions, just be embroiling another hapless little country in a wider war? "I wouldn't trouble yourself about it," the diplomat replied. "The Hondurans are actually very competent at foiling our harebrained schemes," and to prove it he cited the following example: "A few years ago the State Department wanted to settle all these mountain tribesmen from Indochina in the Honduran swamps along the Caribbean coast. The theory was that if the refugees went to Honduras instead of America, President Carter's reelection would be assured." How had the Hondurans managed to foil this American plan? "Well," he answered, "they never said no. But then they never said yes. And when

Washington finally told us to get an answer, they asked us to submit the proposal again. By that time," he continued, "the Montagnards were already in Montana."

### Reagan's hearts and minds

**M**Y VISIT TO HONDURAS not only cast new light on Jimmy Carter's stature as a statesman; much more important, it also added perspective to that vital new question: what would Ronald Reagan do? An American-educated Honduran liberal seemed less concerned than many American liberals were. "Honduras is not a country," he said. "Honduras is a condition, and our relations with the Americans are a symptom of the disease. Under the Carter human-rights policy," he went on, "the object of the exercise was to replace a plague of generals with a plague of politicians, who will misuse the country in their way just as much as the generals did in theirs." He gave me his prognosis for the future: "The transition to constitutional rule will probably continue, in spite of Reagan. But suppose Reagan sent a message: 'Cancel the elections.' Do you think," he asked, "that would change anything in this country at all? Teach children how to read, and officials not to steal?"

At first glance, El Salvador seemed to offer Reagan a much more fruitful proscenium than did Honduras for showing that he was not a weak but a heroically decisive U.S. president. But the more I meditated on the chaos in El Salvador, the more barren that country seemed as a stage for a virtuoso display of White House leadership. Of course Reagan could send in the Marines—no doubt, in keeping with current semantic fashions in diplomacy, under the euphemism of "advisers." But whom would they fight? Indeed, whom could they advise? In El Salvador in 1981—as in Nicaragua in 1979, Guatemala in 1954, and before that Nicaragua in the 1930s, when the U.S. smashed a rebellion and installed the Somoza dynasty—there was a tendency among American officials and in the press to impute novelty to events as old as Central America itself.

To read the headlines, to confer with the Central American "specialists" was to be persuaded that some unprecedented new threat to America's security and values was brewing in El Salvador. Yet the problem there was not Cuban or Russian subversion, or even a home-grown radical insurrection. It was that the army, the oligarchs, and their retainers had run amok once again, as periodically happens in that country. For a few years during the

early 1930s, for example, the grandfathers of the people the United States was now supporting had also gone on the rampage. Lest the oligarchs lose their estates, the generals forfeit their lease on the presidential palace, colonels be denied the privilege of looting the nation, and sergeants the pleasure of raping it, 30,000 peasants, reformers, intellectuals, and other kinds of subversives had been murdered in cold blood. The Salvadorans have a title for this chapter in their history. They call it *La Matanza*—the Slaughter—and for all the gaudy newness attributed to the crisis in El Salvador, it did not seem to amount to the stern new test of American resolve it was said to be.

It was only *La Matanza*, Part II. And if there was any difference between what happened in El Salvador half a century ago and what was happening now, the difference this time was that the United States had chosen, as periodically it did in this part of the world, to attribute great significance, indeed intelligence and purpose, to events that were mindless as a tropical storm. Under Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt, America had simply ignored El Salvador and let the officers and oligarchs get on with the killing. But under Carter and Reagan, a kind of bipartisan consensus had seemed to emerge: this time the slaughter in El Salvador must proceed with the benefit of our direct intervention and be conducted in the manner high-ranking and influential Americans deemed best. In Panama, for example, a

**"This time the slaughter in El Salvador must proceed with the benefit of our direct intervention."**



Alon Reininger/Contact Press Images

local writer and opposition activist with good contacts in Washington played me a prized tape recording he had acquired. It was an off-the-record briefing given by President Reagan's most influential advisers in the field. Here at last was some direct evidence pertaining to that burning question of what the latest president of the United States might do.

**I**T WAS NOT the banality of their analyses that had impressed me, nor the crisp authority with which they exposed them, nor even the fact that other presidential advisers had come up with similar claptrap before. It was the reverence with which the listeners—both to the tape in Panama and in the original audience in Washington—received the wisdom of those soon to have yet another president's ear.

The most eminent speaker addressed the question of El Salvador itself. This was Dr. Jeane Kirkpatrick—later named President Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations, with cabinet rank. The problem in El Salvador, according to her analysis, was not that the Salvadoran armed forces were killing their own people but that they were not killing them in the right way. They needed training in the American manner of warfare and in the use of their American weapons, so that they could root out the guerrilla insurgency in a more effective, cost-efficient, and civilized way.

This interpretation, which those in Washington found most persuasive, judging from the thunderous applause it evoked on the tape, was deficient only in two or three ways. It neglected the fact that previous administrations, including Jimmy Carter's, had already trained no less than 1,971 Salvadoran officers. Lest a mere couple of thousand lieutenants, majors, colonels, and generals be insufficient to keep the communists at bay in a nation smaller than Vermont, farsighted U.S. presidents had given our imperiled Salvadoran ally other kinds of useful aid as well. The ORDEN death squads, for example, had been conceived, like the Peace Corps, as a brainchild of the Kennedy-Johnson era. When they were not hunting down subversives, they could build roads, the theory went. Even Major Roberto D'Abuisson—torturer, murderer, scourge of the land—had enjoyed the privilege of tuition in the American arts that Dr. Kirkpatrick now proposed to confer on multitudes of other Salvadorans as well. Perhaps the man had been born a pathological killer. But it was reportedly under the clasped-hand aegis of the U.S. Agency for International Development that D'Abuisson had found his true vocation—spotted by embassy officials,

identified as a stoutly anti-communist, pro-American patriot, and whisked off to one of those police training programs in free-world ideology, and counter-terror and interrogation techniques.

Another defect in the analysis, of course, was that American-given guns and American-trained armies in Central America were not the solution—no matter how many guns we gave them or how many soldiers we trained. The military in Central America was the source of the plague. For generations the military had looted, murdered, and raped while presidents and U.S. policies came and went. Whenever the tradition of U.S.-backed pillage and depredation at last elicited some popular resistance—as Archbishop Romero had put it, some lament rising up to the heavens that this was not what life on this earth ought to be—the American reflex was identical, whatever the decade and whoever the president: Let them eat guns, at times leavened with the rhetoric of reform. To speak with the American experts, both in Central America and at home, was to encounter a series of university lecturers, diplomats, and policy makers who, first and foremost, were intellectuals. That is, they were persons whose minds worked ceaselessly at plucking patterns out of the chaos of events. Where others saw only carnage, they could detect a successful land-reform program; or, conversely, the hand of Cuba, or a victory (or defeat) for U.S. interests and values—any number and any manner of things.

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### Peace at \$10 a pound

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**O**NE PATTERN IN Central America intrigued me, though it was one that most of the specialists assured me did not exist. Among all seven countries of the region, only two were completely democratic—and they also happened to be the only two that never seemed to cause the United States any trouble: Costa Rica and Belize. What could mostly white, Spanish-speaking Costa Rica and mostly black, English-speaking Belize have in common? Their societies, economies, and histories were totally different, as different as were the Spanish conquistadors from British privateers preying on the Spanish Main. In fact, the only thing they had in common was that neither had an army. There was not a single general or military academy in either of them. And, therefore, there were no coups d'état and no dictators, thus no repression and rebellion, and hence no need for more timely aid from America in the form of helicopters and guns and U.S. resolve.



To travel from the other countries of Central America to Costa Rica and Belize was to encounter a paradox. The more lavishly armed the regime, the more vigilant and active its secret police, the more it felt itself to be jittery, imperiled, beset from within and without, and therefore the more in need of more guns. And this was as true of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua as it was among the right-wing regimes: where the Guatemalans perceived a Cuban subversive behind each sullen Indian, the Nicaraguans detected a CIA plot behind every complaint of the middle class. It was only in the countries that were utterly defenseless that one found any sense of security at all. Indeed, all manner of Costa Ricans and Belizans—from Marxists to millionaires—freely offered the same comments for which Archbishop Romero had paid with his life in El Salvador.

The problems troubling their countries came neither from foreign or home-grown subversion, they said. The only possible effect of U.S. guns, U.S. military training, or U.S. advisers could be to make those problems much worse. Both George Price, the premier of Belize, and José Figueres, Costa Rica's elder statesman, had the same thing to say. The hurricane bearing down on their societies was economic: the more raw materials they produced, the less they were paid, and the more they tried to develop, the costlier became the bills for American technology and imported oil. "People find it a boring subject," Price said, "but the only issue that counts in Central America is the North-South dialogue. If you don't bring stability and justice to the markets in sugar or coffee, you will never have stability and justice in the countries that produce them."

Reagan's options, therefore, seemed limited, as limited as Jimmy Carter's had turned out to be. He could give the Salvadoran military more guns, so they could butcher their people even faster—kill off more and more Christians and liberals and social democrats so that in the end they and the communists might indeed be the only ones left. Reagan could also cut off aid to Nicaragua, as he had pledged, and thus drive the Sandinistas further into the arms of Moscow and Havana. He could cheer on the Guatemalan repression, instead of shaking his finger at it as Jimmy Carter had, and thus accelerate the radicalization of the Indians. Perhaps he could even transform the Honduran dictatorship from one characterized by amiable thievery into one with a shiny new torture chamber or two. In short, President Reagan could cloak the continuing U.S. policy in Central America—perennial as the hunger of the poor and the Miami bank accounts of

the rich—in the ethos of hard-nosed *Realpolitik*, just as Jimmy Carter had dressed it up in human rights, as if for some Tegucigalpa carnival.

But no more than any other president was Reagan likely to be able to change that basic, unchanging American policy. For if the president of the United States really wanted democracy in Central America—or even just a little peace and quiet—he would have to do, or at least try to do, things that were not presidential at all: devise ways to loosen the stranglehold of useless, parasitic armies on poor societies, not draw them, like a noose, tighter and tighter around whole peoples; have the courage to tell the American voters that if they really wanted friendly, democratic, resolutely anti-communist, pro-American little countries in Central America, the answer was simple: pay the growers a dollar for a banana; raise the price of coffee to \$10 a pound; reinvest the profits in those countries where the crops were grown. Actually trying to combat international terrorism was another of those fields that offered no scope for presidential leadership either, because, of course, the logical way to reduce the torture, the murders, the mayhem, would be to take action against those most responsible—that is to say, America's most loyal friends. The truth was that most Central American countries were as littered with useless weapons as an American big city slum, and in most cases the founts of this destruction were also the same. The forces of "law and order" got their guns from the U.S. government. And in spite of all the talk about Cuba, every U.S. intelligence officer in the region knew where the "guerrillas" got theirs—from resolutely anti-communist, free-enterprise friends of freedom in Florida and Panama and Texas and California and even model Costa Rica.

**A**BOVE ALL, ANY CHANGE in U.S. policy would involve asking a question that it was ideologically and temperamentally impossible for any U.S. president, U.S. Congress, or U.S. electorate to answer honestly: Could it possibly be that there were nations on earth that were actually better off with governments we did not arm, with soldiers we did not train, with policies we did not support—ruled by governments of which we, as Americans, did not approve? This, of course, was the question Nicaragua posed—and in fact, Nicaragua was one Central American country where the State Department's political terminology seemed to apply. Certainly, to a far greater extent than El Salvador

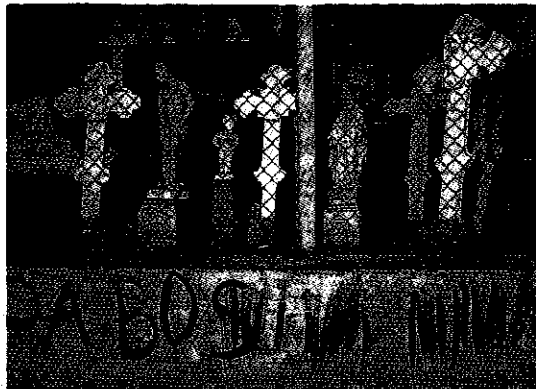
**"The only issue that counts in Central America is the North-South dialogue."**

T. D. Allman  
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was a "Christian Democratic-military coalition," Nicaragua was a "Catholic-communist coalition." In Nicaragua the foreign minister was a Maryknoll priest and the architect of the Sandinistas' economic plan was a Jesuit; from the barrios up to the inner circles of the highest leadership, the Nicaraguan power structure was filled with nuns and priests and theologians and evangelicals of the Christian faith. Indeed, to explore the Sandinista revolution was to rediscover that odd parallelism that exists between the cult of Marx and the Church of Rome. The admirable qualities of the new Nicaraguan leaders—selflessness, honesty, dedication, love of the poor, the faith that social justice can prevail in this world—were the qualities one associated with both Catholicism and communism at their best. And the attributes I did not like in Nicaragua were characteristic of both creeds too: the obsession with doctrine, the tendency to judge reality according to some all-encompassing theory, that sweet intolerance that can derive from the humble faith that you, not the other person, are the repository of Revealed Truth, and that it is your duty to make the world conform to the will of God or Marx or the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

While I was in Nicaragua, for example, an opposition rally was banned on the grounds that it would interfere with reconstruction, but a massive Sandinista rally was permitted to be held. That, apparently, was just what the war-ravaged economy needed. Around the same time, a local businessman had his human rights suspended by being shot dead by government police. A press conference was held to shed light on the matter. It turned out that a monstrous, bourgeois, imperialist conspiracy, with tentacles stretching from the Honduran jungle to Miami, was to blame. To prove his point, a Sandinista officer named Lenin Cerna showed us some interrogation tapes on his Betamax. It was the same model that Colonel García, in El Salvador, had used.

Apparently it was also the good fortune of



*Nicaragua Libre*, as it was phrased on the nation's license plates, to be so entirely free that no elections were needed, at least not for years and years. Elections, to hear the Sandinist leadership tell it, would amount to some ghastly abortion of the popular will. "To have elections would be completely artificial," explained the interior minister, Tomas Borge. He added: "We have elections every week." Such double-talk in Managua was hardly excessive by Central American standards, or indeed by those of Washington, D.C. In Nicaragua, in fact, it was difficult to decide which was more absurd: the outraged glee with which U.S. officials breathlessly revealed that the place was just infested with Marxists and Leninists and all kinds of un-Americans—or the intellectual and verbal contortions to which Nicaraguan officials would resort in their attempts to prove that, really, they were at most just a centimeter or two to the left of the Greenwich Village Democratic Reform Club.

Indeed, many of the hardest of hardline Sandinistas I met were Catholic, while many of the less doctrinaire seemed to draw their inspiration from Marx. By the end of my visit it seemed to me that Americans were making a mistake when they assumed that what was "good" in Nicaragua necessarily derived from the Catholics, and that what was "bad" only proved that our "inordinate fear of communism" was not inordinate at all. Besides the revolutionary Christians, Nicaragua was indeed full of communists, and almost all of them seemed to be that peculiar kind of communist—the kind that fills U.S. policy makers with delight when they happen on them in China or Yugoslavia or Poland; the kind that fills the White House, the State Department, the CIA, and the Pentagon with trepidation and dread when they find them in our own backyard.

Could it possibly be that a nation might find itself better off under a Catholic-communist coalition that the United States had fought tooth and nail than under a "Christian Democratic-military coalition" of which the United States approved? The truth was that the Nicaraguan regime, whatever its defects, was less repressive than the regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador.

One morning in Nicaragua I found myself walking down another trail, to another forest clearing, where another group of campesinos was waiting. They were no different from the campesinos around Aguilares in El Salvador. It was only their circumstances that were different, so I asked them the same questions, and found the same lack of abstraction in their lives.

Susan Meiselas/Magnum

And if Nicaragua did make mischief for America (and I could find no evidence of this), it certainly caused the U.S. much less trouble than did many of the regimes we supported. Only the Nicaraguan government's peculiar beliefs, in fact, set Nicaragua apart from the Central American continuum—made it seem worthy of either special praise or special wrath. Yet Reagan had pledged to cut the Nicaraguans off without a dime, while giving the free-world forces in El Salvador whatever it took to stem the revolutionary tide. That night in Managua I had a most heretical thought: What if the United States made the criterion of its aid not the ideology of the regime but whether the aid helped anybody or not?

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### "The next El Salvador"

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**T**HE PROBLEM WITH that question was the problem with all the other questions Central America posed. It would entail looking at Central America in terms of Central America, instead of in terms of some American special destiny and grand design. It would require considering the possibility that even here, in this small and supposedly manipulable region, there were vast complexities for which we Americans might not have any answers at all. In El Salvador, even inside the U.S. embassy, Americans would shake their heads in incomprehension. Why didn't the junta stop the terrorism? Why couldn't the colonels control their own troops? The answer was very simple: within the military culture of El Salvador, other norms prevailed—and always had since that day, nearly half a millennium ago, when the first Spanish adventurer mutilated the first Mayan chief. Rape and pillage and torture were not aberrations: they were what Salvadoran soldiers and sergeants and officers did. And to expect a Salvadoran minister of defense to protect the life of an archbishop, or to punish soldiers who murdered American nuns, was to expect him to violate values he cherished much more highly than human life—loyalty to his brother officers, his status as patron of his troops, his sources of income, his ability to protect his friends and do harm to his enemies—all the attributes, in fact, that defined membership in the Salvadoran officer caste itself.

A similar problem infested all those questions about United States actions in Central America. Why did we invariably help the worst to crush the best? Why did the most grotesque repression always seem so much less alarming to us than the most modest experiments in letting people seek a measure of real indepen-

dence and dignity in their own lives? Again, the answer was not so complex as the experts made it seem. Within the political culture of the United States, permitting Central Americans to be independent and prosperous and to do what they thought best was not what American presidents—and ambassadors and Marine brigades and CIA station chiefs and Congresses and large corporations—did. Instead, from the Monroe Doctrine and the Mexican-American and Spanish-American wars through the Bay of Pigs, the Alliance for Progress, and the Dominican intervention, down to the human-rights policy and the Reagan election, what Americans did in Central America was to compel Central Americans to be what we, for the moment, had decided they should be—and to punish them (with invasions or CIA coups or suspensions of aid) when they were not. To answer the questions Central America posed was not merely to contemplate some real change in U.S. policy. It was to expose oneself to the possibility of some revision of the significance of America itself. And the much more comfortable alternative to joining the festival of reality always was to retreat into abstraction—to intellectualize, to turn Central America from seven countries into seven dominoes and then into a single metaphor: a test of American resolve, a case of revolution run rampant, "the next Vietnam."

Not that presidents and diplomats and policy makers and academics were the only Americans who did that. Journalists did it all the time too. One evening in Panama, R. M. Koster, whose novels *The Prince*, *The Dissertation*, and *Mandragon* explore, in surreal detail and with black hilarity, the baroque pathology of our relations with Central America, said: "When you finally write your story, Panama will no longer be a country. Panama will be a paragraph."

Of course, he was right. But what an instructive paragraph Panama was—not in the significance of Central America but in that centuries-long tragicomedy of American pretension that so often chooses Central America for its stage. Was it only two or three years ago that it was in Panama—not in Nicaragua or El Salvador—that we perceived the latest challenge, the direst threat? Those Panamanians wanted our canal, and we had a president weak and wicked enough to surrender to their blackmail and then dress up the giveaway as a solemn treaty. It was not, of course, a Central American melodrama that was unfolding; it was an American psychostorm—the equivalent in our political culture of the periodic *matanzas* in Salvadoran military culture—that was blowing. On the ground in Panama, hardly

**"Rape and pillage and torture were not aberrations: they were what Salvadoran soldiers did."**

We're doing what has to be done.

# Insurance Fraud.

**It costs you money. It costs us money.  
That's why Property-Casualty insurance  
companies are trying to stamp it out.**

What you're going to read is a story of corruption—and how it was ended. The place: Baltimore. The specific act: auto insurance fraud. By whom: a few unscrupulous doctors and lawyers who created a fraud ring, and who encouraged otherwise honest consumers to take part.

In January, 1973, a number of suspected fraudulent claims from the Baltimore area were submitted to the Insurance Crime Prevention Institute for review. An agent in Baltimore was assigned to determine if there was any substance to the allegation of fraud.

He soon noticed that the names of certain doctors appeared in a remark-

ably large number of insurance claims for bodily injuries sustained in automobile accidents. As he continued his investigation, the names of certain attorneys representing "victims" of accidents began appearing with the same remarkable frequency.

Was it coincidence—or was it fraud? Only legwork could determine the truth. So the agent began the laborious process of documenting the pertinent information from hundreds of files involving these doctors and lawyers and, finally, of interviewing claimant-witnesses. Until, at last, it seemed clear that there was enough iron-clad information to warrant prosecution.

anything happened at all, in fact. The ships kept passing through the canal; the U.S. dollars kept circulating in Panama's bars; Torrijos' soldiers went on keeping Panama safe for military training in human rights, for the shah, for the American way. There was one change: the Panamanians were allowed to fly their flag over our canal, and in return for this American acknowledgment of Panama's sovereignty, the Panamanians accorded us the right to invade them whenever we chose. It was the classic deal that the Central American dictator makes with the gringos: Give me some piece of paper, some swatch of cloth to deflect the rage of my people, and you may have all my republic possesses. It was only in America, indeed, that headlines blared, senators orated, that a national crisis blew up.

Give away our canal? One might as well ask a Salvadoran colonel to make his soldiers stop raping. The suggestion was outrageous—nearly as outrageous as suggesting that coffee should be \$10 a pound.

**G**UATEMALA, I had been assured, was a most important country because while El Salvador was "the next Vietnam," Guatemala was "the next El Salvador." Certainly there were similarities. El Salvador was a pressure cooker. Guatemala was also a pressure cooker, but it had escape valves. In El Salvador the oligarchy was tiny. In Guatemala the middle class was immense. El Salvador had coffee. Guatemala had oil. El Salvador had a population density of nearly 600 persons a square mile. For Central America, Guatemala was expansive—the size of New York State, with only about 175 persons a square mile. The country had a few political escape valves, too. There was no need for coups d'état here, because usually all the parties nominate generals—and those generals, once elected, respect the constitutional provision that limits them to one term. So here, unlike in El Salvador, all sorts of people, both to the right of him and to the left of him, could retain the hope that when his presidential term was up in 1982, the country's current ruler, General Romeo Lucas García, would leave office and be replaced by someone who might be less worse.

Guatemala was interesting because it was two nations, and the more the country developed according to a U.S. economic model, the wider grew the gap between the two nations. From an anthropological, if not foreign policy, perspective, Guatemala may be one of the more fascinating small nations on earth. The cleavage between the unassimilated Indians

and the Hispanicized mestizos was fascinating and volatile. It was a dilemma with which Guatemalan society might grapple for decades, for centuries, and never resolve. Would friction between Indian traditionalism and Guatemalan chauvinism create sparks, and the sparks grow into flames, and the flames set fires the length of the land? There seemed little doubt, considering Guatemala's unique characteristics, that it might.

And would an American president find in all that smoke and fire down in Guatemala some new Central American menace to our security, some new challenge to American resolve? That, too, seemed less a political, more an anthropological question—but the answer was not to be found in Guatemala or elsewhere in Central America; it was to be found in the idiosyncrasies of American politics.

**T**HE DAILY FLIGHT from Belize to Miami originates in Panama. By the time it arrives in Belize the flight is always an hour late; having paused in San José, Managua, and El Salvador to pick up bankers and magnates and ladies in diamonds, the kinds of Central Americans who periodically fly in jet airplanes to their Florida condominiums. So while I thought I was leaving, in a sense I was wrong. Central America was coming home with me; at least a certain stratum of it was. And what of those who did not fly, whose lives were destined to unfold much closer to the ground? In Belize I had gone up to the artificial capital, Belmopan, in the savannah lands, to talk with the premier, George Price. A kindly and eccentric man, Price was like so many exceptional Central Americans I had met. He had wanted to be a Jesuit when he grew up, but things had not turned out that way. His father had died. He had been obliged to quit the seminary to support his family. He had had to settle for being father of his country instead.

At the end of our talk I had asked Price a question I sometimes ask heads of government and chiefs of state. If he could say one thing and one thing only to America, what would it be? "Be kind to us," he had replied without hesitation. "Tell the Americans to try to be kind." As the plane circled the vacant jungle, it seemed a whole multitude—campesinos and guerrillas, and oligarchs and cartoonists, and evangelicals and Marxists, the ghosts of nuns and the ghosts of archbishops—had joined George Price in his chorus; but it was only the sound of the engines, the rustling tops of the trees. The aircraft headed northward, toward that glittering homeland of all our conceits. □

By the summer of 1974, arrests were being made. A number of Baltimore doctors and lawyers were indicted and tried. Results: five convicted doctors served time in prison; six were fined a total of \$67,000. Five lawyers were convicted of insurance fraud; two resigned their practices; two had their licenses suspended; six were disbarred.

What is the point? The policyholder benefited. According to the Insurance Crime Prevention Institute, the average Baltimore resident today pays an estimated 8% to 10% less for automobile insurance than he would have had not ICPI cracked the fraud ring.

Property-Casualty insurance companies created the Insurance Crime Prevention Institute in 1971 to fill the need for an independent investigative agency that could collect evidence of insurance fraud for prosecution in criminal court.

ICPI agents are all former police officers, FBI agents, or postal inspectors, who have been trained as specialists in insurance fraud. They know what evidence to look for, where to find it, and how to put a case together for successful prosecution.

In its first seven years of operation, ICPI investigations resulted in more than 6,000 arrests and a conviction rate of over 90%.

It would be naive to believe that insurance fraud can be eliminated. But we know it can be reduced. We know, too, that some people feel that an exaggerated claim is justifiable revenge against an insurance company. In reality, it's a crime against all the people who share in the insurance pool, because it drives up the costs which ultimately must be reflected in the premiums policyholders pay.

That's why Property-Casualty insurance companies are supporting ICPI and are stepping up their own fraud-fighting activities. We think these efforts are in the best interests of our policyholders, of our business, and of our troubled society.



**We're working to keep insurance affordable.**

This message presented by the **American Insurance Association**, 85 John Street, NY, NY 10038