El Salvador: Opinion vs. Fact

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A learned observer of world events once said "everyone is entitled to his own opinions but no one is entitled to his own facts." Unfortunately, U.S. policy toward Central America, especially El Salvador, has been influenced more by opinion than facts. During the course of this paper, I will be as judicious as possible in establishing facts and labelling opinions as they appear.

**Background.** To set the stage for my eventual role as a key integer in the Central American equation, the reader should know a little about how fate and circumstance, rather than deliberate design and decision, placed me in this position.

While taking engineering in college, I chanced to room with a fellow engineering student who had traveled in Latin America and had the romantic idea of going down there one day and building railroads. When we had time, we would look over the maps of the area and fantasize on where he would build his railroad. All I could offer was my ability to pronounce the names of some of the places on the maps, thanks to my high-school Spanish.

Following college, with an ROTC commission and a war going on in Korea, I was called to active duty with the Air Force and sent to flying school. By the time I finished flying school, the war in Korea was over and my chemical engineering degree was a bigger drawing card than my pilot wings, so I was sent to White Sands, New Mexico, to work in the new world of rockets and missiles. As in most military organizations, the junior lieutenants got the extra-duty jobs. Two of these were to add a modicum of capability to my introduction to Spanish. I rode range patrol with a group of local Indians who spoke a mixture of English, Apache and Spanish; I also pulled duty at the military police station in El Paso on weekends negotiating with the Mexican police over the disposition of the Gls who went to Juarez and got in trouble. Fortunately, the Mexicans spoke much better English than I spoke Spanish, or some of the Gls might still be in jail today.

Ten years were to pass before this miniscule exposure to Latin America and Spanish was to come back into my career. Following a tour in Vietnam, I was asked to take a language aptitude test, and soon thereafter, had orders to Guayaquil, Ecuador, to teach flying. In preparation, the Air Force sent me to language school to give me a better capability in Spanish.
The war between El Salvador and Honduras broke out while I was in Ecuador and, following the termination of the war, Ecuador joined the OAS peacekeeping force in El Salvador. One of my neighbors was to join that force, and I became the link between him and his family as I had a short-wave radio and he had access to the OAS set. I provided the telephone "through-patch." No one can operate a phone patch without listening, so I got my first taste of Central America via this nightly drill. Ecuador was a poor nation, at this time, but not as poor or backward as El Salvador, if my Ecuadorian friend was reporting correctly. I well recall his describing a vivid difference in cultures when he told his wife about seeing bodies beside the road as he traveled around the countryside, characterizing the deaths as the result of a violent macho society in which arguments were settled with machetes by the poor and with guns by those who had a little money to buy them. At that time in Guayaquil, you could get someone tossed into Ecuador's Guayas River with his throat cut for less than five dollars. I commented to him about this similarity one day when he was home, and he straightened me out, saying that in Ecuador, if someone gets killed, there is a good reason; in El Salvador, it's done just to feel "strong-savage," as he put it.

I met my first Salvadoran when I attended the Inter-American Defense College and had several Salvadoran classmates. I actually had little formal contact with the officers from El Salvador since they were in seminars other than mine. My U.S. Army classmate spent a good part of his time with them and unflatteringly characterized them as more interested in drinking the duty-free Scotch than their diplomatic status allowed them than in classroom activities. These officers and their associates would leave the armed forces of El Salvador in the shake-up when General Carlos H. Romero fell in late 1979, for the junior officers apparently held the same low opinion of this group as did my U.S. Army Inter-American Defense College classmate.

U.S. Southern Command. I entered the Salvadoran equation full-time in the summer of 1979, having previously visited San Salvador briefly in 1973 and, as I mentioned, also having acted as a communication link between the Ecuadoran members of the OAS peacekeeping team in El Salvador and their home country in 1970 while assigned to Ecuador.

I came to Panama in 1979 with no strong opinions and very few
facts. Arriving in Panama in 1979 as chief of military intelligence for all of Latin America (and remaining in this position until 1982), I was inundated with opinions, conjecture, superstition, rumor, disinformation and very few hard facts concerning events in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Mexico is noticeably absent from my list for, ill-advisedly in my view, Mexico is not assigned to the area commander's region of responsibility, but to military intelligence limbo as a "Washington responsibility."

When I joined the United States Southern Command, it was in a period of maximum turbulence. Nicaragua had just fallen to what soon would be labeled correctly as a Marxist/Leninist regime, and Panama was in a few weeks to take over the Canal Zone and integrate that territory under its sovereignty.

Although I had been a working consumer of intelligence for many years and had worked closely with all the major intelligence organizations, I had never been directly responsible for the day-to-day operation of a major intelligence organization. The first thing I did was assess my mission and check the assets available to support my mission. What I found was appalling. Once the sleepy dumping ground of military careers, Latin America had been shoved into the forefront of U.S. public concern and, for the first time, had become a major player in the East-West chess game. Checking my intelligence assets, I found I had too few to meet the challenge. With a few fortunate exceptions, those I did possess had too little talent and, by design and neglect, minimal experience in Latin America. Those with area experience generally carried unmanageable historical baggage. Their opinions were formed a decade or two before, and no amount of facts would change those opinions. This was especially true with large groups in the State Department, and unfortunately for my mission, with many in DOD. On the State side, a universal maxim seemed to be that all governments run by or influenced by the military were notoriously bad, and on the DOD side, Latin America was an area of no vital concern—an economy-of-force area with a DOD intelligence priority lower than that assigned to Bangladesh.

To build an effective human intelligence network takes years; to dismantle one only takes weeks. Especially for DOD and with few exceptions for CIA, the U.S. human intelligence network in Central America was, for all practical purposes, nonexistent. To the CIA's credit, with the few assets
they had, they kept on top of the Soviet/Cuban activity in the area, but beyond this initial concern, the assets were too few and too new for the critical mission unfolding on our doorstep. Even so, bits and pieces of intelligence were flowing through the system, and thanks to help from many friendly nations with small but effective intelligence services, a mosaic was beginning to develop which would soon unmistakably show that we were in a brand-new ball game. Nicaragua was to be the Soviets' Central America rook in the East-West chess game. Arms were flowing into Nicaragua from the Soviet bloc and outward from Nicaragua to the principal guerrilla groups in El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, to those in Guatemala with a trickle into Honduras and Costa Rica. Panama was to remain outside of the Communist bloc's target area for the near term, as Panama's ruling clique had a close relationship with Cuba and could provide a convenient way-station for travelers between the area and Cuba. Cubana Airlines, to this day, operates in and out of Panama weekly, and Cuba maintains the largest embassy in Panama City except for our own.

As poor as our intelligence assets were in '79 and '80, they were further handicapped by the U.S. Ambassador in El Salvador. He was determined to convince one and all that his little revolution was home-grown and independent of outside support. The embassy reporting out of El Salvador consistently lacked objectivity and, on the few occasions when it was factual and useful, was usually accompanied by a deflator in the form of the ambassador's comment or a follow-up embassy cable which tried to steer addressees to the views of the ambassador, Robert White. I was not generally welcome in El Salvador nor were my intelligence operators, for the ambassador wanted no independent views circulating outside of his control. The reader should realize that although the Agency and the military attache's office have means of reporting independent of the views of the U.S. ambassador in any country, disagreement is not conducive to an effective in-country environment, nor to an individual's tenure on station in that country.

Intelligence assets under the control of a Unified Commander such as the head of South Com, are totally independent of any ambassador and can and do report outside of any channel out of an embassy. Ambassador White took exception to my reporting about El Salvador both indirectly and to me personally in a face-to-face encounter on a rare visit he made to Headquarters, U.S. Southern Command. On the very few occasions when knowledgeable observers were permitted to visit El Salvador from Southern
Command, they were subjected to a host of instructions directing whom they could see and talk to and where they could travel. Failure to conform meant retraction of travel permission, as one of our senior officers was to learn when by chance he met popular anti-Communist ARENA Party leader Roberto D'Aubuisson during an evening meal at a friend's house. So convinced was White that D'Aubuisson masterminded the entire "human-rights violation" activity there that White intermittently raged over this unplanned encounter for months. D'Aubuisson, shrewd politician that he was, proved that he certainly understood the political nature of a chance encounter. His message to our visitor was that he should not believe everything coming out of the U.S. embassy in San Salvador, especially that which had to do with D'Aubuisson.

As many of you know, ex-Ambassador White has spent his years since leaving his post, attempting to sell his brand of truth. A careful check will reveal that White has several rigid opinions but less verifiable facts.

Radio Venceremos, the guerrillas' voice from Nicaragua along with Radio Havana and Radio Moscow, was monitored to measure the interest of the Marxist/Leninist camp in the El Salvador revolution. As expected, a degree of exaggeration was injected into its reports of events in El Salvador. Nevertheless, Radio Venceremos was, until lately, accurate about times, dates and places, even as it inflated guerrilla success and overstated government losses. During White's embassy tenure, it was not unusual to find the U.S. embassy and Radio Venceremos singing in close harmony, with the embassy footnoting government activities more harshly than the house organ of the Marxist guerrillas.

Any intelligence analyst worth his salt has a built-in computer that flashes warnings and says you may be getting false information out of that channel when there is a certain flavor of conflict over fact. On one occasion, the embassy was to report on a Sunday sermon, as indicative that the Salvadoran people viewed the guerrillas favorably, only to find that the identical words of the Sunday sermon had appeared earlier on Radio Moscow and Radio Havana. It was not just a similar theme but almost a word-for-word echo. My analysts couldn't accept this as coincidence and correctly labeled the cable as supporting the left campaign and not reporting reality. Three Salvadoran elections were soon to make it evident to one and all that during Ambassador White's tenure, the embassy's insistence that the guerrillas had
wide popularity had been skewed.

On October 1, 1979, I was part of the U.S. delegation invited to Fort Amador, Panama, to witness the turnover of that part of the old Canal Zone to Panama. We stood in the stands awaiting the arrival of Panama strongman Gen. Omar Torrijos. Though he never arrived (reports later said that his late-night activities the evening before had so debilitated him that he couldn't make it), we had the opportunity to observe and meet the invited guests from other countries. Fate and protocol placed me directly behind Jose Lopez Portillo, then President of Mexico, and Tomas Borge, junta member and Minister of Interior from Nicaragua. Whether they didn't care that I could hear their conversation or whether they assumed that, since I was a U.S. Air Force officer, I probably didn't speak Spanish (not an unreasonable assumption), they spoke quite candidly. For the next 45 minutes to an hour, my ears were filled with an outpouring of anti-U.S. sentiment. The repetitive theme was that Nicaragua had gotten rid of the "gringos." Omar Torrijos had taken the first step in Panama, and soon, the United States would be out of Central America. Lopez Portillo lamented that he would still have the United States on his border. Borge consoled him by saying that even the gringo was not immune to the tide of revolution sweeping Central America. Borge knew, as I am certain Lopez Portillo must have, that, at this time, the bulk of aid flowing to Nicaragua was from the United States and that we still viewed events in Nicaragua with hope for the future; in short, Washington did not consider Nicaragua a Cuban/Soviet surrogate. Interestingly, Borge, not only in his conversation but in his dress, looked every bit the clone of Castro, in Cuban-style fatigues, at this inter-American gathering. All other invited dignitaries and the Panamanian officers were in tropical dress uniforms.

Fortunately, some corners of the intelligence community were awakening to the fact that, through design or duplicity or both, we had aided the overthrow of Somoza and the takeover of Nicaragua by a dedicated group of Marxist/Leninists. At this early time in office, I was naive enough to ask if our intelligence knew of the Marxist/Leninist background of Borge and his friends and, if so, why the U.S. government hadn't been informed about the probable outcome in Nicaragua of letting Somoza fall. The oft-repeated answer, which remained the theme for the next several years, was that the intelligence community did not have enough information to convince Washington of the consequences of letting Borge and Company prevail. Why didn't we have
agents of longstanding planted in guerrilla groups? The answer was, well, we had had a few but had to let them go when funds were cut or we lost too many of our agent-handlers in the Washington cutbacks. Well, didn't we keep at least one good one in the most radical group? No, the "policy" was not to get mixed up in local politics. If I had heard these excuses only once, I would have passed it off as simple self-protection from an embarrassing happenstance. The trouble was that I heard this theme or a variation of it up until the last days of my tenure as chief of intelligence in 1982. One U.S. intelligence leader who had previously thought that I was just a trouble-maker with all my questions and requests for improvements, admitted frankly after he had been in the area, that I was right and that he had been wrong. He also offered that his understanding of war or any matters of military interest were based solely on two weeks of field training 15 years earlier and that he had no association with military problems until thrust into the Central American guerrilla war. He also offered that this lack of military experience was not unique in his organization.

To be fair, I must report that once they got the green light in the waning days of the Carter regime (and much more strongly with President Reagan's arrival), the leadership of all the intelligence organizations made every effort to rectify the shortfall in intelligence in Central America. Unfortunately, the intelligence world had inherited a multibillion-dollar storehouse of gadgetry from the "Stansfield Turner" period of replacing human intelligence with electronics. Sadly, we found that the gadgets are next to useless in a guerrilla war.

What little human intelligence we did possess was tied down for political reasons or not qualified to report on military action. As I mentioned earlier, a theater commander is charged with the overall security interests of the United States in a theater of operation and not subordinate to the Department of State; hence, he has a free voice and independent charter. However, to operate in any particular country he still must go through the Chief of Mission (U.S. ambassador). So there is a political link through State channels which limits the theater commander's freedom of action, especially in intelligence.

One of the assists I received from Washington was a tripartite agreement which placed the Army's 470th Military Intelligence Group under my operational control. (Its charter was expanded to include all of Latin
America, not just the old Canal Zone and Panama.) This promised to fill a major void on the human intelligence side. But it did not do so immediately. Although most of the obstacles to seeking meaningful intelligence information disappeared with the arrival of President Reagan's appointed ambassadors, one Carter holdover still remained in Panama. His ploy was to go on record stating that it probably was a violation of the Canal treaty to conduct intelligence operations from Panama targeting groups or countries outside of Panama. This attempt to blind the Unified Commander did not stand up, but it was illustrative of the many ways the opinion-makers frustrated the fact-getters so that their own views could prevail without the embarrassment of having facts get in the way.

The Intelligence Community

President Reagan recently lamented, in reference to why we had insufficient evidence to avert the tragic bombing in Beirut, that the U.S. intelligence community had been degraded over time to a point of limited effectiveness. His remarks provoked the predictable protests and finger-pointing. From my experience, Reagan was 100% correct. The devastation wrought on the career professional intelligence community, beginning in the early '70s and culminating under the Carter regime, was catastrophic. To cover events in Nicaragua prior to Somoza's downfall, U.S. agents had to be pulled in mass from all the other Central America posts, most especially El Salvador. Those that weren't lost in battle were in many cases compromised, and the smarter local native agents decided, after we turned an official blind eye to the overt Communist threat of the FSLN, that it wasn't very healthy to work for the U.S. government. Consequently, when the guerrilla war began in El Salvador, we were, for all practical purposes, blind, both to the guerrilla infrastructure and to the various official and unofficial leadership activities on the government side. This reality opened the door wide to opinions being passed off as fact and to letting bias convert the opinion-as-fact sham into unsupportable but officially accepted U.S. government positions. I would place former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White at the forefront of the biased-opinion-passed-off-as-fact crowd. With proleftist White in office in San Salvador and Carter in the White House, U.S. public opinion was ripe for manipulation based on preconceived opinion. None of this was lost on the guerrillas' mentors. While the churches and other humanitarian organizations are subjugated, manipulated
and, eventually, if need be, eliminated in Marxist/Leninist societies, they
are the vanguard of the revolution in the U.S. and the Free World. Much of
this group can be depended upon to view with horror all that is supposedly
bad in a non-Communist government and to turn a blind eye toward those that
espouse the overthrow of a government to bring "justice and equality" to the
unfranchised masses. With White calling the guerrillas home-grown reformists
and Carter having supported the overthrow of Somoza, it was child's play for
the Soviet/Cuban supporters of the guerrillas to enlist the U.S. humanitarian
and church groups to portray their cause as "righteous." Consequently, they
were to sell, through a skillful propaganda campaign, the idea that once
again the U.S. was on the "evil" side supporting an "oppressive brutal
government." This skillful disinformation effort, implemented by carefully
selected one-sided information, had almost immediate payoffs. Most of the
U.S. press, having for decades left Central America to their stringers, by
late '81 or early '82 took to aiding the guerrillas' cause. (To their
credit, some of the press did eventually send in professionals, and if
traditional biases are discounted, their reporting was accurate and, from an
intelligence standpoint, a valuable check against official-channels reports.)

What may have been lost in these early days to an honest seeker of
fact was a subtle but real concern in DOD. I believe this was also true in
the CIA where one could be correct in stating facts yet left "hanging out to
dry" by Washington when facts did not fit current political convenience. The
military did not want to get involved in another unpopular war, and the CIA
didn't need any more bad press. The CIA had just been subjected to four
years of self-righteous hand-wringing over how the United States handles
intelligence collection and operations. The consequence was less than
enthusiastic support from Washington for those of us at the forefront of the
Central American war.

The Intelligence Process and Public Release

During a senior intelligence officers' conference in Washington in
1982, I was briefed for two and a half days on the latest technological
developments in the intelligence arena and how these multimillion-dollar
gadgets would be used in the event of global war with the Soviets. At the
end of the conference, a former Assistant Chief of Staff of Air Force
Intelligence who was then a high-ranking figure in the Defense Intelligence
Agency, brought the meeting back to earth with his closing remarks. He said, in essence: "We have spent two and a half days taking up the valuable time of the senior military intelligence community discussing a war that probably will never happen and being enthralled by gadgets that will, in all probability, be useless after the first explosion occurs in space. We have not spent one minute discussing a real war going on at this moment in Dick Lawrence's theater, a war more likely to be duplicated throughout the world than what we covered here. I question whether this oversight was deliberate so as not to have to admit our inabilities to cope with low-intensity conflict, or whether we have no appreciation for the seriousness of the Central American problem." I wish that he had added, which he could have, that less than one-tenth of one percent of the cost of the gadgets we had just discussed would create a structure and a capability to address guerrilla war. That tiny cost would have made an enormous difference in our present anti-insurgency capability.

One of the problems which will probably never change is that low-cost, low-visibility missions, no matter how vital, cannot develop the constituency needed to get them funded because they are not career-enhancing. An easily transported, simple field apparatus to pinpoint guerrillas by their radio transmissions cannot compete for appropriations with a multimillion-dollar spy satellite capable of picking up the transmissions of a Russian tank army or a missile command net. There are no lobbyists banging on the doors of Congress for funds nor are there any plump defense contracts for the politician to pass out for such low-tech products.

It would appear that I have digressed from the theme of opinion and fact. Not so. One reason the U.S. intelligence community has such a difficult job aiding our political leaders in establishing fact and labeling opinion as such, stems from its low ability to provide factual information releasable to the public. South Com's commander, General Paul F. Gorman, and Ambassador Thomas Pickering just made a major step forward in informing the American public with their 8 August 1984 press briefing, when they discussed the use of high-technology equipment and its success in tracking the guerrillas' supply net. Left out of that briefing, and for good reason, were any details on codes, intercepts or agent reports. To release this information would require revealing, not only to the guerrillas but to the Soviets as well, our true capability in the world of code and radio intercept and risk the loss of the few agents we may have. While the U.S. law-enforce-
ment community may from time to time surface a key agent or informant to turn state's evidence in a public trial, they can afford the loss of the informant for the value the testimony provides. But if we have reliable agents in the other side's top ranks, we can ill afford the loss of one such asset to help build our case with the American public. At best, it would be a short-term gain, and it would have to be repeated time and again to be convincing.

I participated in the development of several of the white papers put out by Defense and State over the past three years to try to tell the American public the truth about Central America. The process is pure agony for all involved. First, you spend hours searching for a few key items of intelligence that will stand alone and tell the story of infiltration, Cuban/Soviet support and insurgent ties to the Marxist/Leninist camp; then, you fight for release to the public and lose more often than you win. No matter how innocuous the item appears, someone somewhere in the intelligence community will object that release would place a system or an agent in jeopardy. It doesn't matter if it has already appeared in the open press. The belief persists that official release constitutes confirmation. A press report can still be suspect and, hence, less damaging to intelligence systems.

If you get by the first step, you go to number two. Can we be absolutely certain of our facts? We know from painful experience that much of the press and the political opposition will try to find one flaw to pounce upon so they can play "gotcha" and discredit all the valid information. Make no mistake, I have immense respect for the press's ability to assess information from all over the globe, and they can at times be better informed than U.S. officialdom. But some of the press also can and have been taken in by carefully planted misinformation; so they are at least as vulnerable as the intelligence community when trying to put a story together with limited access to all the facts.

Having struggled through steps one and two, you move to step three in getting out your white paper, the step which tends to be the most disheartening job of all. You now must get all the key agencies to "sign off" on the product. This is akin to trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together with all the pieces made of droplets of mercury. Hard-liners and soft-liners, East and West thinkers, Mexico apologists and Cuban demarche hopefuls all get to play with and change or delete your most treasured words and
examples. Since the world is not static and we move up and down the scale of relations with countries from day to day, this political clearance process can go on forever, and it usually takes someone with "cojones grandes" to say, "Enough is enough--go to print!"

Step four, the release, is held up at times awaiting someone's idea of "the right moment." Unless you are lucky beyond words, the paper is already two months late and getting staler by the minute. So step four usually happens without much agony.

Step five, the defense of your findings, can be enjoyable, for what you wanted from the outset was to tell the true story. The more often you get the chance to defend the work, the better chance you have of getting the message to a wider and wider audience.

If, after all the care in checking facts, a flaw in the work surfaces, all you can do is "damage-limit." The left has a vested interest in confusing the American public and hiding the truth. Through an organization whose scope and depth is beyond most Americans' belief or comprehension, they will be ready to inundate the country with a disinformation counter-flood. They, the left, will react in any event, but with less effect, if they have no small factual slip-ups to pounce upon.

**Media Treatment of Events**

In a recent editorial in New Mexico's capital city newspaper, El Salvador's President Jose Napoleon Duarte was hailed for his step toward dealing with the leftist guerrillas. The editorial writer chose to state that the beginning of the war in El Salvador came about as a consequence of the overthrow of Gen. (President) Romero and his followers and their replacement by a group of younger officers. Because this appeared as an editorial, it cannot be criticized for mixing fact with opinion as much as if it were a news report. But El Salvador's guerrilla war had begun before this event, and the fact that the war intensified in late 1979 was not because the left was sorry to see Romero go (the impression the editorial gave) but because Nicaragua was by then able to provide major support to the guerrillas.

The Romero overthrow did not give the guerrillas an excuse to step
up their war for noble reasons; if anything, it signaled to the guerrillas that they were losing legitimacy with the advent of a reform-minded government. (The overthrow of Romero began a process which was to put Duarte in the presidential palace). Panama's Omar Torrijos, in a private conversation with a former chairman of the Inter-American Defense Board, boasted that, "First we'll get Somoza, next we'll get my classmate Romero." The left didn't want Romero to fall except on their terms and at a time of their choosing, e.g. when they were in a position to take over the government as they did in Nicaragua.

The editorial also gave some facts and figures on casualties since the war began and asserted that "80%" of the deaths were from "right-wing death squads." No informed person in or out of the U.S. government will deny that there have been abuses by elements of the Salvadoran government, but to attribute 80% of the deaths to the side of the government, much less to "right-wing death squads," won't stand up to careful analysis. For example, a significant amount of killing in El Salvador is pure and simple lawlessness. President Duarte in a recent interview said:

We are human, and it would be a mistake to forget that our society is also an uncivilized one. It brims with machismo and with arrogance from every sector. It's enough here that a man has a gun and feels like he's king of the world and tries to impose himself on whoever is unarmed. You can see this every day in the streets of El Salvador.

During my political campaign, I spoke of four types of violence in the country: cultural violence, which I believe is the most widespread; institutional violence, which is abuse of authority; Nazi Fascist violence, which is the death squads proper; and subversive violence. It is often difficult to distinguish one from another. The subversives undertake violent actions that sometimes appear like cultural or institutional or Nazi Fascist violence. It is very difficult to tell.

The simplistic way of looking at things is to say the army is guilty of everything, that they are the murderers. But that is not true.

If you study the curves of the monthly death tolls, you will see how we reached the high point around December 1980, January 1981. At that time, the toll was running about 3000 deaths a month. After that, it began to decline to the level of September 1981, which is the same level of deaths, more or less, as the present. On the order of 400 to 500 deaths per month—which is about
what the level of criminality was in the Seventies. Then nobody was concerned that there were 400 deaths a month in El Salvador. But now, every death in El Salvador is counted under the category of political violence, whatever its real cause.

In addition, the judicial system was in shambles and the police investigative capability overwhelmed. This gave the person who wanted to settle a grudge or live outside the law via armed robbery a free hand. In 1981, a minimum of 5% to 15% of the Salvadoran deaths (150 to 450 a month) has been ascribed to the breakdown of law and order. If this is accurate, and most qualified observers agree that it is minimal, that, combined with the 80% claimed for the "death squads," leaves the guerrillas in the odd position of waging a war that has left its enemy virtually unscathed. Even the most liberal reporter would have a hard time selling the idea of a one-sided war to anyone but the most ardent apologists of the left. Radio Venceremos, the voice of the guerrillas, up until the last six to eight months had itself boasted that the guerrillas have slain tens of thousands. By my estimate, you could deflate their boasts by 30% and arrive at an approximation of reality. Through Radio Venceremos, the guerrillas always claimed credit for their share of the violence, probably playing down their violent activity by some percentage just as they inflated their success against the Army.

The bottom line is simply that numbers have been tossed around in this war with little regard for facts, but these have been used to support a course of political action. Since little real intelligence is available, U.S. policy should not be based on the premise that "only the right kills," for this is flatly, obviously and absurdly wrong.

Ignoring a government's and a society's legitimate need for security is equally wrong. A mistaken view which persists is that the military seeks military solutions to problems which can be resolved by negotiations and social and economic assistance. I had the good fortune to work on the Kissinger Commission staff during the six-month development of its report. The most revealing part of this experience was watching this group, an even mix of Democrats and Republicans and evenly matched as to liberal and conservative bent, agonize over the months trying to address the problems in Central America and find a solution outside of the military arena. If you read the opening words of chapter 6 of the report, you will
sense this agony. They say that as much as they would have preferred not to
dress the security issue, they had to, for without adequate security all
social and economic efforts are destined to fail. I do not know, at the time
of this writing, where President Duarte's negotiations with the guerrillas
will lead, but I am certain that without the security assistance we gave the
government of El Salvador, a dialog would never have taken place. The
guerrillas would have been able to dictate terms, not negotiate peace.

Conclusion

There was and still is, to a much lesser degree, a lot wrong with
the government in El Salvador. As a consequence, the U.S. government's
ability to support the government of El Salvador has been an uphill battle
from day one. Had the U.S. intelligence community been strong and effective,
facts would have been available to balance opinion, and a meaningful
government policy would have evolved. Bias is endemic to all organizations,
and reality seldom appears the same to different viewers. Nevertheless, the
U.S. government is composed of basically honest men and women who will arrive
at reasonable conclusions if presented with sufficient facts. Without
meaningful information, the honest person will be at best confused leaving
the zealot, the opportunist or the disloyal person a free hand to shape
opinion and ultimately warp U.S. policy. This reality has shaped our policy
toward Central America, especially toward El Salvador, for too long.

The first and foremost requirement of any government is to gather
facts before making decisions. For a democracy, no intelligence or poor
intelligence is a shortfall of immeasurable proportions; for, without facts,
democracy cannot function.