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Professor Burns

Writing and Rhetoric

A History the US would Rather Forget

“On the way back home, she watched her house being bombed with all her children inside.” - Rosa

I. Introduction

It was a trip to El Salvador that brought me to understand the need for my research. It was in conversation with the beautiful, hearts of gold, Salvadoran people when I realized that their story was not being told. This is how I came to see that people love to cover up mistakes. Specifically, this is how I came to see that the United States does not like to admit they have made a mistake in the first place. I had never heard of the Salvadoran Civil War or that US dollars could create such horrific devastation in another country until I was eighteen. Americans are painted as if they are the heroes of every war, every story. Someone needs saving, and the United States is there to save. Yet, for the Salvadoran Civil War, that is not what happened. The US did the opposite of saving the civilians, they brought deeper destruction and took the lives of one too many innocent family members.

I have read through peer-reviewed articles in the fields of political science and history and read what experts during the time of the civil war have to say. Yet, I believe the most important source is the personal testimonies I obtained from five Salvadorans that lived and experienced the war. Many of the stories that I share were spoken in Spanish or written down later, so they are not word for word translations. Regardless, I believe that I was able to capture the heart of people's voices. The Salvadorans that are included are Mardoqueo, Rosa, Sister

Peggy, Francisco, and Nicholas. From hearing their stories and reading these articles, I argue that the United States was wrong to give foreign aid to the Salvadoran government because it perpetuated the damage done to the country. The choices that the U.S. made are still being felt today, and the U.S. must own up to its mistakes by apologizing and unsuspending foreign aid to help restore the country.

II. History of the Civil War

Up until the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, the Salvadoran government was an oligarchy, and “the rich and powerful have systematically defrauded the poor and denied 80 percent of the people any voice in the affairs of their country” (Wilkinson quoting White). During the 1950s, the economy was solely agricultural, based on coffee and cotton (Ugarte¹). This means that all the money got into a few hands, those of elite landowners. The Salvadoran civilians were fed up with the corruption, so church leaders, citizens, and others started to speak up against the corruption and greed. The government responded to those who spoke out with repression and violence. They would kill anyone who would speak out in public. One example is Father Rutilio Grande. He was the first priest to be assassinated on March 12, 1977:

[Grande] was targeted for his work with the poor as he applied Vatican II and the Medellín conference to his own reality in El Salvador. Grande’s progressive, creative and ultimately transformative ministry with the rural poor was aided by the UCA Jesuits with whom he partnered (Kelly 127).

In 1979, the military took complete control of the government. Popularity with a Catholic Archbishop, Oscar Romero, was increasing. During his homilies at Mass, he spoke out against the military, the upper class, power, and corruption (Ugarte). He would encourage the poor to

¹ Executive Director of Crispaz, A Christian for Peace in El Salvador organization. He is an expert in information pertaining to the war.

stand up for their human rights and would speak to the government, asking them to change their ways. He was assassinated “by a single bullet while he was saying a private mass” on March 24, 1980 (Bonner, “Time for...”). The assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero was what unofficially marked the start of the war (Schultze-Kraft, Santamaria). The war was a brutal and bloody battlefield, and “nearly 1 million people were forcefully displaced within El Salvador or became refugees in Central America, Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere as a result of the conflict” (Chávez). In addition, the government of El Salvador “claimed the lives of 75,000 civilians and thousands of soldiers and insurgents” (Chávez). The Civil War came to an end in 1992 through the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords in which the FMNL (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), the party of the leftist guerrillas, was turned into a legitimate political party (Schultze-Kraft, Santamaria). The war was ugly and took the lives of many civilians who were caught in the crossfire.

III. US influence

The Civil War was in the thick of the Cold War, in which the U.S. government was in its peak of anti-communist frenzy. The Reagan administration feared the communist leftist guerrillas, so they took a stance to support the far-right sided government. He and his administration took a big step forward, “For Reagan, El Salvador was the place to draw the line in the sand against communism” (Bonner, “America's Role...”). During the 12 years of the war, the U.S. government gave the Salvadoran government over 6 billion dollars of military and economic aid “to fight the guerrillas and eliminate what were perceived as the causes of the insurgency” (Quan 280). This equates to around 1 million dollars a day. Over four billion dollars of the U.S. government’s money was “channeled ... through USAID (also referred to as AID),

the federal government agency that manages most foreign economic assistance, to reform multiple sectors of Salvadoran civil society” (276). This money went to provide weapons, train soldiers, and help fund the however they saw helpful to beat the guerrillas.

During this time the U.S. created the U.S. Army School of the Americas, which “ha[d] graduated more than 500 of the worst human rights abusers in the hemisphere, who are implicated in the murder and torture of countless Latin Americans” (Olavarría). This school trained all “the military personnel who killed Archbishop Oscar Romero, the six Jesuit priests and their housekeeper and her daughter, Father Rutilio Grande, and the four U.S. Catholic nuns in El Salvador (amongst others)” (McKinney citing SOA Watch 18).

The most brutal and torturous of these impacts was on December 11th, 1981, when Salvadoran soldiers, trained a few months prior at the School of the Americas, invaded El Motze and created one of the worst massacres in Latin America’s history:

[One thousand two hundred] men, women and children were killed during the operation. Old men were tortured. Then executed. Mothers were separated from their children. Raped. Executed. Crying, frightened children were forced into the convent. Soldiers fired through the windows. More than a hundred children died; their average age was six. (Bonner, “America's Role...”).

Furthermore, I learned that children at that massacre were thrown into the air and killed with a machete (Rosa). Even with the nastiness of this destruction, the US did not surrender its position: “The Reagan administration, determined to preserve U.S. support for El Salvador's war against leftist guerrillas, downplayed reports of the massacre. The White House ignored and deflected reports” (Cantell quoting Elliston 1). Reagan’s behavior during the time of the war was one of denial:

[Reagan] blamed them on a worldwide conspiracy: ‘We have to recognize that the campaign against what we're doing, the helping of El Salvador, is a pretty concerted and well-orchestrated thing.’ The propaganda, he went on, has ‘been world-wide. And you

find the same slogans being used in demonstrations in European countries about the United States in El Salvador' (Lafeber 4).

In addition, the US covered up many assassinations committed by the Salvadoran government. Two of the of the most prominent ones are:

- The leader of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero's murder was Roberto D'Aubuisson. He "continued to be welcomed at the US embassy in El Salvador" even when "Washington knew" he was engaged in the murder (Bonner, "Time for...").
- Four Churchwomen from the United States were murdered as well. Robert White, the American ambassador at the time, was there with two of the churchwomen the day before they were raped and murdered by military officials (Wilkinson). He knew that the Salvadoran military was responsible, told the administration, and yet, the US denied it as well: "Jeane Kirkpatrick [Reagan's top foreign policy advisors] when asked if she thought the government had been involved, said, 'The answer is unequivocal. No, I don't think the government was responsible.'" Furthermore, she said that to diminish the validity of the nuns "'the nuns were not just nuns,' she told The Tampa Tribune. 'The nuns were also political activists,' with a leftist political coalition" (Bonner, "Time for...").

IV. Many believe it is a Leftist Anti-America Ploy

There are still two sides to every war, and many will claim that this is just an exaggerated view of what happened during the war in an attempt to depict the U.S. with explicit malicious intentions. Extreme right wing columnist Joy Pullman, says that "The United States is now host to large numbers of citizens who believe that theirs is an evil country, with no exposure to facts and viewpoints that contradict this opinion". Many believe that speaking out against this war is a leftist agenda to paint the Republicans in a bad light. There is belief that the US was just "inexperienced and ignorant of foreign policy" and had no intention to cause such destruction (Lafeber 4). In addition, people believe that it was more of an attempt to stop the spread of communism in Russia by conquering communism in their own "'backyard'" (5). So, it was not as much as the United States trying to support the Salvadoran government, rather it was an attempt to stop the evils of communism in the world. They believed they were not trying to hurt

the civilians, rather they were trying to do the world a favor by ending communism in each country.

Yet, they were not naive. Many knew what was going on during the time. After the El Motze massacre,

American ambassador, Deane Hinton, sent ... [men], to investigate. They concluded there had been a massacre, and that the Atlacatl battalion was responsible, Greentree told me. But that is not what Ambassador Hinton [...] reported to Washington. In an eight-page cable, he sought to lay the blame on the leftist guerillas. They had done 'nothing to remove' the civilians 'from the path of the battle which they were aware was coming,' he wrote. He then suggested that the victims may have been caught in a cross-fire, or as he put it, "could have been subject to injury as a result of the combat (Bonner, "America's Role...").

The administration blatantly knew of the horrors the military was conducting over in El Salvador but refused to concede to the facts of the situation and rather covered it up.

To further my point, Roberto D'Aubuisson, a right-wing leader who was known to be a pathological murderer, was responsible in the plot of the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Bonner explains that:

D'Aubuisson continued to be welcomed at the US embassy in El Salvador, and when Elliott Abrams, the State Department's point man on Central America during the Reagan administration, testified before Congress, he said he would not consider D'Aubuisson an extremist. "You would have to be engaged in murder," Abrams said, before he would call him an extremist. But D'Aubuisson was engaged in murder, and Washington knew it ("Time for...").

They knew what was going on, knew the horrendous crimes the government was committing, but continued to give aid regardless.

Regardless of the intention and if it is on the Democrats agenda to paint the Republicans in a bad light, the events of the war are facts, the destruction the military brought on the civilians are real events, and the amount of money the United States government spent is in the books.

Truth needs to be revealed whether the intentions were malicious or not. This is a critical piece of US history that is suppressed from the average US civilians.

V. Salvadoran Voices

There are still major repercussions of the war that the country is still facing today. Lost parents and children, burned cities and houses, innocence stolen. I visited El Salvador from March 7th, 2020 - March 15th, 2020 and was able to hear stories from the beautiful people of the country. I was witness to people who were not bitter, who had hope for a better future, and who carried burdens much too large for anyone to bear. I saw remains of bombs that killed many of the people. On March 10th, 2020, I hiked up a mountain that the people of Arcatao, El Salvador would have to walk barefoot while caring for children and fleeing from the soldiers.

Here are some of the things I learned from the people:

Rosa is a leader of the Arcatao community and runs their War Memorial Museum. I stayed at her home from March 9th, 2020 - March 11, 2020. She told us many stories, and I will include a few:

There were children that were separated during the war and reunited as adults. The Salvadorans were smart people, they would trick the military that the radio signal was somewhere far away. They would be on top of the military stations and redirecting the signals. I remember once there was a woman in the mountains who had to give birth but needed a C-section. Tomas² had to give a C-section with a small knife while in hiding. There is another story from our town [Arcatao] where a little boy in his home wanted coffee, so his mother went out to go buy him some. On the way back home, she watched her house being bombed with all her children inside the house. During some massacres, they would just line up the people and shoot them. Many of the people were tricked or deceived because they were not educated.

She had to flee Arcatao for three years during the war and had to come back after the war ended. They had to raffle for homes, and many people did not even have a home to stay in. She

² Rosa's family member

desires that the next generation is educated in these matters because she believes it breaks the chain of ignorance.

Three other students and I had an opportunity to speak with Mardoqueo, Rosa's husband on the night of March 11th, 2020. His stories are quite horrific so please read with caution. He was thirty-one when the war started, and his first wife died at the beginning of the war. He saw people's nails get ripped from their bodies, limbs get torn off, skin peeled from their faces. There was a woman who was killed and skinned. She was pregnant, and they opened her womb and took out the baby and threw it around. Rosa's mother's face was skinned, and they pierced her body through a stake for the whole group to see. He told us that the military would paint their faces so they did not even look like humans, so they could separate themselves from the victims. It was hard for him to tell the stories because it means that he must relive and rethink them again. He feels that his stories are a lie because of how inhumane they were. He said, "I even think sometimes they could be a lie, and I understand that you would think they are lies because they sound so unbelievable, but they are the truth."

Nicholas was our tour guide for the hike we took on March 10th, 2020. He was around 10 years old during the war. He loves to be from Arcatao but knows living there has a cost. He sees the cost as a sacrifice that made them value what they have. During the hike, he showed us the tatus (mini caves) that they built during the war to hide when the soldiers would come to attack. There were instances where he would have to hide with no food, and they could only breathe with bamboo shoots while the soldiers walked above and past them.

On March 12th, 2020, I listened to a talk from Sister Peggy, a nun who left the US to help in El Salvador during the time of the war. She shared with us a story of how she was trying to flee from soldiers with two other women, one pregnant. Their car fell into a field, and they had to

walk many miles to get to safety. They had very limited food the night they fell into the field, yet the pregnant woman, who the sister and the other woman wanted to give all the food to, said “Tonight we share our food, tomorrow we share hunger.” I found this profound solidarity very moving.

These are stories from just a handful of Salvadorans. There are many more like these that have been suppressed or unheard. This is the impact a war funded by US taxpayer dollars had on innocent people.

VI. Conclusion & looking into the future

The Salvadoran people need healing; they need peace; they need an apology. There has been “no U.S. official, not even a mid-level one, [that] has ever ... apologized or expressed regrets ... for Washington’s active role in funding and encouraging El Salvador’s dirty war” (Bonner, “Time for...”). This is absurd. With the amount of destruction, the Salvadorans deserve an apology. Furthermore, Rufina Amaya, the only El Mozote woman survivor, said, “[the El Mozote murderers] have never come to ask our pardon... They have never come to explain why they did what they did, or in any way ever accepted the responsibility for what happened here, and until they do, there cannot be true reconciliation or a just peace here” (Cantrell citing Rohter 5).

Rosa’s words ring in my mind, “How can you build a peaceful society when you don’t have peace within?” These people do not have peace within, and they desire the apologies from those that hurt them to be able to move on and rebuild their society. For people who carry so much pain, a little acknowledgement or remorse from those who hurt them could change everything.

El Salvador needs to be rebuilt. Their democracy is in infancy right now. The United States wanted to help spread democracy, yet when this country is trying so desperately to rebuild itself, the United States is not doing anything to help. Even a step further from not doing anything, “U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration on Monday³ cut hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras” because many of their people flee to the U.S. to have a better life (Wroughton, Zengerle). The United States is now doing the opposite of helping. The Trump Administration has both cut funding that could help restore their country and has sent back people to countries that are not capable of giving them a humane and dignified life. The future administration needs to apologize to the Salvadoran civilians for all the pain and damage they helped cause in their country. Furthermore, they need to start working with the Salvadoran people to help rebuild their country by listening to what they need and funding restorative programs. I am not saying that the U.S should just keep flowing money to the Salvadoran government. Yet, I believe with prudence and care, there are ways in which the money can help give back to the citizens that had to pay the price of money not well spent thirty years ago.

El Salvador deserves love. They deserve peace. They know how to forgive and how to love. I have learned that they are not bitter, rather they are wounded. It is the United States’ turn to apologize and show them love. The US can right its wrongs and make amends with their past mistakes. The cycle of corruption must be put to an end.

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