INSURGENT DIPLOMACY:
EL SALVADOR’S TRANSNATIONAL REVOLUTION, 1970-1992

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Insurgent Diplomacy offers a transnational history of civil war in the Central American country of El Salvador in the last two decades of the Cold War. Centered on the diplomacy of the Salvadoran revolutionary organization, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), this dissertation is both an international history of El Salvador and a Salvadoran insight into global history in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time, El Salvador became the epicenter of regional and international ambitions to transform the global order. It was here that international actors fought out their ideological battles and attempted—by influencing El Salvador—to shape broader regional and global dynamics. In turn, the FMLN capitalized on foreign involvement to further its own bids for political power. The revolutionaries’ diplomacy with foreign state and non-state actors from myriad countries around the globe shaped the course of the civil war and transformed the priorities of Salvadoran insurgent leaders, ultimately leading them to endorse a negotiated peace treaty. In turn, intervention in El Salvador altered the domestic politics of states, solidarity movements, and non-governmental organizations embroiled in the Salvadoran crisis. In this sense, the dissertation showcases how local and global processes influenced one another. Furthermore, by uncovering the diplomatic history of Salvadoran revolutionaries, this dissertation evidences the simultaneously fragmenting and integrative impact of the Cold War’s intrusion into local political conflicts. While regions became divided by national and geopolitical rivalries, a transnational community of activists, organizations, and international legal treaties fostered global interconnections that challenged prevailing notions of state-sovereignty and social activism, which had been at the base of international relations in the modern era. The FMLN’s insurgent diplomacy provides new insight into the dynamics of the Global Cold War and challenges the notion of an East-West axis as the fundamental driver of the global conflict. Ultimately, the international history of El Salvador uncovered in his dissertation provides the basis for understanding the country’s transition from political to apolitical violence in the aftermath of its civil war and foreshadows the limits of neo-liberal peace models that came about in the 1990s.
Writing is a seemingly solitary business. The author spends long hours alone; researching, thinking, writing and rewriting. And yet, seldom is the expression “it takes a village” more applicable than in the production of academic works. The personal and intellectual debts accrued over the years it took to complete this dissertation are vast. There are a number of people and institutions whose encouragement and advice stand out as vital in making this work possible. It is to publicly acknowledging them that I now turn.

I owe a deep intellectual and professional debt to my advisor, Jeremy Adelman, who shared in my enthusiasm for Central America and transnational history. His support and guidance have been fundamental to my formation as a historian and scholar. Professor Adelman is not only a remarkable intellectual but also a kind and generous human being. From his seemingly endless patience with me as I elaborated this project, to his yearly invitations to share Thanksgiving with him and his lovely family, Professor Adelman has been a model mentor. I consider myself most fortunate to have entered his orbit and I should warn him that I do not intend to leave it anytime soon.

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In my final months in graduate school, I found great support in the company of fellow historian Olivier Burtin. He encouraged and motivated me in decisive ways during the so-called “final stretch” and I am most grateful for his presence in my life during these months. I was also privileged to count with the camaraderie and friendship of a number of fellow graduate students. Working alongside them and discussing our interests and intended contributions to the field—both formally and informally—proved enriching and highly enjoyable. Amongst them, I especially wish to thank Teresa Davis, Paula Vedoveli, Jessica Mack, Martín Marimón, and Meg Leja. Across the street from Dickinson Hall, I found a vibrant community of friends in the Woodrow Wilson School. Their commitment to public service, generosity of spirit, and joie de vivre were a welcome counterpart to the more insular and isolated moments of writing a dissertation. I am especially grateful to Jennifer Browning and Kidus Asfaw. They know how much I value their existence. From a distance Rafael González Vázquez and Raudel Ávila Solís have been genuine friends and avid cheerleaders, motivating and supporting me every step of the way. Elisa De Anda, has been a fountain of encouragement and spending time
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Intellectual debts begin accumulating at an early age. Greg Grandin, who served as my undergraduate thesis advisor at New York University, was the first person to suggest that I attend graduate school and consider devoting my professional life to academia. For planting this idea in my mind, I owe him a tremendous debt. Greg Grandin is a model scholar, productive in ways I will never comprehend, and producing the kind of history that we desperately need. I am honored that he now agreed to serve on my dissertation committee. As an undergraduate senior, I also benefitted tremendously from Jorge Castañeda Gutman’s generous offer to put me in touch with former Salvadoran revolutionaries so that I could interview them for my undergraduate thesis on FMLN-Cuban relations during the 1980s. My ensuing trip to San Salvador in early 2007 became the first of many. It sparked my love for El Salvador and its history, marking my personal and professional trajectory in ways Castañeda doubtless did not envision.

It was during my first trip to San Salvador in 2007 that I first experienced the excitement and dynamism of conducting oral history. My initial conversations with five former Salvadoran revolutionaries opened the floodgates to what are now over 50 interviews with an array of actors that participated in the Salvadoran Civil War. This project would not have been possible without their collaboration and I am deeply indebted to each and every woman and man who generously gave of their time to share
their vision of the past with me. Few things make History so tangible as to see the faces of its creators come to life as they recount it. Amongst those interviewed, I am especially indebted to a fascinating group of Salvadorans who have over the years become akin to my Salvadoran family. Luisa, Ana, Claudio, Joaquín, Estelita, Meche and Mirna make prolonged research travels and long days at the archive a truly enjoyable experience. I am deeply grateful to them for sharing their beautiful country and its history with me. There is something deeply unsettling about making a career out of the convulsed history of a nation and its people. I am deeply indebted to the people of El Salvador who have yet to live in a nation that is worthy of them.

I have saved the most important for last. I find myself, every single day, overcome by gratitude for the three people without whom nothing is possible. First, my best and oldest friend: my sister, Laura. Thoughtful, creative, witty, resilient, and with a brilliantly sharp sense of humor, she is my fiercest ally, partner in mischief, and my most uncensored critic. Laura is the cornerstone of my history and the person whom I most wish to walk alongside with in the future. I would not be who I am without her. Second, my parents, Maria Laura and Santiago, are model human beings who have supported me ceaselessly in both my academic and personal pursuits. My mother taught me to read and my father filled our house with books. My mother is a brilliant woman and fierce feminist who always encouraged me to find my own path and be self-reliant. Her strength of character and bottomless love for our family are constant referents. My father from an early age taught me the value of hard work and intellectual pursuits. Leading by example, he instilled in me the notion that what defines us are not material possessions or titles but how we treat others and contribute to the world around us. The depths of my debt to these
three people, I fear, cannot be properly expressed here. But I hope, one day, to find the right words. It is to them, my greatest source of joy and most fervent (if not unbiased) advocates, that I dedicate this dissertation.

The Alsatian Albert Schweitzer is alleged to have said: “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another human being. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” To all those who at different moments shared of their spark to relight my own, thank you, thank you, and thank you!!!
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INTRODUCTION

It was close to midnight on December 31, 1991 and negotiations to end a civil war in the Central American country of El Salvador had reached their final stage. Locked inside the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan, a high-profile international delegation mediated between leaders of the two belligerent Salvadoran factions: the State and Army on one side, and an umbrella organization of leftist insurgent groups (the Frente Farabundo Martí Para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) on the other. The excitement and anticipation were palpable. Signing the peace accords would bring a grueling twelve-year long civil war that had left more than 75,000 dead and over a million displaced in a country of only five million people to an end. Furthermore, securing peace in El Salvador would make a success out of the United Nations’ first ever effort to mediate and oversee the end of a civil war. Participants to the peace negotiations rightfully sensed that they were on the brink of making history.

Since January 1981, the smallest of the Central American nations had been engaged in a bloody civil war between the two groups now negotiating in the heart of the United Nations. The first group was made up of the military forces, which pretended to embody “the state” and uphold “law and order,” and Washington backed them politically

2 The story replicated in these pages detailing the final hours of the Salvadoran peace process was related to the author by two key signatories to the negotiations, FMLN leaders Joaquin Villalobos and Francisco Jovel, as well as by Mexican Ambassador to the United Nations Jorge Montaño. Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 30, 2011; Jovel, Francisco. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 16, 2010; Montaño, Jorge. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 27, 2011.
and diplomatically. They fought to maintain the status quo and protect the interests of the country’s economic and political elite. Their national support base consisted primarily of business and landowners, the mainstream political parties, and the military apparatus. The second group, the FMLN, consisted of the country’s different leftist elements—guerilla movements, the Communist Party and mass based organizations of workers, peasants, and university students. They alleged to champion the interests of the oppressed, repressed, and impoverished *pueblo salvadoreño*—Salvadoran people—by advancing social and economic justice.

After years of fighting each other without either side securing a definitive military victory, in 1989 both the Salvadoran military and FMLN agreed to a participate in a negotiated peace treaty mediated by the United Nations. On the night of December 31, 1991, the chief mediators of the Salvadoran negotiations, which included Secretary General Perez de Cuellar, Latin American and European Ambassadors to the UN, and high-ranking members of the United States Administration, hurried between representatives of the two groups.³

Time was in short supply. The mandate of the United Nations’ Secretary General, the Peruvian Javier Pérez de Cuellar, was scheduled to end that same night at midnight. The Salvadoran belligerents and international mediators sensed that it was imperative to secure peace before Pérez de Cuellar left office. They feared that his successor, Egyptian diplomat Boutros Boutros Ghali, would be less concerned with Central America and with securing peace in El Salvador than his predecessor. Furthermore, some thought that a change in the UN’s highest office might give Salvadoran factions opposed to the peace

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³Montaño, Jorge. *Interview with author*. Mexico City, Mexico: July 27, 2011; Villalobos, Joaquín. *Interview with author*. Mexico City, Mexico: July 30, 2011
process ammunition to backtrack on what had already been agreed and that this might compromise the entire process of negotiations. Adding to the sense of urgency, a large body of international press correspondents had gathered in the UN’s main auditorium and anxiously awaited the signing of the Salvadoran Peace Accords, which, they had been assured, would occur before midnight so everyone could go out and celebrate the New Year.

As the clock approached midnight, the two warring parties approved the main terms of the negotiations. However, provisions addressing the reincorporation of guerrilla combatants into post-war civilian life were left out of the treaty because key members of the Salvadoran Army and the country’s economic elite opposed their inclusion. All but one of the five highest-ranking leaders of the FMLN were prepared to sign the treaty as it stood and deal with the matter of reinsertion later. The FMLN—an agglomeration of four guerrilla movements and the Communist Party—had formed in 1980. Although united in their fight against the Salvadoran State, the revolutionary organization had, from its outset, been riddled with rivalries and tension between its five groups. Their last few hours as a revolutionary movement would prove to be no exception.

Joaquin Villalobos, the leader of the FMLN faction Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), was the dissenting voice refusing to endorse a peace treaty that did not include provisions for the reinsertion of upwards of 10,000 guerrilla combatants; most of

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whom were poor landless peasants. For Villalobos, “if former guerrillas were not offered a means to secure their livelihood in a post-war context, through favorable credits and land grants, for example, there was no way they would agree to lay down their arms. The root causes of the conflict would remain unchanged, war would continue, and the peace process would achieve nothing.”

Others present at the negotiations, however, were itching to call the peace process a fait accompli. Amongst them were the Colombian, Venezuelan, Spanish and Mexican Ambassadors to the United Nations. They called Villalobos to a private room and attempted to persuade him to sign the treaty as it stood and send everyone home to celebrate a successful peace process and the New Year with their respective friends and family. “The ambassadors were very stern with me,” Villalobos recalls. “My FMLN comrades had sidelined me on the matter of reinsertion and I was perceived by the international delegation as foolhardy and the only obstacle to peace. I attempted to explain that reinsertion programs were the crux of a viable peace, but the ambassadors didn’t support me.”

Isolated from fellow FMLN leaders and from international members of the peace effort, Villalobos felt cornered into backing the treaty. Thus, with a profound pessimism and sense of defeat, he agreed to sign on the condition that the ambassadors promise to support reinsertion efforts after peace was declared. They agreed, got up, and left the room. As Villalobos prepared to inform his comrades that he would endorse the peace treaty, Mexican Ambassador, Jorge Montaño,

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approached him and whispered: “Mexico is with you. Don’t back down with the issue of reinsertion. We’ve ensured that Secretary General Pérez de Cuellar will remain in office for one more day if necessary so this can get resolved before his term ends. Some of these people can’t wait to get out and celebrate the New Year, but you are right to push reinsertion and Mexico supports you. Don’t back down!”

With Mexico’s backing, Villalobos, who like many Central Americans is prone to swearing, used strong “non-diplomatic language” to inform his FMLN comrades and the representatives of the Salvadoran Government and Army that he would not sign the peace treaty until reinsertion provisions were incorporated. A few more hours of deliberations ensued and in the early hours of January 1st, 1992, the Salvadoran warring parties signed a peace treaty in the main auditorium of the United Nations’ headquarters and brought their country’s civil war to a much-anticipated end.

The aforementioned events surrounding the final hours of the Salvadoran conflict give rise to a series of questions: Why did the end of the civil war of a very small country in the heart of Central America invite the involvement of such a high-profile foreign delegation? Why did El Salvador’s conflict become the first instance in which the United Nations—arguably the most respected international institution at the time—brokered a

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10 Central Americans are notorious in Mexico for the regularity and ease with which they incorporate swearwords into everyday conversations and language. A Mexican activists who spent time working in Nicaragua on agricultural reform after the 1979 Revolution and then fought alongside the FMLN in El Salvador recalls that the ubiquitous use of swear words took some getting used to, and that, upon returning to Mexico after the end of the Salvadoran conflict she suffered a series of mishaps that ranged from comical to embarrassing as she corrected her vocabulary. Having spent long periods of time amongst Central Americans, I can fully relate to her experience. Maria Socorro Álvarez. Interview with the author. Mexico City, Mexico. July 19, 2011.

peace agreement between warring parties to a civil war? Why did Mexico’s support carry such clout for Villalobos’ resolve to stand up to his fellow comrades and high-profile international diplomats? And why was a large committee of press correspondents and TV anchors from respected news sources around the globe willing to forgo New Year’s celebrations in order to document the end of war in a country that most people had never heard of, let alone cared about, before 1980?

To answer these questions, one must recognize that the Salvadoran Civil War that unfolded between 1979-1992 was from its outset an international conflict at the heart of the global Cold War. During this time, El Salvador became the theater where international actors fought out their ideological battles and attempted—by influencing El Salvador—to shape broader regional and international dynamics. In turn, the Salvadoran revolutionary organization FMLN capitalized on foreign involvement to further its own bids for political power. Since its birth in 1980, the FMLN sought out legitimacy and support from regional and global powers. Just as the Salvadoran insurgents depended on M-16 and FAL rifles to wage war against the State in the countryside at home, they simultaneously relied on press releases, international institutions, and transnational organizations as they jockeyed state and non-state actors on the stage of global public opinion. Between the FMLN’s formation in 1980 and the signing of the Salvadoran Peace Accords in 1992, the guerrillas built a formidable diplomatic apparatus that included relations with revolutionary governments, European social democrats, United States activists, Mexican diplomats, and the Non-Aligned Movement, to name only a few. Spearheaded by their Political Diplomatic Commission (CPD) based in Mexico City, the Salvadoran revolutionaries cum diplomats transcended the Cold War divide and fostered
relations with myriad state and non-state actors of differing ideological persuasions. The FMLN’s diplomatic accomplishments far surpassed those of their adversary. While the Salvadoran State relied largely on supporter from the Reagan Administration in the United States, the FMLN stretched its diplomatic wings across the globe, effectively becoming a parallel state in the international arena.

*Insurgent Diplomacy* uncovers the international history of the Salvadoran Civil War and places the FMLN’s diplomacy at the center of this story. While the conflict in El Salvador was rooted in the country’s vastly unequal and exclusionary socioeconomic and political order, it became the epicenter of regional and global ambitions to transform the international order. This dissertation argues that the ties forged between the FMLN and foreign state and non-state actors shaped the course of the civil war, transformed the priorities of the Salvadoran revolutionaries, and ultimately led insurgent leaders to endorse a negotiated peace treaty. In turn, intervention in El Salvador altered the domestic politics of states, solidarity movements, and non-governmental organizations embroiled in the Salvadoran crisis. In this sense, the dissertation showcases how the vectors of influence between Salvadoran insurgents and foreign powers and movements were multidirectional.

By uncovering the diplomatic history of Salvadoran revolutionaries and their engagement in global forums, this dissertation evidences the simultaneously fragmenting and integrative impact of the Cold War’s intrusion into local political conflicts. While regions became divided by national and geopolitical rivalries, a transnational community of activists, organizations, and international legal treaties fostered global interconnections. State and non-state actors in Europe, America and the global south
came together around the crisis in El Salvador and they used human rights, democracy and self-determination as a powerful moral and political vocabulary to challenged prevailing notions of state-sovereignty and social activism, which had been at the base of international relations in the modern era. The international history of revolutionary politics and civil war in El Salvador thus elucidates the early development of multi-centered power, and it highlights the role that local regional forces, international organizations, and global non-state actors played in shaping the current global order.

Understanding the international history of El Salvador from 1970-1992, as it made the passage from an authoritarian “peace” order, to revolutionary upheaval and civil war, to an eventual civic peace process that opened the way for contested elections, requires employing multi-scalar analysis. Much as a matryoshka nesting doll consists of a series of separate yet interrelated figurines that rest inside one another, the history of El Salvador during this turbulent period was the product of national processes, nested within regional developments, which were in turn situated within broader global dynamics. Insurgent Diplomacy thus integrates perspectives and processes unfolding at different levels, and moves up and down scales as it uncovers the interaction and interdependence of national, regional and global political processes.

The FMLN’s diplomatic engagements during the Salvadoran Civil War were complex, variegated, and involved a multiplicity of state and non-state actors. To simplify them, the dissertation breaks down the FMLN’s international relations into two broad camps: military and political. Military diplomacy pertains to relations that had the objective of securing weapons, military training, and funding for the FMLN’s military operations. These actions intended to increase the FMLN’s coercive strength and help
secure their decisive military victory over the Salvadoran Army. Military diplomacy tended to center on relations with governments and organizations that the West considered “rouge states,” such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Vietnam, North Korea, Libya and the Soviet Union. In turn, political diplomacy was geared towards winning over international public opinion and aimed to secure recognition and legitimacy for the FMLN as a rightful force of opposition in El Salvador. The FMLN’s political diplomacy was more nuanced than its military counterpart. It was centered on international organizations such as the United Nations, Socialist International and Non-Aligned Movement, and countries of a social democratic or liberal order in Latin America and Western Europe. As with most typologies, dividing the FMLN’s diplomacy into political and military does not do justice to the complexity of events as they unfolded on the ground. Revolutionaries often employed both forms of diplomacy simultaneously and there was overlap between the actors with which the different diplomatic strategies were pursued. Conceptualizing Salvadoran diplomacy in these two spheres is nonetheless helpful to the extent that it signals the FMLN’s dual nature as both a guerrilla organization of the left in the midst of the Latin American Cold War, and also a political and diplomatic force of opposition catering to movements and governments that did not strictly align with Cold War allegiances.

How international forces shaped the priorities of FMLN actors and shifted the nature of warring coalitions in El Salvador is at the heart of this project. So too is the capacity of Salvadoran guerrillas to capitalize on foreign involvement in their history to further their own specific objectives. Negotiations between the FMLN and the Salvadoran State and Army get to the heart of both of these matters, and it is for this
reason that debates over a consultative political peace feature so prominently in the dissertation.

The relationship between the FMLN’s military and political diplomacy shifted over the course of the war and this became most apparent in relation to how the guerrillas approached negotiations with the Salvadoran State and Army. First, the FMLN pretended to endorse negotiations as a means to support their military efforts. From 1980-1984, the main objective of FMLN diplomacy was to secure an absolute military victory that would bring them to power. From 1984-1989, success on the battlefield increasingly became a means to back the FMLN’s international standing as a legitimate political force of opposition, and the prospect of negotiating from a position of strength was advanced with more seriousness. From 1989-1992, the FMLN’s military character receded further and further into the background and diplomacy geared towards securing the FMLN’s political participation took centre stage.

Both military and political endeavours were essential to the FMLN’s ultimate ability to secure a position at the negotiation table—on an equal footing with Salvadoran elites—and to their legacy as agents that pushed for a transition to a more inclusive political order in their country. Ultimately, however, the FMLN’s most important victories were secured not in El Salvador or on the battlefield but abroad. In the end, it was the FMLN’s insurgent diplomacy that secured the modification of the country’s order and that brokered transformations on the international stage that helped define the post-Cold War order.

Sources

Insurgent Diplomacy benefits from a variety of sources including multi-archival research and an extensive base of oral histories. My dissertation is the first scholarly work on the Salvadoran Civil War that draws from a private FMLN archive that has not yet been opened to the public. The archive, compounded by the ERP faction of the FMLN, is a remarkable and unique historical artifact of the Salvadoran Civil War and of Latin America’s Cold War left. It holds over 52,386 documents totaling 163,886 pages and contains a wealth of information on the FMLN’s military, political, diplomatic and social activities. In essence, the archive allows us to better see the world as Salvadoran revolutionaries saw it during their time as armed revolutionaries.

The very existence of this archive speaks to the transnational nature of Salvadoran insurgency, as well as the audacity of FMLN leaders who in the most arduous of circumstances set out to preserve their history for future generations. Compiling this archive in the midst of war involved a tremendous effort that stretched beyond the borders of El Salvador. Technology to record and preserve materials and warehouses to store the documents were facilitated by the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. From Nicaragua, the ERP received weapons and munitions but also photo cameras, video cameras, photo films and videocassettes. Once films and recordings had been made in El Salvador, the ERP would send them to Nicaragua by hiding the tapes, cassettes, documents and cables in secret compartments inside vehicles, or by placing them in the small maritime vessels used to bring weapons into El Salvador through the Gulf of Fonseca. It was through these elaborate and dicey operations that the ERP was able to preserve much of its history.
The archive contains a wealth of information on the FMLN’s diplomacy, including hundreds of documents detailing the Salvadoran revolutionaries’ relations with governments across the globe, as well as with solidarity movements and non-state actors from a diverse array of countries. Beyond what individual documents reveal about the foreign relations of a Latin American guerrilla movement in the last decade of the Cold War, when taken as a whole they reflect the shifting balance between the FMLN’s military and political strategies in relation to the matter of negotiations. Documents from the early 1980s consist mostly of military plans and logistical operations to wage war. As the decade progresses, the FMLN’s documents acquire an increasingly diplomatic and international character. Furthermore, the archive documents bring to life an insurgent organization that was anything but a Cold War pawn. FMLN leaders understood the place their civil conflict held in broader international processes and proved adept at manipulating this context to further their own endeavors. From catering their discourse and platform depending on which actors they addressed to coaxing distinct public realms, the FMLN was a political and diplomatic force en par with the Salvadoran state. The FMLN’s archive is reflective of an organization that thought it would come to power and wanted to preserve its history. In this sense, it presents an alternative story of state formation.

Alongside the FMLN’s archive, and other archives, the dissertation draws from a plethora of interviews with former Salvadoran revolutionaries, government and military officials, and regional state and non-state actors engaged in the Salvadoran process. In many respects, this dissertation only begins to scratch the surface of these archival and oral sources.
Historiography

*Insurgent Diplomacy* engages with a number of historiographical currents. First, it speaks to histories of the Salvadoran Civil War and endeavors to build on a rich body of scholarship on this complex episode of Salvadoran state formation. Most accounts of the Salvadoran Civil War are either national stories or bilateral stories that contemplate the role played by the United States government in the Salvadoran process. There is great value to both approaches. The Salvadoran Civil War was, at its core, a national conflict fought between Salvador actors seeking to shape economic, political and social circumstances at home.¹³ At the same time, the Carter and Reagan administrations in the United States became deeply involved in the country and altered the course of Salvadoran history in decisive ways.¹⁴ My project builds on this existing scholarship and expands on it by bringing Salvadoran and U.S. actors in conversation with other international actors.

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Insurgent Diplomacy sets out to present the first international history of Salvadoran Civil War.

The international history of the Salvadoran Civil War also engages directly with historiography on the Latin American Cold War. In recent years, scholars have set their sights beyond U.S. influence and challenged notions of U.S. hegemony in the region, either by contemplating the agency of local powers in shifting the policies of the colossus to the north, or by considering the role of other regional actors, most notably Cuba and the Soviet Union, in driving regional dynamics during the Second half of the twentieth century. Others have set out to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between local processes in Latin America and global currents. In the past few years, historians of the Latin American Cold War have put a spotlight on new actors and in so doing uncovered how the Cold War in the region was shaped not only by the usual suspects, that is actors traditionally conceived of as Cold War powers—most


notably the United States, the Soviet Union and Cuba—but also by less conspicuous regional forces that either pushed back against the Cold War's intrusion into local politics, or that sought to manipulate the geopolitical Cold War matrix to further their ends. Two key works stand out as defining this field: Tanya Harmer’s *Allende’s Chile and the Inter American Cold War*, and Hal Brands’ *Latin America’s Cold War*.\(^{17}\) Harmer highlights Brazil as a decisive regional power playing into the strengths of the anti-Allende coalition in Chile. In turn, Brand’s account of the Latin American Cold War stresses how this episode took a decisive regional turn. Rather that the Cold War being an exogenous imposition, Brands argues, Latin America had its own distinct Cold War experience that largely responded to its own dynamics.

*Insurgent Diplomacy* owes a significant methodological debt to the works of Harmer and Brands and builds on their contributions. By stressing the importance of regional powers like Mexico, and international actors like Western European social democracies, this project calls into question the idea of “unilateralist” US hegemony in a manner that approximates Harmer’s efforts. Furthermore, in uncovering how FMLN members and, to a lesser extent, Salvadoran state actors, were capable of manipulating the geopolitical context of the Cold War to further their bids for power, *Insurgent Diplomacy* echoes Brands effort to highlight how Latin America had its own distinct Cold War experience that was in important ways of its own design. In this respect, the dissertation also draws from the analytical contributions of historian John Coatsworth, who in his groundbreaking work on U.S.-Central American relations evidenced the

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extents to which the vectors of influence between the Isthmus and its colossus to the north were multidirectional.\textsuperscript{18}

This dissertation elucidates Salvadoran agency in shaping transformations in the broader international order. The Civil War became a geopolitical chess game between a wide array of hemispheric and international actors who, in shaping the course of Salvadoran history, hoped to transform the nature of the broader regional and international order. In the geopolitical chess game that was the Salvadoran conflict, the FMLN and Salvadoran State were not pawns of broader Cold War dynamics but rather active players capable of skillfully playing the game.

Beyond the hemisphere, this dissertation draws from the field of late twentieth century international history. In constructing the history of the Salvadoran Civil War and highlighting El Salvador’s agency in shaping international politics, the project draws from historian Matthew Connelly’s transnational history of Algeria’s independence movement in which he challenges employing a Cold War framework to understand insurgencies in the global South during the late twentieth century.\textsuperscript{19} Like Connelly’s work, \textit{Insurgent Diplomacy} concedes that the Cold War remains a critically important framework to understand how different actors engaged with Latin American state and revolutionary violence during the period. At the same time, the history of the Salvadoran FMLN evidences how if our understanding of Latin American civil wars and revolutions in the late twentieth century is framed solely through a Cold War lens we miss the opportunity to see the construction of fundamentally transnational movements advancing their own models of state-formation and international relations. Furthermore, like

\textsuperscript{18} Coatsworth, \textit{Central America and the United States}.
\textsuperscript{19} Matthew Connelly, \textit{A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era} (Oxford University Press, USA, 2003).
Connelly, this project highlights the autonomous, regionally-based but internationally-ramified complexities of Cold War geopolitics.\textsuperscript{20}

Finally, this dissertation is about the transnational diplomacy of an insurgent non-state movement that had to fight for legitimacy on the global stage in order to advance its political clout at home. The FMLN was both a benefactor of transnational spaces and circuits created by movements that preceded it as well as an agent carving out new, non-conventional spaces of agency on the international stage. In uncovering this history my project benefits tremendously from recent works by international historians such as Paul Chamberlin and Ryan Irwin, whose studies of the transnational efforts of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Anti-Apartheid Movement, are revolutionizing our understanding of international relations in the second half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{21} This project is unique, however, in that it draws from a vast archive of the revolutionary movement it examines.

The peace treaty in 1992 gave birth to a more representative political order and electoral democracy in the smallest country of Central America, but by abandoning economic and social reforms it also helped to create conditions for some of the defining features of post-civil war El Salvador: widening socioeconomic disparities, chronic political weakness, and the emergence of transnational gangs – the recipe for a new model of violence. The international history of El Salvador contained in the following chapters provides the basis for understanding the country’s transition from political to apolitical violence in the aftermath of its civil war and foreshadows the limits of post-


conflict peace models in the 1990s, which focused almost exclusively on electoral democracy and market-driven economies.

Chapter Synopsis

The first chapter of this dissertation contextualizes the Salvadoran Civil War of the 1980s within the decade that preceded it. The 1970s were marked by systemic crises that unfolded at three distinct yet interrelated levels. First, a global crisis brought on by the collapse of economic and political orders, and by shifting global dynamics resulting from détente and the transnational clout of human rights. Second, a regional crisis in the American hemisphere characterized by Washington’s efforts to strengthen its hegemony in Latin America; the breakdown of the Alliance for Progress modernization model advanced since the early 1960s; the rise of Cuba as an international military power; and the polarization of regional politics brought on by the rise of radical forces on both the left and right. Third, a local crisis within El Salvador, resulting from serious economic turmoil, the end of a brief democratic experiment, and the emergence of popular movements and urban guerrillas ready to challenge the historic alliance between the country’s military and oligarchy. The global, regional and local crises opened up spaces for new repertoires and political agency that various state and non-state actors of distinct ideological persuasions would aim to fill. It was in this context of crises, collapse of established orders and seeming possibility to make the world anew that the civil war in El Salvador erupted in January 1981 and became the epicenter of a global struggle to reshape the international order.
Chapter 2 traces the early history of the FMLN as an umbrella organization of guerrilla movements and the Salvadoran Communist Party that came together in Cuba throughout the course of 1980. It demonstrates that the FMLN was a national movement rooted in local realities but that it was also the product of regional influences, most notably the Sandinista Revolution of 1979 in neighboring Nicaragua and renewed Cuban interest in promoting revolutionary triumphs in the hemisphere. In examining the FMLN’s early relations with the Cuban Administration and the incipient Nicaraguan revolutionary government, the chapter introduces the concept of military diplomacy, as Cuba and Nicaragua became the FMLN’s most important military allies throughout the entirety of the civil war. Chapter 2 concludes with the failure of the Salvadoran insurgent’s first wide-scale military offensive, optimistically called “the final offensive,” and with Ronald Reagan’s inauguration as President of the United States in January 1981. While the FMLN found its main military allies in Havana and Managua, the Salvadoran Army and State that they sought to overthrow had no better ally that Washington under Ronald Reagan. By the end of this chapter it is clear that El Salvador’s conflict has drawn the attention of key Cold War powers and become a nodal point in a regional and global conflict.

Chapter 3 turns to the FMLN’s political diplomacy. In the aftermath of their failed final offensive, revolutionaries set out to build international legitimacy and win over public opinion abroad. Two of the FMLN’s most important political allies where the Mexican Administration and Western European social democracies and the chapter uncovers the initial stages of these relations. In studying the FMLN’s political diplomacy, the dissertation elucidates the ways in which the vectors of influence between
revolutionaries and their allies were multidirectional. Supporting the FMLN diplomatically and allowing the organization to set up its political and diplomatic headquarters in Mexico City was a means through which the Mexican government aimed to validate its own revolutionary credentials, appease opposition to its one-party regime at home, and coopt the regional left. For European social democracies, involvement in the Salvadoran Civil War allowed their organization, the Socialist International, to increase its international clout. Furthermore, El Salvador became a touchstone of Western European opposition to Reagan’s Cold War foreign policy and a way to resist Washington’s pressures on European allies to rearm. In turn, the FMLN benefitted from allying with actors outside of the Eastern camp as these alliances increased the transnational legitimacy of the Salvadoran insurgents with the non-aligned camp by making them appear more versatile and less dogmatic.

The third chapter concludes by uncovering a crucial sphere of the FMLN’s political diplomacy: relations between the revolutionary organization and non-state solidarity organization in the United States. While the Reagan Administration proved unwavering in its efforts to defeat the Salvadoran insurgents militarily, a broad community of activists, non-governmental organizations and progressive Congress members in the United States opposed their government’s policies. Appalled by the Salvadoran regime’s abominable human rights record, social movements in the United States of various ideological stripes came to sympathize with FMLN efforts to denounce the government and promote greater social justice in the Central American country. The FMLN’s relations with U.S. activists and solidarity movements showcases how the civil war in El Salvador became a focal point of debates within the United States about what
kind of role the country should play on a regional and global scale. Furthermore, the history of FMLN relations with various groups of U.S. activists speaks to deep divisions and factionalism within the Salvadoran revolutionary organization. As different FMLN factions carried favor with distinct solidarity organizations, competition between the different insurgent groups came to the fore. Thus, unbeknownst to them, U.S. activists often supported not the FMLN as whole, but specific political and ideological currents within the revolutionary organization.

The fourth chapter discusses how external forces affected internal coalitions within the two dominant warring factions of El Salvador: the State and the FMLN. The United States and Cuba both pursued very similar strategies in El Salvador and promoted the ascent of moderates within the group each supported believing this would secure the necessary international backing for a military victory. Paradoxically, while both the United States and Cuba hoped that moderating the radicals within the group they each supported would facilitate an all-out victory on the battlefield, their strategies actually paved the way for what became a political resolution to the Salvadoran conflict.

The fifth and final chapter concentrates on the middle years of the Salvador Civil War and tells a Mesoamerican story about the internationalization of the Salvadoran conflict. The chapter uncovers the history of two separate attempts to broker peace between the Salvadoran warring parties: the Contadora Peace Effort and the La Palma Negotiations. The first process entailed a transnational Latin American effort while the second was a national Salvadoran process. Although both efforts did not succeed at bringing about the negotiated end to conflict, the chapter argues that they were crucial building blocks to what eventually became a successful peace effort.
Chapter 1: THE MAKING OF EL SALVADOR’S GLOBAL CIVIL WAR

Introduction

The 1970s were a period of crisis. Established political and economic orders crumbled producing widespread uncertainty about what should replace them. This breakdown swept over both the eastern and western camps. Politically, the governments on both sides of the Iron Curtain faced serious crises of legitimacy and political leaders struggled to craft policies that would earn back the public’s trust. On the economic front, the 1970s were equally turbulent. The growth enjoyed by nations around the world for a quarter century came to an abrupt end as the international monetary system in place since the end of the Second World War collapsed. By the early 1970s, policies that had fostered economic recovery in the aftermath of the Second World War no longer seemed viable, but no one appeared certain about what should replace them. Adding to the challenges brought about by political and economic crises, the 1970s witnessed the emergence of new players on the global stage. In 1973, oil-producing Arab countries responded to the United States’ support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War by implementing an oil embargo. The embargo sent the global price of oil skyrocketing and wreaked havoc on industrialized Western nations whose economies had come to rely on this scarce natural resource. The 1973 oil crisis demonstrated the newfound economic power of seemingly peripheral nations.

Alongside new economic actors, non-state organizations and transnational activist networks proliferated during the nineteen seventies. These movements, which coalesced around issues such as human rights, women’s rights, and non-proliferation, defended universal causes. They challenged the power of nation-states and contested the notion
that geopolitics and national security should be the driving motors of foreign policy. These non-state actors and movements contested the sovereignty and authority of national governments during a particularly trying period.

In so far as this dissertation is concerned, the crisis of the 1970s unfolded on three distinct yet interrelated levels. First, a global crisis brought about by the collapse of the political and economic orders. Second, a regional crisis in the Americas marked by serious challenges to U.S. hegemony, the breakdown of the modernization model that aimed to counter the appeal of communism, and the polarization of politics in the region. Third, a local crisis within El Salvador, characterized by serious economic turmoil, the end of a brief democratic experiment, and the emergence of popular movements and urban guerrillas ready to challenge the military political establishment. Much as a Matryoshka nesting doll, the local crisis in El Salvador was nested within the regional crisis in the Americas, itself embedded within the global crisis.22

Familiarity with the tumultuousness of the 1970s as it unfolded in all three levels is necessary to understand the events and actors that shaped the Salvadoran conflict of the 1980s. The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was born in the late 1970s as an agglomeration of guerrilla movements that emerged at the beginning of that decade. The FMLN was the product of local, regional and global dynamics. Furthermore, international state and non-state actors who threw their hats into the Salvadoran Civil War were in no small measure motivated by the breakdown of the global order and shifting regional dynamics that unfolded throughout the 1970s.

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22 A matryoshka doll, also known as Russian nesting doll, is a set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside the other. The dolls are often referred to as “babushka dolls.”
This chapter examines the crises of the 1970s as they unfolded in the global, regional and local spheres and argues that they were distinct yet interrelated processes, with causal chains running both in and out of each sphere. First, it traces how global economic and political crises produced the breakdown of previous models of development and government. Second, the chapter uncovers how in the context of global crises, superpowers recognized each other’s spheres of influence by pursuing a policy of détente. At the same time, a transnational community of activists and organizations that promoted an international order based on the defense of human rights acquired increasing legitimacy and salience. Third, the chapter uncovers how regional dynamics in the Americas during the decade gave rise to particular hemispheric crises. Finally, the chapter turns to El Salvador and situates the rise of insurgency and outbreak of civil war within the broader regional and global dynamics. Only by understanding the 1970s as a decade of multiple interrelated crises can one can grasp why in the 1980s a seemingly local conflict in the smallest nation of Central America acquired global significance and eventually helped define the post Cold War order.

_A Crumbling Global Order_

The following section examines the global mayhem of the 1970s—the outermost layer of the matryoshka doll of inter-penetrating crises that shaped the decade preceding the Salvadoran Civil War. The 1970s witnessed the breakdown of political orders in various countries and regions. The decade was also marked by serious economic turmoil in the advanced capitalist world, in developing countries in the so-called “Third World,” and in nations following some variance of socialist economic models. The following pages uncover the history of this political and economic breakdown and suggest that
together they produced a systemic vacuum that carried on into the following decade. The internationalization of the Salvadoran conflict in the 1980s cannot be understood without taking account of how the breakdown of established orders in the 1970s created a window of opportunity that multiple actors seized in an attempt to shape the international landscape.

In August 1971, United States President Richard Nixon announced his decision to abandon the fixed exchange rate between gold and the U.S. dollar. The gold-dollar parity had been at the center of the Bretton Woods system since it was set up in 1944, in anticipation of a postwar Pax Americana that would see the recovery of Europe’s capitalist economies. The Bretton Woods accords, which led to the foundation of international financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, pegged the U.S. dollar to gold (at 35 dollars an ounce) and required other currencies to be fixed to the dollar. The dollar-gold parity, or as economist Jomo Kwarme Sudarme aptly calls it, the ‘dollar standard,’ was intended to stabilize currencies and promote trade and investment in the aftermath of the Second World War. This system required that the United States maintain a steady exchange rate. Devaluing or revaluing the dollar would disrupt the entire international economic order.23

The Bretton Woods system secured the remarkable recovery of the economies of Western Europe and Japan, as well as of international finance more generally. By the late

23 Kwarme Sudarme, an economist and former Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development in the United Nations argues that the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971, by freeing the dollar from the gold standard, increased U.S. control of the world economy because dollar assets continued to be the main form of reserve to support the economies of foreign central banks. In the aftermath of 1971, Sudarme argues, “the world economy is increasingly hostage to US monetary policy as the Federal Reserve determines world liquidity. Jomo K. S, ed., The Long Twentieth Century: The Great Divergence: Hegemony, Uneven Development, and Global Inequality (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7–8.
1960s, however, the honeymoon was over. The United States faced a growing trade deficit with rising economies like Japan and Germany, which, coupled with the exorbitant costs of the Vietnam War, provoked a balance of payments crisis and rising inflation.\textsuperscript{24} Foreign governments, weary of a possible devaluation by Washington, began to cash in their dollars for gold, putting exceptional pressure on United States gold reserves. By the early 1970s, Nixon faced deep economic trouble at home and took the monumental decision to abandon the parity between gold and the dollar. With this action, the Bretton Woods monetary system came to a crashing halt. Political scientist Jeffry Frieden characterized the U.S. abandonment of the gold standard as “the most momentous economic decision of the postwar period.”\textsuperscript{25}

International trade and investment, which blossomed in the decades following the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, were also facing serious challenges by the early 1970s. The postwar period had been marked by a trade liberalization that had mostly benefited Western Europe and Japan. As the export power of these countries increased, domestic producers in receiving countries, most notably in the United States, began to call for protectionist measures. The Nixon administration’s decision to heed these calls for protectionism had an important impact on international trade. As Frieden states, “the liberalism of the postwar trading order had originated with American pressure, and an


\textsuperscript{25} In 1944, eminent economic historian Karl Polanyi published his brilliant critique of market liberalism, \textit{The Great Transformation}. In it he assessed that the collapse of the gold standard at the turn of the 20th century had effectively ended the Hundred Years' Peace of the previous century, unleashing a period of unpredictability and disarray. In his words: "The snapping of the golden thread was the signal for world revolution." The 1970s collapse of the gold standard had a comparable destabilizing effect. See Karl Polanyi, \textit{The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time}, 2nd ed. (Beacon Press, 2001), 29; Jeffry A. Frieden, \textit{Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century}, Reprint (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 339.339
American turn toward protection seemed likely to reverse the course of global trade integration.”

By the early 1970s, the international economic system that had fostered the recovery of the advanced capitalist world in the aftermath of the Second World War was no longer secure. Economic crisis and uncertainty was not confined to the capitalist camp. Socialist countries also experienced the breakdown of their postwar development models. When the decade began, economic reforms had slowed significantly or even stopped in much of Central and Eastern Europe. Communist governments could not institute functioning price systems while maintaining party control of regimes that alleged to master both economic allocation and political decision-making. For countries in the Soviet bloc, declining economic growth over the late 1960s and early 70s, high defense budgets, inability to raise living standards enough to keep populations happy, and failure to satisfy consumer demands fueled by constant comparisons with the West all meant trouble. Popular discontent against the Soviet Union and socialist local governments brewed. Furthermore, by the 1970s it became increasingly apparent that the socialist camp was lagging far behind the capitalist countries in its technological advances. Central planning, which rewarded efficiency and stability, was not conducive to the innovation and experimentation that had bred some of the most significant technological advances in capitalist countries. To develop their technologies, socialist regimes would need to import from Western industrialized countries. Thus European socialist regimes faced their own 1970s crisis by realizing that they could no longer

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26 Frieden, Global Capitalism, 348.
function as a closed system of exchange and had to rely on imports from the non-socialist world furnished on credits.\textsuperscript{28}

The late 1960s and 1970s also posed a challenge for the economic model of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) that was central to industrializing nations in the developing world. The ISI model rested on the premise that countries should develop their own industries through protectionist practices. In other words, by developing their own industries, reducing imports, and protecting domestic markets nations could catch up with more advanced industrialized economies. Countries undergoing ISI could not avoid the need to import at least some products that were not locally available; the more a country industrialized the more it needed imports.\textsuperscript{29} In order to import countries had to export, something the political economy of ISI had originally strongly discouraged. Thus developing countries pursuing models of import substitution faced a serious predicament: they were unable to export enough to buy the imports they required to continue to grow. Furthermore, ISI policies fostered unequal development and increased poverty and inequality in many countries. The strong bias in favor of industry aggravated rural poverty as agricultural development was neglected in favor of industry. This was especially marked in predominantly rural societies where thousands of peasants and rural workers were forced to migrate to cities in search of work. The capital-intensive nature of import substitution growth, however, meant that many of the displaced peasants were unable to find employment. Many ISI countries ended up with dual or split economies: on the one hand, modern, capital-intensive industries that counted with skilled, well-organized workers earning appropriate living wages; on the other, a mass of struggling

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. P.46
\textsuperscript{29} Frieden, \textit{Global Capitalism}, 350.
farmers and urban poor excluded from the modern economy and from the social protections workers in the modern sector received.\textsuperscript{30} The economic and social tensions produced by ISI culminated in the political unrest that erupted in many third world countries during the 1970s.

In this decade, not only did capitalist, socialist and developing countries face crises in their respective development models, but also, as the 1973 oil crisis evidenced, new economic players acquired increasing clout. In October 1973, the Arab members of the Organization of Oil Producing countries (OPEC) imposed an oil embargo on the United States and Europe in retaliation for U.S. support of Israel during the Arab-Israeli War. In a single day, the price of oil went from $3 to $5 dollars and then reached $12 dollars by the start of 1974.\textsuperscript{31} The embargo strained industrialized countries whose economies had grown dependent on oil. United States citizens across the country waited for hours in line at gas stations, often in vain as there was no gas to fill their cars. The 1973 oil embargo evidenced an unprecedented shift in the global financial balance of power in favor of oil-producing states.

The decade signaled that the Bretton Woods system, ISI and socialism all had serious flaws as economic models of development. How they should be modified or what new systems ought to replace them, however, was unclear. The 1970s were thus a period of tumultuous economic uncertainty which, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs, came with deep political unrest that furthered the sense of systemic collapse.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 353.
The political whirlwind began in 1968 as large-scale popular protests erupted across different corners of the globe. Students, middle-class workers and disaffected citizens took to the streets in places as diverse as Berlin, Paris, Mexico City, Prague, Berkeley, and Wuhan. The protests were spontaneous and vague in their demands, but there was a sense among participants that they were part of a common movement to defy authority. The ambiguity of the protesters motives was perhaps best captured in some of the slogans that characterized the mobilizations: “we want the world and we want it now” or “be realistic, demand the impossible.” While the plight of protesters was not entirely clear, they sent an unequivocal message that leaders could no longer count on the unbridled support of a submissive citizenry willing to accept established social roles. The protests also signaled that the value system writ large of the new generation was out of synch with their elders’. As one historian succinctly puts it, “the virtues of sacrificing for the future, the assumption of an identity as producers, the acceptance of the metanarratives of modernization all came under scrutiny, sometimes utopian, sometimes intolerant, sometimes violent.”

In effect, the 1968 protests were representative of a transnational phenomenon: the diminished authority of governments throughout the world. Historian Jeremy Suri posits that the global disruptions of 1968 grew from the declining ability of leaders across the globe to manufacture consent at home, and he characterizes the combined effect of the protests as:

A truly "global disruption" that challenged the basic authority of the modern nation-state. The legitimacy and prestige that had made the

nation-state the accepted form of political organization for at least three centuries now confronted an unprecedented number of detractors. Leaders could no longer count on persuading the population at home to support their programs. Most often, they could expect the opposite from skeptical citizens. Rulers were now formulating policy against their constituents.33

Political turmoil was intertwined with the concurrent global economic crisis. The end of economic prosperity fed into the political crisis, laying the basis for considerable class conflict over distribution. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, labor-capital conflicts, largely absent in preceding decades, became commonplace. Labor unions and workers who had patiently withstood wage restraints while postwar economies recovered were now demanding higher wages.34 Governments had raised expectations to levels they simply could not meet. The academic field of political economy blossomed throughout the decade as scholars of various political persuasions attempted to make sense of the state’s role in the economic crises and challenged its competency as economic manager.35 In the West, conservative forces (most notably the Trilateral Commission in the United States) criticized the model of welfare state capitalism developed since the end of WWII as too costly and unsustainable, and they asked for transnational cooperation to meet the

mounting challenge of populism. In the Soviet Union, citizens questioned the Kremlin’s ability to manage all affairs of state while still meeting their basic needs, and those in the Soviet camp opposed Moscow’s control and demanded spaces for greater individual freedom.

While during the 1970s governments on all sides of the Cold War divide faced crisis of legitimacy, the breakdown of support for the United States and the Soviet Union was particularly consequential for the global order in light of their unparalleled international clout. The human costs of their imperial behavior came to light and further fed the fires of a disillusioned and rebellious populace. During the decade, the U.S. government was criticized as its anti-democratic behavior abroad in pursuit of Cold War ends came to the surface. American atrocities against Vietnamese villagers in My Lai first surfaced in November 1969 and gave way to investigations on other government actions. The Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Phoenix program in South Vietnam turned out to be a tool of large-scale assassination of government opponents by the Saigon regime, the United States main ally in the region, whose corruption and undemocratic practices were brought to light in the 1974 Academy Award-winning film “Hearts and Minds.” Between 1974-5 the U.S. public learned of a series of covert operations by the (CIA) including coups and assassination attempts. This transformed popular perceptions of the history of U.S. foreign policy and furthered the decline in support for U.S. actions overseas. As historian Thomas Borstelmann assesses: “Such imperial behavior had the power to shock Americans still imbued with the Cold War idea of their nation as benevolent and generous, a bulwark of decency against Communist
perfidy.” President Richard Nixon’s resignation in August 1974 over allegations that he was behind the Watergate scandal further chipped away at the government’s legitimacy. Many came to interpret these events as showcasing an incompetent and corrupt government.

The Soviet regime’s image faced a similar blow during this period. In August 1968, the Soviet Union led an invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush the brief period of liberalization that came to be known as the Prague Spring. The ouster of the Czech leader who had overseen the reforms, Alexander Dubcek, did away with the idea that communism could be reformed from within and represented a profound blow to liberal elements in the Soviet camp that favored democratization. In 1973, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published *The Gulag Archipelago* in France after smuggling the manuscript out of the USSR. The book was based on the author’s own experiences as a political prisoner in one of the Soviet Union’s work camps, as well as extensive research and interviews with hundreds of other political prisoners. It documented in great detail the brutal mechanisms of interrogation, incarceration, forced labor, and execution employed by the Soviet government to extinguish domestic opposition. In doing so, it exposed what writer David Remnick called “the inherent illegitimacy of the regime and every Soviet leader including Lenin.”

Widespread disillusion with the Soviet and United States political and economic models created a vacuum of ideologies. This disillusion was essential to the ascent of the

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global human rights movement and the emergence of new non-state actors as decisive players on the international stage.

_Détente for Whom?_

Within this global context of economic and political mayhem, two processes stand out as particularly consequential for the additional levels of crisis—regional and local—covered in this chapter. The first is the process of détente between the Soviet Union and the United States, whereby in agreeing that they would not attack each other directly, the two superpowers recognized one another’s spheres of influence. The second is the rise of human rights both as an international ideology and as a transnational community of non-governmental organizations and activists that championed a new framework for conducting foreign relations. These two processes were interconnected. The tensions between an international and largely non-state human rights movement on the one hand, and a United States and Soviet Union wishing to reclaim their global hegemony and legitimacy were driving motors of the regional and local histories of the Salvadoran Civil War.

The Presidencies of Richard Nixon (1969-74) and Gerald Ford (1974-77) in the United States marked a moment of cooling geopolitical tensions between the two superpowers. This period of “détente” or rapprochement began in earnest when Nixon visited Moscow in May 1972 and met with Soviet Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev. The photographs of both leaders shaking hands circled the globe. This historic encounter, coupled with President Nixon’s trip to communist China a few months earlier, seemed to signal that the Cold War that had marked the geopolitical order over the previous decades could be coming to an end. Détente, however, had mixed implications.
On the one hand, the agreements reached between the Soviet and United States administrations de-escalated the possibility of a direct confrontation between the two great powers. On the other hand, this thawing of relations implied recognition by both empires of their respective spheres of influence, thereby implicitly reinforcing their own legitimacy. As historian Robert D. Schulzinger put it: through détente, the USSR and US “recognized that each was a legitimate state. Henceforth, they would compete for influence throughout the world, but they would limit their rivalry and reduce the danger of nuclear war between them.”39 The détente of the 1970s thus entailed particular challenges for the developing regions and nations that the superpowers considered to be their geopolitical domain.

In a groundbreaking contribution to the field of global history and more specifically to scholars’ understanding of the Cold War, Odd Arne Westad argued that the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was mostly in, and about, the third world. As Westad explained, the Cold War can best be understood as a period of contested modernities where the two superpowers aimed to spread—and impose—their project of economic and societal modernization. Westad challenged scholars who, in attempting to understand the Cold War, tended to focus too much on European issues and understood U.S. and Soviet interventions in the Third World as a kind of 'afterthought.' As Westad persuasively argued, “the most important aspects of the Cold War were neither military nor strategic, nor Europe-centered, but connected to political and social development in the Third World.”40 (p. 396).

Understanding this dynamic is critical in order to grasp why the global dynamics of the 1970s took a particular turn in the developing nations that comprise the remaining levels of my analysis: the Americas, and more specifically El Salvador. Not only did Third World governments face internal challenges to their legitimacy, but many also fell pray to increased intervention in their local affairs by global powers. The 1970s may have been a decade of détente for the United States and Soviet Union, but the cooling of tensions between them had no bearing on their willingness to intervene abroad. Rather, unable to fight one another directly, they sought to defend their increasingly precarious way of life by promoting it abroad.

_Human Rights: “The Last Utopia”_

The 1970s brought a novel international order in which transnational non-state organizations and activist networks challenged prevailing ideas of sovereignty and non-intervention. Throughout the decade, civic movements advancing global agendas—particularly around the defense of human rights—gained unprecedented clout and took on an increasingly active role as they campaigned and lobbied to influence the interests and behavior of states in different corners of the world.

Advocacy movements with transnational agendas were nothing new. The Anglo-American campaign to end slavery (1833-68) and the 1888-1928 international women’s suffrage movement, for example, dated back to the nineteenth century. It was in the 1970s, however, that these organizations proliferated, diversified, and acquired a presence and clout that made them a novel phenomenon in the international arena.41 In

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41 Scholars point to the late 1960s and specifically TO the 1970s as the period when these organizations really took off. See Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, _Activists beyond_
many respects, their rise as international players was tied to the aforementioned global political crisis. The disenchantment with politics and existing governments increased the willingness of individual citizens to challenge the behavior of states and to do so through novel and exogenous channels. Furthermore, as the events of 1968 illustrated, individual citizens in both the east and west had grown tired of living in a world driven by Cold War tensions and rivalries. As historian Samuel Moyn put it, “in the 1960s new visions of social change seeking a way out of Cold War contention flowered everywhere around the world.”

Transnational activist networks and organizations with global aspirations and Universalist ideas seemed to provide a way. As Niall Ferguson argues, the durable non-state organizations that blossomed in the 1970s represented the institutionalization of the spontaneous and often chaotic protests of 1968. In their groundbreaking work Activists Beyond Borders, scholars Kathryn Sikkink and Margaret Keck posit that in the late 1960s and 1970s “advocacy and activism through either NGOs or grassroots movements became the most likely alternative for those seeking to “make a difference.”

For Moyn, the propagation of human rights organizations in the 1970s responded to the collective disenchantment with the status quo. Human rights, he argues, emerged as a last utopia at a time when the legitimacy of other political and ideological models had collapsed. It was the moral displacement of politics in the 1970s that brought human rights to the forefront of the international system by transcending official government institutions. In his words:

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42 Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 133.


“In the face of soiled utopias in politics, a nonpartisan morality existed outside and above them.”

While activists were disenchanted with the political order, technological advances in the 1970s largely made possible the development of non-governmental transnational activism. Increased accessibility of air travel and advances in communication technologies allowed citizens in different parts of the world to engage with one another with unprecedented ease. Furthermore, greater access to information in many parts of the world, through television and the press, broke government monopolies over information and made it easier for people to scrutinize the behavior of their rulers both at home and abroad. These developments help explain not only the proliferation of non-governmental transnational networks but also the rise of global public opinion, which was essential to the effectiveness of these organizations. Domestic policies were now seen and judged by an increasingly engaged community of global citizens.

The spread of transnational activism in the 1970s and the rise of global public opinion further contributed to the aforementioned crisis of the nation-state referenced by historian Jeremy Suri. The very mission of transnational non-state organizations—to affect the interests and behavior of foreign governments—challenged prior notions of state sovereignty and non-intervention. As Sikkink and Keck argued, from the 1970s onwards, these transnational organizations “reinforced a reconceptualized view of state sovereignty in which international scrutiny of domestic human rights practices is not only legitimate but necessary.” Furthermore, As Samuel Moyn pointed out, the spread of human rights as a bastion of international discourse represented a radical shift from

45 Moyn, The Last Utopia, 132.
46 Keck and Sikkink, Activists beyond Borders, 103.
previous conceptions of the individual’s relation to the state. Rights had long been considered an integral part of the authority of the state. In fact, it could be argued that the very raison d’être of the state was to grant and protect the rights of individual citizens. Human rights, however, became a mechanism to protect individuals from state abuses. In this light, they promised “to penetrate the impregnability of state borders, slowly by replacing them with the authority of international law.”  

Furthermore, involvement in transnational activism and the proliferation of international non-state organizations produced not only what Akira Iriye calls a global community but also a new identity or sense of global citizenship. Citizens who participated or sympathized with these non-governmental organizations no longer identified exclusively or primarily with the nation-states but saw transnational causes as preeminent in their identity and belonging. States, it seemed, had been the main violators of fundamental rights; likewise, an international order based on nation-states had produced the Cold War. Human Rights activists directly challenged the legitimacy of national policies regarding labor, immigration, women, free speech, and torture. They countered the manichean Cold War view of a world split between repressive Communists and virtuous anticommunists (or the opposite view in the Soviet bloc), focusing instead on the concrete abuses committed by regimes everywhere, regardless of their ideological persuasion.

The international politics of human rights in the 1970s were key for the United States leader that made this theme central to his presidency. In 1976, the Democratic Presidential Candidate James Carter defeated Republican incumbent Gerald Ford. In no

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47 Moyn, The Last Utopia, 1.
48 Akira Iriye, Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World (University of California Press, 2002).
small measure, Carter owed his success to having capitalized on the momentum of the human rights movements and appropriating its discourse as a cornerstone of his campaign. The new historiography on the human rights movement of the 1970s is quick to point out that Carter did not create the movement. It was non-state actors, mobilized around issues such as opposition to abuses by authoritarian governments, civil rights, opposition to the Vietnam War, gender equality and disarmament, that did the leg work and prepped the international terrain for the human rights revolution. Historians are right to emphasize the vanguard role of non-governmental organizations and civil society in this global movement.49 While Carter did not create the movement, scholars agree that his contribution to it was decisive. By making human rights central to his discourse as President and to the executive branch's approach to foreign relations, Carter gave human rights a degree of international visibility and legitimacy that it had previously lacked. His embrace and institutionalization of human rights represented a watershed moment for the movement as a whole.

Carter’s embrace of human rights in the last years of the decade brought to the fore a tension within U.S. foreign policy that had been brewing in preceding years: the contest between advocates of moral imperatives and those who argued that such concerns had no place in defending national security and pursuing Cold War aims. U.S. foreign policy in the late 1970s was fiercely contested between cold warriors and human rights advocates. Nowhere was this contest more salient than over Latin America.

While the crisis of the 1970s was global in scope, it had distinct regional and local manifestations. In specific countries, instability heightened and the contest for legitimacy grew more violent. It was in these places that local, regional, and global powers came to a head in their struggle over distinct social and political models. The countries at the heart of this process—countries like Afghanistan, Angola, Vietnam, El Salvador and Nicaragua—had long been geopolitical borderlands. The crisis of the 1970s, transformed them into central theaters where major geopolitical rivalries unfolded. Local dynamics coupled with the global conjuncture made these places the background for the militarized conflicts of what is known as “the Second Cold War.” The remainder of this chapter will examine how the global dynamics of the 1970s interacted with regional processes in the Americas and with local realities in El Salvador. This interaction is the backdrop of the Salvadoran Civil War of the 1980s, as a local war that acquired regional and global significance.

*The Americas: Shifting Regional Dynamics*

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Mexico’s long-serving president, Porfirio Díaz, allegedly professed: “poor Mexico, so far from god and so close to the United States.” While speaking about his own country at a specific historical conjuncture, President Díaz could well have been forecasting much of Latin America’s future history. During the twentieth century, no foreign power was as involved in the Americas as the

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50 In *The Global Cold War*, Odd Arne Westad argues that it was in the Third World that superpowers attempted to advance and impose their respective global visions. It was for this reason that the Cold War turned hot in the third World as the United States and Soviet Union fought each other indirectly. In *Empire’s Workshop*, published the same year, historian Greg Grandin presents a similar account to explain U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America. The region’s seeming peripherality made it ripe terrain for the United States to try out its imperial strategies. Westad, *The Global Cold War*. 
colossus to its north. Latin America’s unequal relationship with the United States was a central driver of regional politics during the century, and Washington’s unrivaled and very often unsolicited involvement gave way to multiple regional efforts to keep it at arm’s length. The global crisis of the 1970s and the United States’ experience with the mayhem of the decade converged with economic, political and social forces in the Americas to profoundly unsettle the region.

The shifting geopolitical dynamics of the 1970s posed particular challenges to the United States. While East-West détente was institutionalized and the Soviet Union, it would turn out, was crumbling internally, a series of events produced the impression that the Kremlin was on the rise.\(^5^1\) In 1975, Communists seized control of Cambodia. In newly independent Angola and Mozambique, Marxists won out, as they did also in Ethiopia. Most importantly, communist forces in Vietnam managed to take control of the entire country, ending more than two decades of conflict against the United States. The fall of Saigon dealt an unprecedented blow to the U.S. imperial project. The war had cost the U.S. almost two hundred billion dollars and upwards of 58,000 deaths, put tremendous strains on its economy, divided its population and tarnished its image both at home and abroad immeasurably.\(^5^2\) The Soviet’s take-over of Afghanistan and the triumph of the Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions in 1979 were a fitting culmination for a decade marked by an unstable international order in which United States autonomy decreased markedly.


Further adding to the mercurial international setting of the 1970s, the communist regime in Cuba demonstrated that it was an important transnational player. Between November 1975 and April 1976, Cuba sent 36,000 soldiers to fight in the Angolan Civil War. In 1978, 12,000 Cuban soldiers disembarked in Ethiopia; missions to Benin, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Guinea and the Congo would soon follow. As foreign policy scholar Piero Gleijeses documents in his groundbreaking works on Cuban involvement in Africa during the Cold War, Havana’s international endeavors defied and humiliated Washington. The Caribbean island in the United States’ backyard became the only Third World country capable of projecting its military power beyond its immediate neighborhood.53 The Cuban regime’s international ventures played into apparent Soviet gains abroad to help create the impression that communism was again on the rise.

In *Empire’s Workshop*, historian Greg Grandin compellingly argues that throughout the twentieth century Latin America served as the theater for the United States to test out its imperial projects and became the place where Washington secured its international prowess.54 The unprecedented global challenges of the 1970s would once again drive successive United States administrations towards Latin America, making it the setting where Washington attempted to reverse its perceived loss of international power.

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Underlining U.S.-Latin American relations during the tumultuous 1970s was the collapse of the United States’ economic program for the region. Paralleling the crisis faced by the capitalist economic model in the 1970s, by the beginning of the decade it was clear that the United States-funded Alliance for Progress—which aimed to thwart the appeal of left-leaning groups by promoting economic modernization and development—had failed. United States optimism about the panacea-like effects of development and democratization—an idea at the core of American policymaking towards the third world—had been crumbling since the mid-1960s.\(^5^5\) The question of what should replace this modernizing vision remained open throughout the next decade.

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\(^5^5\) The Alliance for Progress was a program for Latin America instituted by U.S. President John F. Kennedy in the aftermath of Cuban Revolution of 1959. The program espoused development as a counterinsurgency strategy, believing that economic development and political democratization would go hand in hand. In essence, programs undertaken under the Alliance for Progress set out to accelerate the course of modernization and economic development. By so doing, U.S. policymakers hoped to contain the allure of Communism by driving the world into a historical stage of prosperity in which Communism would no longer have any appeal. The developments programs of the Alliance soon clashed with the interests of ruling classes in many Latin American countries. The original charter of the Alliance, the Punta del Este Charter, pledged the signatories to encourage programs of comprehensive agrarian reform with the help of timely and adequate credit, technical assistance and facilities for marketing and distribution of products, but the landed elite who dominated Latin American politics were hardly inclined to fulfill this pledge, which they saw as tantamount to political and economic suicide. By the end of the 1960s few Latin American nations had reached their target economic growth rates or made expected increases in popular living standards. Declining terms of trade and Latin American elites unwillingness to endorse economic reforms made substantial transformations in the regional economies all but impossible. Furthermore, the Alliance’s development objectives were soon overshadowed by anti-communist concerns. The United States prioritized counter-insurgency and strengthening military power over development goals. Elites red baited their adversaries and used steady flows of U.S. counterinsurgency aid to wage war against opponents. In effect, U.S. sponsored repression through counterinsurgency programs gutted the development gains that modernizers had sought, and an anti-communist crusade killed Kennedy’s intended "peaceful revolution" in its infancy. For a bird’s eye view of the development ideas guiding the Alliance see Michael Latham, “The Cold War in the Third World, 1963-1975,” in The Cambridge History of the Cold War, ed. Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn P. Leffler, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2010). For an account of the clash between the development goals of the Alliance for Progress and the interests of ruling classes in Latin America countries see Walter LaFeber, “The Alliances in Retrospect,” in Bordering on Trouble: Resources and Politics in Latin America, ed. Andrew Maguire and Janet Welsh
It was within this context of uncertainty that one must situate the polarization of U.S. policies towards the Americas in the 1970s. On one side, was the human rights movement—the advocates of moral imperatives. A loose coalition of grassroots organizers, Washington lobbyists, and sympathetic members of Congress, they focused on raising public awareness and utilizing Congressional control over foreign aid to curtail what became known as the “imperial presidency.” On the other, were the cold warriors, consisting mainly of politicians, diplomats, and military leaders. This camp prioritized alliances with anticommunist and often authoritarian leaders in the region. Cold warriors prioritized military power and would work hard to bypass Congressional constraints on its use. The same tension between these two antagonistic camps manifested itself in an increasingly critical, vocal and divided U.S. public opinion. While some citizens believed that the calamitous losses suffered in South East Asia demonstrated the need to focus attention on domestic issues, others concluded that the country needed to redouble its activism in the third world. Likewise, there was no consensus as to the balance of power between the two superpowers. Some believed that détente suggested a more harmonious international order and thus reduced the need for the U.S. to contain communism in the

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56 Historian and public intellectual Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. introduced and popularized the concept of the “imperial presidency” with the publication of a book bearing that title in 1973. In it, he voiced concern over what he perceived as a U.S. Presidency that had exceeded its constitutional limits and was out of control. Schlesinger was reacting to President Nixon’s overreach of his constitutional powers with the secret bombings of Laos and Cambodia, from 1964-1973, without Congressional approval. The Nixon Administration’s covert engagements in Indochina in the effort to secure victories against the North Vietnamese government ignored the U.S. Congress, the public, the press, and the Constitution and set a dangerous precedent for constitutional overreach by the executive. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Imperial Presidency. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1973).
developing world. Others, frightened by the spread of Marxist agendas abroad and losses in Vietnam, thought it warranted increased U.S. involvement abroad.

In their foreign policy towards the Americas, Presidents Nixon and Ford largely followed the cold warrior camp. They prioritized maintaining order and preserving the status quo by backing regimes that appeared to take a strong stance against leftist factions, and helping to overthrow those that did not. U.S. support for strong anti-communist governments in the region caused major setbacks for the Latin American left. On 11 September 1973, the democratically elected Chilean President, Salvador Allende, was overthrown by a military coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power. President Allende’s violent ouster—which had received substantial help from the CIA—had important repercussions in the entire hemisphere. His electoral victory in 1970 had inspired hope amongst Latin American leftists that a democratic socialist alternative was viable in the region. The 1973 coup thus radicalized important factions of the Latin American left by making them loose faith in the electoral avenue as a channel for substantial political change. As historian Samuel Moyn describes: “While Prague in 1968 proved that no revisionist socialism would be tolerated in the Soviet sphere, Santiago in 1973 brought home the lesson that no revisionist socialism would be tolerated in the American one.”

Chile was merely one example among many democratic reversals that took place in Latin America throughout the 1970s. The region was not impervious to the political and economic uncertainty of the period. The global economic crisis and political upheaval pushed many Latin American elites to favor strong governments believed to be

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57 Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 142
more capable of managing the economy and controlling new social forces. Economically, the decade brought accruing foreign debt to the region. Inflation, the end of Bretton Woods, and the liquidity of oil exporting countries allowed many Latin American nations to acquire debt like never before. While this was a decade of authoritarian governments, it was also one of public spending. Spending, financed through foreign loans, was intended to foster public support and allow governments to keep up with inflation. By the early 1980s, many countries in the region had accrued debts of such magnitude that they would default on their loans and thereby send national economies into profound recession.

Politically, the region experienced a period of polarization characterized by the rise of radical forces on both the left and right. In 1975, the governments of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia created a rightist international alliance to destroy the revolutionary left in the region. This alliance, which came to be known as Operation Condor, “represented the first formal collaboration among the counter subversive structures in the region.” 58 On the left, in 1974 Cuba created the Departamento América. Heretofore, this was the ministry from which Cuba supported Latin America’s revolutionary movements and it would become an important institution for Central American revolutionaries in the subsequent decade. The return of authoritarian governments pushed important sectors of the Latin American left to form or join clandestine guerrilla movements. While the decade was one in which Cuba limited its support for movements abroad, Latin American revolutionaries continued to find a

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receptive audience in Havana. The emergence of Operation Condor and the Departamento América in the mid 1970s would seem to confirm historian Ariel Armony’s assessment that during this period, Latin American revolutions seemed to matter more, strategically and ideologically, to countries such as Cuba and Argentina rather than the United States and the Soviet Union.

The 1970s was in fact a period in which Latin America looked inward. The failure of the Alliance for Progress and unfulfilled U.S. promises for economic aid left many Latin American governments feeling deceived. Consequently, they stopped addressing their problems at a hemispheric level and instead increasingly identified with the Third World, participated more actively in the United Nations and turned towards the Non Aligned Movement as a theater to address their problems.

The cold warrior approach of Nixon and Johnson towards Latin America shifted when President James Carter came to office in 1977. Carter emphasized his intent to abandon what he perceived to be a tradition of manipulation of the third world, and opted instead for open cooperation with these countries. This new policy changed the role of Latin America. The region became a laboratory for sincere dialogue between North and

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59 In the 1970s, Cuba retreated from supporting revolutionary movements in Latin America and turned its attention to Africa. U.S. relations with the island improved and the Cuban government was careful not to jeopardize this hiatus in tensions. In July 1975, the Ford Administration joined fifteen other members of the Organization of American States and voted to end diplomatic and commercial sanctions against Cuba. In August of that year, some provisions of the embargo were lifted. In 1974 and 1975, a few U.S. senators visited the island, amongst them Senator Jacob Javits, Claibore Pell, and George McGovern. In 1977 Senator Frank Church traveled to Cuba, in an air force plane, and spent 3 days there meeting with Cuban leaders. The Castro Administration reciprocated by allowing 84 US citizens to leave Cuba with their families. Church and Castro spent considerable time together. The normalization of Cuba’s diplomatic relations with many of the region’s governments incentivized the Castro Administration to pursue a hands-off attitude towards local affairs in the hemisphere.


South, with the United States abandoning its historic support for anti-communist dictators allied with the United States. The key points of Carter’s policy in the region were "the negotiations for a treaty for the Panama Canal, the commitment to human rights and the democratization of the hemisphere, and the intention to improve relations with Cuba. From the perspective of Washington, Latin America was a "gray area" on the international geopolitical map, and therefore a suitable and safe place for the U.S. government to put this agenda into action." Carter’s human rights policy in the region had a profound impact on the political landscape. It fueled the aspirations and demands of important social sectors for democratic change and for governments to uphold basic civil liberties. The failure of authoritarian governments to meet these aspirations incited social disruptions and popular mobilizations.

It was within this framework of shifting regional dynamics during the 1970s that the local crisis in El Salvador to which we now turn unfolded.

*El Salvador’s 1970s Crisis*

El Salvador is overridingy an agrarian society characterized by historically deep land concentration. In the years following its independence in 1821 from three centuries of colonial rule by Spain, land ownership in El Salvador became the monopoly of a minority comprised by state officials and professionals of Spanish descent. In a country where a lack of natural resources rendered coffee cultivation and export the central economic feature, land ownership was essential for economic prosperity. The landed elite came to control the production, processing, exportation and financing of the country’s only significant export. By 1930 a powerful landed elite had coalesced into the oligarchy

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that would dominate the Salvadoran economy until the outbreak of civil war half a century later. Political scientists Elisabeth Jean Wood referred to this as the “power pyramid or “magic square” of coffee production, processing, exporting, and finance that permitted a few dozen families to continue to dominate the economy until the civil war in the 1980s. She further asserts that of the Central American countries, only Guatemala had a more concentrated coffee sector.\textsuperscript{63} Although the monoexporter economy was mildly diversified with the cultivation of cotton and sugar after the Second World War, and with beef in the 1960s and 70s, control of these industries and the constituent economic gains remained largely in the same few hands.\textsuperscript{64}

Agricultural developments in the 1960s and 70s further aggravated the already pressing problem of land concentration. The Salvadoran government, international development agencies, and multilateral development banks emphasized investment in export crops and large-scale export-oriented agriculture at the expense of domestic food production. The landed elite were able to secure loans for export production and thus lands used for the main cash crops gradually took over those previously used for subsistence farming. Furthermore, unlike what occurred in many Latin American countries outside of the isthmus, agricultural production in Central America was fueled mostly by expanding the amount of land under cultivation and in pasture, rather than through more intensive use of existing farmlands and pasture by investing in modern


\textsuperscript{64} For a gripping account of the ties between revolution in Central America and the personal, familial, and class histories of the coffee elites see Jeffery M. Paige, \textit{Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America} (Harvard University Press, 1998).
machinery and fertilizers. Growth through the expansion of cultivated terrains created significant pressure on small landowners—many of whom lacked clear titles of ownership—who were pushed off their plots by powerful and well-connected landlords who, at best, employed them as wage laborers on the lands they had previously owned. Between 1960 and 1972, territory used for the main cash crops expanded by 43,000 hectares, yet the percentage of the rural population that was landless grew massively from 12 per cent in 1961, to 20 per cent in 1971, to 41 per cent in 1975.

In addition to exacerbating land concentration, the emphasis on exports encouraged the neglect both of domestic food production and of the long-term health of El Salvador’s natural resources. Coupled with the availability of foreign credit and loans for export production, the Salvadoran government also provided incentives and assistance for commodities produced for export but maintained price controls on basic foodstuffs. The reality that the Salvadoran farming economy was geared towards exports made it highly vulnerable to capricious international demand and led to a scarcity of food for domestic consumption. While agricultural production increased during the 1960s and 70s, the export-based nature of production and the land tenure system meant that this growth was accompanied by starvation and misuse of resources. By the late 1970s, one in every 8 Salvadorans had migrated to Honduras in search of land, work and food.

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The Salvadoran landed elite fiercely attached to its traditional power base, doggedly opposed necessary land reforms such as increased credit to small farmers, better rural land titling procedures, and agrarian reform programs. Given their historic alliance with the country’s politically empowered military, Salvadoran landlords were, until the outbreak of civil war in 1980, able to block attempts at even the mildest agricultural reform.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, El Salvador also underwent mild industrialization. The way in which its industry developed, however, did not alleviate the social and economic pressures emanating from the countryside. As Walter LaFeber explains in his analysis of the failures of the Alliance for Progress in Latin America, there was a key difference between how industrialization unfolded in developed Western nations such as the United States and in Latin America. In the former, agriculture provided the foundation for new industries—with excess foodstuff, minerals and agricultural purchasing power—but suffered as a result of industrialization. In the United States, at the turn of the 20th century, for instance, economic and political elites determined that industry should take precedence over agriculture. This same shift would occur in Latin America in the 1950s and 60s. The crucial difference was that in the United States, agriculture not only generated large export earnings and triggered capital formation for the economy but it also developed powerful interest groups that grew more powerful politically even as they became less important economically. Farm interest groups in the U.S. were thus able to ensure the redistribution of some of the new industrial wealth to rural areas in the form of communication infrastructure, dams, credit systems, electrifications, and so forth. In Latin America, by contrast, no such
redistribution occurred. The elite who controlled the agrarian sector either kept the wealth for themselves or channeled it into the cities where many of them lived.

In addition to exacerbating tensions in the countryside, industrialization in El Salvador was largely an endeavor directed by foreign multinational corporations. As James Dunkerley details, even though the establishment in the 1960s of free trade zones and other incentives such as liberal tax regimes and low labor costs succeeded at attracting foreign investment, multinationals imported the majority of their raw materials and manufactured components, assembled the commodity in El Salvador taking advantage of cheap labor costs, and then re-exported the finished product paying marginal export duties. The new industries, therefore, operated as virtual enclaves similar to the banana enclaves in Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. They established few links with local markets and failed to stimulate domestic production that could feed back into local markets.\(^\text{69}\) “Industrialization neither stemmed from nor produced a ‘national bourgeoisie’ with its own economic project or with political independence.”\(^\text{70}\) In other words, the industrialization of El Salvador did not produce an independent industrial sector.

The way in which industrialization unfolded in El Salvador, coupled with the aforementioned failures of agricultural development, resulted in a decreased quality of life for the majority of Salvadorans. Worsening conditions in the countryside, where the concentration of landownership increased while the potential for subsistence farming decreased, resulted in more landless peasants and an escalation of poverty. Thousands of workers poured into the cities but new industrial jobs absorbed less than one sixth of the

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\(^\text{70}\) Ibid., 54.
country’s unemployed.\textsuperscript{71} The economic and social pressures resulting from the failures of Salvadoran modernization efforts were further aggravated in the 1970s by the global economic crisis. The rise in oil prices produced by the 1973 embargo significantly affected Central American countries that imported all of their oil. Thus, foreign debt burdens—already high due to the capital-intensive nature of their agricultural and industrial modernization efforts—swelled tremendously.\textsuperscript{72} Furthermore, although the global economic crisis reduced demand for Salvadoran exports, this did not incentivize production for domestic consumption. As Maguire and Brown explain, El Salvador’s export industry was a victim of the following phenomenon: when the demand for exports expanded in the 1960s so did the demand for labor, and food production declined in the subsistence sector. Unfortunately, subsistence food production did not bounce back when the export sector shrunk. Instead, dealers who sold abroad reduced food purchases from small-scale independent producers and large landowners simply switched to more profitable export crops.\textsuperscript{73}

The effects of economic development in El Salvador during the 1960s and 70s created unprecedented social pressures. Coupled with the political developments that will be described in the following paragraphs, this made El Salvador fertile ground for the massive upheavals it experienced in the 1980s.

The Salvadoran elections of 1972 marked a watershed in the nation’s political history, and the events that followed were a somber presage of the dynamics that would characterize the country for the remainder of the decade. The 1972 presidential race

\textsuperscript{71} See LaFeber, “The Alliances in Retrospect.”
\textsuperscript{72} Smith, \textit{Resisting Reagan}, 76.
\textsuperscript{73} Nations and Leonard, “Grounds of Conflict in Central America,” 71.
differed from previous electoral contests in that it offered a strong and cohesive alternative to the official military-dominated party, the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), which had ruled El Salvador since its foundation in September 1961. For the first time in almost four decades, it looked as though the military’s control of the executive branch could be defied by a coalition of center-left parties: the Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO).  

Formed a few months before the election, UNO—composed of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), the Unión Democrática Nacionalista (UDN) and the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR)—presented José Napoleón Duarte as its presidential candidate. After he founded the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) in 1960, Napoleón Duarte had built a strong social and political base. In 1964 he became mayor of San Salvador and quickly secured the support of intellectuals, professionals and an important sector of the urban middle class. In the 1967 legislative elections, the PDC came only one vote short of securing a legislative majority. Why the military and landed-elite allowed the emergence and growth of the center-left PDC is difficult to determine. It’s plausible that the initial tolerance of an institutional opposition responded to expectations that it would help stave off some of the broiling popular discontent without posing a real threat to the political and economic order. As became clear with the 1972 election, however, the Salvadoran military had no intention of allowing the opposition to control the highest order of government.

The campaign leading up to the elections in February was perhaps the most active in the country’s history. Duarte launched an unprecedentedly ambitious nation-wide operation. His collaborators disbursed hundreds of thousands of leaflets and painted
“UNO” on walls across El Salvador. Duarte personally traveled throughout the entire country and spoke regularly before large crowds of cheering supporters. Arturo Armando Molina, the candidate for the official military party, also made extensive travels and took advantage of his party’s privileged access to the media by making regular appearances in the press and on television.75

There is today an overriding consensus among historians that, notwithstanding fraud and intimidation of voters by the military, UNO won the majority of votes at the 1972 elections.76 Notwithstanding, the Legislative Assembly—where the official PCN held an overriding majority—designated Armando Molina as the next president of El Salvador. A small progressive group within the military rejected the electoral fraud and staged a short-lived coup denouncing “the prevailing corruption, imposition of a candidate and electoral fraud.”77 The coup that took place on March 25 lasted only a few hours, yet it was used by the ruling administration to discredit Napoleón Duarte and the political coalition he represented. A wave of repression ensued against UNO collaborators, and Duarte was captured, tortured, and held personally responsible. While the military had managed to maintain control of the government, the 1972 elections were a turning point in the political history of the country. They marked the moment at which many Salvadorans lost faith in elections and institutions. A consequential number of the


77 Rey Prendes, De la Dictadura Militar a la Democracia: Memorias de un político Salvadoreño 1931-1994, 222.
men and women disillusioned by the events surrounding the 1972 presidential race subsequently turned to violence and clandestine organizations, believing that they were the only viable channels to contest the military’s stranglehold on political power and the only means through which to pursue a more inclusive socioeconomic order. Consequently, many Salvadorans formed or joined guerrilla organizations in the aftermath of the 1972 elections. A handful of future FMLN leaders, for example, traveled to Cuba in the wake of the electoral fraud to receive training in urban guerrilla warfare. Amongst them was Ana Sonia Medina; then a Salvadoran woman in her early 20s who helped found the guerrilla organization Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). In a current interview, the former FMLN Commander, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, recounted a recent conversation she held with one of the founders of the Christian Democratic Party of El Salvador, Abraham Rodríguez. Martínez sustains that in discussing the causes of the civil war, she and Rodriguez both agreed that the war would have been avoided if Napoleón Duarte’s electoral victory in 1972 had been respected. In interviews sustained by the author with more than twenty former leaders of the FMLN they all referenced the 1972 electoral fraud as a decisive moment in the radicalization of Salvadoran politics.

Arturo Molina took office on 1 July 1972 with tenuous legitimacy. While backed by the military and the country’s powerful landlords, the events surrounding his election left an imprint on Salvadoran popular consciousness. Duarte’s campaign represented the political awakening of important sectors of the population who now felt uneasy with the

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78 Medina, Ana Sonia. *Interview with author*. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 20, 2010
80 For the names of those interviewed, see the sources cited in later chapters and in the bibliography.
mechanisms through which the military managed to retain its hold on power. Furthermore, student organizations and associations of workers and professionals protested against what was largely perceived as a fraudulent election. To secure his authority, Molina began his presidency by spearheading a series of repressive policies aimed at curtailing the clout of opposition movements. One of his first acts as president was to send Duarte and his closest collaborators into exile, and to crack down on the three parties that had formed the UNO coalition by accusing them of orchestrating the failed coup attempt of March 25.

Molina’s repressive tactics aimed to send the unequivocal signal that opposition under his watch would not be tolerated. This message was reinforced a few days later, when on July 19 a military unit intervened at the University of San Salvador “to expel and imprison all terrorists and communists from the university as well as atheists who were corrupting Christian values.”81 The military take-over of the University of San Salvador had profound implications. Like many of its Latin American counterparts, this institution had in recent years become a hub for activism and student politics. The autonomous character of Latin American universities made them insulated spaces where independent ideas and student power could flourish.82 Intellectuals and students became protagonists in efforts to stimulate civilian rule, democratic institutions, and respect for human rights, and they became leaders in the revolutionary movements that took hold of

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Central America during the 1980s. Mexican intellectual Jorge Castañeda describes the importance of universities as follows:

*It was no coincidence that many of the leaders of the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran insurrections had taken their revolutionary tutorials in the universities of the Isthmus where left-wing lay or Jesuit intellectuals held sway. It was almost as important—and revolutionary character building—an experience to have attended one of the continent’s public universities...as it was to have enrolled at the Ñico López School for cadres in Havana, or at the Punto Cero shooting range outside the Cuban capital.*

In the case of El Salvador, during the presidency of General Fidel Sánchez Hernandez (1967-72) broad based student movements and the National Association of Salvadoran Educators (ANDES) emerged in the University of San Salvador. The *Asociación General de Estudiantes Salvadoreños* (AGES) denounced the PCN’s use of repressive tactics to squelch popular mobilizations in its publication *Opinión Estudiantil* that circulated massively in the interior of the University. For the first time in the country’s history, professors and intellectuals began to articulate concerns about the way the country was ruled. Furthermore, they organized around these political concerns, reached out to

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83 In an interview with the author, Joaquín Villalobos, who led one of the largest guerrilla organizations from the mid 1970s until the end of the civil war, recalled that his first encounters with radical politics took place at the University of San Salvador. Villalobos, Joaquín. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: June 26, 2008. See also, Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, 186.

worker organizations and other popular movements, and began to actively participate in political life. Molina decided to put an end to this upon coming to power.

During the military’s take-over of the university, which lasted until the end of 1973, troops patrolled the campus and all university activities remained under strict surveillance. An ad hoc administrative committee was created to review the credentials of all administrators and faculty. Those who had supported the opposition or were suspected of having leftist sympathies were quickly purged from the university. While the occupation brought a brief hiatus to political activities inside the campus, it did not eradicate subversive activities. Rather, the flagrant assault on the university’s autonomy strengthened the resolve of some students and faculty to confront what they perceived as an increasingly exclusionary and authoritarian regime. Some of those expelled sought asylum in Costa Rica while others turned to the incipient guerrilla organizations. The personal testimony of José Luis Quan is illustrative in this regard. A philosophy professor at the University of San Salvador, Quan was fired soon after the military’s take-over for allegedly exhibiting leftist sympathies. One month later, he was recruited by the incipient guerrilla organization Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). Evidently, the incipient guerrilla movements were adept at making an unfortunate situation, in which many professors and administrators lost their livelihoods, work to their advantage. Quan was able to resume teaching at the university in 1975, once the military had left the institution and from there he continued to work both as a professor and as an ERP militant.\(^85\)

Notwithstanding the systemic state-sponsored repression against the opposition, student movements, trade unions, and worker and peasant associations continued their

\(^{85}\) Quan, *El Día Menos Pensado*. 
political activism throughout the decade. The 1977 Presidential elections were again characterized by rampant fraud and they brought PCN candidate General Carlos Humberto Romero to power. His administration followed the path set out by President Molina and he employed a zero tolerance policy towards opposition movements.

The wave of popular mobilizations and state-sponsored repression that followed the electoral turmoil of 1972 foreshadowed what would become quotidian realities for El Salvador during the remainder of the 1970s.

One of the most consequential developments for El Salvador during this period was the rise of guerrilla movements. These clandestine organizations had variegated leftist political affinities. While some identified as Marxist-Leninists, sympathized with the Soviet Union and sought to bring some form of communism to El Salvador, the intellectual foundations of the majority of the Salvadoran guerillas rested on Catholic Liberation theology more than on a comprehensive cognizance of Marxist-Leninist thought. Undoubtedly, many guerrilla movements proclaimed adherence to Marxism and socialism as a way of securing their revolutionary credentials, and most likely, of securing foreign support for their cause from the socialist camp. With time, many revolutionary leaders did come to acquire Marxism as an intellectual paradigm, but with the exception of militant members of the Communist Party, this was generally not the case in the early stages of their formation.

While guerrillas did not really appear in El Salvador until the early 1970s, their emergence was nothing new in the region.86 During the Cold War period, and particularly in the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, guerrilla movements acquired an

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86 Early guerrilla movements in the region have been traced back to 16th century attempts to counter Spanish invaders. See, Daniel Castro, Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1999).
unprecedented prominence in Latin America’s political landscape. Virtually every country in the region, at one point or another during the second half of the twentieth century, was home to leftist political movements seeking to overthrow the established regimes through violent methods. With the exception of Cuba in 1959 and Nicaragua in 1979, none of these movements succeeded at conquering power, yet their challenge to states and demands for more equitable and representative orders profoundly affected the political trajectories of numerous countries in the hemisphere.

Salvadoran guerrilla movements were overwhelmingly formed and led by young middle-class students and intellectuals. Although they would increasingly reach out to other social sector and acquire a powerful popular base (particularly amongst peasants) by the 1980s, this was not the case in the early years of their formation. In the 1970s, their membership consisted mainly of young middle-class professionals and students.

Salvadoran guerrilla movements were part of what scholars have termed the second wave of revolutionary activity in Latin America.87 They differed from their predecessors of the 1960s in that they were largely urban-based and no longer adhered strictly to the theory of foquismo.88 In the 1980s, as their membership increased and military repression escalated, guerrilla movements would again retreat to rural areas and conduct their operations from there.

The 1970s were a formative period for the incipient Salvadoran guerrillas. As students, young professionals, and intellectuals, most of the founders and early members of El Salvador’s guerrilla movements had little or no familiarity with weapons and armed

87 Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America.
88 See p.47 of this chapter for an analysis of foquismo and its impact on leftist movements in the region.
struggle. Military training and instruction on urban guerrilla warfare, which consisted of acquiring familiarity with weapons, fabricating and using explosives, and learning the acts of clandestine communications, disguise and photography were prioritized in the early 1970s. Guerrilla members' initial inexperience with these matters at times led to comical situations. For example, FMLN Commander Eduardo Sancho recounts an instance in which a group of guerrillas captured a handful of weapons from military officers only to realize that nobody knew how to load or unload them. Other times, acquiring military knowhow carried a heavy price. A number of guerrillas died or suffered permanent injuries at the hands of faulty homemade bombs in the 1970s, or due to what would later seem like the most naive logistical mistakes.

With time, Salvadoran guerrilla organizations established transnational support networks that helped them finance many of their activities. In the early years, however, obtaining funds was a constant struggle. Guerrilla organizations resorted to a few bank robberies and to kidnapping wealthy Salvadorans for ransom. While kidnappings proved to be a highly successful method for acquiring much needed money, it tarnished the image of the guerrillas in the eyes of many Salvadorans who may have otherwise sympathized with their efforts to challenge the military and landed elites.

In the 1970s, guerrilla organizations also encouraged the intellectual formation of their members. A former ERP member recounts how when he joined the organization in the early 1970s, the ERP had a centralized political school and those who joined were

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90 For vivid testimonies by former guerrillas of their experiences in their first years as insurgents that include candid accounts of mistakes and oversights due to inexperience, see Quan, El Día Menos Pensado; Carlos Eduardo Rico Mira, En Silencio Tenía Que Ser: Testimonio Del Conflicto Armado En El Salvador, 1967-2000, 1a ed (San Salvador: Editorial Universidad Francisco Gavidia, 2003); Jose Ignacio Lopez Vigil, Las mil y una historias de Radio Venceremos, 1. ed edition (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1991).
asked to study successful insurrectionary movements and liberation efforts in Africa, South East Asia (especially Vietnam), and Latin America. Close attention was paid to the insurrectionary process in Russia, the long popular war in China, and the Cuban Revolution's resilience in the face of the United States’ embargo. The manual for guerrillas by Argentinian theoretician Mariaghella, Ernesto (Che) Guevara’s personal diary and his work *War of Guerrillas* were also mandatory readings. This particular interest in intellectual development is telling regarding the demographic of Salvadoran guerrillas. As has already been mentioned, the pioneers of these movements came largely from a privileged and educated sector of society. In this, they followed the norm rather than the exception in a region where revolutionary and guerrilla efforts were largely led by educated men and women. In a spin off of Barrington Moore’s famous assertion about the relationship between democratic transitions and the preexistence of a middle class, in the case of twentieth century Latin America one could well affirm: no intelligentsia, no revolutionary movement. Guerrilla organizations were not limited in their intellectual pursuits to being consumers of knowledge but also took it upon themselves to produce works that examined El Salvador’s political history and political economy, as well as the potential impact of a burgeoning civil society. The historical and international

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91 Quan, *El Dia Menos Pensado*, 38.
93 Save for Ana Guadalupe Martinez’s poignant analysis of factionalism within the Salvadoran economic elite on account of modernization efforts in the 1960s, these works were not published. They consisted of hand-written or typed monographs written by revolutionaries and circulated amongst themselves. The author’s cognizance of their existence, and seriousness with which guerrilla leaders read and discussed them, comes from a series of interviews with former FMLN leaders. Amongst the texts that revolutionaries cited as most significant were “El Grano de Oro” by Rafael Arce Zablah, which argued that El Salvador faced a situation analogous to what political scientists call “the natural resource curse” on account of it coffee; Mercedes del Carmen Letona’s “El Poder Popular de Doble Cara,”
sensitivities of the Salvadoran insurgents who were keen to understand and learn from liberation efforts abroad show that while their emergence responded to local realities, they were never insular movements out of touch with foreign affairs.

As they emerged, Salvadoran guerrillas grappled with the question of how they would relate to the country’s myriad social movements that had emerged in the country in preceding years. Guerrilla movements debated the costs and potential benefits of establishing relations with civil organizations. If they decided in favor of building bridges with civil society, should they ally with already existing social groups or form their own? The matter proved to be one of the most contentious and divisive issues within the different guerrilla organizations during the 1970s. Some guerrillas were most influenced by revolutionary movements in Latin America, specifically the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and by foquismo—the theory elaborated by Cuban Revolutionary Ernesto (Che) Guevara and French intellectual and public servant Régis Debray. This theory, based on the notion of vanguardism, held that given adequate structural conditions a small illuminated guerrilla movement could on its own provide the insurrectionary spark for a massive popular uprising that would overthrow a sitting regime and secure a revolutionary victory. Foquismo assumed that the masses would simply join an insurrection once it began and thus placed little emphasis on building a social base or fostering ties to civil organizations and movements.

which studied the importance of winning over the hearts and minds of the Salvadoran population; and Mélida Anaya Montes “Experiencias Vietnamitas en su Guerra de Liberación,” which drew lessons from the Vietnamese experience fighting a U.S.-backed enemy. This text, of which I was given one of a handful of existing copies, is discussed more fully in Chapter 4. Martínez, Ana Guadalupe, Las Cárceles Clandestinas de El Salvador, 2008 edition (9th edition). First edition, 1978. (UCA EDITORES, San Salvador, El Salvador).
The history of the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) illustrates the schisms provoked in the 1970s by debates on how to relate with popular movements. While key members of the ERP were exclusively focused on military affairs and what they believed was an imminent insurrection, other members argued in favor of popular mobilizations. Disagreement over this matter was largely responsible for the internal purge that resulted in the death of ERP member Roque Dalton.\(^{94}\) Dalton’s murder by members of his own guerrilla organization consolidated the internal ruptures that had been brewing for months. Those who favored building alliances with popular movements and organizing popular mobilizations subsequently broke off from the ERP and formed the Resistencia Nacional or joined the Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Centroamericanos. For the remainder of the 1970s, the ERP and RN were sworn enemies and remained suspicious of one another. It was not until the end of the decade that these groups reestablished communications at a series of meetings in Havana, where they both joined the umbrella guerrilla movement that became the FMLN. In turn, the PRTC not only prioritized building relations with civil society but also maintained that these efforts should be conducted at a transnational level throughout all of Central America. The PRTC originated from the “*Organización Revolucionaria de los Trabajadores*” (ORT) or Revolutionary Organization of Workers—a group that had splintered from the ERP in 1973 over tactical differences regarding guerrillas’ relation to popular movements. Fabio Castillo Figueroa, a former dean of the University of San Salvador, founded the PRTC in 1975. His aspiration was to build a revolutionary party throughout the entire Isthmus.

\(^{94}\) See Quan, *El Día Menos Pensado*; Rico Mira, *En Silencio Tenía Que Ser*. 
Ultimately, the late 1970s and 1980s would see all the major guerrilla groups recognize the importance of building a social base. They established close ties with existing organizations and formed their own social movements, which, while seemingly independent remained inextricably linked to the guerrillas.

Building Blocks of Guerrilla Diplomacy

The Salvadoran guerrillas were born at a time when leftist movements and governments held sway in the region and on a global scale. Throughout the 1970s, the largest Salvadoran insurgent organizations reached out to sympathetic groups abroad and brought their revolutionary efforts into direct conversation with international movements. The foreign contacts Salvadorans cultivated throughout the 1970s contributed significantly to the guerrillas’ early efforts and helped pave the way for what in the 1980s became a highly successful revolutionary diplomacy without precedent in Latin America.

Notwithstanding their differences, guerrilla movements found Cuba to be a powerful referent. The largest and better-funded guerrilla organizations sent some of their first members to the island for brief periods of time. Individual Salvadoran guerrillas traveled to Cuban camps where they received military training and political lessons on Marxism, revolutionary theory and the Cuban Revolution. ERP Commanders Claudio Armijo and Joaquín Villalobos both recounted how their organization had sent a handful of members to train in Cuba during the 1970s. Ana Sonia Medina, also an ERP commander, was sent to train in Cuba for a 6-month period in 1972. Eduardo Rico Mira, who would go on to become the diplomatic representative of the RN, was sent to receive military and political training in in Cuba in 1972. Here he was placed under the direct tutelage of Salvadoran poet-cum-revolutionary Roque Dalton. In his autobiography, En
Silencio Tenía Que Ser, Rico Mira narrates his experiences while receiving political and urban warfare training on the island. Political instruction consisted primarily of studying the experiences of the Vietnamese Vietcong while urban warfare centered on recognizing terrain, and using cameras. He also received military training that emphasized the use of weapons and physical education. While being trained in Cuba, Rico Mira came in contact with revolutionaries from other parts of Latin America, most notably Nicaraguan Sandinista leaders Jaime Wheelock and Carlos Fonseca, and members of Argentina's People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP).  

There is vast concurrence amongst the FMLN leadership that the actual number of Salvadorans trained on the island was small. The number of guerillas trained in Cuba is deceptive, however, because these officials would return to El Salvador and train fellow combatants based on their newly acquired skills. Thus, although the actual numbers of Cuban-trained officials was small, Cuban instruction had a ripple effect that permeated the Salvadoran guerrilla organizations and had a much greater impact than mere numbers would suggest. Furthermore, the rapport that unfolded in Cuba between Salvadoran guerrillas and revolutionaries from other parts of Latin America proved consequential. Not only did Salvadorans benefit from learning about the successes and failures of more


experienced guerrillas, but also the transnational relations established on the island would prove to be a decisive asset in subsequent years.

The Soviet Union also played a role in the 1970s albeit a marginal one when compared to Cuba—the hemisphere’s bastion of revolution. The guerrilla organization *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación* (FPL) had its roots in the Communist Party of El Salvador, which, like most communist parties in the hemisphere, maintained a close relationship with Moscow. Consequently, a handful of FPL members traveled to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the 1970s to receive military training and learn about the Soviet’s experience with communism.97

Beyond Cuba and the Soviet Union, throughout the 1970s guerrilla members also traveled to countries like Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, France, Portugal, and the Czech Republic. These travels constituted the first international experiences of most of the Salvadoran guerrillas. It was primarily in foreign countries, away from the persecution they faced at home, that they began to build relations with sympathetic governments and solidarity movements. ERP leader Joaquín Villalobos recalls how his first contact with a progressive Salvadoran army officer occurred in Mexico City’s *Parque Hundido* in the mid 1970s. There, Villalobos found not only a dynamic and captivating country that he would eventually consider his second home, but also a receptive and solidary environment. He recalls how upon arriving in Mexico City’s Benito Juárez Airport he was panic-stricken when his suitcase full of revolutionary posters and propaganda was

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opened for inspection by Mexican authorities. “In El Salvador, this would have been enough to secure my capture, torture and disappearance, but in Mexico the security officer simply asked me if I would please give him a couple of the posters. He sympathized with our struggle, he assured me with a smile.”

In 1976, after enduring six months of imprisonment and torture in a clandestine Salvadoran prison, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, who would go on to preside over the FMLN’s Political and Diplomatic Commission (CPD), was sent to Paris where she spent a few months recovering physically and emotionally. It was during these months in Paris that she wrote *Cárceles Clandestinas*, a first-hand account of the brutal tactics used by the Salvadoran security apparatus in clandestine prisons. Her book would go on to become quite influential inside El Salvador during the 1980s. Joaquín Villalobos joined Martínez in Paris and from here they began to establish relations with French and Western European civil society organizations that were receptive to the plight of Latin Americans fighting against military dictatorships and oppressive regimes.

The testimony of Eduardo Rico Mira, an RN member who headed some of the organization’s diplomatic efforts in Costa Rica, is illustrative regarding the scope and significance of the guerrilla’s international endeavors in the 1970s. Rico Mira recounts that the RN created an International Relations Commission in San Salvador in 1977. The organization determined that it would have a non-aligned foreign policy, that is, that they would establish relations with movements and governments on all sides of the

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99 Martínez, Las Cárceles Clandestinas.
100 Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 30, 2011.
geopolitical Cold War divide. In 1977, they prioritized relations with Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama. Rico Mira was sent to Costa Rica where he initially contacted leftist parties and sympathetic organizations. According to his account, Costa Rica was a vital base for the RN’s diplomatic efforts during the last years of the 1970s. It was here that he established relations with the Partido Vanguardia Popular—which was like the country’s communist party—and RN members came in contact with other revolutionaries, most notably Nicaraguan tercerista and Argentinian Montoneros.

The Montoneros and terceristas had important bases in Costa Rica and the RN’s interactions with them were consequential. Based in Costa Rica at the time was Nicaraguan guerrilla leader Daniel Ortega. He convinced RN members of the importance of building a strong international nexus, of launching an aggressive foreign policy and of establishing links not only with political parties and solidarity movements but also with state governments. The terceristas also put the RN in touch with Panamanian President General Omar Torrijos. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, General Torrijos became a crucial supporter of the Salvadoran insurgency until his premature death in 1981. Perhaps his most notable contribution was in building a bridge between the FMLN and the Socialist International. In turn, the Montoneros brought the RN in contact with the Costa Rican government, which had allowed the Argentinians to set up a radio station in Costa Rica. The RN was eventually allowed to establish a military school in Costa Rica.

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102 Rico Mira, En Silencio Tenia Que Ser, 129–30.
103 Ibid., 133.
104 Ibid., 134.
105 Ibid.
Rica. Furthermore, they set up a fund for money obtained from kidnapings. At one point, their savings fund in Costa Rica amassed 20 million dollars.\textsuperscript{106} Costa Rica was also an important base for purchasing and shipping weapons. The Sandinistas had opened an arms market in the country and they put the RN in touch with their arms dealer who would sell them weapons to be shipped to El Salvador on small planes. The RN rewarded the Sandinistas for their support and advice by donating $7 million dollars to their cause.\textsuperscript{107} Rico Mira does not speak about the extent to which Costa Rican authorities were involved with revolutionary movements’ efforts in their country. It seems reasonable to speculate that the administrations of Daniel Oduber Quiros and Rodrigo Carazo Odio were at least willing to turn a blind and sympathetic eye to the activities of guerrilla movements on Costa Rican soil.

The diplomatic activities of the Salvadoran guerrillas in the 1970s laid the foundation blocks for what would become a highly elaborate guerrilla diplomatic machine with global reach. In 1980 the four largest guerrilla organizations of El Salvador—the ERP, RN, PRTC and FPL—joined with the communist party to form the umbrella revolutionary organization FMLN. The ensuing twelve-year long civil war, between the FMLN and the Salvadoran state and military would profoundly alter the course of Salvadoran history. As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, both the FMLN and the Salvadoran Civil War were largely a product of the global, regional and

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{107} RN leader Eduardo Sancho and ERP leader Joaquin Villalobos both told the author about the RN’s financial contributions to the Sandinistas before they came to power. The exact amount provided here comes from Rico Mira’s account, Ibid; Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 22, 2010; Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: June 26, 2008.
local dynamics of the 1970s. The breakdown of preexisting economic and political models mixed with new social pressures provoked a legitimacy crisis on a global scale. For countries like El Salvador, where the government was unwilling to give out any shred of power even to "respectable" middle-class opposition parties—let alone to the lower classes—and where popular social movements acquired unprecedented clout, the decade was particularly consequential. As Whickam Crowley puts it: regimes such as El Salvador’s faced "crises" of participation with which their "old" institutions were incapable of dealing, and guerrilla warfare was freshly available in the cultural repertoire as a revolutionary option."108 As would become evident in the subsequent decade, this proved to be an explosive combination.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the 1970s as a turbulent decade of systemic breakdown and shifting dynamics that unfolded on three distinct yet interpenetrating levels—global, regional and local. Much as a matryoshka nesting doll, the local crisis in el Salvador fell within the regional crisis in the Americas that in turn rested within the global crisis. The shifting dynamics of the 1970s and the severe blows to previous political and economic models created systemic vacuums and opened up spaces for new repertoires, such as human rights and an invigorated “Third Worldism” in the Americas. The systemic breakdown of the decade also opened up spaces for political agency that various state and non-state actors of distinct ideological persuasions would capitalize on in the effort to tip the geopolitical scales in their favor.

108 Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America, 228.
It was in this context that the civil war in El Salvador erupted in January 1981 and became the epicenter of a global struggle to resolve the crises of the previous decade. The myriad state and non-state actors that threw their hats into the Salvadoran Civil War were ultimately attempting to shape the course of the international order. Only by accounting for how the crisis in El Salvador fit into the broader regional and global histories can one understand why the fratricidal conflict in the smallest country of Central America became a phenomenon of global involvement and concern. The remainder of this dissertation tells this history of an internationalized civil war that helped determine the fate of the post Cold War world.
CHAPTER 2: THE SINEWS OF WAR

Introduction

This chapter examines the birth of the Salvadoran revolutionary movement, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), as an umbrella organization of four distinct guerrilla movements and the Salvadoran Communist Party. The FMLN was formed throughout the course of 1980. The terms of the revolutionary alliance between previously disparate and antagonistic groups were convened at a series of meetings in Havana, under the auspices of Cuban leaders and high-ranking members of the Nicaraguan revolutionary government, Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). In addition to giving birth to the FMLN, these meetings served to formalize relations between the Salvadoran organization and Havana and Managua. Interactions with the revolutionary governments of Cuba and Nicaragua would constitute the crux of what I call the FMLN’s military diplomacy, that is, diplomacy geared at obtaining support for military endeavors such as weapons, training and financing of military operations.

The history of the FMLN’s formation elucidates the significance of the Salvadoran organization being formed abroad, with the endorsement and support of the only two leftist revolutionary governments in the hemisphere. Although rooted in local realities, the unified Salvadoran revolutionary movement was indissolubly linked to broader processes in the region, which were in turn embedded in the geopolitical matrix of the global Cold War. Furthermore, the FMLN’s alliance with Cuba and Nicaragua speaks to the Salvadoran insurgents’ ability to capitalize on the internationalization of the Salvadoran crisis to further their bid for political power. Rather than being a pawn, the FMLN became an active player in the Cold War chess game in which it was immersed.
Having surveyed the FMLN’s formation and military diplomacy, the chapter then shifts its gaze north to the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States. While there is scholarly debate about the extent to which Reagan differed from his predecessor, James Carter, in his foreign policy towards El Salvador, warring Salvadoran factions perceived Reagan’s ascent to power as a watershed moment and it affected their strategies and calculations in decisive ways. A staunch anticommunist, President Reagan portrayed events in Central America as the product of East-West Cold War rivalries, and defeating the FMLN and the revolutionary regime in Nicaragua became dominant foreign policy goals. The Reagan Administration became the staunchest ally of the Salvadoran State and Army in their fight against the leftist insurgents, and the Salvadoran Civil War and the FMLN’s diplomacy cannot be understood without accounting for the impact of U.S. policies in El Salvador. While the Reagan Administration allocated massive amounts of U.S. resources to annihilate the Salvadoran left, the U.S. public learned of atrocious human rights violations perpetrated by the Salvadoran Army and death squads, which their government was funding and training. As early as 1980, a community of activists and solidarity organizations opposed to Reagan’s support for the Salvadoran state began to form in the U.S. This chapter ends with a brief history of the FMLN’s relations with these solidarity movements and argues that Salvadoran insurgents were decisive agents in the formation of these movements. While these non-state actors became key supporters of the revolutionary organization, they also accentuated tensions amongst the different FMLN factions. The FMLN’s relations with solidarity movements in the U.S. evidence the fraught nature of the Salvadoran revolutionaries’ coalition.
Ana Guadalupe Martínez made her way through Managua in an old Nicaraguan taxi. It was October 15, 1979 and as the political representative of the Salvadoran guerrilla movement *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), she was headed for the Cuban embassy in Managua. Ana Guadalupe was to speak to Cuban officials at the embassy and persuade them to incorporate the ERP into the discussions taking place in Havana between different Salvadoran insurgent movements.

For months, the Cuban administration had been mediating talks between the groups that it considered to be the strongest revolutionary movements in El Salvador: the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS), the National Resistance (RN), and the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL).\(^{109}\) It was not difficult for the ERP to speculate that these meetings aimed to cement Salvadoran revolutionary unity under Cuban auspice. A year earlier, the Castro administration struck a similar arrangement three Nicaraguan guerrilla organizations. After years of attempting to overthrow long-standing Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza independently, the insurgents movements joined forces in 1978, formed the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), and a year later took power as Somoza was overthrown.

The strategy pursued by the FSLN differed markedly from the tactics followed by other Latin American guerrilla groups in the 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike their insular and sectarian predecessors, the three Nicaraguan guerrilla groups that formed the FSLN decided to set ideological differences and factional tendencies aside and forge a coalition between distinct and seemingly contradictory groups. Once unified, the rebel forces

sought to gain the support of various interest groups in the country, including prominent businessmen and the urban and rural middle class. In the months leading up to the Nicaraguan Revolution, the FSLN allied with a group of prominent intellectuals, businessmen, and progressive politicians known as *El Grupo de los Doce* (the Group of Twelve). This group, which formed in 1977, helped the FSLN secure international condemnation of the Somoza regime, fostered the FSLN’s legitimacy abroad as a genuine representative of the Nicaraguan people, and in the aftermath of revolution led efforts to build a new revolutionary government. In July 1979, less than a year after its formation, the FSLN launched a joint offensive that managed to overthrow the Somoza regime and take power.

The Sandinistas’ victory shook the continental axiom and brought armed insurgency back from the realm of political imagination to that of political reality. Furthermore, it showcased a new revolutionary model that unlike the guerrilla movements of the 1960s seemed to offer a recipe for victory. The Nicaraguan insurgents succeeded only after they set ideological and tactical differences aside and formed a united revolutionary front. They also created a broad-based social and diplomatic network that while seemingly independent worked closely with the FSLN. The Sandinistas’ success in the aftermath of unity had a deep impact on sectors of the Latin American left, most notably on the Cuban administration and on the guerrilla movements in the neighboring country of El Salvador.

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110 FMLN leaders Joaquín Villalobos and Ana Guadalupe Martínez both mentioned the Nicaraguan *Grupo de los Doce* as an important referent for the FMLN that motivated the Salvadoran organization to create a political diplomatic commission. Martínez, Ana Guadalupe. *Interview with author*. San Salvador, El Salvador: August 21, 2010; Villalobos, Joaquin. *Interview with author*. Mexico City, Mexico: July 30, 2011.
When Ana Guadalupe traveled to Managua in October 1979 her mission was to lobby the Cubans for the ERP’s inclusion into the bourgeoning Salvadoran revolutionary coalition brewing in Havana. Her task was complicated. Since the murder of communist poet Roque Dalton in 1975 in El Salvador by leaders of the ERP, Cuba had severed ties with this Salvadoran guerrilla movement and relations between the two had been characterized by hostility and mistrust. With the support of a few ERP members who had fought with the Sandinistas and still remained in Nicaragua, Ana Guadalupe was able to bypass the Cuban Embassy’s reluctance to see her. She secured a meeting with Joaquin Cuadra, the Sandinista Army Chief of Staff, and Cuadra persuaded two Cuban agents in Managua to meet with her.

The Cuban deputies were swayed by the young Salvadoran guerrillera, but being part of a regime in which practically all decisions had to be made directly by Fidel Castro, Ana Guadalupe was sent to meet with the Directorate in Cuba. The next day, she was in Havana meeting with the head of the Americas Department of the international relations department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party (Departamento América): Manuel Piñeiro (better known as Barba Raja—“red beard”—after his chief identifying feature). Born in Cuba in 1934 to a privileged upbringing as the son of a Bacardi rum representative, Manuel Piñeiro was an intriguing and polemic figure.

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111 Before joining the ERP in 1973, Roque Dalton lived in Cuba and built close relationships with prominent members of the Cuban administration. Dalton’s execution on May 10, 1975 by members of the ERP leadership was condemned by Havana, who consequently broke relations with the ERP. For a first-hand account of Dalton’s death see, Fermán Cienfuegos, Crónicas Entre Los Espejos (San Salvador, El Salvador: Editorial Universidad Francisco Gavidia, 2003), 100–114. For an account of Dalton’s time in Cuba, see the testimony of a Salvadoran guerrilla trained on the island in the mid 1970s under the tutelage of Roque Dalton: Rico Mira, En Silencio Tenía Que Ser.

that exemplified the bourgeois roots of many of the hemisphere’s revolutionary leaders. He pursued his college education at Columbia University in New York where he concentrated on business and met his first wife, American ballet dancer Lorna Burdsall. During his time in New York, Piñeiro’s political awareness flourished, albeit not in the direction his father would have presumable intended. After completing his studies, the young Cuban business graduate returned home and soon thereafter joined Fidel Castro’s 26 of July Movement. He was initially assigned to carry out clandestine operations in his birth province of Matanzas, but his subversive undertakings soon forced Piñeiro to go into hiding and join fellow revolutionaries in the Sierra Maestra. Fighting under the command of Fidel’s younger brother, Raul, Piñeiro earned the trust and respect of the Castro brothers and rose quickly in the ranks of the guerrilla movement. With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959, _Barba Roja_ was asked to develop and head a new security apparatus from the recently created Ministry of the Interior (Minint). As deputy minister of the interior from 1961-1974, Piñeiro oversaw the creation of one of the most effective security agencies ever constructed. The agency not only proved capable of safeguarding the livelihood of every single member of the Cuban leadership, but also achieved almost absolute control over Cuban society.

In 1974 Piñeiro was transferred from the Ministry of the Interior to head the newly created _Departamento América_—Americas Department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. This Department, which came to be known as the Ministry of Revolution, was the institutional nucleus from which Cuba directed its efforts to assist revolutionary movements elsewhere in Latin America. This ministry was granted an unusual degree of autonomy and its leader enjoyed a substantial amount of power. The
Departamento América had its own group of specialists and private communications networks abroad. Furthermore, Piñeiro had the privilege of proposing and vetoing Cuba’s highest diplomatic representatives in Latin America, thereby securing him a steady flow of first-hand information from the region.\(^{113}\) In his study of the Latin American left during the Cold War period, Utopia Unarmed, Jorge Castañeda describes the Departamento América as follows: “It was, thereafter, where revolution was exported from; its agents were placed in embassies and press bureaus; its headquarters were just next to Fidel’s office in the Palace of the Revolution; its links with the Latin American left were extensive, intimate, and decisive.”\(^{114}\) While classifying the Americas Department as an exporter of revolution downplays the autonomous roots of the region’s revolutionary movements and the extent to which the Department’s efforts abroad were bound by local realities, Castañeda assessment accurately conveys the clout of this Cuban agency within the Cuban government and its intimate ties with the Latin American left.

Piñeiro’s golden hours in the history of Latin America’s revolutionary movements would not come easily or rapidly. Born in the aftermath of the Chilean coup of 1973, the Americas Department’s first years were rather unexciting in so far as Cuba’s involvement in Latin America was concerned. The overthrow of Chilean social democratic President Salvador Allende by a right-wing military coup on September 11, 1973 dealt a heavy blow to the Cuban administration’s faith in revolutionary successes elsewhere in the region. For better or worse, Salvador Allende was one of the most influential figures in the history of twentieth century Latin America. Born in Valparaiso to an upper-middle

\(^{113}\) Jorge Masetti and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, El Furor Y El Delirio: Itinerario de Un Hijo de La Revolución Cubana, 1a. ed, Colección Andanzas ; Memorias 363 (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1999), 287.

\(^{114}\) Castañeda, Utopia Unarmed, 57.
class family in 1908, Allende was quick to demonstrate his political passion and skill and his leftist inclination. He co-founded Chile’s Socialist Party in 1932, was elected to Congress five years later and subsequently served as Minister of Health. In this capacity, he helped implement social reforms such as higher pensions, better safety laws for factory workers and a free school lunch program for Chilean children. In 1945 he was elected to the Senate where he doggedly defended the interests of the working class and denounced imperialism and unbridled capitalism. While an avowed Marxist, Allende was also an avowed democrat who was as devoted to advancing socialism as to doing so within the framework of electoral democracy. Upon coming to office in 1970 (after three failed attempts to secure an electoral majority) Allende wasted no time in implementing his socialist agenda. He increased wages and froze prices; was strongly committed to promoting education and literacy; worked to improve the country’s healthcare system; and nationalized large-scale industries including the copper industries owned largely by United States’ citizens.

Salvador Allende’s efforts to entwine electoral and economic democracy tapped into an entrenched Latin American project. As historian Greg Grandin argued, “for most of the 20th century, many Latin Americans thought democracy and socialism were the same thing – the fight for the vote was indistinguishable from the fight for welfare.”115 Allende’s efforts to build a modern social democratic state proved exciting for many throughout the hemisphere, including Cuban leader Fidel Castro who embraced Allende’s social democratic program and provided extensive support to his administration, including sending doctors, and military and political advisors. Furthermore, Fidel Castro,

who seldom spent more than a few days away from home, visited Chile for an entire month in 1972.

Castro’s lengthy visit doubtless excited many Chileans, but it also preoccupied those not wishing to see the Cuban model replicated at home. In addition, it further annoyed the Nixon administration in Washington who had vehemently opposed Allende’s nationalization of U.S. copper industries. While unhappy with Chilean domestic policies, President Nixon and his close aides were even more concerned over the country’s foreign relations. In their view, Allende was too close to Castro; was all too willing to challenge United States’ hegemony in the region and clout in the Organization of American States; became deeply involved with the Non-Aligned Movement; and publicly denounced the disadvantages faced by Third World countries in the global economic system. In other words, President Allende espoused a “third-worldism” that cut across east-west and right-left Cold War divides. For the Chilean leader, the crucial divide was not between communist and capitalist countries but rather between privileged and underprivileged nations in the global economic system. In this light, he sought to carve out a space for a non-aligned social democratic alternative in the hemisphere.

His social democratic platform and marked geopolitical independence made Allende persona non grata for the U.S. administration. President Nixon sought out the Chilean opposition and supported groups that could weaken or overthrow Allende. These included not just right-wing factions in the military but also upper and middle class Chilean citizens concerned over Allende’s mismanagement of the economy and his social agenda. On September 11, 1973, a right-wing military coup led by General Augusto
Pinochet overthrew the government of Salvador Allende and began one of the most repressive dictatorships of the twentieth century.

Allende’s overthrow impacted Latin Americans deeply. While reactions predictably varied between sympathizers and opponents of his programs, most perceived his ouster as laying a decisive—perhaps final—nail on the coffin of revolutionary transformations in the region. This sentiment was reinforced by the reality that at the time of the coup the democratic tide that had swept over the region in the 1950s and 1960s appeared to be shifting. By the mid 1970s right-wing governments ruled in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and most of Central America. Not a promising setting for revolutionary movements in the Americas or for Cuba’s aspiration to support them. Further dissuading the Castro administration from backing regional insurgents was the island’s normalization of diplomatic relations with many Latin American governments and the considerable advances made in its dealings with the United States.\(^{116}\) Thus, when the Americas Department was created in the mid 1970s, the Cuban administration was playing a cautious hand in the region. As Jorge Castañeda argues in *Utopia Unarmed*, the creation of the Americas Department “was as much a sign of continuing island support for revolution in the hemisphere as of the constraints, contradictions, and declining enthusiasm for extracurricular revolutionary activities in Cuban politics as a whole.”\(^{117}\) While this may well have been the case for the Americas, Cuba’s enthusiasm for revolutionary activities did not dwindle, it simply travelled to more distant lands.


\(^{117}\) Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, 57.
In 1975 Castro sent Cuban instructors to assist the people’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in their war of independence against the Portuguese Army. The following year, Cuban troops were backing the Namibians in their struggle against the South African apartheid regime, which continued to occupy Namibia notwithstanding declarations by the International Court of Justice and UN Security Council that Pretoria’s occupation was illegal. In 1977 the leftist military junta in Ethiopia received decisive Cuban support to repel an invasion by the Somali Army.

Cuba’s reasons for engaging so actively in Africa during the mid to late 1970s were manifold and will not be examined in any depth here.\(^\text{118}\) It’s probable that a combination of genuine solidarity with third world liberation movements and geopolitical aspirations to increase Havana’s clout in the international arena were driving motives. In *Visions of Freedom*, an in-depth study of Cuban-African relations in the last decades of the Cold War, Piero Gleijeses argues that Cuba’s decision to get involved in Angola was a bold move as it could jeopardize relations between Havana and the West at a moment when these were markedly improving.\(^\text{119}\) However, Cuban support for African liberation movements was expectedly less concerning for Washington than the alternative of backing revolutionaries in Latin America. Furthermore, Cuba’s dealings in Africa were of little concern to the Latin American governments then improving relations with Havana. In this sense, involvement in Africa was a more diplomatically cautious choice

\(^{118}\) *Conflicting Missions* and *Visions of Freedom*, two groundbreaking scholarly works by Piero Gleijeses detailing Cuba’s engagement in Africa during the Cold War, make a couple arguments that are worth mentioning here. First, in its foreign policy towards African nations, Cuba acted independently of the Soviet Union. It was Havana, not Moscow, who was calling the shots. Second, Cuba got involved in Africa because it was safer and less controversial to do so than to get involved in Latin America. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976*, Envisioning Cuba (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*.

for Castro. It allowed the Cuban administration to remain active in the geopolitical arena and to continue to uphold its solidarity with the third world while avoiding the certain heavy costs of supporting revolutionaries closer to home, which, given regional trends in the mid 1970s, were not showing much promise of succeeding anyway.

This is not to say that Cuba entirely abandoned Latin America during the mid 1970s. As the previous chapter elucidates, a small number of aspiring revolutionaries from different countries in the Americas were welcomed on the island and received military and technical training and the warm embrace of the Cubans they so admired. But for a while, Cuba ceased prioritizing revolutions close to home. That is, until the Nicaraguan Revolution.

By 1978 it began to look as though the Nicaraguan rebels might actually succeed. As head of the Americas Department, Piñeiro started working closely with these Central American guerrillas. Cuba supplied the Sandinistas with military training and weapons and helped broker their relations with other revolutionary movements in the months leading up to their final insurgency. Furthermore, Cuba provided invaluable advice on how to unify the three FSLN guerrilla factions.\(^\text{120}\) United States intelligence agencies took note of Havana’s reemergence on the Latin American stage. In a cable sent by the

\(^{120}\) In interviews with the author, former FMLN leaders conveyed that although the Nicaraguan Revolution was a homegrown process responding to local realities, the Cuban administration assisted the FSLN in the months leading up to their revolutionary victory in important ways. Former FMLN commanders also attested to Cuban support for the Sandinistas and judge that Cuban-FSLN relations played a decisive role in how the Cubans subsequently engaged with Salvadoran insurgents. Arce, Bayardo. Interview with author. Managua, Nicaragua: August 17, 2010; Cuadra, Joaquin. Interview with author. Managua, Nicaragua: August 18, 2010; Tirado, Victor. Interview with author. Managua, Nicaragua: August 18, 2010; Martinez, Ana Guadalupe. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: August 21, 2010; Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 22, 2010; Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: June 26, 2008. For secondary sources detailing Cuban support for the Nicaraguan revolutionaries see, Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, 59; Georges A. Fauriol and Eva Loser, eds., *Cuba: The International Dimension* (New Brunswick (U.S.A.): Transaction Publishers, 1990).
United States Embassy in Guatemala, a mere 12 days before the Sandinistas took the Nicaraguan capital, U.S. diplomat John Tescan Bennett informed the Department of State that Fidel Castro had met with the leadership of the Sandinistas, encouraged them to avoid using Marxist slogans in order to gain popular support, and that Cuba increased training for the Sandinista guerrillas and sent arms to Panama to be delivered to the FSLN via Costa Rica.\(^{121}\) The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documented Cuba’s role in the unification of the Nicaraguan guerrillas. “Castro…was instrumental in unifying the three Sandinista factions. In return for the Sandinistas’ unity agreement, the Cubans sharply increased their assistance in money, arms, and ammunition. The same may also occur in the case of El Salvador.”\(^{122}\) As subsequent paragraphs will elucidate, the CIA’s predictions about Castro replicating the Nicaraguan model in El Salvador were accurate. In the aftermath of the FSLN’s victory, Cuba pursued an almost identical strategy with the Salvadoran revolutionary factions.

The success of the Nicaraguan Revolution in July 1979 put armed insurgency back on the Latin American table. For the Cubans, this represented a watershed moment.


Safeguarding the survival of the Nicaraguan Revolution became a top priority for Fidel Castro who now shifted his focus back to the internal politics of his regional neighbors.

Specifically, Havana turned its gaze to the Central American nation of El Salvador, where social and political unrest in opposition to the military regime was on the rise. The Sandinistas’ success raised hopes that neighboring El Salvador could meet a similar fate. For Cuba, the prospect of a victorious revolution in El Salvador proved highly alluring. It would bring another leftist regime and Cuban ally to the region and help strengthen the incipient Sandinista administration, as a Salvadoran revolutionary government would expectedly cooperate closely on security and other policy matters with its Nicaraguan counterpart. Furthermore, the United States administration would have to divide its anticipated anti-revolutionary fervor between the two Central American nations rather than focusing exclusively on Nicaragua. The Cuban administration thus opened talks with the Salvadoran opposition movements it considered to be strongest and best organized—the Salvadoran Communist Party, the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL), and the Resistencia Nacional (RN)—and Piñeiro pursued a strategy that mirrored that followed with the Sandinista guerrillas a few months earlier: offering them Cuba’s military and technical support and diplomatic backing while attempting to broker a united coalition between the different insurgent factions.123

It was in this context that the Salvadoran guerrillera, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, arrived in Havana in October 1979. When she met the notoriously charming Piñeiro —

once praised by Colombian writer Gabriel García Marquez as having the best sense of humor he had ever encountered—they immediately took to one another. The head of the Americas Department was excited at the prospect of strengthening the Salvadoran revolutionary coalition. In turn, Comandante Martínez understood full well that Cuba’s support could prove decisive for revolutionary success in El Salvador and that without Piñeiro’s backing her organization, the Ejército Revolucionario del pueblo (ERP), would not be part of the revolutionary coalition. On a more emotive level, one cannot underestimate the allure for Ana Guadalupe Martínez, then a soft-spoken 26 year old, to be making the acquaintance of the historic revolutionary leader Piñeiro—a man who had given up a plush existence to fight for ideals of equality and social justice alongside Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in the Sierra Maestra. Martínez, a middle-class Salvadoran who up until a few years ago had been studying medicine and aspiring to be a doctor, could doubtless see the red-bearded Cuban as a sort of kindred spirit.

The meeting between Comandante Martínez and Piñeiro was the first of many to come and marked the beginning of the ERP’s integration into the organization that became the FMLN. The months that followed consisted of an arduous process of negotiation between the five Salvadoran movements and high-ranking Cuban and Sandinista officials who oversaw and participated in the meetings.

Negotiating the alliance of these three guerrilla organizations and the Communist Party into the FMLN was a complicated matter. Throughout the 1970s, disagreement over insurgent strategies and rivalry to achieve hegemony of the revolution by winning the support of the workers and peasants had kept the groups at odds and unwilling to
compromise with one another. The relation between the guerrilla movements and the Communist Party was particularly tense. The Party’s strict adherence to soviet style communist doctrine had led it to oppose insurgent tactics and guerrilla movements. Judging that El Salvador was not yet ready for a socialist revolution, the Party supported elections believing that political reforms would eventually lead to a bourgeoisie revolution, a necessary first step before a socialist revolution could take hold. The very emergence of the guerrilla groups in the early 1970s thus implied their rejection of the Communist Party. The Party had taken note and maintained a marked distance.

The alliance of these disparate elements raises three key questions: Why did these groups decide to set aside their differences and coordinate their efforts? Why did they do so in Cuba? And why did their unification occur at this particular historical juncture?

The revolutionary leaders’ agreement to come to terms with each other after years of enmity was driven by three decisive motivators: the demonstration effect of the Sandinistas’ victory, the political situation in El Salvador, and Cuba’s role as promoter and mediator of the unification process.

The different Salvadoran factions saw much of themselves in the Sandinistas. Both movements had emerged in opposition to authoritarian and exclusionary regimes in nations where over fifty percent of the population was poor and illiterate. In the 1930s, communist leaders in both countries—Farabundo Martí in El Salvador and Augusto Cesar Sandino in Nicaragua—attempted to organize the peasantry and push for reforms. Sandino and Martí were both assassinated by state forces and their death solidified elite opposition to reforms and helped consolidate the autocratic states that ruled in both
countries, virtually unchallenged, until the 1970s. The Nicaraguan and Salvadoran insurgencies each took their names from their countries respective martyr. The make-up of the leaders of the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran insurgencies was similar. They came from the middle-class, were students and young professionals, admirers of the Cuban Revolution, and ideological hybrids of Marxism-Leninism, Soviet communism, anti-imperialism and the teachings of Catholic liberation theology. In addition, structural similarities between the two countries seemed evident: predominantly agrarian underdeveloped societies marked by the concentration of economic and political power; nations historically vulnerable to economic exploitation by transnational corporations (mostly from the United States); and both governed by states that systematically resorted to violence to suppress popular demands for reforms.

With these parallels in mind, the Salvadorans looked to the trajectory of the Sandinistas as something they could replicate. In fact, the Salvadorans were so confident that they would meet the same fate as the Sandinistas that a popular FMLN slogan became “Si Nicaragua venció, El Salvador vencerá” (If Nicaragua succeeded, El Salvador will succeed.) The Nicaraguans’ own experience as disparate and rivaling groups that achieved victory only after coming together and launching a joint offensive served as a poster child for the potential benefits of unity. While the parallels between the FMLN and FSLN were real, the two groups faced markedly distinct conditions at home and abroad that help explain why the aforementioned slogan never materialized. The Nicaraguan regime that the FSLN confronted was a dynastic order, controlled by the Somoza family and backed by an exceedingly corrupt National Guard that was subservient to the Somozas. The insular and self-serving nature of the Nicaraguan regime
was such that not even the country’s wealthy families supported it. When popular opposition mounted in the 1970s, the Somoza dynasty crumbled. It was in this context of regime collapse that the FSLN launched its popular insurgency and came to power. The Nicaraguan Revolution did not so much overthrow a sitting regime as capitalize on its collapse.125 The Salvadoran insurgents faced a markedly different political situation. The Salvadoran regime consisted of an alliance between the country’s military and counterrevolutionary civilian elite that held the reins of the country’s economy. In the face of popular opposition in the 1970s, the ties binding this military-civilian coalition were strengthened. The regime adapted to new challenges by changing the form—if not the substance—of its rule. Civilian politicians replaced military generals as the country’s leaders, and new political coalitions were institutionalized as new political parties, but the alliance between the military and counterrevolutionary civilian elites remained. Another key difference between the plight of the FSLN and FMLN was the international context faced by each group. The Nicaraguan insurgency spearheaded by the FSLN was launched during the Carter Administration, at a moment in which Central America was not a dominant concern for the U.S. government. The Nicaraguan Revolution took Washington by surprise and the White House subsequently prioritized preventing another revolution in the Isthmus. Although the Sandinistas were a vital ally of the FMLN, the Nicaraguan Revolution made an FMLN victory much more complicated by drawing the United States directly into the region. Understanding these fundamental differences is crucial in order to grasp why Nicaragua had a revolution while El Salvador had a civil war.

125 For insightful accounts of regime collapse in Nicaragua on the eve of the Sandinista Revolution in July 1979, see: Dunkerley, Power in the Isthmus; Coatsworth, Central America and the United States; Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America.
The aforementioned differences between the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran contexts were overlooked at the time, and the example of Nicaragua played a decisive role in guiding FMLN strategies. Beyond this, the political situation in El Salvador also motivated the guerrillas to come together and form the FMLN. Throughout the 1970s the country became increasingly polarized, unstable and violent. As mentioned in the previous chapter, social protests voicing a wide range of demands, from better pay and working conditions to political inclusiveness and electoral transparency, were repressed by the Salvadoran police and military with systemic violence. Furthermore, paramilitaries in the countryside instilled terror amongst the rural population by torturing, killing or “disappearing” those suspected of harboring leftist tendencies. The Nicaraguan Revolution exacerbated this situation. Fearing that El Salvador could follow in Nicaragua’s footsteps, Salvadoran security forces intensified their efforts to destroy the opposition and violence became more indiscriminate. This had a markedly debilitating impact on the urban guerrilla movements who were forced to curtail their operations and limit their social networks for fear of being betrayed. In this climate, unity seemed to offer the Salvadoran opposition a means by which to avoid individual annihilation. ERP leader Joaquin Villalobos asserts that a big driver of unity was the political situation at home. “The escalated levels of repression and state-sponsored violence against those believed to have leftist sympathies, particularly in the aftermath of the Sandinistas’ victory, was traumatic and debilitating for us. At this trying time, unity seemed to offer a means to avoid our annihilation.”126 Debilitating the guerrillas is expectedly what the military had hoped to achieve by escalating repression of the opposition. Salvadoran state

forces failed to account for how this strategy played into Cuba’s efforts to unite the insurgents.

Beyond the demonstration effect of Nicaragua and the pressure of increased repression at home, Fidel Castro and his advisors played the most consequential role in bringing the Salvadoran factions together. The fact that the ERP sent Ana Guadalupe Martínez to seek inclusion into the revolutionary coalition through Cuba reflects that, at this point, relations between the individual Salvadoran organizations were still dominated by wariness. In this atmosphere the island provided a safe heaven for the unfolding of negotiations and its mediation allowed the groups to set aside differences that they otherwise may not have. In effect, the disparate factions envisaged Cuba as a type of objective overseer that they trusted to ensure parity between them in the united organization. Commensurate leadership was indispensable for the Salvadoran groups to agree to come together and it was institutionalized through the creation of the Comandancia General: the FMLN’s commanding body where each group was equally represented.

Beyond its provision of a space for discussion and its role as guarantor that no group was marginalized, the Cuban administration provided the most compelling incentive for unity: extensive Cuban support contingent on this unity. As FMLN leader Eduardo Sancho recalls, “throughout the meetings in Havana the Cuban administration made its position clear: it would provide large-scale aid through armaments, financial backing, and military training if, and only if, the groups agreed to unite and coordinate their efforts.”

Francisco Jovel, who was also present at the meetings, agrees with

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Sancho. “The Cubans played a fundamental role in our coming together. The fact that they wanted us to form a united front was crystal clear and their offer to give us weapons was a big incentivize for us.”

Above all else, the prospect of receiving weapons—at a time in which their scarcity was proving detrimental—led the Salvadorans to agree to launch a coordinated offensive. Eduardo Sancho and Joaquín Villalobos, who were present at these negotiations as the heads of the RN and ERP, respectively, concur that Havana’s offer to provide weapons was Cuba’s biggest selling point in exchange for unity.

Rumor had it that in one of these meeting Manuel Piñeiro symbolically placed an AK-47 on the table and told the Salvadorans: “It’s yours if you are together.” When in early 2007 I asked Joaquín Villalobos about the veracity of this rumor during an interview in Oxford he replied with a smirk: “We weren’t idiots; it was blatantly clear that Cuba wanted us to unite and that if we did we would count with the island’s full backing. There was no need for such insinuations; Cuba’s stance was explicit.”

In addition to practical considerations, Cuba’s interest in the efforts of Salvadoran revolutionaries, and Castro’s personal offer to endorse and assist them, had a powerful subjective allure on the FMLN leadership.

It would be myopic to deny Salvadoran agency in the creation of the FMLN. The process was by no means a Cuban imposition. A better conceptualization is that in offering arms and support Cuba made the guerrillas an offer that they could not—or did not—refuse. Crucial to this acceptance was the fact that Cuba never sought ideological uniformity between the groups. Some of Barbarroja’s first words upon meeting Ana

Guadalupe Martínez were: “We are not here to impose relations between the groups, but we can discuss the importance of your union and collective coordination, independently of your ideological differences.”\textsuperscript{131} The Cuban leadership was not dogmatic but practical. While it sought a strategically united front it understood that the different ideological positions of the Salvadoran groups were impossible to reconcile. In turn, the Salvadorans’ willingness to ignore ideological opacity in their revolution can best be attributed to fear of individual annihilation. This concern, coupled with the prospect of victory with the promised weapons and support, underlined Salvadoran motivations for cohesion. Ideological differences, and for that matter hegemonic control of the revolution, were meaningless if the movement failed, and in 1979 it looked as though it might unless radical changes were adopted. As the fourth chapter of this dissertation evidences, the FMLN’s ideological heterogeneity and rivalry between revolutionary groups over resources and support remained a source of contention throughout the duration of the civil war. Thus, the confluence of national realities, the Sandinistas’ example, and Cuba’s support, motivated the Salvadoran guerrillas to negotiate the terms of unity and form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

A crucial question remains to be answered: what was in it for Cuba? In other words, what did Cuba have to gain from pursuing this relationship?

First, it must be stressed that Cuba’s relationship with the FMLN was the product of Cuban policy and not, as some have charged, the product of instructions by Moscow.\textsuperscript{132} Cuban diplomacy is what secured the support of the Soviet camp towards the


\textsuperscript{132} This was the official position of the United States during the Salvadoran civil war. It was most forcefully expressed in speeches by such prominent figures as ex-Secretary of State
Salvadoran revolutionaries and not the other way around. With the exception of members of the Salvadoran Communist Party who did have close ties with Moscow, the FMLN leadership dealt with Havana and not with the Soviet Union. In the words of an FMLN leader and member of its Directorate: “The USSR never understood revolutionary movements in Central America, they never understood Che Guevara and they never understood us. The initiative in Cuba’s relations with the FMLN was Cuban and the Soviets…. stayed out of it and let the Cubans do their thing.”

In an extensive study on Cuban foreign policy, Jorge I. Dominguez establishes that Cuba’s independence from Moscow regarding its policy towards El Salvador actually pertained to the entirety of Central America. Dominguez asserts: “Cuba led the USSR in fashioning policies towards Central America, inducing the Soviets to behave in ways they otherwise might not have.” Piero Gleijeses’ later work on Cuba’s foreign policy in Africa compliments Dominguez’ analysis and reveals that Cuban autonomy

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133 Joaquin Villalobos, for example, attests to the fact that throughout the entirety of the civil war he spent only two days in Moscow in contrast to the myriad days he spent in Havana. Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Oxford, United Kingdom: January 8, 2007.


from Moscow in matters of foreign policy stretched beyond the Americas. This vastly complicates theories that conceived of Moscow and Havana as allied agents pursuing a joint international program.

The Caribbean island’s policy towards the FMLN was its own. It was driven by both Cuban altruism and the island’s necessity to compensate for its geographical and geopolitical isolation. The Cuban administration accurately perceived—and sympathized with—the injustices and suffering inflicted upon the Salvadoran masses under the oligarchic and autocratic system that ruled the country until the 1980s. Whatever might be said about Fidel Castro’s pragmatism, he is also a man of conviction, and he genuinely believes that the socioeconomic system in post-revolutionary Cuba offers a more humane and more just existence to the people than the alternative presented by an exclusionary capitalist model. The bold voluntarism that constituted a key element of Cuban foreign policy—under the principle coined by Fidel Castro that “it is the duty of revolutionaries to make the revolution”—cannot be accurately understood if this factor is not taken into account: the Cuban administration thought it was fulfilling a benevolent duty by backing revolutionaries elsewhere in the region and throughout the Third World.

Supporting and endorsing the FMLN also provided Cuba with a means by which to ensure its own survival in the face of open hostility and animosity from the United States. From the moment the Cuban revolution triumphed, the island had been subject to economic, diplomatic and military attacks by Washington, as well as a plethora of failed CIA attempts to kill and overthrow Fidel Castro. The Cuban revolutionary government rightfully perceived that its existence was under threat. Accordingly, it made its own

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136 See Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*; Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*. 
survival the primary foreign policy goal. Supporting revolutionary movements elsewhere in the region was conducive to this objective because it created peripheral distractions and preoccupations for Washington and, in so doing, took pressure and attention away from Cuba. While the United States was vexed with possible revolutionary triumph elsewhere in Latin America, it’s resources, time and attention primarily focused on preventing such an occurrence. Consequently, weakening or overthrowing Cuba—an ambition the US never fully abandoned—took a back seat to these more immediate objectives.

In order for the United States to deem other movements as more pertinent than Cuba, it was essential for them to seriously challenge to the status quo and appear as though they might succeed. By promoting the union of opposition in El Salvador; arming, training and indirectly funding the guerillas; and supporting their strength in the international arena, Cuba contributed towards creating exactly the type of movement that would scare and preoccupy Washington. In this effort, Cuba was in fact successful. With the triumph of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the birth of the FMLN in El Salvador, the United States made preventing revolution in Central America one of its primary foreign policy goals. It trained and funded counter-revolutionaries in Nicaragua and diverted a vast amount of attention and resources to defeating the FMLN.

Whether the United States’ resolve to prevent revolution in El Salvador was, as US Ambassador to the UN Jean Kirkpatrick argued, the product of Central America being “the most important place in the world for the United States.” Or, as others have more convincingly suggested, the product of the regions insignificance that made it a

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137 Domínguez, To Make a World Safe for Revolution, 6.
138 Grandin, Empire’s Workshop, 71.
place where the US could recover from the calamitous loss and humiliation it had suffered in Vietnam by reestablishing its credibility; the outcome for Cuba was the same. Insurgency in El Salvador absorbed a vast amount of attention and resources from the region’s hegemonic power.\(^{139}\)

This pragmatic Cuban objectives for supporting the FMLN do not negate the fact that the island ultimately hoped that the insurgent movement would succeed. A revolutionary triumph in El Salvador would provide Cuba with a friendly government in the region and, more importantly with a geopolitical ally. Upon entering the geopolitical matrix of the Cold War, Cuba wished to end its regional isolation. It needed other governments in the region that adhered geopolitically with the socialist camp. Throughout the Salvadoran Civil War, the island faced a decreasing, but still existing, seclusion from most Latin American governments. Furthermore, Cuba’s geographical location—in close proximity to the United States and surrounded by countries of a liberal order—rendered it geopolitically isolated. An FMLN victory would have provided the island with a valuable second ally in Central America. The reality that the Salvadoran government was antithetical to Cuban policies, and was closely aligned with the United States, made Cuba that much more determined to support the FMLN.\(^{140}\)


\(^{140}\) According to Jorge I. Domínguez, there was a rule of precedence in Cuba’s support for revolutionary movements to the extent that “state-to-state relations that enhance Cuba’s security have precedence over support for revolutions.” Domínguez develops this argument by providing a detailed analysis of how Cuba only supported revolutions in Latin American nations that did not have beneficial relations with the island. Domínguez, To Make a World Safe for Revolution, 117–24.
The survival of the Cuban revolutionary government for almost half a century, in the face of myriad challenges, attests not only to the courage and resilience of the Cuban people and government but also to the island’s bold and successful foreign policy.

Some of the FMLN’s leaders emphasize the Cuban administration’s benevolent motivations when assessing why their movement received so much support from the island. Others focus instead on the pragmatic considerations that led Cuba to endorse and assist their movement. Joaquin Villalobos goes as far as to say that the FMLN helped Cuba much more than Cuba helped the Salvadoran revolutionary effort. In truth, altruistic and pragmatic motivators are not mutually exclusive and both drove the Cuban-FMLN affaire. Supporting the FMLN enabled the Cuban administration to back a movement alleging to advance a more inclusive socioeconomic and political model, to protect the island from Washington’s wrath, and to wreak havoc on the Salvadoran government that opposed Cuban policies and aligned geopolitically to the United States.

The FMLN was officially born on October 10, 1980 with the union of the PCS, ERP, RN, and FPL. A few months later, in December of that year, the fifth and last member, the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC) joined the organization. Beyond the creation of the Comandancia General, the FMLN formed various specialized commissions such as finance, solidarity, and propaganda where each group was represented.

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The reality that the FMLN’s formation came about at a series of meetings in Havana, under the auspices of the Cubans and Nicaraguans—the hemisphere’s only two revolutionary governments—is essential to understand the international history of the Salvadoran Civil War. While composed by homegrown movements responding to local realities, the FMLN, as a united revolutionary front capable of challenging the Salvadoran State, was from the outset embedded within regional movements that were themselves nested within the global Cold War.

*The Salvadoran Regime Gets a Makeover*

While the leaders of what became the FMLN met in Havana and discussed the terms of their union, events back in El Salvador unfolded at a very rapid pace. On October 15, 1979, on the same day that Ana Guadalupe Martínez traveled to the Cuban Embassy in Managua, a coup in El Salvador deposed President General Carlos Humberto Romero and put an end to the regime that had ruled the country since 1932. Two members of the military, Colonels Adolfo Arnoldo Majano Ramos and Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez Avendaño, and three civil political leaders of the center and center-left, Guillermo Ungo, Mario Antonio Andino and Román Mayorga Quirós, took power and formed the civil-military junta—the Revolutionary Government Junta (JRG). The coalition was a pluralist agglomeration of the most important social and political forces of El Salvador. Colonel Arnoldo Majano represented the young democratic members of the Salvadoran military; Colonel Abdul Gutierrez stood for the more conservative hardline faction of the military; Guillermo Ungo was the Secretary general of the National Revolutionary movement (MNR) that encompassed the social democratic movements and parties; Mario Andino, a moderate, represented the private sector; and
Román Mayorga Quirós was former dean of the Jesuit-run university, *Universidad Centroamericana*.

The new government proclaimed a series of reforms geared towards addressing the various political, social and economic crises facing the country. The JRG announced the restoration of civic and human rights; the dismantling of ORDEN (a right-wing paramilitary network of informers and vigilantes) and the death squads; reform within the Salvadoran military apparatus that included removing around 240 of the most right-wing officials; granting amnesty to political prisoners; a commitment to agrarian reform; and exploring the nationalization of banks and the coffee and sugar export sectors.\(^{144}\) The weeks following the coup were characterized by the wide scale renewal of political activity and social activism in the country. This development was short-lived, however, due to the junta’s inability to secure control over right-wing military and paramilitary forces. Hard-line rightists within the military benefitted from the support of the Salvadoran oligarchy, took over the main posts assigned to the military, and reinstated the death squads. The persecution of suspected guerrillas turned into a virtual witch-hunt and widespread repression against the newly mobilized social forces nipped renewed civil activism and popular political participation in the bud.

Internal contradictions within the JRG quickly became apparent. Rising tensions between the two Colonels and widespread violence against the civilian population culminated in the resignation on January 5, 1980 of the three civilians in the ruling junta as well as all civilian members of the cabinet. José Antonio Morales Ehrlich and Héctor Miguel Dada Hírezi now joined the JRG, thus initiating the Second Revolutionary

Government Junta. When Dada Hirezi resigned in protest at the violence of the Junta on March 3, José Napoleón Duarte took his place giving way to the Third Revolutionary Government Junta. On December 7, Majano was expelled and sent into exile, and on 22 December 1980, Duarte became head of the Junta and head of state with Gutiérrez, considered to be the strongman of the regime, becoming his Vice-President.

On 24 March 1980, just a few weeks after the Third Junta was established, the Salvadoran crisis reached a new apex when the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was assassinated with one shot to the heart while officiating mass in a hospital chapel in San Salvador. A moderate within the Church, Romero had been named Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Once in office, he captured the hearts and minds of the Salvadoran masses, becoming an outspoken critic of the rampant poverty, social injustice, assassinations and torture in El Salvador. While admired and followed by the Salvadoran left, the Archbishop did not align with Marxism or support the guerrillas. Rather, he advocated for social reform through peaceful means and denounced the government for endorsing torture and assassinations.

By the time of his murder, Romero had built up a huge following in El Salvador and gained considerable recognition internationally. In weekly radio broadcasts of his sermons, Archbishop Romero listed and denounced the most recent disappearances and assassinations. His broadcasts enjoyed a wide listenership and became the most reliable source on government-sponsored violence. The day before he was assassinated, Archbishop Romero made an incendiary and defiant appeal to Salvadoran soldiers and the National Guard publicly calling on them to obey God’s laws and defy orders to kill
their fellow Salvadorans. In his call to the members of the military, police and National Guard Romero told them:

Brothers, you are our same people, you kill your peasant brothers and, when faced with an order to kill given by a man, the law of God that states “thou salt not kill” should prevail. No soldier is obligated to obey an order that goes against God’s laws. No one needs to abide by an immoral law. It is about time that you recover your conscience and obey your conscience rather than sinful orders. The church, a defender of the rights of God, of the laws of God, of human dignity, of human beings, can no longer remain silent in the face of such abominations. We want the government to understand that reforms are useless if they are covered in so much blood. In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments raise up to the heavens with increasing urgency every day, I beg you, I implore you, I order you, in the name of God: stop the repression!

No persons were ever prosecuted for Romero’s assassination and while the culprits were never found, it is largely believed that right-wing death squads affiliated to Arena founder Major Robert D’Aubuisson were responsible.

Archbishop Romero’s murder dealt a heavy blow to hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans who found hope in his sympathy with the countries downtrodden and his open defiance of the Junta’s repression. Furthermore, his assassination reinforced the notion that no one in the country was immune from the quotidian brutality and horror. Further exacerbating the extreme sense of chaos brought on by Romero’s assassination, his funeral, attended by hundreds of thousands of mourners, degenerated into a massacre.
Smoke bombs exploded near the Cathedral where the burial procession was taking place and shots were fired from surrounding buildings. Many people were killed by gunfire and in the stampede that ensued after the bombs exploded.

As events surrounding the murder of the country’s Archbishop reflect, the 1979 overthrow of General Humberto Romero by the Revolutionary Government Junta did little to bring peace and stability to El Salvador. In hindsight, perhaps efforts to resolve the country’s political crisis by instituting a pluralist governing junta were terribly naïve at a time marked by such stark polarization in the country. Furthermore, the reality that antagonistic factions had the means and willingness to resort to violence to annihilate the opposition made political compromises all but impossible. The junta was in effect what Napoleon Duarte retrospectively called “a government of national disunity.”

Consequently, the 1979 coup produced a weak government that was unable to contain the existing power struggles in the country. From October 15, 1979 until March 1980, El Salvador experienced a complex period in which political alliances and enmities were in constant flux as people crossed over from opposition to power and power to opposition. By the time the third revolutionary junta was instituted on March 3rd 1980, the lines had ceased to blur and the only political groups with clout left in the government were the Salvadoran Armed Forces and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). Reform-minded civilians who originally supported the coup had left the government or been expelled. As Arthur Schmidt argues, “1980 became a year of divisions into revolutionary and counterrevolutionary poles.”

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145 Duarte, Duarte, 104.
1980 was thus a year marked by the exacerbation of political polarization in El Salvador. Ironically, this polarization made an FMLN victory much more difficult. Rather than fighting a weak civilian government backed by a corrupt military—as had occurred in Nicaragua—the FMLN squared off against a coalition of death squads, a strong army, and a counterrevolutionary civilian elite, allied in their joint effort to defeat the Salvadoran left. The FMLN would square off against an enemy that would have crushed the Sandinistas in a blink. In effect, as soon as the Salvadoran political spectrum turned rightwards, the Sandinistas’ model became unworkable in El Salvador.

Polarization also took a toll of the country’s leftist forces and pushed the civilian left into the revolutionary coalition. Following the assassination of Archbishop Romero, the civilian left consolidated into the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) in April of that year. The FDR grouped together PDC dissidents who coalesced under the name Social Christian Popular Movement (MPSC), with Rubén Zamora as a prominent leader; the social-democratic National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), led by Guillermo Manuel Ungo; the Jesuit Central American University (UCA) and the University of El Salvador (UES), and the coordinating structures of the social movement controlled by the guerrillas. As a response to escalated violence and countless failed attempts to alter government strategy through demonstrations and strikes, the FDR moved closer to supporting a strategy of insurrection. By late 1980 the FMLN and FDR established a strategic alliance that would last throughout the entirety of the civil war. In turn, the counterrevolutionary bloc was formed by different elements of the armed forces, the

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former governing coalition, and the remaining factions of the PDC, and it counted with the backing of the United States.

The hardening of political poles in El Salvador left little room for reforms coming through peaceful channels, and Salvadoran revolutionaries began planning their first large-scale military offensive with the assistance of Cuban and Sandinista officials. The offensive, optimistically called “the final offensive,” was the first joint operation by the Salvadoran FMLN. Launching a joint wide scale offensive was a pivotal turning point for the Salvadoran insurgency. Their aim was to bring about a popular insurrection that would overthrow the Salvadoran State and bring the FMLN to power.

Preparations for the final offensive gave way to the FMLN’s military diplomacy, which consisted of lobbying countries and organizations to receive weapons and military training. In preparation for the final offensive, in the summer months of 1980, Communist Party leader Shafik Handal traveled to the Soviet Union, North Vietnam, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Ethiopia to secure aid in arming the Salvadoran guerrillas.\textsuperscript{148} In launching their military diplomacy as a joint revolutionary organization, prominent FMLN leaders agree that Cuba’s support was decisive in winning over the Socialist camp.\textsuperscript{149} In fact, Joaquin Villalobos recounts that in one of the first meetings he had with Fidel Castro, he consulted with the Cuban leader

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\footnote{149} Joaquin Villalobos, Ana Guadalupe Martinez and Eduardo Sancho all claim that Cuba’s diplomatic efforts on the FMLN’s behalf with other socialist countries were pivotal for the FMLN’s procurement of vital military support from these countries. Cuban endorsement, they argue, ensured that these countries provided weapons for the FMLN at this early stage. Martinez, Ana Guadalupe. \textit{Interview with author}. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 30, 2007. Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Oxford, United Kingdom: January 8, 2007; Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 29, 2007.}

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about the possibility of traveling to North Vietnam to obtain weapons from the Vietnamese government. Castro’s response was: “Chico! What are you going to do in Vietnam? Your place is in El Salvador, with the combatants. I’ll take care of Vietnam’s support.”\footnote{Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Oxford, United Kingdom: January 8, 2007; Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 29, 2007.} Reasonably, Cuba’s diplomatic efforts with communist countries to secure armament for the FMLN carried significantly more weight than those of the incipient Salvadoran revolutionary leaders, especially in these initial stages of conflict. After all, Cuba was a well-established revolutionary communist country and its ability to survive as such, in the face of extremely adverse conditions, had earned the Caribbean nation prestige and respect within the Socialist bloc. While Shafik Handal may well have persuasively advocated for the Salvadoran revolutionary cause throughout his travels, and put a face on the Salvadoran movement for national liberation, his power of persuasion was no match for the Cuban leader. As Villalobos conveys: “the most important communist we had was Fidel, not Handal.”\footnote{Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Oxford, United Kingdom: January 8, 2007.}

Once third countries, such as Vietnam, Ethiopia and Angola, agreed to provide the FMLN with weapons, these were sent to Cuba.\footnote{Facundo Guardado noted that Vietnam, Ethiopia and Angola had contributed significantly to the FMLN’s military efforts in the initial stage of the war. Guardado, Facundo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 30, 2007.} Havana had legitimate trade relations with the countries supplying the armaments and thus the boats used to transport weapons were predominantly Cuban commercial carriers. As RN leader, Eduardo Sancho, recalls, “although there was regulation of these carriers, it was impossible to know which ones were carrying arms, and the arms were generally hidden within the
vessels.”  

153 Soviet documents—that have now been made more or less public—also disclose that many of the arms from Vietnam and Eastern Europe were transported to the island by air.  

154 From Cuba, the weapons were shipped to Nicaragua both by sea and by air and then, from here, they were sent clandestinely by sea into El Salvador through the Gulf of Fonseca or by land through Honduras.  

155 Nicaragua’s function in the FMLN’s preparation for the final offensive set the stage for the vital role the Sandinistas would play in getting weapons to the Salvadoran insurgents. This was not always an easy or profitable arrangement for the Sandinistas. However, at the time of the final offensive, before the Reagan administration took office in the United States and threw its full weight behind the counter-revolutionary campaign in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas were all too willing to assist their Salvadoran brothers.  

On January 10, 1981, on the eve of the Reagan administration taking office in the United States, the FMLN launched its “final offensive,” which covered almost the entire country. The struggle lasted less than a week and neither side was able to defeat the other. While the offensive proved that the insurgents could not topple the government through an all-out insurrection, it also demonstrated that the Salvadoran Army couldn’t defeat the FMLN. Ironically, the so-called “final offensive” effectively opened the chapter of what became a twelve-year long civil war between the FMLN and the Salvadoran Army.


The failed “final offensive” had important tactical and political consequences for the FMLN. Tactically, the Salvadoran guerrillas were forced to reevaluate their *modus operandi*. Revolutionary groups would now move to rural areas and focus on building guerrilla armies, recruiting new members from the peasantry, and asserting territorial control. Mario Lungo Unclés offers a useful typology for understanding the tactical evolution of the Salvadoran insurgents. He argues that the Salvadoran revolutionaries had three stages in their formation: (1) the creation of a political base amongst the masses, beginning in 1974 when the FAPU (Frente Amplio Popular de Unidad) was created, through (2) the formation of bases of support for specific actions, to (3) the constitution of true zones of political-military control. The 1981 offensive, Lungo Uncles asserts, laid the foundation for the final consolidation of the third stage.\(^\text{156}\) For military leader Joaquín Villalobos, after January 10 the Salvadoran revolutionary forces passed from having political control in certain areas to establishing military control of those zones. This constituted a crucial advance in the insurgents’ preparation for a potentially drawn out war against the army.\(^\text{157}\) At this time, the official line of approach for FMLN leaders became: “Resist, Develop and Advance.” And so they did. By February 1981, the FMLN had eight military fronts, controlled areas around the four great volcanoes and an extensive strip of land near the Honduran border.\(^\text{158}\) Beyond restructuring militarily, the prospect of a longer drawn-out war meant that the FMLN had to build an international network that spanned beyond the Eastern bloc and socialist camp. This sphere of FMLN activity, which I term “political diplomacy,” will be discussed in the following chapter.


\(^{157}\) Villalobos, Joaquin. “Acerca de la Situación Militar.” In Ibid., 50–51.

Before doing so, however, it is pertinent to consider the political situation in the United States when the FMLN formed and launched its final offensive.

The Reagan Turn

On the heels of the FMLN’s final offensive Republican movie star cum politician, Ronald Reagan, took the reins of the oval office. A staunchly conservative Cold Warrior, Reagan sought to reverse many of the policies of his predecessor. Carter, he argued had weakened U.S. global influence and ceded vital territory to the Soviets and communists. Reagan was determined to, in his words, “make America great again,” and he believed that El Salvador offered fertile ground for a swift victory against leftist forces.159

In his extensively researched and commendably thorough account of U.S. involvement in Central America between 1977-1992, historian William LeoGrande presents the radical argument that the Reagan Presidency did not constitute a watershed moment in terms of U.S. policy towards El Salvador. For Leo Grande, by the time Reagan came to office, Carter had already established the pillars of U.S. policy towards El Salvador. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Nicaraguan Revolution, both in 1979, Cuban and Soviet influence appeared to be growing throughout the Third World. The Carter Administration judged that global containment demanded that revolution be stalled in El Salvador. In this light, Carter conceptualized preventing a revolutionary victory in El Salvador as a national-security priority. Furthermore, while revolution in the country was to be encouraged, it was a distant second from thwarting revolution. Finally, to make U.S. aid to a homicidal regime more palatable to the U.S. public, the human rights improvements of the government of El Salvador would be vastly

159 See, LeoGrande, “A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador.”
exaggerated. When Ronald Reagan came to office, he took these foreign policy contours and injected them with steroids.\textsuperscript{160}

LeoGrande’s account is factually correct and his analysis about continuities between Carter and Reagan are convincing. Notwithstanding, Ronald Reagan’s coming to office had a profound effect on the Salvadoran insurgents, on the Salvadoran State and Army, and on U.S. public opinion. Salvadoran oligarchs and officers followed the 1980 presidential election closely hoping for a Reagan victory and the end of being pressured about human rights.\textsuperscript{161} News of Reagan’s electoral triumph were celebrated by Salvadoran conservatives who interpreted the change in U.S. administrations as a license to kill.\textsuperscript{162}

In turn, the Salvadoran FMLN also followed the U.S. elections closely. Their reaction to Reagan’s triumph was, expectedly, diametrically opposed to that of the country’s Army and elites. When I asked one of the principal FMLN military commanders who led the \textit{final offensive} if Cuba and Nicaragua had pressured the Salvadorans into pursuing this military operation so soon after the revolutionaries’ unification Villalobos said that it was quite the opposite. “Cuba wanted us to wait to get more weapons and military training but we felt a sense of urgency to act quickly. We felt that time was not in our favor. The right at home was becoming even more repressive and Reagan was about to come to office.”\textsuperscript{163}


\textsuperscript{162} Rabe, \textit{The Killing Zone}, 172.

\textsuperscript{163} Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: June 26, 2008.
**Revolutionaries Without Guns**

President Reagan’s foreign policy in El Salvador became the most divisive issue in the United States since the Vietnam War. While Reagan allocated copious amounts of money and resources to supporting the Salvadoran regime, U.S. citizens learned about horrendous atrocities being perpetrated by those its government was supporting. In December 1980, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, four American churchwomen who had journeyed to El Salvador, to aid Salvadoran peasants fleeing the violence, were captured, raped and shot to death by right-wing death squads. Evidence pointed to complicity by Salvadoran military officials. Within days, newspapers across the United States carried the tragic story on their front pages, and U.S. citizens learned of the dreadful fate that befell their pious compatriots, presumably on the orders of the Salvadoran Military high command.\textsuperscript{164} The killings came as the United States government began its decade-long struggle to defeat the FMLN on the battlefield; an

effort that led the U.S. to dispense more than a million dollars a day to fund the lethal counterinsurgency campaign in El Salvador.\textsuperscript{165}

The horrific murder of the four U.S. churchwomen shocked the international community, and it inflamed a heated debate over El Salvador in the United States that persisted until the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{166} The murder of the four women, while appalling, was not an isolated event. Church workers in El Salvador assisting the country’s impoverished rural population with literacy campaigns, health services and the distribution of basic foodstuff, had become regular targets as the country’s military and paramilitary forces accused them of supporting the guerrillas. In 1980 alone, 11 priests had been killed, including the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, an outspoken human rights advocate.\textsuperscript{167} As United States’ Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy stated before Congress: “In El Salvador, the church, for having identified itself with the victims, has become a victim itself.”\textsuperscript{168} After the assassination of the four U.S. churchwomen the


\textsuperscript{167} “Bodies of 4 American Women Are Found in El Salvador” Special to \textit{The New York Times}; Dec 5, 1980; pg. A3

\textsuperscript{168} “Bodies of 4 American Women Are Found in El Salvador” Special to \textit{The New York Times};
Carter Administration suspended military and economic aid to El Salvador then totaling $25 million dollars. Aid was reinstated after a mere six weeks, however, after President Reagan took office.\textsuperscript{169}

A year later, in January 1982, major U.S. newspapers broke yet another horrific story featuring El Salvador. This time, a massacre of more than 700 peasants was reported to have taken place in the small mountain village of \textit{El Mozote}, located in the northeastern department of Morazán that borders Honduras. The testimonies of the few villagers who managed to escape the carnage revealed to the U.S. Congress and public that uniformed soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion, a U.S.-trained elite military unit that specialized in anti-communist counter-insurgency, had swooped in to El Mozote and indiscriminately killed hundreds of children, women and elderly people. News of this massacre, allegedly the largest single massacre in recent Latin American history, broke as the United States was debating whether to renew aid for El Salvador. As had occurred earlier with the murder of the four U.S. churchwomen, the massacre at El Mozote unleashed a heated debate in the United States about the humanitarian implications of supporting the Salvadoran military, but, once again, the geopolitical interests and anti-communist rhetoric of key policymakers trumped human rights concerns and aid was not suspended.\textsuperscript{170}

The Reagan Administration’s responses to egregious atrocities in El Salvador perpetrated by U.S. backed forces appalled and angered many U.S. citizens. Reagan observed that Salvadoran elites could not be expected to enact reforms in the middle of a


\textsuperscript{170} For a gripping account of the massacre at El Mozote and its significance, see: Mark Danner, \textit{The Massacre at El Mozote}, 1 edition (New York: Vintage, 1994).
civil war and he suggested that guerrillas, masquerading as rightists were responsible for most of the killings. Reagan’s ambassador in El Salvador, Deane Hinton, also a tough anticommunist, dutifully denied that security forces perpetrated atrocities.\textsuperscript{171}

The FMLN was able to capitalize on opposition to Reagan’s policies within the U.S. and lobbied grass roots based movements that fundraised, mobilized public opinion, and pressured the Reagan administration and Congress to stay out of the conflict in El Salvador. Over the course of the 1980s these solidarity movements evolved into a nationwide decentralized campaign with overlapping networks of peace groups, religious organizations and leftist associations. Activist networks greatly advanced the FMLN’s clout and legitimacy abroad and became an important source of financial support. While popular solidarity with El Salvador was not confined to the United States, and many of these activist networks were in fact transnational, U.S. based movements were the most consequential to the efforts of the FMLN. The early history of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), which became the largest and most visible of these movements, is illustrative regarding the dynamics behind U.S. activism for El Salvador.

In late 1980, Arquimides Magaña left his native country of El Salvador and traveled to Los Angeles, California as an undocumented migrant. Magaña had joined the opposition in El Salvador in the early 1970s when he became affiliated with the UR-19: one of many popular student movements that opposed the military dictatorship. As the state-sponsored repression against the Salvadoran opposition escalated, with extrajudicial

\textsuperscript{171} Rabe, \textit{The Killing Zone}, 173.
killings and disappearances becoming a daily reality, thousands of Salvadorans emigrated to escape persecution, torture and death.

A couple weeks after arriving in Los Angeles Magaña saw a flyer for the screening of “Revolución o Muerte,” a movie about the incipient revolutionary movements in El Salvador made by a small Dutch production agency. At the screening, he was struck with a number of familiar faces. Here, thousands of miles from home, in a small theater in the Latin neighborhood of Los Angeles, Magaña was reunited with university classmates and friends who had also participated in the Salvadoran opposition. Magaña learnt that the “Comité de Solidaridad Farabundo Martí” or Committee in Solidarity with Farabundo Martí (CSFM) had organized the screening. This organization was an incipient solidarity committee formed by Salvadoran immigrants to support the opposition movements back home. Its members met every Sunday, generally in the basement of the progressive law school, “The Peoples College of Law,” and were working to start chapters in other cities and form a more integral solidarity movement. Magaña signed up and joined the CSFM, the organization that would evolve into the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador.172

Magaña’s story sheds light on the degrees to which state sponsored repression of popular movements in El Salvador fostered their burgeoning abroad. Many Salvadorans who had participated in peaceful opposition campaigns were forced to migrate and a significant number of them ended up in the United States. Once here, they tended to congregate in the Latin quarters and Latin neighborhoods and they soon came in contact with one another. Already politically aware and versed in the logistics of popular

mobilizations and activism, organizing and supporting the opposition movements from abroad came naturally.

The CSFM consisted of an Executive Committee and a number of task committees. The former was the organization’s executive body while the task committees were in charge of issues like: finance, propaganda, social relations and popular mobilization. In what became their first newsworthy act, the CSFM joined forces with a number of other bourgeoning movements and “more that 150 people, including businessmen U.S. teachers and students, and Salvadoran refugees” demonstrated outside the Salvadoran consulate in downtown Los Angeles to protest the torture and murders of revolutionary leaders in el Salvador. By 1981 the CSFM had around 400 members and the numbers would continue to grow as non-Salvadorans joined the organization. The CSFM created 13 committees throughout the United States, in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Long Island, Boston, Austin, and Houston.

The CSFM was merely one of a number of movements that joined together to form the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador in 1980. CISPES was organized into regional and local chapters and in 1982 it opened its central office in Washington D.C. The organization was guided by three main objectives: to fundraise and secure financial resources for the Salvadoran insurgents; to garner political support through mass mobilizations, protests, sit-ins, and so forth; and to foster diplomatic

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support by lobbying with the U.S. Congress.\textsuperscript{174} Movements such as CISPES became an important source of support to the efforts of the FMLN.\textsuperscript{175}

Magaña, who in 1987 was named the regional director of CISPES for Los Angeles, Texas and New Mexico, recalls that the organization became a sort of solidarity umbrella for El Salvador that drew in many U.S. organizations and leftist parties, such as the clandestine U.S. Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Oakland based Maoist organization, Line of March.\textsuperscript{176} In effect, the crisis in El Salvador became a point of convergence for many disparate leftist social movements in the United States.

\textit{The Struggle within the Struggle}

The Political Diplomatic Commission (CPD) was an endogenous part of the revolutionary movement. The Commission was, as its name suggests, the political and diplomatic arm of the FMLN. In turn, the five guerrilla movements presided over by the \textit{Comandancia General} were the military wing. Together, these two bodies were the core of the organization. The solidarity movements were a different story. While integral to the FMLN’s efforts, they were exogenous—their members supported and worked for the FMLN but were not themselves a part of it. In theory, umbrella organizations such as CISPES and NEST supported the FMLN as a whole, in reality they were affiliated with one of the five guerrilla factions and their loyalties were dispensed accordingly. CISPES,

\begin{flushleft}\footnotesize\textsuperscript{174} Magaña, Arquímides. Interview with the author, \textit{op cit.} Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with the author. San Salvador, El Salvador. March 22, 2013.\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}\footnotesize\textsuperscript{175} There is uniform consensus amongst FMLN members interviewed by the author about the importance of support from U.S. based solidarity movements.\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}\footnotesize\textsuperscript{176} Magaña, Arquímides. Interview with the author, \textit{op cit.} Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with the author. San Salvador, El Salvador. March 22, 2013.\end{flushleft}
for example, was partnered with the FPL, NEST and Casa El Salvador with the ERP, and the *Comité Ernesto Jovel* with the PRTC. These affiliations were insignificant on the political and diplomatic fronts. When NEST lobbied with members of Congress or Casa El Salvador staged a protest, the entire FMLN benefited. It was different when it came to finances, however, and this became a source of conflict within the Salvadoran revolutionary organization. As the solidarity movements became an increasingly important source of financial support, where the funds went mattered a great deal to combatants on the grounds.\(^{177}\)

When the FMLN was formed its leaders agreed that the financial resources they secured would be placed in a common pot and controlled by an internal committee called COFIN. The money would be divided amongst the organizations in accordance with their membership and military strength: 30% would go to the FPL, 30% to the ERP, and the remaining 40% would be split evenly between the RN, Communist Party and PRTC.\(^{178}\) While this rule was adhered to with the funds that reached COFIN, solidarity organizations had a lot of leeway when giving the FMLN funds they gathered and the faction they were affiliated with often received the lion’s share.\(^{179}\) While the FMLN was a united front, tensions between the factions were pervasive throughout the war.\(^{180}\) The allocation of funds and allegiances with solidarity movements were an important source of disagreements. Marisol Galindo, an ERP member who worked at COFIN claims that “throughout the entire war, funds were a very contentious issue. The five organizations


\(^{178}\) Galindo, Marisol. Interview with the author. San Salvador, El Salvador. March 22, 2013. Joaquin Villalobos confirmed this to the author during a conversation in San Salvador on the same day.


\(^{180}\) Oñate, Oñate, “The Red Affair.”
that made up the FMLN were on the one hand raising the flag of the FMLN and on the other defending the interests and welfare of their own organization and their own combatants. The same was true for the solidarity movements.” ERP leader Ana Guadalupe Martínez, remembers how distraught the ERP leadership was at the beginning of the civil war when it became clear that the FPL had won over the Jesuit bloc in the United States. “Damn it! we though, they got the Jesuits.” Because according to Ana the Jesuits were so good at mobilizing and collecting money, their affiliation with the FPL was a blow to ERP. The FMLN’s five guerrilla organizations were posted in different areas of the country and had their own armed forces. The way in which funds were distributed thus had direct and consequent implications for the welfare of each organization.

The FMLN’s relations with solidarity movements in the United States elucidate the fractious nature of the FMLN and also of U.S. foreign policy. Furthermore, this sphere of FMLN diplomacy speaks to FMLN agency in U.S. social movements that acquired noteworthy clout in the 1980s. The FMLN was able to capitalize on U.S. civic discontent over Reagan’s policies in order to further its bids for political power and international legitimacy.

The next chapter will expound on the FMLN’s diplomacy with other foreign actors that also sought to countervail Reagan’s policies in the Isthmus, most notably the Mexican Government and Western European political parties belonging to the Socialist International (SI).

Conclusion
This chapter has uncovered the history of the FMLN’s foundation in 1980 and
stressed the implications of it being born abroad, under the auspices of the revolutionary
governments of Cuba and Nicaragua. In discussing the FMLN’s formation, the chapter
elucidates the pivotal role of the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 on the Salvadoran
revolutionary movement. While arguing that the Nicaraguan revolutionary model shaped
the FMLN in decisive ways, this chapter also stresses the very real differences between
the domestic and international realities faced by the Nicaraguan FSLN in 1979 and the
Salvadoran FMLN in 1980. In effect, the Salvadoran revolutionary model was
unworkable in El Salvador.

As the FMLN formed in Cuba, El Salvador’s ruling coalition experienced a coup
in late 1979 and subsequently a series of revolutionary juntas that signaled the breaking
of the final straw of the Salvadoran ancient regime. This, coupled with the FMLN’s
formation and emergent military diplomacy created the perfect storm for the outbreak of
civil war.

The chapter ends by discussing the Reagan turn in the United States and
Washington’s backing for Salvadoran state forces. It juxtaposes Washington’s aims to
defeat the FMLN with the efforts of U.S.-based solidarity organizations that pushed back
against Reagan’s policies in the Isthmus by supporting the FMLN. When understood as
interrelated, these histories evidence how the Salvadoran Civil War divided the United
States and forced the dominant country in the hemisphere to grapple with crucial debates
about its role as a world power.
CHAPTER 3: REVOLUTIONARY DIPLOMATS

Introduction

The FMLN’s failure to instigate a popular insurrection and seize political control of the country with its 1981 final offensive pushed the FMLN to pursue a civilian track that ran parallel to its military endeavors. This chapter examines the early stages of that civilian track, which I call pol diplomacy. This differed from the military diplomacy discussed in the previous chapter in important ways. It aimed to secure international legitimacy and brought the FMLN into alliances with governments and political parties abroad that were not part of the Eastern Cold War camp. The FMLN thus grappled with various international “lefts.”

In uncovering the history of he FMLN’s relations with both Mexico and Western European social democracies the chapter highlights the dialectic vectors of influence inherent to the FMLN’s diplomacy. Just as the Salvadoran revolutionary organization was shaped through its foreign relations, exogenous actors engaging with the FMLN were transformed by virtue of their engagement with the Salvadorans. Mexico and the Socialist International capitalized on the crisis in El Salvador to further their own agendas. The chapter thus highlights both how external forces shaped internal coalitions in El Salvador and how El Salvador transformed the regional and international balance of power.

Taco-Eating Revolutionaries

When the Salvadoran revolutionaries met in Cuba in 1979 and 1980 to discuss the terms of their union they set out to build a political diplomatic body to work in tandem with their insurgent military organization. In November 1980, the incipient FMLN
created its Political Diplomatic Commission (CPD). The CPD, which began with a mere seven members, was presided by social democratic politicians Guillermo Ungo and Rubén Zamora, had one representative from each of the five organizations of the FMLN, and was subdivided into areas of operation and countries of interest. Its original purpose was to contact foreign governments and prepare to form a provisional government to take power when the FMLN’s impending insurrection succeeded.

The decision by Salvadoran insurgents to form a Political Diplomatic Commission was deeply influenced by the trajectory of the FSLN. In the months leading up to the Nicaraguan Revolution, the FSLN allied with a group of prominent intellectuals, businessmen, and progressive politicians known as El Grupo de los Doce (the Group of Twelve). This group, which formed in 1977, helped the FSLN secure international condemnation of the Somoza regime, fostered the FSLN’s legitimacy abroad as a genuine representative of the Nicaraguan people, and in the aftermath of revolution led efforts to build a new revolutionary government. The role that the Grupo de los Doce played in the Sandinista Revolution served as a referent for the Salvadoran insurgents and the Cubans and Nicaraguans advising them.\textsuperscript{183}

The failure of the FMLN’s final offensive in January 1981 severely shook the Salvadoran insurgent leadership. They had expected a swift victory through insurrection, as had been the case for their Nicaraguan allies. When this failed to materialize, the FMLN was forced to augment its shift to a parallel civilian track, and the CPD’s functions changed accordingly. While still responsible for conducting international

\textsuperscript{183} Joaquín Villalobos and Ana Guadalupe Martínez both mentioned the Nicaraguan Grupo de los Doce as a crucial referent for the FMLN in its decision to create a political diplomatic commission. Villalobos, Joaquín. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 30, 2011; Martínez, Ana Guadalupe. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: June 16, 2012.
relations, the objective of the CPD became to boast the legitimacy of the Salvadoran opposition abroad and garner political support for the insurgents. With this goal in mind, CPD members reached out to foreign governments, international institutions, and non-state actors, and the CPD began sending representatives abroad as foreign attachés and using Salvadoran exiles as diplomatic representatives of the FMLN.

While the military factions of the FMLN would be based in El Salvador, the CPD required an extraterritorial base from which its members could travel freely and communicate with foreign actors. By 1980, when the FMLN and its CPD came into existence, the levels of repression in El Salvador were such that anybody suspected of sympathizing with the guerrillas could be rounded-up, imprisoned, tortured, “disappeared” or killed by the Salvadoran Army, police, or the right-wing paramilitary death squads. As journalist Mark Danner graphically described:

_The most visible signs of the "dirty war" were mutilated corpses that each morning littered the streets of El Salvador's cities. Sometimes the bodies were headless, or faceless, their features having been obliterated with a shotgun blast or an application of battery acid; sometimes limbs were missing, or hands or feet chopped off, or eyes gouged out; women's genitals were torn and bloody, bespeaking repeated rape; men's were often found severed and stuffed into their mouths. And cut into the flesh of a corpse's back or chest was likely to be the signature of one or another of the "death squads" that had done the work, the most notorious of which_
were the Union of White Warriors and the Maximiliano Hernández Martínez Brigade.\textsuperscript{186}

Travel privileges were restricted and the government closely monitored citizens’ private communications. The FMLN thus needed to find a politically stable country, sympathetic to the Salvadoran opposition, from which the CPD could coordinate its affairs. They found a willing and suitable host in Mexico, a country with a revolutionary history of its own and an established reputation for welcoming foreign leftist dissidents.

In 1910, Mexico experienced the outbreak of the first social revolution of the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 30s the country became a referent for foreign leftist thinkers and activists, amongst them Salvadoran communist leader Farabundo Martí and Nicaragua’s revolutionary leader Cesar Sandino who both spent time in Mexico during the 1930s. By mid-century, Mexico had developed a nationalist and populist presidential system dominated by one political party—the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)—and a strong executive. While the revolution had doubtless ended by the termination of the Second World War, it continued to shape the country’s political landscape and image abroad. Most significantly, the legitimacy of the country’s post-revolutionary leaders became linked to their ability to propagate the notion that they were the institutional representation of the revolution of 1910.\textsuperscript{187} To what extent they succeeded at convincing the Mexican masses of this is debatable, but through their use of revolutionary rhetoric Mexican leaders sought to present themselves as standing by the revolution of years gone by.

\textsuperscript{187} It was no coincidence that the name of the dominant political party was the “Institutional Revolutionary Party”.
Although far from an ideal electoral democracy, Mexico avoided the military dictatorships and strong revolutionary movements that befell many countries in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. While this Mexican anomaly was multi-causal, it was in no small measure a product of policies geared towards co-opting opposition movements whenever possible and repressing them only when co-optation seemed to fail. Between the late 1960s through the 1980s incipient guerrilla movements—particularly in the states of Morelos and Guerrero—were brutally suppressed in what became known as Mexico’s “dirty war.” However, the government’s proclivity for resorting to co-optation produced a close and symbiotic relationship between the opposition—groups such as trade unions and peasant associations that could have pushed the government to deepen revolutionary reforms—and the regime.

In the Mexican government’s effort to appease domestic opposition and propagate the image of being a revolutionary regime, foreign policy played a consequential role. This was particularly significant—not to mention relevant for the FMLN—during the Cold War period, and more specifically in the last two decades of the Cold War.

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In 1968 Mexico experienced the greatest domestic crisis in its post-revolutionary history when months of student and workers demonstration were brought to a tragic halt as state forces opened fire on thousands of unarmed students and civilians gathered at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco. About 40 protesters were killed and more that 1,300 people arrested in what became known as the Tlateloco Massacre. Much has been debated and written about the extent to which this tragedy paved the way for the end of PRI hegemony in Mexican politics; a downfall that occurred gradually over the course of the next three decades. Undoubtedly, however, the massacre tarnished the legitimacy of the Mexican regime in an unprecedented fashion and evidenced profound contradictions between the political imaginary leaders wished to espouse and the country’s political reality.¹⁸⁹ In the aftermath of 1968, winning over disenchanted leftist and intellectuals took on increasing relevance. The crisis in Central America came on the heels of the post-1968 legitimacy crisis, and the extent to which Mexican leaders eventually involved themselves in the region cannot be fully understood if this is not taken into account. Mexico’s foreign policy in Central America was largely driven by the former’s desire to recover its legitimacy and reestablish its clout in the hemisphere as a progressive and

independent force in the Americas. This is why, after a long history of ignoring the region south of its border, Mexico all of a sudden took an interest in Central America and made the Isthmus the focal point of its foreign policy.

During the Cold War, Mexico pursued an independent and non-aligned foreign policy. While the country shared a 2,000-mile border and strong economic ties with the United States, it maintained open diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and its allied countries. When the Cuban Revolution of 1959 shook the continental axiom and the United States took great strides to isolate the country economically and politically, Mexico stood by the Castro administration, never ceasing commercial and diplomatic relations with the island. In fact, Mexican presidents tried to capitalize on the revolutionary momentum in the aftermath of 1959 by standing alongside the Cuban Revolution. The same was true when President Allende launched his social democratic experiment in the southern cone. After Allende came to power, Mexican President Luis Echeverría traveled to Santiago and embraced the Chilean experiment as if it were a natural successor to the Mexican Revolution.

Maintaining diplomatic relations with the United States’ and with Cuba in the midst of the Cold War required audacity, skill, and often double-dealing on the part of Mexican diplomats, but it served the Mexican administration well. Beyond sending the message

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192 The Cuban Embassy in Mexico and the homes of Cuban diplomats were tapped by the CIA with Mexico’s consent, and the passenger list of all flight going to Havana from Mexico City were overseen by the CIA. See, Patrick Iber, “Paráiso de Espías. La Ciudad de México Y La Guerra Fría,” *Nexos*, Abril 2014, http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=20004; Jefferson Morley,
to domestic audiences that Mexico stood by its fellow revolutionary nation, an unwritten pact was established between Fidel Castro and his Mexican counterparts: so long as Mexico stood by Cuba, Castro would not offer any assistance or support to subversive and insurgent movements in Mexico. Until the end of the twentieth century, both kept their end of the bargain. Beyond using radical rhetoric and diplomatically embracing leftist regimes in the region, Mexican leaders exhibited a marked receptivity towards foreign liberal and leftist dissidents and political refugees fleeing the right-wing dictatorships that took hold in the southern cone in the 1970s and 80s. When their time came, the Salvadoran guerrillas benefitted from Mexico’s open doors and used the country as a safe base to rest, hold meetings, and travel to other countries. An anecdote by Joaquín Villalobos proves illustrative regarding Mexico’s lax attitude towards foreign dissidents. On a trip sometime in the 1970s Villalobos was stopped at Mexico City’s Benito Juárez Airport and his luggage, which was full of revolutionary propaganda and pamphlets, searched. “I was scared shitless,” he recalls, “in El Salvador that would secure my imprisonment, torture and disappearance.” To his relief (and disbelief), the Mexican officer doing the searching seemed enthralled and asked sheepishly if Villalobos could give him some pamphlets as personal souvenirs. After Villalobos more that willingly acceded, he was sent on his way.  

RN leader and FMLN commander Eduardo Sancho recalls that the time he and his comrades spent in Mexico in the 1970s was formative and consequential. It was here that the FMLN established its first contacts with the international press. The Mexican

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publications *Uno Más Uno* and *Jornada* took an interest in the young revolutionaries, interviewed them and helped put them in touch with news outlets and reporters from other parts of the world. In Sancho’s words, “Mexican reporters gave us, for the time ever, an international voice.” The FMLN’s relationship with the international press became increasingly important in later years as the Salvadoran war became the subject of scrupulous monitoring by the international community and the battle for legitimacy took center stage. Furthermore, during their initial visits to Mexico Salvadoran guerrillas initiated relations with sympathetic activists and non-governmental organizations. These solidarity networks would in later years help the Salvadoran insurgents in various ways. Throughout the 1980s they organizing charity events to help collect funds for the FMLN, offered guerrillas places to stay when they travelled to Mexico, helped put the Salvadorans in touch with similar groups in other parts of the region and some even went to El Salvador, joined the ranks of the FMLN and fought against the Salvadoran military alongside their FMLN comrades.

Mexico’s willingness to receive the international left served not only the foreign dissidents being welcomed but also the Mexican. In part, this openness was intended to serve as proof of Mexico’s revolutionary nature, but more importantly, it gained Mexican leaders the sympathy of the international left. Dissidents that came to Mexico felt grateful to the regime that welcomed them. Comparing conditions in Mexico to the lack of political freedom and levels of repression in their own countries, Mexico’s one-party

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195 I conducted interviews with many Mexican activists who spent time in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Amongst them was a Mexican doctor who traveled to El Salvador and served as doctor and surgeon for the ERP leadership in Morazán throughout the entire 1980s. Also, his then wife, also a Mexican national, served as one of the FMLN’s chief representatives in Washington D.C. through the FMLN’s CPD office. This is something I intend to expand on much more in the monograph.
state seemed a very favorable alternative to authoritarian right-wing dictatorships elsewhere in the region. The exiles that joined the university ranks shared their views with young and impressionable Mexican students, and the activists and foreign guerrillas did likewise with Mexicans eager to come in contact with anything smelling of revolutionary gunpowder. Maria Socorro Álvarez, an activist Mexican student who eventually went to fight with the FMLN’s ERP faction in El Salvador, recalls how the foreign radicals she and her comrades admired and sought out spoke positively of conditions in Mexico and encouraged activists like herself to direct their revolutionary fervor and militancy abroad rather than at home.\(^\text{196}\) Whether this attenuation of domestic opposition was something that Mexican leaders intended \textit{a priori}, or rather a fortunate by-product of a policy guided by other considerations, the result was that Mexico’s ability at co-opting the opposition extended beyond national boundaries.

Mexico’s relationship with the Salvadoran insurgency eventually surpassed, in both scope and significance, the country’s involvement with any previous leftist movement. The Mexican administration’s first contacts with the Salvadoran opposition were, as had been the case with the Socialist International, with the leadership of the MNR in the late 1970s.\(^\text{197}\) However, according to Gustavo Carvajal, who served as leader of Mexico’s PRI from 1979-1981, the decisive moment in the Mexican-FMLN nexus came in July


\(^{197}\) On October 12, 1979, Mexico’s PRI created COPPPAL, a transnational organization of Latin American parties considered to be “of the left.” According to COPPPAL’s first president, Gustavo Carvajal, the organization was intended to strengthen the Latin American left and, by extension, Mexico’s clout in the hemisphere. Scholar Fernando Pedrosa, contends that the creation of COPPPAL cannot but be seen as a strategy by Mexico’s PRI—who was not a member of the socialist international—to ensure that it did not lag behind European social democracies who were making strides in the Americas. Carvajal, Gustavo. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 25, 2011; Fernando Pedrosa, “Partidos Políticos Y Acciones Transnacionales: El Comité Para América Latina Y El Caribe de La Internacional Socialista (1976-1983),” \textit{Revista Izquierdas} 22 (Enero 2015): 48–77.
1980, when during a state visit to Cuba Mexican President José López Portillo was directly asked by Fidel Castro to consider supporting the bourgeoning revolutionary movement in El Salvador.\textsuperscript{198} The Cuban leader had good reason to expect the good will of his Mexican counterpart given López Portillo’s recent support of the Nicaraguan revolutionaries. Carvajal recalls that it was at the instigation of Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo that López Portillo decided to throw his support behind the Sandinistas. At a meeting between Carazo and López Portillo in Guanajuato, Mexico in 1978, President Carazo asked López Portillo to back the movement against Somoza and Carvajal was subsequently instructed to find ally countries willing to stand with Mexico on this matter. He met with Cuban Manuel Piñeiro and Panamanian General Omar Torrijos only to learn that Mexico was arriving more than fashionably late to the party. Both Cuba and Panama were already assisting the Sandinistas, as were Venezuela and Costa Rica. Not wanting to be on the sidelines of what seemed like an imminent victorious revolution, Mexico jumped on board. A meeting followed between leaders of the different Latin American countries backing the Sandinistas and they determined which FSLN factions each country would prioritize in their support.\textsuperscript{199}

The Sandinistas set up propaganda offices in Mexico and received some money for “travel expenses.”\textsuperscript{200} Meanwhile, the Mexican Embassy in Managua became a safe-haven for the Nicaraguan opposition. Although Mexico had withdrawn its ambassador to Nicaragua in 1978, the young Mexican diplomat Gustavo Iruegas—who had earlier been posted in Cuba—was sent as “business liaison,” and he soon developed a close personal

\textsuperscript{198} Carvajal interview with author. Mexico City, July 25, 2011.
\textsuperscript{199} At this meeting, “Mexico got Tomás Borges and his GPP, while Cuba got Daniel Ortega and the terceristas.” Carvajal, Gustavo. Interview with author. Mexico City, July 25, 2011.
\textsuperscript{200} Riding, \textit{Distant Neighbors}, 351.
friendship with the Sandinista leadership whom he allowed on more than one occasion to take refuge in the embassy where they could rest, eat well, and stave off the infamous Managua heat in the embassy’s swimming pool. Furthermore, during the most brutal months of war the Mexican Embassy gave asylum to over 600 people including the Grupo de los Doce. In May 1979, President López Portillo broke diplomatic relations with the Somoza regime in Nicaragua and publicly called on other countries to do the same, and when the Sandinistas came to power a few months later Mexico became one of the first countries to recognize the revolutionary regime.

Fidel Castro’s call to López Portillo about supporting the FMLN was met with predictable acceptance. Gustavo Carvajal was then instructed to meet with the leader of the Salvadoran Communist Party, Shafik Handal, and subsequently Mexican Foreign Minister, Jorge Castañeda de la Rosa, and Carvajal held a series of gatherings with Salvadoran guerrilla leaders to discuss the terms of their support. Mexico explicitly conditioned it’s backing on the FMLN agreeing to three preconditions: first, the FMLN’s activities in Mexico would be solely political and not military and Mexico would not offer military support; second, the FMLN would not establish relations with dissident movements in Mexico and would refrain from supporting or encouraging them in any way; third, if the FMLN broke any of these rules they would be expelled from the

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201 FSLN leader Joaquín Cuadra told the author how on more than one occasion he found refuge in the Mexican Embassy and recalled cooling off in the embassy’s swimming pool. Cuadra, Joaquín. Interview with author. Managua, Nicaragua, August 18, 2010. See also, Ruben Aguilar, “Diplomacia En Tiempos de Guerra: Memorias Del Embajador Gustavo Iruegas,” Animal Político, April 25, 2014.

202 Ibid.


country. The Salvadoran revolutionary, leaders agreed and promptly began setting up their diplomatic office in the capital’s Colonia Roma. From this cosmopolitan Latin American city the FMLN would build and coordinate its nexus of revolutionary diplomats.

Mexico’s preconditions offer fascinating insight into the dynamics underlying Mexican foreign policy. They also speak to how the Salvadoran conflict played into the domestic politics of regional forces. Offering the Salvadorans a safe heaven on their home soil offered Mexican administrations a series of advantages. It augmented Mexico’s clout in the region by making it one of the few powers that had positive relations with all the key actors in the Salvadoran conflict: the Salvadoran State, the U.S., Cuba, and Sandinista Nicaragua. Mexico was thus in a privileged position to serve as intermediary between the different warring factions and in particular to influence the FMLN and coax it towards a more moderate platform of a liberal rather than a socialist order. Conditioning the FMLN to limit its activities to the strictly diplomatic realm served to avoid confrontations between Mexico and Washington. Also, it helped to ensure that Mexico did not become a point of transit for weapons that could fall into the hands of domestic opposition to the Mexican regime. Southern states in Mexico such as Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero, for example, could have been convenient points of transit for

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weapons being brought to El Salvador. These were geographic spaces where the Mexican State had limited and contested presence. The second precondition—not establishing relations with dissident movements in Mexico or supporting or encouraging them in any way—was a means for the Mexican administration to control the impact that the Salvadoran revolutionary effort could have on Mexican politics and society. For better or worse, allowing the FMLN to set up its CPD in Mexico City, and actively supporting the insurgents’ diplomatic efforts was how the Mexican regime co-opted the Salvadoran revolutionary effort.

Less than a year after the FMLN set up its diplomatic headquarters the Mexican administration crafted an audacious diplomatic maneuver of great significance for the Salvadoran rebels. On 27 August 1981 the governments of both Mexico and France issued a joint pronouncement on the FMLN that came to be known as the Franco-Mexican Declaration. The document, elaborated by Mexican Foreign Minister Castañeda and French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson, and signed by French President Francois Mitterrand and Mexican President López Portillo, recognized the FMLN as a representative political force in El Salvador, subject to the rights and responsibilities that this entailed in accordance with the UN Charter. The document stated:

*Taking into account the extreme gravity of the situation in El Salvador and the country’s need for fundamental changes in its social, economic and political spheres, both governments recognize the alliance of the FMLN and FDR as a representative political force willing to assume the consequent rights and obligations. Consequently, it is legitimate for the*
alliance to participate in the unfolding of negotiations necessary for reaching a political solution the Salvadoran crisis.\textsuperscript{206}

Public recognition by France and Mexico of the FMLN’s legitimacy as a representative political force of opposition constituted the Salvadoran revolutionaries’ first decisive political-diplomatic breakthrough. Furthermore, by stressing the primacy of a political negotiated solution to the conflict and acknowledging that the Salvadoran insurgency would need to participate in negotiations, the Franco-Mexican Declaration countered the United States and Salvadoran government’s attempts to present the crisis as a purely military conflict between a legitimate government and an illegitimate terrorist organization.

Given its far-reaching implications, the Franco-Mexican Declaration expectedly provoked a strong international reaction by both supporters and opponents. News of the proclamation made headlines in major newspapers across the globe and gave the FMLN a heretofore-unknown spotlight/platform in the international arena. The governments of Norway, Sweden, Holland, Ireland and the Democratic Republic of Germany were quick to back the Mexican and French presidents, as were the 43 members of the Socialist International. In turn, President Duarte embarked on a diplomatic tour to denounce France and Mexico’s stance as a foreign intervention into El Salvador’s domestic affairs.

Duarte traveled to the United States, gave several press conferences and spoke against the Franco-Mexican Declaration at the Organization of American States. The United States

Department of State published a communiqué rejecting the idea of a political solution in which the FMLN-FDR would participate, stressing instead its backing of an electoral solution led by the military junta and guaranteeing President Duarte that U.S. military advisors in El Salvador would stay put until provocations by foreign actors subsided.\footnote{Ana Covarrubias, “La Declaración Franco-Mexicana Sobre El Salvador,” \textit{Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior}, 2013, 53.} Furthermore, the Christian democratic president of Venezuela, Luis Herrera Campins, a close ally of Duarte and the Reagan administration in the United States, led efforts to consolidate wider international condemnation in the region by mobilizing governments allied with Salvadoran President Napoleon Duarte or who feared that the FMLN’s newfound international stature could motivate other insurgent movements. President Herrera Campins’ labors gave way to the Declaration of Caracas in September 1981. This document, signed by the governments of Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic, stated that third parties were under no obligation to recognize the Salvadoran insurrection as legitimate belligerents and could continue dealing exclusively with the central government.\footnote{Jesús Ceberio, “Caracas critica la declaración franco-mexicana sobre El Salvador,” \textit{EL PAÍS}, September 4, 1981.}

While contentious, the Franco-Mexican Declaration helped shape the subsequent history of the FMLN and Mexican involvement in Central American. Mexico sent a clear message of where it stood on the Salvadoran crisis—favoring a political negotiated solution—and demonstrated that it was willing to take risks—most notably antagonizing the United States and other regional governments—to advance this platform. This sent a compelling message to the Salvadoran insurgents that Mexico was a serious political ally. Furthermore, up to this point Mexican administrations had been staunch defenders of the
principle of non-intervention in the international arena. In this case, however, regardless of what may have been argued at the time to stave off criticism by opponents of the Declaration, Mexico was prioritizing other ethical, political and diplomatic principles. Allusions to the grave human rights crisis in El Salvador in the document and explicit reference to this by President López Portillo in subsequent interviews on the Declaration, suggested that peace in Central America, social change in El Salvador, and respect for human rights in the region were being prioritized over abstract principles of national sovereignty. Mexico’s shifting attitude towards sovereignty was reflective of broader global trends and changing perceptions regarding the primacy of international principles such as human rights and peace in the international arena.

For the Salvadorans insurgents, the Declaration gave their organization unprecedented international visibility and allowed them to develop a more active political diplomacy. Recognition by a liberal non-aligned country like Mexico and a social democracy like France, and the subsequent backing of this recognition by Europe’s western democracies, helped to offset the image of the Salvadoran insurgents that the Duarte and Reagan administrations wished to propagate: that of a radical Marxist terrorist organization. While this benefitted the FMLN by bolstering its international legitimacy, it also forced the organization to tone down its Marxist rhetoric and moderate some of the more radical elements of its economic platform, lest they risk scaring off their new diplomatic allies. Furthermore, recognition as a legitimate insurgent force implied that

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the FMLN was now bound by the Geneva Convention and would need to be much more attentive to abiding by the laws of war in its military proceedings as violations could carry important political and diplomatic costs.

It is pertinent to note that the Franco-Mexican Declaration was not a foreign or exogenous imposition on the FMLN but rather a joint diplomatic strategy devised in conversation with the Salvadorans. As Eduardo Sancho recalls, the Franco-Mexican Declaration was originally an FMLN idea. Salvadoran insurgent leaders wanted international recognition as a representative political force and they reached out to Mexican diplomat, and FMLN friend, Gustavo Iruegas for this purpose. In Sancho’s view, the Mexican foreign ministry looked favorably upon this but also understood that the motion would be highly contentious, particularly give the Reagan Administration’s efforts to annihilate the FMLN militarily. Mexico thus needed the support of a great power, and reached out to France.210 Given the social democratic nature of President Mitterrand’s administration, his political advisor Régis Debray’s sympathy with insurgencies in Latin America, and the amicable relationship between Mitterrand and Foreign Minister Castañeda, France seemed like a wise and appropriate partner. CPD member Salvador Samayoa provides a different account in his book *La Reforma Pactada*. According to Samayoa, Jorge Castañeda Gutman, the son of the Mexican Foreign Minister and then an advisor to his father on the Central American crisis, was the intellectual author of the declaration. Castañeda first consulted the matter with Regis Debray and then with representatives of the FDR and FMLN.211 Precisely who deserved credit for concocting this strategy seems less relevant than the fact that the Franco-

Mexican Declaration was the product of negotiations and diplomatic maneuvering involving many actors, and that the Salvadorans were protagonists helping craft this groundbreaking document. In his memoirs, Castañeda Gutman recalls how Regis Debray, who had been a close personal friend of Roque Dalton, interrogated Salvadoran leaders extensive about his friends’ death back in 1975 as a precondition for supporting the Declaration. Castañeda Gutman also recounts that Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez—a world-recognized novelist and close friend who was then living in Mexico—helped convince the newly elected Mitterrand government to support and consummate the joint Declaration on El Salvador.212

Mexican diplomats knew full well that the polemic declaration could help the FMLN’s legitimacy. In a private letter between Gustavo Iruegas—now back from Managua and working in the Foreign Ministry—and Castañeda de la Rosa, Iruegas told Castañeda that Mexico had a historic responsibility to give the Salvadoran revolutionaries “that which their ideological partners—practically their comrades in arms—Cuba and Nicaragua could not give: anoint them with legitimacy.”213 By granting their support, Mexico also hoped to moderate the Salvadoran insurgents. At its root, the Franco-Mexican Declaration was a call for a middle-of-the-road solution to the crisis in El Salvador; a negotiated compromise between the military dictatorship and the guerrilla. This would not occur if the FMLN were perceived as a dogmatic Marxist organization unwilling to accept anything save an absolute revolutionary victory. William M. LeoGrande eloquently describes this in his exhaustive work on Central American-U.S. relations during the last decade of the Cold War. Leo Grande states:

212 Castañeda, Amarres perros. Una autobiografía.
The Mexicans certainly did not favor the establishment of pro-Soviet Marxist-Leninist regimes in Central America, although, based on their experience of peaceful coexistence with Cuba, they were confident they could live with whatever revolutionary government might emerge. They believed the best strategy for blunting Cuban and Soviet influence was to support the social democrats among the region’s revolutionaries rather than side with the forces of conservatism. By trying to hold back the process of social change in Central America, the United States would only make the inevitable break with the past more cataclysmic and radical. By introducing large amounts of military aid, Washington itself was turning Central America into an arena of East-West conflict, drawing Cuba and the Soviet Union in. “The United States will not make the Vietnam syndrome disappear by repeating it,” warned one Mexican official.214

Ana Guadalupe Martínez recalls Mexico’s efforts to draw on the FMLN’s more moderate strings and stresses that this was also the case with Western European democracies. In her words:

Mexico knew that we were revolutionaries...but they also knew that this phenomenon would not be repeated in the continent. They understood that they needed to help us tone down our rhetoric and mentality, and so they would take us aside and talk to us about democracy and institutions and

214 LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard, 98.
political parties...in essence how democratic institutional systems functioned. The Europeans would do the exact same thing with us.\textsuperscript{215}

Although the Mexican Government wished to moderate the FMLN, it did not want to compromise the organization’s integrity. Ultimately, Mexico—and the myriad countries that to varying degrees sympathized with the FMLN—was cognizant of the appalling crisis in El Salvador under the military junta and wished to see genuine transformations in the country.\textsuperscript{216} A series of internal documents from an FMLN private archive, shed light on how Mexico juggled moderating the FMLN and bringing it to the negotiation table while simultaneously trying to bolster its strength. In February 1981 Foreign Minister Castañeda sustained a private meeting with two leaders of the CPD and one member of the \textit{Comandancia General} (CG) (Salvador Samayoa, Eduardo Sancho (Fermán Cienfuegos) and Guillermo Ungo) to discuss a potential meeting between FMLN leaders and representatives of the US government. While it is not explicitly stated, the documents suggest that members of the U.S. administration reached out to Castañeda and asked him to orchestrate a gathering between them and the Salvadorans.\textsuperscript{217} Beyond


\textsuperscript{216} When Mexico and France recognized the legitimacy of the FMLN, the human rights crisis in El Salvador was appalling. In just the past seven months, between January and July 1981, around 10,000 people had been murdered and over 300,000 Salvadorans had fled the country. These numbers are even more staggering when one considering that the population of this small country was approximately 4.5 million. The number of dead and displaced are cited in Covarrubias, “La Declaración Franco-Mexicana Sobre El Salvador,” 47.

\textsuperscript{217} In a letter for Minister Castañeda signed by CDP members Salvador Samayoa, Eduardo Sancho and Guillermo Ungo, the Salvadorans thank Castañeda for his willingness to serve as intermediary between the FMLN and the U.S. government and his efforts to orchestrate some type of dialogue between the two parties. The letter stresses that the FMLN has on repeated occasions voiced its openness to initiate a process of dialogue and inquires what the subject
leaving little doubt about the deep level of trust the FMLN placed on Castañeda— they praise his sympathy with their cause, genuine interest in supporting the FMLN and confidence that Castañeda would not pressure them to negotiate prematurely, or under terms that were unfavorable to their interests—the documents convey that Castañeda told FMLN members that their best card was the organization’s military strength. Their military might would determine the FMLN’s ability to engage in dialogue and have leverage at a negotiation. Consequently, he advised the Salvadorans not to suspend their military activities and went even further by mentioning that it would serve them well to get to their first meeting with U.S. officials with a resounding military victory under their belt. In his memoires, Castañeda Gutman recalls that the same advice was given a few months later before the Franco-Mexican Declaration as the Salvadorans were told that a striking military victory in the days or weeks surround the Declaration could serve them well.

The implications of the FMLN’s internal documents mentioned above warrant discussion in light of what they reveal about Mexico’s role in the conflict, U.S.-FMLN relations, and more importantly, the evolution of the Salvadoran revolutionary’s diplomacy. These documents show that from the very early stages of the Salvadoran Civil War, Mexican diplomats were actively seeking to help mediate between warring parties and that they did so hoping to facilitate a genuine—if not revolutionary—
transition in El Salvador. The Mexican government had was in good standing with both the United States and the Salvadoran insurgents, and this bestowed Mexico with a degree of clout in the conflict that was not open to FMLN allies like Cuba and Nicaragua. This reality proves illustrative regarding the degree to which non-aligned third parties could quietly exert their influence and help shape the fate of the Salvadoran Civil War.

Furthermore, the Reagan Administration’s interest in meeting with Salvadoran combatants and the FMLN’s openness to this possibility in the early months of 1981 reflects that the relationship between the Reagan Administration and the FMLN was more fluid and complex than their antagonistic rhetoric would have suggested. This deepened significantly in later years when the FMLN directly lobbied U.S. Congress members through a covert diplomatic office in Washington D.C.

Finally, Castañeda’s advice that the FMLN prioritize and step up its military strength demonstrates the Mexican Foreign Minister’s perception that at this early stage of the civil war, the Salvadoran insurgent’s international legitimacy rested almost exclusively on their military might. To what extent the FLN was genuinely open to negotiating in the months after the “final insurgency” is debatable and will be discussed in the following chapter. The organization was in fact deeply divided on this matter and the role that international actors played in navigating these divisions was pivotal. What is pertinent to stress here is that as Mexican diplomats accurately noted to FMLN leaders, in 1981 they did not yet have political and social capital in the international arena. This would change markedly in the following years as the FMLN threw increasing weight behind its diplomatic efforts and made great strides in bolstering its international
credibility as a representative political force. And it is to this heightened diplomacy in the aftermath of the Franco-Mexican Declaration that the next chapter now turns.

_The Perks of Being a Palm Tree_  
In May 1981 three young Salvadoran revolutionaries found themselves in the presidential suite of one of Panama City’s most luxurious hotels. Amidst the ornate couches, tropical flowers and crystal ashtrays decorating the room, President of Panama General Omar Torrijos took twenty eight year old Ana Guadalupe Martínez by the arm turned to her two compañeros and said: “Muchachos, I’ve brought you here because I want the social democrats to see you, to get to know you. I want them to see that this girl right here wouldn’t even kill a chicken to make stew.”

The hours that followed were an exhilarating and somewhat surreal experience for Ana Guadalupe Martinez, Joaquin Villalobos and Eduardo Sancho—three key leaders of the FMLN. Only a few days prior, Villalobos and Sancho had been fighting against the Salvadoran Army in the mountains of Central America. Now, in this Panama hotel room, they spent the day meeting heads of state and key representatives of social democratic parties who discreetly snuck out of the high-profile meetings of the Socialist International taking place in the hotel’s conference rooms and made their way into the presidential suite.

Villalobos, Martinez and Sancho could not publicly attend the meetings unfolding downstairs. The Socialist International (SI), founded in Frankfurt in 1951 by European social democratic parties, was an international association of political parties and organizations seeking to advance democratic socialism. Until the late 1970s, the SI had few members outside of Europe and its most substantial work consisted of assisting

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220 Torrijos’ exact words were: “Quiero que vean que esta muchacha no mata un pollo para hacer sancocho.” Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with the author via skype. January 18, 2013.
social democratic parties in Portugal and Spain get re-established as dictatorships gave way to democracy in these countries in the 1970s. Following a 1976 Conference in Geneva, however, the organization decided to expand its global reach. In the effort to become more inclusive, the SI opened its doors to parties and leaders that were not strictly social democrats and specifically began to coax Latin American and Caribbean organizations.

According to Fernando Pedrosa’s research on the Socialist International’s involvement in Latin America, the SI’s policy of greater inclusiveness after 1976 responded to high profile members of the organization— in particularly it’s president, West German leader Willy Brandt, and its secretary General, Bernt Carlsson from Sweden— that foresaw a direct correlation between the number of SI members and the organization’s geopolitical clout. The aim thus became to recruit new members that had political potential in their own countries and influence in the “hot zones” of the Cold War.221 Under this new framework, the SI’s involvement in Latin America increased exponentially after 1976. Political Parties such as the Dominican PRD, the Liberal Party of Colombia, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, the party of Panamanian General Omar Torrijos, groups of Chilean socialists, and the APRA party of Peru had joined the Socialist International by the end of the decade and in October 1979, the organization created the Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean (CALCIS).

The Socialist International turned its eyes towards El Salvador in 1977. In March of that year Carlsson wrote to Hector Oquelí, one of the leaders of the Salvadoran party *Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario* (MNR), suggesting a meeting to discuss how the

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221 Pedrosa, “Partidos Políticos Y Acciones Trasnacionales,” 54.
Socialist International might support his party. The following month, the two men met in London and Oqueli expressed the MNR’s interest in joining the Socialist International. Carlsson proved receptive to this idea and Oqueli subsequently lobbying in Western Europe to "establish solid relations between the MNR and the Socialist International and its European parties." Attesting to Oqueli’s diplomatic skills and the SI’s interest in engaging with Latin America, the MNR’s request for inclusion into the Socialist International was widely backed by SI members. While initially the MNR had requested consultative status, by September 1977 it was calling for full membership. Due to the intricate bureaucratic procedures of the SI where applicants had to be approved by a series of bodies, the MNR was not officially granted membership until June 1980. However, from mid 1977 onward a close alliance developed between the MNR and the Socialist International. MNR leader Guillermo Ungo, a renowned politician who had earned the respect of social democrats around the world, was the quintessential type of person the SI wished to draw near, and the MNR’s efforts to democratize El Salvador were very much in line with the SI’s statute. After the FDR was formed in El Salvador in mid 1980, the SI also made efforts to draw this organization in.

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In July 1977, Bernt Carlsson issued a statement on El Salvador on behalf of the Socialist International. The statement, which was made public and sent to the then President of El Salvador, General Humberto Romero, was strong and unequivocal:

The Socialist international recognizes the aspirations of the people and democratic organizations in El Salvador to achieve peacefully a democratic regime. In particular it supports the struggle of the electoral coalition—National Opposition Union—and the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) as part of that electoral front, that on two occasions—1972 and 1977—has won the presidential election. It was declared to have lost, however, after a massive fraud perpetrated against the interests of the Salvadoran people...the Socialist International demands an end to the wave of violations of civil rights in El Salvador. At the same time it expresses its solidarity with the Salvadoran people and in particular with the National Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario) and its leader Guillermo Ungo.\footnote{Carlsson, Bernt. Second Draft. Socialist International Statement on El Salvador. July 22, 1977. IISH. Socialist International Papers. El Salvador 1977-1979. Folder 1155.}

A few months later, MNR leader Héctor Oquelí, wrote to Carlsson thanking him for this report and informing Carlsson that while the political situation in the country had not changed much, the SI’s declaration had helped. The Romero government had since been moderating its use of violence against the MNR, Oquelí said, and the statement had
bolstered the MNR’s public standing in the eyes of the Romero government that was now concerned with the international image of El Salvador.  

The above-cited pronouncement on El Salvador was merely one of many instances in which the SI held the Salvadoran government publicly accountable for human rights violations in the country. In November 1980, after a series of arrests of FDR leaders, Bernt Carlsson sent a cable to the leader of the Salvadoran Junta, Napoleon Duarte. On behalf of the Socialist International Carlsson held the Duarte government directly responsible for actions taken by his country’s armed forces and paramilitary units, and he requested the immediate release of these persons. When two MNR members were killed in late November 1980, Carlsson also denounced the extra-judicial killings in a public letter to President Duarte. Monitoring and publicly shaming the administration for violating civil rights and obstructing democracy was a central component of the Socialist International’s strategy in El Salvador.

In addition to chastising the Salvadoran government and tarnishing its international standing based on its human rights record, the Socialist International also supported the MNR and FDR by assisting in the procurement of funds and helping them broaden their international networks and standings. In 1979, for example, Bernt Carlsson asked the Danish Labor Movement to make the MNR a recipient of donations by the

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International Solidarity Fund of the Danish Labor Movement.  The Finnish Taksvaerkki, a solidarity movement made up by trade union movement, pupils’ organization and the Finnish Church, raised between 500,000 and 1 million U.S. dollars for different projects in the Third World. For their 1982 campaign, they reached out to Hector Oqueli and inquired what organizations in El Salvador could be adequate recipients of the money. Oqueli’s access to organizations such as Taksvaerkki was doubtless a product of his immersion in the Socialist International.

Participating in the Socialist International allowed the MNR and FDR to network with an array of political parties and influential leaders. From 1977 onwards, MNR members traveled to countries such as England, Italy, Germany, Romania and Bulgaria to meet with social democrats and garner support for their organization. Oqueli was asked to attend a number of different SI gatherings even before the MNR was formally brought into the organization. The SI also asked the FDR to participate in meetings under observant status. In June 1980 the SI invited the FDR to attend a gathering in Oslo, Norway, in August, to participate in one in Caracas, Venezuela, and in September to

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attend a Congress of the Socialist International hosted by the Spanish PSOE in Spain. Attendance at these gatherings in a variety of European and Latin American countries were vital opportunities for the Salvadoran organizations to raise awareness of realities in their country and garner international support. Bernt Carlsson also put MNR leaders in touch with some actors in the United States and encouraged that they reach out to potentially sympathetic groups such as the U.S. Labor Movement.

The SI-facilitated network that would ultimately prove most decisive was bringing the Salvadoran opposition in close contact with the United Nations. The Socialist International had observant status at the UN and could thus attend meetings of its General Assembly. Starting in 1980, the SI drew Guillermo Ungo and Hector Oquelí into the United Nations. In October of that year, the Socialist International helped MNR members attend the General Assembly in New York. Carlsson personally requested that the MNR be present as an observer at the General Assembly for matters pertaining to El Salvador. Guillermo Ungo was eventually named Vice President to the Socialist

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237 In a private note Carlsson was given the MNR’s bank account details and references for three people that needed credentials to attend the meeting. Socialist International Internal note. From Hector to Bernt. October 1, 1980. IISH. Socialist International Papers. El Salvador. 1980. Folder 1156.
International and his attendance at UN meetings became commonplace, so much so that the FMLN created a working group in New York City specifically to support Ungo’s work at the United Nations.  

The Socialist International’s relations with the MNR and FDR were mutually beneficial. The MNR kept the SI informed about developments in El Salvador and the region. Frequent first-hand reports about political and social developments in a region that was quickly becoming a Cold War “hot spot” were doubtless valuable to an organization that relied on being up-to-date on local and international developments. Furthermore, proximity to actors and movements that were at the forefront of developments in their countries, such as the MNR and FDR in El Salvador, bolstered the Socialist International’s standing, making it a weighty actor in the geopolitical matrix of the Cold War. While cozying up to contentious Third World movements raised eyebrows in certain corners, as evidenced by U.S. diplomat Richard H. Melton warning Carlsson that: “the Socialist International cares so much about credibility in the Third World that it looses credibility in the First World,” it bolstered the Socialist International’s standing with social democrats and liberation movements fighting against autocratic regimes.

The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, followed six months later by the outbreak of insurgency in El Salvador, left little doubt for SI members that Central America had become an epicenter of Cold War geopolitics, and the organization consequently deepened its interest in the region. This was made evident in the make-up of CALCIS. MNR leader Hector Oquelí was named CALCIS Executive Secretary and,

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239 See interview with Ana Guadalupe Martínez conducted by Jean Krasno as part of the Yale-UN oral history project. Martínez, “Central American Peace Process.”

with the exception of Chilean politician Anselmo Sule, all the original leaders of the Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean came from Central America and the Caribbean.241

Members of the Socialist International widely accepted the organization’s support for the MNR and FDR.242 This was not the case, however, when the SI leadership decided to back the insurgent and allegedly Marxist FMLN. After the FMLN launched its “final offensive” in January 1981, prominent leaders of the Socialist International voiced their sympathy with the Salvadoran insurgents. While opposition to the Salvadoran government was largely unanimous in the SI, some of its Latin American members were wary of supporting an insurgent organization that alleged to be Marxist-Leninist and have an international agenda.243 On February 18, 1981, SI Secretary General, Bernd Carlsson, received a telegram from one of the organization’s members, Oscar Arias, who then presided over the Costa Rican social democratic party, Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), reproaching the organization’s sympathy towards the FMLN. In the telegram Arias told Carlsson that a document signed by Carlsson and the President of the Socialist International, Willy Brandt, voicing their sympathy with the revolutionary movement in El Salvador was unacceptable to the PLN because it implied support to an insurgent organization “whose leader Cayetano Carpio, a recognized communist, has publicly announced the liberation of Central America, which includes Costa Rica.” Arias warned

241 Pedrosa, “Partidos Políticos Y Acciones Trasnacionales,” 57.P.57
243 Opposition to the FMLN came mostly from the Costa Rican Partido de Liberación Nacional (PLN) and Venezuelan Acción Democrática (AD). Pedrosa, “Partidos Políticos Y Acciones Trasnacionales,” 62.
that he had no choice but to publicly disassociate himself from the position of the Socialist International on this matter. 244 Few could have imagined that by 1987, Oscar Arias, as President of Costa Rica, would be leading a regional peace effort that aimed to broker negotiations between the FMLN and the Salvadoran state, recognizing both as legitimate representatives of the Salvadoran people. But in 1981, things were different.

President Arias’ statement on El Salvador provoked a crisis for the Socialist International as media outlets in the United States used it to indicate “all over the world that the Socialist International was seriously split on El Salvador.” 245 The Socialist International’s leadership decided to deal with internal differences on El Salvador by convening a meeting to discuss the organization’s stance on El Salvador, Arias’ opposition to supporting the FMLN, and the possibility of the SI mediating a negotiated peace solution in this Central American country. It was decided that the meeting would take place in Panama where the country’s leader, General Omar Torrijos, and his Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) would act as hosts.

The Socialist International’s meeting on El Salvador took place from February 28 through March 2, 1981 in Panama City. The two official items on the agenda were to address Oscar Arias’ remarks on the FMLN, which were seen as “deviating in a right-wing direction from the position held by the Socialist International” 246 and hurt the organization’s legitimacy; and to discuss the possibility of the Socialist International

spearheading a negotiated peace process in El Salvador. Attending the meeting where SI members parties of Latin America and the Caribbean; other Latin American organizations such as the Nicaraguan FSLN; representatives of European member parties such as the Socialist Party of Germany, the Socialist Party of France, the Socialist Party of Portugal, and the Socialist Party of Spain; and Bernt Carlsson. A number of others, while not formally invited to the meeting, happened to be in Panama at the time on invitation by General Torrijos, and they displayed a considerable interest in the meeting and met with SI representatives. Such figures included members of the Cuban administration; former deputy-chief of the CIA, General Vernon Walters who had been in Latin America as special representative of President Ronald Reagan; Fidel Chávez Mena, the Foreign Minister of the Duarte government in El Salvador; and of course, the three FMLN leaders hiding in the hotel’s presidential suite: Martínez, Sancho and Villalobos.

The FMLN was naturally not officially invited to attend the meetings in Panama. The open presence of FMLN members at the gathering would have been too controversial and disruptive. The Socialist International first had to decide whether as an organization they were prepared to sympathize with and support the Salvadoran insurgents. Notwithstanding this reality, President Omar Torrijos determined that members of the FMLN should be present at the meeting, if not openly, clandestinely, so the social democrats could get a sense of who these Salvadoran guerrillas actually were. While the SI had been in close contact with the FDR—the political wing of the FMLN—they had yet to engage with the armed men and women waging a war against the state. Intrepid and well versed in politically delicate situations, Torrijos knew just how to handle the FMLN’s presence at the meeting of the Socialist International without
unleashing a crisis. He hid Villalobos, Martínez, and Sancho in the presidential suite and invited only trusted leaders of the social democratic world to come meet with them, away from potentially unsympathetic members, and the reporters, microphones and cameras.

It seems fitting that General Torrijos was the man who bridged the gap between the FMLN and the international community of social democrats. In 1968 members of the Panamanian National Guard led a military coup that overthrew President Arnulfo Arias and put an end to more than half a century of rule by the Arias family and the oligarchy related to them. Omar Torrijos, then a young National Guard colonel, soon emerged as the head of the new Panamanian government and this Central American country would never be quite the same again.

General Torrijos was a leader unlike any other in Latin America at the time. A dictator-like military leader who had little tolerance for independent opposition movements, he was also a widely popular and charismatic man, particularly among the rural lower classes. While in office, he implemented a series of progressive social and economic reforms that included land redistribution in the countryside, founding co-operatives, opening many rural schools and clinics, social security and labor laws that highly favored the poor and working classes. Torrijos also strove to diversify the Panamanian economy and encouraged the establishment of international banks guaranteeing secrecy of operations and protection from investigation. While this encouraged money from South American drug exports, the boom in offshore banking increased capital investment, white-collar employment, and high-rise construction in
Panama City.  

His style of rule, a mix of populism and nationalism, differed from that of previous Panamanian leaders. Torrijos sought continuous proximity to Panama’s middle and lower classes. Until his death in 1982, he flew around the country constantly by helicopter to help rural towns and villages, he sat in on town meetings where citizens voiced complaints and concerns for hours on end, and he visited schools and clinics in the most marginalized areas of the country.

When General Torrijos came to power he had his eye on recovering the Panama Canal, as evidenced by a phrase he was fond of repeating: “I do not wish to enter into history, I wish to enter into the Canal Zone.” And enter he did. The Torrijos-Carter Treaties signed in 1977 abrogated the Hay-Manau-Varilla Act of 1903 and guaranteed that Panama would gain full control of the Canal after 1999.

Torrijos’ audacious foreign policy was not limited to the Canal. While an avowed social democrat, the Panamanian leader showed great sympathy towards the region’s leftist-movements and granted asylum to Latin Americans fleeing the brutal military dictatorships of the southern cone. He maintained a friendship with Cuban leader Fidel Castro and leftist writers such as Gabriel García-Márquez and Graham Green. In his brilliant work on General Torrijos, Graham Green describes him as follows:

*We are too apt to class together the generals of South and Central America. Torrijos was a lone wolf... Torrijos was no communist, but he was a friend and admirer of Tito and he was on good terms with Fidel Castro who kept him supplied with excellent Havana cigars...His (Torrijos) country had became a haven of safety for refugees from*

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Argentina, Nicaragua and El Salvador, and his dream, as I was to learn
in the years that followed, was of a social democratic Central America
which would be no menace to the United States, but completely independent.248

While sympathetic towards leftist movements in the region as a whole, General Torrijos had a particular affinity with El Salvador and with this country’s leftist leaders. Torrijos had studied at the military academy in San Salvador after winning a scholarship at the age of 18 and it was here that he began his military career. His years in El Salvador gave him a first-hand account of the vast socioeconomic disparities in the country and the Salvadoran Military’s tight-grip on political power.249 It is unsurprising then that once in office he demonstrated a close affinity with the Salvadoran opposition. When Napoleon Duarte was forced into exile after the rigged 1972 elections, General Torrijos welcomed him in Panama, as he did other members of Duarte’s opposition movement. From the early 1970s until his death, the Panamanian leader also opened his doors to Salvadoran guerrilla leaders. Ana Guadalupe Martínez recalls that between 1972 and 1982, Panama was a vital strategic location for the Salvadoran opposition and guerrillas. “Unlike in Costa Rica and Honduras where we had to keep our operations more or less covert, in Panama the sympathy and support of General Torrijos allowed us to move around openly.”250

In his proximity to and support of the Salvadoran revolutionaries, Torrijos differed from the Cuban and Sandinista administrations. The General’s relations with the

Salvadoran left were based on political rather than military support. While a revolutionary in his own right, and notwithstanding his friendship with Fidel Castro, Torrijos was by no means a Marxist or socialist. His politics were left of center and his greatest affinity was with socialist democratic regimes. In his dealings with the Salvadoran insurgents it is clear that Torrijos wished to coax them into pursuing a middle-of-the-road political and economic platform that included negotiating with the Salvadoran military. As early as 1978, the Panamanian leader was encouraging key Salvadoran guerrillas to think politically and not militarily and to consider the possibility of negotiating with progressive members of the military. He personally offered to use his contacts in the Salvadoran Armed Forces to help facilitate some kind of arrangement.251

Above all else, General Torrijos was a skilled political pragmatist who understood that compromise was sometimes the only road to survival. To illustrate this point, he was fond of telling a tale about an oak and a palm tree. The oak, he would say, was a strong and powerful tree with deep roots. In turn, the palm tree was modest tree, with a feeble trunk and shallow roots. When a terrible hurricane came, the oak would try to stand its ground firmly, unwavering to the winds, and eventually the wind would tear the tree to shreds. Meanwhile, the modest palm tree had a flexible trunk and would bend down to the wind waiting for the storm to pass. After the storm, the oak was destroyed but the palm tree soon recovered. Torrijos was a palm tree, and he encouraged the Salvadorans to be palm trees as well.252

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252 Joaquín Villalobos told this anecdote to the author during an interview. Carlos Eduardo Rico Mira also narrates it in his testimonial account of the civil war. Villalobos, Joaquín. Interview with author via skype. January 18, 2013; Rico Mira, En Silencio Tenia Que Ser.
It was with this idea in mind that Torrijos machinated his elaborate plan to bring the FMLN and the Social Democrats together in the Panama hotel room during the gathering of the Socialist International in 1981. Here, the three leaders of the FMLN met with prime minister of Sweden Olof Palme, leaders of Chile’s Social Democratic Party such as Anselmo Sule, with Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Perez, and with Elena Flores, a close ally of Spain’s future prime minister and Torrijos’ close personal friend, Felipe González. The Salvadorean explained conditions in their country: the injustices embedded in an oligarchical system that condemned most Salvadorean to poverty; the repression with which the military dictatorship had systematically annihilated efforts for economic reform and political inclusiveness; and why, after years of working to effect change through institutional and peaceful means, hundreds of Salvadorean had finally resorted to armed insurgency as the only viable means for change. In turn, social democratic leaders spoke of the prospects for democratization in El Salvador, about their own political experiences, and of social democratic politics as a “third way” that embraced capitalist production while simultaneously offering protection from the adverse effects of an unbridled market.

The Salvadorean were enticed by what they heard and the seduction appeared to be mutual. Social democrats cracked jokes, asked questions, indulged in personal anecdotes and eventually, before returning to what now must have seemed like mundane official meetings, asked to have their pictures taken with the young guerrillas—strictly as personal mementos, they promised.

As a long day of clandestine lobbying drew to a close, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Joaquín Villalobos, Eduardo Sancho, Elena Flores and General Torrijos flew in one of
President Torrijos’ private jets to his house in the Panamanian beach of Farallón. The five of them spent the night talking informally in the presidential beach house. The conversation ranged from their respective upbringings, to domestic politics, to the geopolitical realities of the Cold War, to the sassy sexual adventures of notorious womanizer General Torrijos. “On this table right here, he told Flores and the Salvadorans, I’ve sat with the leadership of the Nicaraguan Frente Sandinista, with Felipe Gonzalez, with Presidents Jimmy Carter and Carlos Andrés Pérez, and with the best whores Panama has to offer.” After hours of lively conversations, the General retired to bed and Martinez, Villalobos, Sancho and Flores lingered in the hallway before doing the same. “We were overwhelmed by how much we identified with the people and ideas we’d been exposed to throughout the day,” recalls Joaquín Villalobos. “We were young and passionate revolutionaries, but we had just discovered that the social democratic world offered real potential for substantial change.” In a burst of the unbridled enthusiasm that characterizes him to this day, Eduardo Sancho turned to Elena Flores and said: “and couldn’t the FMLN become a member of the socialist international?” Elena was dumbfounded. What Sancho was asking for was absurd. The Socialist International, while contentious, was wholly institutional and no guerrilla organization or armed insurgency had ever been a member. In 1981, nobody, including Flores and Torrijos, could contemplate the possibility that the FMLN would eventually become a legitimate political party, and even less so that it would one day win the Presidency of El Salvador. Notwithstanding the preposterousness of the question,

\[255\] Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 22, 2010
Sancho’s remarks evidenced that the social democrats had won the three Salvadoran guerrillas over. Flores’ ensuing laughter probably reflected both a mixture of endearment with Sancho’s naivety and a sense of accomplishment: three key leaders of El Salvador’s revolutionary organization felt at home with the transnational social democratic movement.

It is perhaps no coincidence that fourteen years later the FMLN factions led by Villalobos and Sancho—the ERP and RN—would split from the FMLN, proclaim their adherence to social democracy and form their own party. But much terrain still had to be covered before that would happen.

The meeting in Panama on El Salvador was an overriding success. The resolution was approved unanimously by the SI, thus helping it recover credibility as a united organization. In the resolution, the Socialist International aimed to counter attempts, particularly in the United States, to make the Salvadoran conflict an East-West matter. The SI condemned all foreign military interference in the country and advocated for a negotiated peace effort in which the organization could play a mediating role.256

Consequently, in the aftermath of the Panama meeting the Socialist International tried to lead negotiations between the FMLN-FDR and the Salvadoran junta, but its efforts failed before they could really take off. The Socialist International had determined that United States’ support would be vital to any peace effort and thus SI leaders wasted no time in lobbying the Reagan Administration. Bernt Carlsson and Carlos Andrés Pérez, the former President of Venezuela and CALCIS representative for South America, traveled to Washington DC after the meeting in Panama to discuss the SI’s role in leading

a negotiated peace solution in El Salvador. At a meeting at the State Department between Carlsson, Pérez, and assistant to the U.S. Secretary of State, John Bushnell, Bushnell questioned how the Socialist International could pretend to lead a negotiation when they were so clearly partial to the FMLN. Furthermore, Bushnell contended that the FMLN was dominated by its radical Marxist wing and that moderate leaders like Guillermo Ungo were merely figureheads lacking any political clout. “The left would fail to use politics to win what it had lost on the battlefield, even if it had the Socialist International on its side,” Bushnell warned.257

Internal documents from the Socialist International corroborate a lack of United States support for a negotiated political solution to the Salvadoran conflict. One such document is a report written in February 1981 to Bernt Carlsson and Willy Brandt by Swedish social democrat, Pierre Schori. Schori had held a series of meetings in Washington and Managua regarding the situation in El Salvador and reports on a meeting he held in D.C. with the main responsible persons for Latin American affairs in the State Department and National Security Council, as well as Congressmen Barner and Bonker and Senator Kennedy’s Foreign Policy Adviser.258 At this meeting, Schori expressed that in Europe there was growing concern over the situation in El Salvador, “not only within the social democratic parties but also in the public opinion at large and governments…and that we wished that no effort be spared to find a political solution to the conflict.” United States officials seemed entirely closed off to this idea, arguing that


258 Pierre Schori was International Secretary of the Swedish Social Democratic Party and assistant to Swedish president Olof Palme in the Socialist International Movement at the time he wrote this memo.
this was “part of a communist strategy to get into power. Once in government positions, the extreme left would get rid of the democratic elements.”

While lack of United States’ support was doubtless an insurmountable obstacle to SI led negotiations, in hindsight it is clear that even if the United States had agreed to stay out of the matter, this diplomatic effort had little chance of success. The Socialist International, while a prestigious international body, was not legitimate or impartial in the eyes of crucial Salvadoran actors that needed to be brought to the negotiation table, most notably the PDC and army. Furthermore, it seems that members of the FDR and FMLN had reservations about the SI serving as intermediary for fear that they would be neutralizing “their main international support, the SI.”

Finally, and most importantly, as the following chapter will discuss in detail, in 1981 the FMLN was itself divided over whether they would even be open to a negotiated solution to the conflict. Important leaders in the organization, most notably FPL leader Cayetano Carpio, were adamantly opposed to negotiating.

It would take several more years and thousands more dead before the Salvadoran warring parties sat down together at a negotiating table. The SI’s effort, however, was significant. It constituted the first international attempt to find a political solution to the


military conflict in El Salvador by mediating talks between the two warring parties. It was at this Panama meeting that the idea of international mediation in the Salvadoran conflict was formalized, and this forced the FMLN to start thinking seriously about negotiations as a real possibility and to consider the perks of being a palm tree.

**Conclusion**

In an interview, CPD leader Ana Guadalupe Martínez argued that the FMLN’s most important supporters were unquestionably Cuba and Nicaragua on the logistical front and Mexico on the political-diplomatic front. But beyond the hemisphere, she conveyed, “the FMLN received its most consequential backing from social democratic nations in Western Europe: Sweden under Olof Palme, Spain under Carlos Andrés Pérez, and France under Francois Mitterrand, in addition to all the support we received from the Socialist International, who worked so closely with our CPD leader Guillermo Ungo.”

The previous chapter uncovered the early history of the FMLN’s relations with Cuba and Nicaragua whose military guidance and support and helped convert the Salvadoran urban guerrillas into a mighty revolutionary force capable of standing up the Salvadoran regime. In turn, this chapter has shed light on the Salvadoran revolutionaries’ early relations with a series of actors, such as Panama, the Socialist International, Western European Democracies, and Mexico who wanted to advance a negotiated peace in the warring Central American country. With this purpose in mind, they strove to moderate the more radical elements of the FMLN’s platforms and rhetoric. The broader significance of actors who pushed for a political solution in El Salvador, like Mexico and the SI, is that they blurred the seemingly dichotomous choice between pro-Washington

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and pro-Havana models. This chapter thus shows how the FMLN grappled with various lefts that were local, regional and global.
CHAPTER 4: A HOUSE DIVIDED

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Abraham Lincoln, 1858

Introduction
In March 1981, Panamanian leader General Omar Torrijos facilitated a meeting between three FMLN leaders and members of the Socialist International (SI). With this encounter began what would become entrenched and open relations between the international community of social democrats and the Salvadoran insurgents. The meeting also led the SI attempt to broker peace negotiations between the Salvadoran warring factions. Relations with European social democrats belonging to the SI and their effort to mediate negotiations to the civil war in El Salvador brought to the fore profound differences within the FMLN leadership over diplomatic strategy. These disparities unleashed a power struggle at the heart of the FMLN that almost tore apart the burgeoning Salvadoran revolutionary organization. The conflict ended tragically in April 1983 with the brutal murder of the FPL’s second-in-command, Mélida Anaya Montes “Ana Maria”, and the apparent suicide of FPL supreme leader, Cayetano Carpio “Marcial.” The following pages uncover the history of this crisis and argue that it sheds light on two decisive facets of the FMLN: the fragile nature of the guerrillas’ alliance and the degrees to which the histories of the FMLN and Salvadoran Civil War were shaped by the diplomacy of Salvadoran revolutionaries. The chapter argues that in understanding the failure of SI attempts to broker peace negotiations one must account for the fact that the Salvadoran Junta does not bare all the responsibility as saboteur. Part of the responsibility for the failure of this initial effort to bring about peace lies with a dogmatic
faction within the FMLN that advanced a “pure” model of revolution and saw compromise as a betrayal.

The second part of the chapter examines divisions within the Salvadoran right surrounding the matter of political and economic reforms. The Chapter’s title “A House Divided” alludes to the reality that both warring factions in El Salvador were themselves highly fractious. Embracing reforms led to contentious internal reactions both for the Salvadoran left and right.

What Kind of Revolutionaries Are We?
Joaquín Villalobos, Ana Guadalupe Martínez and Eduardo Sancho returned from their meetings in Panama confident that in forging an alliance with social democrats they had secured a key diplomatic victory for the FMLN. ERP leader Joaquín Villalobos and RN leader Eduardo Sancho went back to the war front in El Salvador, while Ana Guadalupe Martínez—the ERP’s leader in the Political Diplomatic Commission (CPD)—returned to the CPD’s headquarters in Mexico City. Details of how the meetings in Panama had unfolded soon began to circulate amongst FMLN members. Many guerrilla leaders responded to newfound alliances with alacrity, believing the nexus with SI members would bolster the FMLN’s legitimacy abroad. Undoubtedly, there was also anticipation that monetary support would now come from these newfound sources. Other leaders, however, particularly FPL Commander Salvador Cayetano Carpio, were less celebratory than anxious.

Carpio’s central objection was that Villalobos, Martínez and Sancho had indicated to SI members that the FMLN would be willing to participate in internationally mediated talks and negotiations with the Salvadoran Government and Army. Carpio also took issue
with his comrades allegedly proving very receptive to the social democrats’ political platform.

The FPL leader’s personal history and ideological formation differed from that of other FMLN leaders such as Villalobos, Martínez and Sancho; and as the aftermath of the Panama meeting revealed, these differences became consequential once the Salvadoran Civil War got underway and the revolutionaries ventured into crafting a diplomatic strategy.

Born in 1919 to a poor Salvadoran family in *Santa Tecla*, just a few kilometers outside of San Salvador, Salvador Cayetano Carpio experienced first-hand the injustices and misery that befell the vast majority of Salvadorans. More than any other revolutionary leader, his life was entwined with the histories of oppression and revolutionary fervor in El Salvador. His father, a shoemaker, died soon after Carpio was born leaving him, his sister and mother destitute. The shoemaker’s widow was forced to leave her two children behind to be taken care of by relatives and travel to the capital where she found work as a full-time domestic servant in the houses of San Salvador’ wealthy families.

As a young teenager, Carpio lived through the 1932 peasant uprising led by the fledgling Communist Party and its leader Farabundo Martí. The uprising, known as *La Matanza* (The Killing), left over 30,000 peasants dead at the hands of state forces. This marked the young Carpio deeply. Soon thereafter he abandoned his schooling and joined the Salvadoran labor force, working first as a shoemaker’s apprentice, then as a day laborer cutting cane in the Salvadoran province of Santa Ana, and finally settling down with a definitive trade as a baker.
From a young age, Carpio exhibited a marked commitment to social justice as well as distinct abilities as a social activist and political leader. As a baker, he became a trade union organizer seeking better working conditions for Salvadoran day laborers. His activism and defiance of a military government that outlawed trade unions and repressed opposition movements resulted in him being captured and imprisoned, first in 1946 and then again in 1949. After his second capture he was exiled. Carpio then spent several months in Mexico where met the leader of the Cuban Popular Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Popular de Cuba*), Blas Roca. The Cuban socialist invited Carpio to experience first hand the inner workings of the socialist party in Cuba. After spending time on the island, Carpio returned to El Salvador in 1950 and put his newfound knowledge of underground politics to work. He joined the clandestine Salvadoran Communist Party and rose quickly in its ranks, eventually becoming the Party’s chairman and its secretary general from 1963-1969.\(^{262}\)

While a committed communist and Party member, Carpio became convinced that armed insurgency was the only way to challenge his country’s stalwartly anticommunist army and oligarchy. This brought him into conflict with other more senior party leaders who believed El Salvador needed to undergo a bourgeoisie revolution before a socialist alternative could be pursued. Hoping to promote the advent of a bourgeoisie revolution, which would later lead to a revolution of the proletariat, senior communist party leaders

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\(^{262}\) Detailed and laudatory biographies of Salvador Cayetano Carpio can be found in: Salvador Cayetano Carpio, Mario Payeras, and Jaime Wheelock, *Listen, Compañero: Conversations with Central American Revolutionary Leaders, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua* ([Berkeley, Calif.]: San Francisco, Calif: Center for the Study of the Americas ; Solidarity Publications, 1983); Cayetano Carpio, *Revolución Popular Anti-Imperialista Sin Concesiones* (Bogotá, Colombia: Colectivo Salvador Cayetano Carpio, 1983).
supported elections in El Salvador and wrote off armed insurgency as premature and ill advised. 263

Carpio’s endorsement of armed insurgency became increasingly problematic for his fellow Party members. In 1969, the future FPL leader openly opposed the Salvadoran Communist Party’s decision to back the country’s government in the “Soccer War” against Honduras. Carpio was subsequently expelled from the Party for “militaristic adventurism.” In a 1980 interview, Carpio made his position clear:

Undeterred by his expulsion from the Communist Party, Carpio travelled to North Vietnam intent on studying how a Marxist-Leninist party could organize students, peasants and workers into a political-military movement that could lead a revolution. 264

Carpio’s months in the Southeast Asian nation in the midst of the Vietnam War left a profound imprint on the future Salvadoran revolutionary leader. Particularly revealing for him were the organizational strategies of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the pivotal leadership of Ho Chi Minh, and the Vietcong’s laudable ability to resist the United States’ interventionist efforts. A decade later, when heading his own revolutionary struggle, Carpio found a compelling referent in Vietnam, specifically the historic role of the Vietcong’s supreme leader, Ho Chi Minh. 265

263 The Salvadoran Communist Party was not alone in believing that revolutions came in stages. In fact, communist parties throughout most of Latin America did not endorse armed insurgency in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather, they supported democratic elections as the channels through which a bourgeoisie revolution could take hold. Revolution and socialism would come later, once conditions were ripe for such processes. For the specifics on the opposition of Latin American Communist Parties to armed insurgency See Castañeda, Utopia Unarmed.


265 FMLN commanders would later recall that Carpio looked to Ho Chi Minh as an inspiration and fashioned himself as the future Ho Chi Minh of the Americas. Guardado, Facundo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 30, 2007; Martínez, Ana
Upon concluding his travels in Vietnam, Carpio returned to El Salvador in 1970 and founded a new revolutionary organization: the Popular Forces of Liberation (FPL). Carpio became the supreme leader of the FPL and Mélida Anaya Montes, a woman with a solid reputation as an activist and social organizer who headed the education union, became his second in command.

When the four distinct revolutionary organizations (FPL, ERP, PRTC, RN) and the Communist Party (PC) joined forces and formed the FMLN in 1980, the heads of the respective organizations—Cayetano Carpio (FPL), Shafik Handal (PC), Joaquin Villalobos (ERP), Eduardo Sancho (RN) and Francisco Jovel (PRTC)—made up the FMLN’s highest political and military body: the Revolutionary Directorate (Comandancia General CG). While the Communist Party was included in the FMLN, largely at the behest of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, in the first years of the Salvadoran Civil War its clout within the FMLN fared pale in comparison to that of the insurgent guerrilla organizations.\footnote{Former FMLN leaders assert that the Communist Party was included into the revolutionary coalition because Cuba pushed for its inclusion. Martinez, Ana Guadalupe. \textit{Interview with author}. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 30, 2007; Sancho, Eduardo. \textit{Interview with author}. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 29, 2007.} The PC was the smallest of the groups and had no army or direct experience with warfare. Why Castro pushed for their inclusion is an interesting question. Possibly, the Cuban leaders foresaw that the CP’s international contacts with the Soviet Union and communist camp would come in handy for the FMLN and help legitimate the leftist credentials of the incipient revolutionary organization. In the first years of the Salvadoran conflict, however, the viewpoints of the FPL, RN, ERP and PRTC dominated in the Revolutionary Directorate.
Carpio and Handal belonged to an older generation of revolutionaries than Villalobos, Sancho, and Jovel. The younger revolutionary leaders had not participated in the Communist Party or, for that matter, had much knowledge of Marxist theory when they formed the FMLN. Their revolutionary roots sprang from exposure to liberation theology and the demonstration effect of the Cuban Revolution. These different in the ideological formations of the FMLN’s leaders would seep into their political, military and diplomatic priorities and strategies once the Salvadoran Civil War began.

Throughout the 1970s, the FPL adhered to a theory of a prolonged popular war (Guerra Popular Prolongada- GPP) that largely emulated the Vietnamese experience. This model sustained that the goal of revolution was to establish a government of and for the proletariat. Furthermore, the goals were international: after consolidating in El Salvador in the revolution would spread to neighboring nations. As the name ‘prolonged popular war’ suggest, the conflict was expected to be a long and drawn-out process lasting several years, perhaps even decades, and to entail massive popular participation. To withstand a lengthy war, securing widespread support from social movements and civilian organizations was prioritized. FPL leader Salvador Sánchez Cerén “Leonel González,” succinctly explained this notion of popular support: “Wars are made with men. Weapons are merely an instrument of war. If you don’t have the men you will not have a war, and if those men are not conscious that society needs to be transformed you won’t have a war either.”

For the purpose of creating a mass base, in 1975 the FPL fashioned the Bloque Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Block—BPR) as its non-military wing

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and charged it with coordinating and consolidating the FPL’s social bases of support. By the end of the 1970s, the FPL’s BPR included thousands of workers, peasants, and university students.

The notion of a prolonged popular war differed from the theory of insurrection, advanced primarily by the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People’s Revolutionary Army—ERP). Insurrectionary theory sustained that key military victories by a guerrilla army would spearhead a massive rebellion and overthrow the oligarchy and army relatively quickly. The ERP’s insurrectionary theory emanated from the Cuban Revolution of 1959. It assumed that popular support would be a natural extension of a military victory, and thus, building a top-notch guerrilla army took precedence over constructing a social base. More importantly that their differing stances on popular support, however, was that where adherents of GPP wanted to establish a revolution of the proletariat, insurrectionists had a less defined objective and were mainly concerned with overthrowing the military dictatorship. This had important implications for the diplomatic strategy of both groups. While insurrectionists embraced alliances with key progressive members of the ruling class, including businessmen and military personnel, adherents of GPP found these coalitions to be anathema to a popular revolution of workers and peasants.²⁶⁸

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²⁶⁸ The FMLN recognized these divergent strategies during the war, as is illustrated by a speech on the history and growth of the FMLN, given by Eduardo Sancho on December 24, 1986. FPL leader Salvador Sánchez Cerén in his autobiography also discusses them. The analysis of FMLN guerilla strategies provided by scholars Jose Angel Moroni Bracamonte and David E. Spencer also attests to the prevalence of these contrasting strategies by different insurgent groups during the 1970s. Fermán Cienfuegos, *Veredas de Audacia*, 1. ed (San Salvador, El Salvador: Arcoiris, 1993); Cerén, *Con sueños se escribe la vida*; Moroni Bracamonte and Spencer, *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts*. 
When in October 1980 after lengthy discussions in Cuba the Salvadoran guerrilla leaders decided to come together and form the FMLN, they tacitly agreed to set their ideological differences aside—if only for a fleeting moment—and undertake a joint wide-scale military operation, which they optimistically called the “final offensive.” Launched in January 1981, the offensive failed to overthrow the Salvadoran military and oligarchy, but it succeeded at making the FMLN a forceful guerrilla movement and a credible contender for power. While the ideological and strategic differences of the individual groups within the FMLN had not posed a problem during the 1970s, as insurrectionists and GPP adherents operated independently of each other, they became significant once the guerrilla organizations had to design a communal strategy and act as a joint organization.

The FMLN’s alliance with the Socialist International brought the implications of their differences to the fore.

A few weeks after Villalobos, Martinez and Sancho met with Torrijos and members of the Socialist International in Panama, Cayetano Carpio called for a summit of the FMLN’s Comandancia General. Villalobos and Sancho, who attended this gathering as the heads of the ERP and RN respectively, remember the meeting as rife with tension. A visibly distraught Carpio sat the FMLN leaders down and according to Villalobos opened the meeting by saying: “we are here to determine who is a real revolutionary and true Marxist-Leninist and who is merely a petit-bourgeois.” Then, according to both Sancho and Villalobos, Carpio went around the room and asked individual FMLN leaders to confirm their belief in Marxism and a revolution of the

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269 Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 22, 2010
proletariat. Adding insult to Carpio’s injury, in Panama Eduardo Sancho had asked Spanish social democrat, Elena Flores, if the FMLN might be able to join the SI. Sancho’s naïve probe, according to him, was said largely in jest and as a means to indicate his sympathy for the social democrats and their platform. For Carpio, however—who had found out about the incident—the RN leader’s remarks betrayed a genuine revolutionary organization and he asked Sancho to publicly apologize for his transgression.

Years later, Villalobos and Sancho would remember this meeting convened by Carpio and suggest that it evidenced the FPL leader’s dogmatic and authoritarian personality. For Sancho, the incident reflected Carpio’s hegemonic streak. Sancho said he and Villalobos had been made to feel “like two recalcitrant schoolboys getting openly scolded in front of their classmates.” For Villalobos, who judges that “Marcial was always paranoid that people were turning against him and trying to pull one over his head,” the event reflected Carpio’s ideological rigidity and paranoia: “the whole meeting was absurd. It was like we were in mass being forced to profess our faith in his holiness the only true God, Karl Marx.” Villalobos, who is not a religious man, has a tendency to compare rigid political ideologues to religious extremists.

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271 Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 22, 2010
273 During most, if not all, of my interviews with the ex ERP leader, Villalobos referred to religious and political zealousness as one and the same. He is fond of saying that “pragmatism is the intelligent defense of ideals.” In an article published in 2008 in the Mexican political magazine Nexos, Villalobos compares Fidel Castro to Pope John Paul II and posits that while Fidel Castro makes a religion out of politics the Pope makes politics out of a religion. Villalobos, “El Aterrizaje Cubano,” Nexos, November 1, 2008.
Villalobos and Sancho may have staunchly disagreed with Carpio’s actions, which belittled and humiliated them in front of their comrades. However, the fact the two young guerrilleros and all the other FMLN leaders present at this meeting heeded to Carpio’s request and professed their allegiance to Marxism and a revolution of the proletariat elucidates the power dynamics within the FMLN’s Revolutionary Directorate in 1981.

When the FMLN formed in October 1980, FMLN commanders had agreed upon commensurate leadership and parity between all five organizations as a precondition for unity. However, both the size of the FPL and the age and experience of its leaders distinguished this group from the four other organizations. At the time of the meeting with Torrijos and the SI in Panama, the FPL was the largest and most powerful urban guerrilla movement of El Salvador. Furthermore, it’s leaders, Cayetano Carpio “Marcial”, then 61, and his second-in-command, Mélida Anaya Montes “Ana María,” then 51, were by far the oldest and most experienced of the revolutionary leaders—most of whom were in their late 20s or early 30s. The FPL’s size and the trajectory of its leaders initially made Carpio the apple of Fidel Castro’s eye; a reality that doubtless helped fuel the FPL leader’s aspirations to preside over the entire FMLN.274

While Villalobos, Sancho and Jovel were open to exploring different revolutionary strategies and alliances, Carpio was a stalwart defender of a particular revolutionary model that he aspired to lead.

Jovel, Sancho and Villalobos would later recall how troubling they found Carpio’s dogmatism and authoritarianism, referring to him as “Pol Potian” and “Ho Chi Minh-like” to stress his intransigence when it came down to making communal decisions at the CG.\(^{275}\) For PRTC leader Francisco Jovel: “Carpio was a very ideological man, influenced by Stalin and Mao Zedong. He had undergone training in China and the Soviet Union and really endorsed a personality cult mindset.”\(^{276}\) Other FMLN leaders shared these sentiments recalling Carpio’s aspiration to advance the dominance of the FPL and be the leader amongst leaders of the Salvadoran Revolution.\(^{277}\) This judgment is not particular to the leaders of rival organizations within the FMLN, fellow FPL leaders who worked in closer proximity to Carpio share it.

In his memoir, Salvador Samayoa, the FPL’s representative in the Political Diplomatic Commission (CPD), posits that Carpio was the most rigid leader of the FMLN.\(^{278}\) FPL guerrilla commander, Facundo Guardado, described him as an ideological and authoritarian man who was set on becoming the sole leader of the FMLN and to having the FPL dominate within the revolutionary organization. Guardado also describes Carpio as a man riddled with mistrust and paranoia: “He had a Stalinist stance. He was always suspicious of the other FMLN organizations and thought the FDR was trying to trick him and sneak strategies past him. He was very afraid of decisions getting out of his


\(^{276}\) Jovel, Francisco. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 16, 2010


\(^{278}\) Samayoa, El Salvador, 36.
hands.”  

In his autobiography, Salvador Sáchez Cerén, the commander who took charge of the FPL in 1983 after the deaths of Carpio and Anaya Montes, puts forth a candid and contrite assessment of how other FPL leaders also shared Carpio’s priorities in the first few months of the Salvadoran Civil War:

*The FPL assumed that we were the political force that best represented the interests of the working class and peasants, and in consequence, we were called to be the leading party in the revolutionary process. This hegemonic line of thought was prevalent in the FPL...Today we can say that there was an important inclination towards dogmatism, and in that initial phase that was dominated by a brutal and class based struggle, we did not know how to creatively apply our principles to reality, thus resulting in our party-centric thoughts and actions. It was a mistake to pretend that other organizations would assume the ideology and strategies of the FPL, we know that today.*

Carpio’s rigid ideological commitments were also apparent to those outside of the FMLN. Mario Renato Menéndez, a Mexican reporter and founder of the periodical *Por Esto*, had strong ties to the FPL. In a published interview he sustained with Carpio, Menéndez called the FPL leader “the Ho Chi Minh of the Americas,” a title that did not sit well with other FMLN leaders who counted on commensurate leadership. After Carpio committed suicide in April 1983, the British periodical *The Guardian* described the FPL as “the toughest and most ideologically intransigent of the five groups forming

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280 Cerén, *Con sueños se escribe la vida*, 189.
the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.” In a similar vein, a Sri Lankan diplomat and scholar who studied the ideology of the FMLN described Carpio and the FPL as follows:

_In the post-1968 period, it is hard to identify any one personality (outside of the Vietnamese Communist leaders) who epitomized the combination of hard ideologies and radical philosophies better than Salvador Cayetano Carpio—and any political organization that did so better that the one he founded, the FPL (Popular Liberation Forces, with its logo of twin submachine guns in clenched fists)._283

Carpio would ultimately pay the heaviest price for his authoritarianism and dogmatism. They compromised his privileged relation with Cuba, earned him the enmity of the other FMLN commanders, and eventually lead to his suicide.

__The Wischnewski Crisis__

While Carpio’s anger over the Panama meeting was momentarily quenched after FMLN commanders confirmed their Marxist credentials, the heart of the matter—the FMLN’s stance towards negotiations—remained the source of divisiveness and conflict for the Revolutionary Directorate.

After the “final offensive,” FMLN leaders were forced to reevaluate their political, military and diplomatic strategies. They now had to transform from disparate groups of urban guerrillas and a clandestine political party into a unified revolutionary movement capable of challenging the state and army on a national and international front.

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283 Dayan Jayatilleka, _The Fall of Global Socialism: A Counter-Narrative From the South_ (Palgrave Pivot, 2014), 71.
Heeding to the advice of various international allies, including Fidel Castro, Omar Torrijos, Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda, and the Sandinista leadership, many FMLN commanders endorsed making negotiations part of their diplomatic and political strategy.

Initially, the FMLN’s openness to negotiate with the Salvadoran Army and government was exclusively intended to win support abroad. As Villalobos and Martínez explained, when they met with Torrijos and SI members in Panama they were not genuinely considering negotiating with the Salvadoran government, nor where they interested in pursuing a social democratic platform.\(^\text{284}\) However, the revolutionaries rightfully perceived that nominal agreement to international mediation and to finding a political solution to the conflict was crucial for the FMLN to gain the SI’s support. After all, the international community of social democrats was not about to back a movement whose sole and unwavering objective was a Marxist-Leninist revolution of the proletariat. And so, the Salvadoran revolutionary leaders in Panama catered to their audience and conveyed that mediated negotiations was something they were open to studying.\(^\text{285}\) As Martínez candidly put it:

\(\text{With Cuba we had genuine revolutionary solidarity and compatible goals, so we were brothers. With the others (Western European governments) what we had was a necessary alliance through which we aimed to favor our revolutionary victory. We did not want to be}\)


reformists like the governments whose support we sought out. We wanted to be revolutionaries.  

The majority of the FMLN’s leaders shared the pragmatism Martínez, Villalobos and Sancho’s had exhibited in Panama. Convinced that agreeing to a potential political solution was a *sine qua non* to build bridges with Western governments and win over international public opinion, they too endorsed negotiations. Carpio and those closest to him in the FPL, however, continued to vehemently oppose this strategy.  

As Sánchez Cerén explains: “The FPL saw dialogue and negotiations as a step backwards in the revolutionary process as it could divert attention from the main objective, which was none other than armed confrontation.” It would seem Torrijos chose his guests wisely when he invited leaders of the RN and ERP—rather than the FPL—to meet with SI representatives.  

The schism at the heart of the FMLN over diplomatic strategy took on increasing salience in the weeks after the Panama meeting as the Socialist international went forward with its efforts to broker talks between the revolutionaries and Salvadoran government and army.  

In the first days of April 1981, the President of the Socialist International, Willy Brandt, asked then Secretary General of the West German Socialist Party and SI member, Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski, to visit different Latin American leaders and lobby for support to an SI-led negotiation in El Salvador. Wischnewski seemed like an ideal man.

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288 Cerén, *Con sueños se escribe la vida*, 189.
for the job, having served successive West German governments as a high-level negotiator in delicate overseas missions. A few years earlier, Wischnewski had successfully negotiated the release of 90 hostages held on board a Lufthansa flight by Arab sympathizers of the West German Red Army faction: the Baader-Meinhoff group.289

Wischnewski accepted the mission in El Salvador and traveled to meet with various Latin American heads of state and get their support. The West German troubleshooter spoke with Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo, Panamanian General Omar Torrijos, Mexican President José López Portillo, Venezuelan leader Luis Herrera Campins, and Cuban leader Fidel Castro. He then traveled to meet with the head of the Salvadoran junta, Napoleón Duarte, and share the SI’s proposal for an internationally mediated negotiation.290

It is generally believed that Duarte agreed to study the proposal with fellow junta members and after a few days informed Wischnewski that the Salvadoran junta and United States would not back the SI’s proposal lest the FMLN lay down its arms; something that the revolutionaries had explicitly said they would not do.291 Foreign diplomats and historians have largely interpreted this as reflecting the Salvadoran junta’s utter refusal to consider a political solution to the conflict. While this may well have been the case for some junta members, and doubtless for the Reagan Administration in the United States, Wischnewski’s Salvadoran mission went awry on account of more

290 Peñate, El Salvador del Conflicto Armado a la Negociación, 45. P.45
291 Ibid.
complex reasons, which were directly linked to the internal struggle unfolding at the heart of the FMLN.

A few days before Wischnewski met with Duarte, a group of Salvadoran businessmen enjoyed their lunch at Nicaragua’s renowned steakhouse “Los Ranchos.” A few tables down, a group of FMLN leaders also relished the chance to enjoy some of Nicaragua’s finest steaks. The juxtaposition of contrasting groups eating peacefully in such close proximity at a busy restaurant was characteristic of Nicaragua in the first few years of the Sandinista Revolution. This conviviality would come to a halt by the end of 1981 as the war between the Sandinista government and the counterrevolutionary *contras* polarized and terrorized Nicaraguan society. But in April 1981, the dream of a peaceful revolutionary Nicaragua was still tenable and Salvadoran businessmen and guerrilla leaders could simultaneously enjoy their meals and the jovial atmosphere at “Los Ranchos.”

After finishing their lunch, the FMLN members walked out of the restaurant and left a folder behind. A waiter took the folder and brought it over to the businessmen. No tip would have sufficed to reward the Nicaraguan waiter for the service he had just done the conservative businessmen. Inside the folder they found a lengthy internal FMLN document with a draft of the Socialist International’s proposal for an internationally mediated negotiation in El Salvador. The outline of the plan expressed that amongst those supporting the SI’s proposal were renowned international figures such as Pope John Paul II, the presidents of Mexico and Venezuela, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and Fidel Castro. The document also included a more pernicious statement that would seal the fate of the Socialist International’s peace efforts. It was a statement by FMLN
leaders expressing that the Salvadoran revolutionary organization was not genuinely considering negotiations, but rather, that they were merely pretending to be open to a political resolution in order to boast their international credentials and gain credibility and support with foreign actors.

The businessmen, who now unwittingly found themselves in possession of such a charged document, flew back to El Salvador and handed the folder over to Duarte’s Foreign Minister, Fidel Chávez Mena. Chávez Mena rushed to share its contents with the Junta leader, Napoleón Duarte. The two Salvadoran public servants agreed to keep the matter a closed secret between them. While it may have served the Junta well to publicize that the FMLN by its own acknowledgment had no real intention of negotiating, the endorsement of the SI’s proposal by so many important figures did not serve the Duarte administration well. As Chavez Mena recalls: “We saw the SI’s proposal as a very dangerous and damning venture. It had strong Latin American and European backing but no one had consulted us or the United States.” The document in effect validated the FMLN as a legitimate contender for Salvadoran power. Certainly not something the leader of the Salvadoran Junta and the Foreign Minister wanted to publicize.

A few days after they received the document, Wischnewski, who was unaware of the documents existence, traveled to El Salvador to meet with Duarte and Chávez-Mena. The Salvadoran officials let him talk. Chávez Mena recalls: “We listened to him attentively and in silence as he carefully outlined the Socialist International’s proposal (which we already knew about) and tried to persuade us of the importance of working together with the FMLN towards a political solution. When he was done talking, I opened

up the folder and read the FMLN’s internal document to him in its entirety.” Wischnewski was stunned and “shaken to his core.” He genuinely denied knowing about the FMLN’s position on negotiations as stated in the document, and he asked Duarte and Chávez Mena to give him a week to investigate what this was all about.

Feeling betrayed and humiliated by the FMLN, the German traveled to Havana to meet with Cuban leaders. From the outset, Fidel Castro and members of his administration working closely with the Salvadoran insurgents advocated that the FMLN ought to convey that it was open to negotiations. Joaquín Villalobos recounts how in early 1981, the head of Cuba’s America’s Department, Manuel Piñeiro, invited him for a private gathering at a protocol house outside of Havana. Here, Villalobos was introduced to Jaime Bateman, the leader of Colombia’s M-19 revolutionary movement. Bateman, who was then starting the process of negotiations with the Colombian government, discussed the M-19’s rapport with the Colombian administration at length and pointed out how this was benefitting the revolutionary movement. In turn, Piñeiro emphasized that Latin American revolutionary movements were now operating under a

293 Former Salvadorean Foreign Minister Fidel Chávez Mena conveyed the details of this to the author. This episode is also shared, albeit in much less detail, by former President Napoleón Duarte in his autobiography. Chávez Mena, Fidel. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 12, 2010. Duarte, Duarte, 168–70.

294 Villalobos and Sancho shared this with the author. In his autobiography, Amarres Perros, Jorge Castañeda Gutman, who, as assistant to his father, Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda, dealt extensively with the FMLN in the first years of the Salvadoran Civil War, goes so far as to argue that the FMLN’s endorsement of negotiations was a Cuban imposition on the FMLN leadership. For Castañeda, the endorsement of negotiations was a “Cuban dikta.” While this exaggerated assessment of Cuba’s coercion of Salvadoran insurgent obfuscates the real and autonomous support of FMLN leaders for endorsing negotiations, and is a view not sustained by testimonies of the organization’s leaders, it does reflect Cuba’s support for an FMLN diplomatic strategy that included negotiations. Villalobos, Joaquín. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: June 26, 2008. Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author, 2010. , Loc.4222 of 13460 in Kindle Edition.

295 For a history of Manuel Piñeiro and how central he was to the Cuban-FMLN link see Insurgent Diplomacy, Chapter 2.
new paradigm in which international relations and ideological flexibility were pivotal. For Villalobos there is little doubt that Piñeiro and Castro planned this meeting carefully to get the ERP leader fully on board with endorsing negotiations. “The Cubans never did anything by accident”. The ERP and M-19 leader subsequently met on a couple of occasions, always in the company of Piñeiro.296

For Cuban advisors, as for many FMLN leaders, support for negotiations was initially strategic: including negotiations in their platform would open doors for the Salvadoran insurgents that would remain shut if the revolutionaries revealed that their only aim was an all-out military victory and a socialist revolution. Villalobos affirms: “Fidel Castro knew full well that the FMLN was not intending to negotiate at this time, and he wouldn’t have wanted us to do so, but he understood the importance of including negotiations as part of our platform and he was one of the main advocates of our using this as a diplomatic strategy.”297

When Wischnewski reported to Castro on his meeting with Duarte the Cuban leader was incensed by a situation that could become a diplomatic crisis and isolate the FMLN. He was also dumbfounded over the guerrillas’ brazen carelessness with such a crucial document and he complained that these revolutionaries had turned into bureaucrats with all their paperwork!298

298 In his autobiography, José Napoleón Duarte also recounts the Wischnewski crisis and conveys that FDR leader Rubén Zamora signed the captured guerrilla document and that it “explained that the call for negotiations was a tactic the guerrillas could use against the government. The document talked about all the intermediaries whom they planned to use, including the Pope.” Duarte recalls that Wischnewski “looked deflated after he read this cynical document” and the took it to Fidel Castro to verify it’s authenticity. Fidel Castro confirmed that it came from the guerrillas and complained that they had turned into bureaucrats with all their paperwork. Duarte, Duarte, 169–70.
For many FMLN leaders, there is little doubt that this document was intentionally leaked to sabotage the Socialist International’s efforts and that the man responsible for doing so was none other than Cayetano Carpio. Their views seem well founded. Carpio and FPL leaders close to him were fervently against including negotiations as part of their platform. Regardless of whether the FMLN endorsed negotiations in good faith or not, for Carpio it represented a betrayal of revolutionary principles. The reality that the rest of the FMLN leadership and a distinguished group of international leaders were endorsing the SI’s effort must have been deeply unsettling for the dogmatic and authoritarian Carpio. That the group of FMLN leaders at “Los Ranchos”—men with over a decade of experience in clandestine operations and secrecy—could have been so careless as to leave a critical document of this magnitude behind is suspicious, to say the least. Even if their actions could be attributed to genuine human error it would still not explain the waiter’s very deliberate actions in taking the folder over to men who clearly had a vested interest in sharing this message with the Salvadoran Junta leader. Rather than this all being an improbable series of unfortunate coincidences, it is much more likely that the FPL leader deliberately orchestrated this operation to highjack negotiation efforts.

After meeting with Wischnewski, Castro sent a representative to Mexico City to talk to the CPD leadership. The reprimanded FMLN diplomats in Mexico apologized to Wischnewski and the majority of them truthfully denied even knowing about the

299 CPL leader, Salvador Samayoa, also designates Carpio as the culprit of the leak. Samayoa, it should be noted, was a member of the FPL faction of the FMLN like Carpio. In separate interviews with the author, both Eduardo Sancho and Joaquin Villalobos claimed that Carpio leaked the document. Samayoa, El Salvador, 36–37. Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 29, 2007; Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: June 26, 2008.

300 Ibid.
polemic document in question. Wischnewski was disheartened, however, having lost trust in the Salvadoran revolutionaries’ good faith, and Duarte now had an unobjectionable excuse to refuse the SI’s proposal. Although the SI’s efforts to advance international mediation continued, the damage had been done and this particular initiative failed. Carpio had achieved his objective.

What would have happened had Carpio not sabotaged the SI’s efforts will never be know. It’s unlikely that the Salvadoran Junta or the FMLN would have been willing to sit down together in 1981 and negotiate a political resolution to the conflict. Both the Salvadoran Army and the FMLN were deeply mistrustful of one another and each group was internally divided over the crucial matter of negotiations. Most importantly, both the Army and FMLN—and their main international supporters, the United States and Cuba, respectively—still believed that an all out military victory was possible. Neither side would negotiate and compromise if they felt an absolute victory was near. The Wischnewski crisis, however, was a real diplomatic blow for the FMLN, and it aggravated the internal crisis at the heart of the revolutionary organization.

As FMLN diplomats deepened their relations with western governments in the aftermath of the Wischnewski crisis, Carpio’s opposition to negotiations became increasingly problematic. PRTC leader Francisco Jovel recalls how this played out at a meeting he and RN leader, Eduardo Sancho, sustained with Mexican Foreign Minister, Jorge Castañeda, in the lead up to the Franco-Mexican Declaration of 28 August, 1981:

*Castañeda wanted to be sure that we backed a possible political solution to the conflict. We tried to give him as many guarantees as we could but we also couldn’t hide the fact that there was very real
Carpio’s opposition to negotiations came to pose enough of a problem that FMLN leaders in favor of endorsing negotiations devised a seven-point proposal that they called “the green book.” Carpio was the only member of the Revolutionary Directorate that refused to endorse it. Cognizant of Cuba’s position on this matter and counting on Havana’s clout within the FMLN, the authors of the green book turned to the island for support.

A decisive meeting followed in Havana where the FMLN leadership sat across the table from its Cuban and Nicaraguan counterparts to discuss the platform. According to an FMLN leader and member of the Revolutionary Directorate who has asked to remain anonymous, Fidel Castro picked up the proposal which Carpio had refused to sign and, one by one, read over the seven points asking Carpio to voice any objections to each of the arguments as he finished reading them. Sensing his isolation, and the evident endorsement of the Cuba leader for the proposal, Carpio shied away from objecting and was, in essence, coerced and pressured by Castro into signing the document. For a man such as Carpio, who prided himself on being the revolution’s supreme leader and insisted on being treated accordingly, this event provoked his outmost humiliation. Not only had it become evident that the rest of the FMLN leadership disagreed with him, but he had been pressured by Cuba—at the FMLN’s request—to endorse something that violated his principles. The FMLN leader who shared this story with the author recalls that, when

Carpio left the room abruptly after signing the document, “I thought he was going to commit suicide.” Prophetic words.

The FPL Commander’s endorsement of the green book gave other FMLN leaders peace of mind and allowed insurgent diplomats to go forward building bridges with western actors. But although Carpio had signed the green book and, in theory, endorsed the tactic of negotiations, his ensuing opposition continued to manifest.

The FPL’s supreme leader practically withdrew from the Revolutionary Directorate. He stopped attending meetings and sent his second in command, Mélida Anaya Montes and later Salvador Sánchez Cerén in his place. According to Francisco Jovel, neither Anaya Montes nor Cerén “could make any important decisions because they did not lead the FPL.” And so, the Directorate came to a virtual standstill, unable to make concrete plans regarding military and diplomatic strategies.

For Sánchez Cerén it was palpable that his appointment as Carpio’s representative in the Revolutionary Directorate was not well received by the other FMLN leaders:

The decision caused reservations in the FMLN and its Revolutionary directorate, as other organizations interpreted it as a deliberate attempt by the FPL to weaken its participation in the FMLN in order to grow stronger as a party, as the FPL, and jeopardize the FMLN’s unity.

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305 Cerén, Con sueños se escribe la vida, 191.
RN leader Eduardo Sancho, PRTC leader Francisco Jovel, and ERP leader Joaquín Villalobos confirm that these were in fact their impression. They perceived that Carpio aimed to break from the FMLN and promote the hegemony of the FPL. 306

In addition to the difficulties faced by the FMLN’s ruling body in light of Carpio’s sabotage, the FPL also began to experience internal schisms as more and more of its members digressed from their leader. As Sánchez Cerén noted, the majority of FPL leaders had a change of heart and came to believe that the likelihood of revolutionary success would increase if the five organizations remained united. Furthermore, FPL commanders came to see the advantages of endorsing negotiations and engaging with international actors of different political stripes. For an organization commanded by a highly dogmatic and authoritarian figure, the widespread divergence from the leader’s policy preferences produced a tense and uncertain climate.

If the FPL was in fact as dogmatic and hierarchical as Salvadoran revolutionaries and scholars claim, why so many FPL members came to disagree with their leader is an important question. Sánchez Cerén lays much of the blame on the influence of the Vietnamese Revolution. From 1980 onwards, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) became a staunch—and covert—FMLN supporter. In addition to supplying the FMLN with vast amounts of weapons—most of which were manufactured in the United States and captured from either the U.S. Army or the South Vietnamese Government—the SRVN opened its doors to FMLN members throughout the duration of the Salvadoran Civil War and provided invaluable military guidance and diplomatic and political

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advice. FPL leaders Sánchez Cerén and Facundo Guardado convey that after the formation of the FMLN, the vast majority of the FPL’s leaders took courses in Vietnam and received invaluable training from their Vietnamese comrades. Guardado emphasizes the importance of learning the tactics of fighting a war of guerrillas while Cerén judges that the experience “opened us up to a new vision and mentality.” Cerén makes specific reference to how Vietnamese influence coaxed individual FPL members to endorse negotiations:

We got to know their history: of how the Vietnamese people had managed to defeat imperialism, with a comprehensive strategy that endorsed armed struggle and negotiation. The simultaneous tactic of military struggle and diplomatic understanding pursued by Vietnamese leaders in their struggle revealed a new perspective for the Central Committee and the Political Commission of the FPL, which now turned on the hegemonic and sectarian position that closed off the possibility of dialogue and negotiation. Marcial wrote this off as the FPL devolving into a bourgeoisie organization.


309 Ibid.
The FPL’s second in command, Mélida Anaya Montes, found her intellectual exchanges with Vietnamese leaders so meaningful as to publish a book in 1982, “Vietnamese Experiences in their War of Liberation,” based on conversations, interviews and seminars she had undertaken with Vietnamese leaders. In her book’s dedication, Anaya Montes refers to her Vietnamese comrades as “heroic and legendary brothers,” and she argues that their experiences and theoretical knowledge are:

“an invaluable contribution to the world.” For El Salvador in particular, Vietnam is “a mirror of our own reality, the importance of the aggression by Yankee imperialism, the behavior of local puppets, the suffering and heroism of its people in their efforts to construct a motherland that is free from exploitation and misery and practices the highest human values....”

Anaya Montes was unable to finish and publish her second book on Vietnam’s revolutionary experience, which she started immediately after the first. Less than a year after publishing “Vietnamese Experiences in their War of Liberation,” she was the victim of the internal power struggle at the heart of the FPL and "during the early hours of the morning masked men burst into the house in Managua where she was staying on what

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310 Mélida Anaya Montes’ nom de guerre was “Ana María,” and it’s the name with which she chose to author her book. She dedicates the book to the FMLN, her comrades of the Guatemalan URNG, and her comrades from the National Directorate for Unity (Dirección Nacional para la Unidad: DNU) in Honduras. Montes hoped that learning Vietnam’s experience would help these groups liberate their countries from US imperialism and authoritarian and exclusionary political orders. I should note that my copy of this text (a bound photocopied replication covered in withering cardboard and plastic) was generously passed down from Jorge Castañeda Gutman. It is a copy that he himself received during the 1980s, when as advisor to his father, Foreign Minister Castañeda, he dealt extensively with the FMLN. Comandante Ana María, Experiencias Vietnamitas En Su Guerra de Liberación, Ediciones Enero 32 (1982, n.d.).
was officially described as "an international mission", stabbed her 80 times, broke her arm, and slit her throat."

Vietnamese leaders also established deep relations with other FMLN organizations. However, in recounting the importance of Vietnam, members of the RN and ERP focus less on endorsing negotiations and more on the strategic military knowledge their Southeast Asian comrades shared. RN and ERP leaders had endorsed negotiations and unity from the outset, so the Vietnamese were not about to waste time preaching to the choir. They therefore prioritized other types of instruction. Sancho recalls the importance of courses RN combatants received in Vietnam on specific military strategies. The methods employed by the popular militias of the RN’s popular groups, for example, were directly imported from a strategy used by the Vietcong to defend civilian towns against attacks by the South Vietnamese and United States’ armies. ERP Commander Claudio Armijo explains that the tactic used by the ERP’s “special troops” (elite units of combatants) was imported straight from the Vietcong. The Vietnamese elaborated this method by observing how tigers attack their prey through excruciatingly slow movements that go practically undetected by the human eye. For these operations, combatants were practically naked, aside from their underwear, and camouflaged with paint, branches and leaves. This approach was used by the ERP in their highly successful 1981 attack on the Ilopango Military Air Base. Its seemingly bulletproof efficiency led the RN, FPL and PRTC to also adopt it.

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311 Rettie, “Guerrilla Leader’s Suicide.”
313 In, Masters of War, Clara Nieto observes that the tactic used in Ilopango seemed identical to a strategy used by the North Vietnamese, however, she does not seem to be aware of the direct relations between these two movements. Armijo, Claudio. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: February 1, 2007. Nieto and Zinn, Masters of War, 372.
Internal FMLN documents support the testimonies of FMLN leaders regarding Vietnam’s importance. In an ERP document from an FMLN combatant who had been to Vietnam, the guerrilla details a military strategy used by the Vietnamese and advocates that it be adopted by the entire organization.\footnote{Letter from “Goyo” to undisclosed recipient. ERP private archive. January 6, 1982. San Salvador, El Salvador. January 6, 1982. Document D1005-04-52.} Furthermore, the FMLN’s relations with their Southeast Asian comrades continued as the Salvadoran Civil War progressed. In 1986, ERP Commander Ana Guadalupe Martínez reported to Joaquín Villalobos and ERP Commander “Rodrigo”\footnote{“Rodrigo” was one of Joaquin’s closest collaborators and the man in charge of military logistics with Cuba.} that she, Claudio Armijo, and Communist Party leader Shafik Handal would travel from the Soviet Union to Vietnam where they would spend the last two weeks of March. Regarding their visit to Vietnam, she writes:

\emph{We have asked to learn about their experience consolidating the “special zone” in the capital and its surrounding areas, their anti-aerial war, the formation of their Party and the popular front, their negotiations with the Yankees, and to talk with some technical heads of the revolutionary army.}\footnote{Letter from Ana Guadalupe Martínez to Joaquín Villalobos and Jorge González (“Rodrigo”). ERP private archive. March 12, 1986. Document M1002-03-15.}

Relations with the Vietnamese swayed FPL members towards endorsing negotiations and highlighted the importance of unity within the FMLN as a whole. The FPL-Vietnam connection thus inadvertently helped to isolate Carpio from his own organization. The Vietnamese, which had so inspired and shaped Carpio in his youth, had inadvertently helped to turn his colleagues against him. A more decisive— or at least
direct and deliberate— influence on these critical matters emanated closer to home than Indochina, from the FMLN’s mot important ally: Cuba.

Fidel Castro had been a staunch endorser of Salvadoran revolutionary unity since the end of the 1970s. In fact, he had conditioned supplying the FMLN with weapons on the unity of the five disparate organizations.\(^{317}\) Carpio’s efforts to sabotage the Revolutionary Directorate by ceasing to attend their meetings and sending subordinates in his place did not go unnoticed by the Cubans.

When Carpio’s withdrawal from the Revolutionary Directorate put he the FMLN’s highest body in crisis, other FMLN leaders turned to the Cubans for support. They asked if the FMLN’s General Command might be able to hold a series of meetings in Havana, where it was easier to isolate themselves from the daily hassles of war and converse. The Cubans, always eager to be on top of FMLN developments, gladly agreed. After the tension-riddled-gathering, which lasted about four days, Castro arranged for FMLN members to have an informal R&R gathering in one of the protocol houses outside Havana. At this retreat, Fidel would tell Carpio, in front of his comrades: “Carpio, please, reflect, the unification of the left cannot occur under the same terms as it did at the end of the 19\(^{th}\) and beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) centuries. Latin America now faces a completely unprecedented context.”\(^{318}\) “Fidel is a very passionate man when he speaks”, recalls Francisco Jovel, “and so it seemed almost as though Fidel was scolding Carpio in front of all of us.”\(^{319}\)

\(^{317}\) See Insurgent Diplomacy, Chapter 2.
\(^{319}\) Jovel, Francisco. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 16, 2010
In turn, Eduardo Sancho remembers how, to persuade Carpio to embrace a broad range of international alliances, Manuel Piñeiro would tell them: “be pragmatic in how you present yourselves to international actors,” and advice them that: “it isn’t always wise to say you’re socialists: why would you declare that you are socialists if you don’t have to?”

As these anecdotes reflect, the Cuban’s were not dogmatic but practical and they sought to encourage this in the FMLN. Consequently, Cuba was less interested in a die-hard socialist Marxist movement than in an ideologically flexible revolutionary movement capable of coming to power. In this, Nicaragua was doubtless a constant referent.

Carpio’s dogmatism eventually got the best of the Cubans, who had originally favored him over other FMLN leaders. Castro started to build a broader relation with the FPL’s second in Command, Mélida Anaya Montes, and her preferences eventually contrasted with Carpio’s. “Mélida came to favor a leadership based on consent whereas Carpio thought: either I’m the leader or no one is.” Furthermore, Mélida also came to support endorsing negotiations and building broad international relations. Carpio began to blame her for what he perceived was the “aburguesimiento” of the FPL.

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321 FPL Commander Facundo Guardado judges that Castro had a privileged relationship with Carpio until May 1891, but by June the relations between them was very tense and the Cuban leader got closer to Melida Anaya Montes, the FPL’s second in command. Facundo Guardado. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 30, 2007
323 Cerén, Con sueños se escribe la vida, 190.
Castro’s annoyance with Carpio worked to the advantage of Joaquin Villalobos and the ERP.\textsuperscript{324} At a meeting in November 1981, Castro made clear what was quickly becoming evident to the FMLN’s General Command: that he favored Villalobos over Marcial.\textsuperscript{325} Villalobos possessed two qualities that were terribly seductive for the Cuban leader: he was extremely pragmatic and he was a brilliant and audacious military strategist. Villalobos is fond of saying that “pragmatism is the intelligent defense of ideals.” For Castro, “the least dogmatic person in the world,” according to Ana Guadalupe Martínez, this mentality was doubtless refreshing.\textsuperscript{326} Furthermore, although the ERP came second in size to the FPL, it was the most fearless in military matters.\textsuperscript{327}

Villalobos judges that the key to his chemistry with Castro—a chemistry that was unrivaled between 1981 and 1990—was that they shared a passion and genius for devising military strategies. This was the aspect of FMLN-Cuban relations that Fidel Castro most enjoyed. As Villalobos claims: “Fidel is a Commander, a military man, a man of war. What he most liked to discuss was war strategy, much more than the political and

\textsuperscript{324} Facundo Guardado, Eduardo Sancho and Joaquin Villalobos all agree that Cayetano Carpio was the man closest to Castro and that Joaquin Villalobos replaced him in this position soon after the final offensive of January 1981. They also concur that Castro’s disenchantment with Carpio stemmed from the latter’s dogmatism and his desire to be the supreme leader of the FMLN. Facundo Guardado also argues that Carpio’s fall from Cuban grace resulted from the latter’s paranoid nature and hegemonic ambitions, which affected not just his stance towards negotiations but also his military strategy. After the failed final offensive of 1981, many FMLN leaders and their Cuban advisors determined that the guerrilla organizations should concentrate their forces to make strategic and decisive attacks. Carpio, determined to demonstrate that his FPL organization dominated, refused to concentrate his forces. In contrast, ERP leader Joaquin Villalobos embraced the idea of concentrating his forces. He devised plans to create an elite military unit within the ERP, the \textit{Brigada Rafael Arce Zablalh} (BRAZ), to carry out strategic operations. “Castro was completely fascinated by this idea.” Guardado, Facundo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 30, 2007; Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 29, 2007; Villalobos, Joaquin. Interview with author. Oxford, United Kingdom: January 8, 2007.

\textsuperscript{325} Facundo Guardado. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: January 30, 2007


\textsuperscript{327} Jovel, Francisco. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 16, 2010
ideological aspects of revolution." RN leader Eduardo Sancho agrees with Villalobos’ assessment. He says that Castro loved Villalobos’ audacity and that the ERP leader devoted himself solely to military matters and not to philosophizing about ideological principles. “Castro really identified with Villalobos.”

Castro’s shift in preferences not only dealt a heavy blow to the FPL leader on an emotive level but also carried real practical consequences. “From here on out, Fidel sought to make all agreements about logistical support with Villalobos. He didn’t want to put the distribution of weapons in Marcial’s hands and under the FPL. He very deliberately choose top place this under Villalobos’ control.”

The struggle at the heart of the FMLN leadership over the matter of negotiations, and the decisive role played by the Cuban Administration in how these differences played out, speaks to the importance of key international actors—in this case Cuba and Western European social democracies—in shaping the trajectory of the FMLN, and by extension, the Salvadoran Civil War. It also highlights the dialectic influence between domestic and international processes.

Within a year of the final offensive, Carpio had become isolated, both in the FMLN and within the very organization he had created. Furthermore, he had lost his privileged relation with Cuba; the FMLN’s most important ally. In 1983 the FPL leadership gathered in Managua, Nicaragua to discuss the two central issues dividing the organization: the unity of the FMLN and endorsing negotiations and dialogue. Carpio’s position on these matters was sidelined.

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The FPL determined to reshape its political and military strategy. The organization’s first and second in command, Carpio and Anaya Montes, respectively, would go into El Salvador to direct the FPL’s war front based in Chalatenango. Meanwhile, Sánchez Cerén could represent the FPL in the Revolutionary Directorate. Before returning to El Salvador, Carpio embarked on an international tour to garner support for the war effort. While

On April 6, as Ana Montes prepared her return to Chalatenango, a group of men broke into her clandestine safe house in Managua. The schoolteacher and union organizer cum guerrilla was stabbed more than 60 times with an ice pick and then, to close the deal, beheaded. Her gruesome murder was consistent with the methods employed by the Salvadoran death squads. Fellow FMLN members rapidly concluded that this was their doing, and by extension, they blamed the Junta’s principal ally, the United States and its Central Intelligence Agency.

When Ana Montes was murdered, Carpio was in Libya meeting with the country’s leader, General Muammar Gaddafi. The Libyan leader had made his sympathies for the FMLN evident to the revolutionaries and on two separate occasions personally given RN leader Eduardo Sancho and FPL leader Cayetano Carpio $500,000 dollars in cash to support their struggle.331

Upon learning of his second-in-command’s murder, a visibly distraught Carpio immediately made his way back to Managua to attend her funeral and deal with the crisis at hand.

Given the far-reaching implications of Ana Montes’ murder, the Nicaraguan revolutionary government offered to investigate the case with the help of Cuban intelligence. After a rapid investigation, they exonerated the Salvadoran government and CIA from responsibility. Rather, all evidence pointed to this being an inside job: a niche within the FPL had carried out the gruesome murder and did so in a way that would make the death squads the prime suspect. The intellectual author of the assassination, according to Sandinista and Cuban investigators, was none other than the FPL’s supreme leader. Not wanting to believe the results of the investigation, the FPL took it upon itself to investigate, but to no avail. All evidence pointed to Carpio.

On April 12, a mere six days after Ana Montes was murdered, Carpio took a double cannon pistol, allegedly a gift from General Omar Torrijos, and committed suicide in his room in Managua.\textsuperscript{332} In less than a week, the FPL had lost its two top leaders and the FPL and FMLN faced unprecedented crises. The FPL not only had to reorganize its leadership, but also split between those who trusted that Marcial was guilty—as Sandinista, Cuban and FPL investigators had determined—and a minority that believed Carpio was innocent and had been framed.

FMLN leaders who judged that Carpio was responsible believed that the FPL leader simply could not forgive Anaya Montes for going against his preferences on unity and negotiations. “He felt betrayed by his second in command and could not tolerate this.”\textsuperscript{333} Carpio also blamed her for turning the majority of the FPL leadership against him and thought she was responsible for the FPL taking a “petite bourgeoisie” turn.

\textsuperscript{332} Cerén, \textit{Con sueños se escribe la vida}.
Furthermore, Carpio resented that as he was falling from Cuban grace, Anaya Montes was getting closer to the administration in Havana.\footnote{Cerén, \textit{Con sueños se escribe la vida}, 185–98. Villalobos, Joaquín. Interview with author. Oxford, United Kingdom: January 8, 2007. Sancho, Eduardo. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 22, 2010.}

A minority within the FPL, however, was never convinced of Carpio’s culpability. They judged that his rivals in the FPL and FMLN—helped by the Cubans and Sandinistas—orchestrated the whole thing and framed Carpio for the murder. When Carpio realized that he would face a lifetime of shame and imprisonment, and this FPL would come undone, he committed suicide. The FPL members who remained loyal to Carpio splintered off and formed their own small movement: the Clara Elizabeth Front. They had marginal influence but devoted their time to discrediting the FPL and FMLN, arguing that the entire crisis had been caused by the interference of the Sandinistas and Cubans in the FMLN’s affairs.\footnote{This episode is narrated at length in Cerén’s autobiography. Cerén, who took Carpio’s place after his alleged suicide, believes that Carpio killed Anaya Montes and that he committed suicide. In turn, Jorge Castañeda is amongst those that never bought into the official version of Carpio’s culpability. He believes that the crisis was produced by pressure from Havana and Managua for the FMLN to endorse negotiations. When Carpio’s staunch opposition negotiations as a political strategy became an obstacle, the Cubans and Sandinistas found a way to take him out. See, Ibid.; Castañeda, \textit{Amarres perros. Una autobiografía}. Loc. 4222, 4232, on Amazon Kindle.}

The convoluted history of the FMLN’s struggle to endorse negotiations, as it unfolded between January 1981 and April 1983 evidences Cuba’s role in the FMLN’s endorsement of negotiations. As Joaquín Villalobos put it: “undoubtedly, Cuba carried tremendous weight with negotiations being used as a political tool, especially so early on in the conflict.”\footnote{Villalobos, Joaquín. Interview with author. Oxford, United Kingdom: January 8, 2007.} However, to regard this as a Cuban imposition, as Jorge Castañeda Gutman and others have done, obfuscates the preferences and agency of other FMLN
leaders, as well as the influence of other international actors. Fidel Castro put pressure on the FPL leader knowing that other FMLN commanders endorsed using negotiations as a political tool. That is to say, this was not Castro acting unilaterally to impose his preferences on the FMLN, but rather helping the majority of Salvadoran revolutionary leaders to implement a policy that both they and the Cubans wanted to pursue. Like much of the FMLN-Cuban nexus, it was a marriage of convenience.

Furthermore, Castro was not alone in wanting the FMLN to endorse negotiations. As this chapter has sought out to demonstrate, a number of other international actors sympathetic to the FMLN’s plight, including Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos, the Sandinista leadership in Nicaragua, Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda de la Rosa, and members of the Socialist International also advocated this course of action for the Salvadoran insurgents.

*In the Wake of Carpio: the end of revolution?*

In the wake of Carpio’s bloody death, the Salvadoran revolutionaries endorsed negotiations and conducted relations with a variegated array of foreign state and non-state actors. Furthermore, while competition and rivalry between the different FMLN organizations continued, their unity was no longer in question. Rather, it deepened as the FMLN leadership went beyond coordinating amongst the five organizations and started to organize joint operations and strategic planning.

The resolution of the conflict inside the FPL and FMLN allowed the Salvadoran revolutionary organization to replace their old platform of 1980 with a new strategic document. The platform, publicized in January 1984, “was appreciably less radical and
more concerned with tactics than its predecessor.”

Historian James Dunkerley describes it as follows:

“At its core was the proposal for a new coalition government ‘in which no single force predominates’ and which would uphold national sovereignty, respect human rights, meet immediate socio-economic needs, bring the war to an end, and prepare for elections after a suitable period of time. Many of the specific objectives of the 1980 Platform, such as nationalization and economic planning, were dropped, whilst others, such as agrarian reform, were substantially moderated in tone...Above all else, it offered a basis for negotiation.”

The implications of Carpio’s death for the Salvadoran revolutionary project as a whole are a matter of controversy. In his provocative book, *The Fall of Global Socialism*, Dayan Jayatilleka points to the FPL leader’s suicide as having laid the last nail on the coffin of the global socialist project. Jayatilleka’s central argument is that the decline and fall of socialism in the last half of the twentieth century was brought on by internal political struggles within socialist movements (the vanguards of revolution) and not, as many have argued, a result of the inherent superiority of the capitalist western project. In Jayatilleka’s words: "the defeat was for the most part self-inflicted: it took place due to the violent internecine struggles within the anti-systemic fold, that is, socialist civil wars.”

In this vein, Jayatilleka, points to Carpio’s death as precipitating the decline of the Salvadoran Revolution— the last viable movement of its kind. “Had the FPL not

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338 The document was reprinted in *El Salvador Informativo*, San Jose, no.35, 15 February 1984. It is cited in Ibid.
decapitated itself,” he claims, “one can easily imagine that victory would have been obtainable a few years earlier—with the regional and global consequences feared by the U.S.” 340 Jayatilleka seems to tie the potential success of social revolution to its ideological sturdiness as he claims: “If Carpio symbolized the age of ‘hard ideologies,’ his tragedy symbolized and contributed to its end.” 341

We will never know how the Salvadoran Revolution would have unfolded had the fratricidal struggle not taken the lives of the FPL’s top commander and founder. However, Jayatilleka’s claim that Carpio’s death killed the chances of a revolutionary success is dubious at best. As Fidel Castro pointed out to Marcial during the aforementioned meeting in Havana, the Salvadoran insurgents were facing a new international context that was no longer hospitable to revolutionary movements grounded in hard ideologies. By the 1980s, international public opinion and broad-based diplomatic support were pivotal. The FMLN’s diplomatic endeavors and successes were largely a product of the organization’s flexibility and willingness to consider a political solution.

Furthermore, Jayatilleka’s claim ignores the situation in the United States and the Reagan administration’s staunch determination to “draw the lie in El Salvador” and prevent another revolutionary take-over in Central America. As the following chapter will elucidate, the FMLN’s willingness to endorse negotiations and pursue a flexible diplomatic strategy allowed the movement to lobby myriad state and non-state actors in the United States. These networks were decisive to the mobilization of public opinion in the country against intervention and to the United States Congress’ efforts to limit aid to the Salvadoran Army and government.

340 Ibid., 76.
341 Ibid., 71.
Finally, Jayatilleka alludes to what he believes is one of history’s ironies regarding Marcial’s death and that is that it occurred in the same place as the last revolutionary victory of the century. He writes:

“The last revolutionary victory was in Managua in 1979. The last real hopes of a Central American revolution would also die in Managua, on 6 and 12 April 1983, in clandestine hideouts, with a homicide and a suicide. It was weeks after Marxists worldwide had commemorated the centenary of the death of Karl Marx.”

While the comparison to the Nicaraguan Revolution is pertinent, Jayatilleka misses a key point: the Nicaraguan FSLN was not a movement characterized by the “hard ideologies” that Carpio espoused, but rather by the ideological flexibility and broad diplomacy the FMLN pursued after his death. The Sandinistas were a flexible ideological mix, both before and after their revolutionary triumph. Before coming to power, the FSLN opened itself up to negotiations with the United States and established a broad diplomatic network headed by El Grupo de los Doce. Once in office, they openly alleged to endorse a mixed economy, political pluralism, and non-alignment in the geopolitical Cold War matrix. Throughout the entire Civil War, the FMLN found the Sandinistas to be not only a decisive military ally but also a powerful referent. Rather than pointing to Carpio’s death as the end of the Salvadoran Revolution it seems more fitting to understand it as paving the way for the Salvadorans to follow a distinct revolutionary model that, along with its Nicaraguan neighbor, represented a new

342 Ibid., 70.
343 In fact, upon coming to power one of the first things the Sandinistas did was purge the revolution of its most dogmatic and radical members. See for example, Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America; Dunkerley, Power in the Isthmus. Ibid., 59; Coatsworth, Central America and the United States, 138.
kind of revolution. In March 1986, while visiting the Soviet Union, Ana Guadalupe Martínez met with a Soviet academic and close friend of El Salvador’s Communist Party leader, Shafik Handal. Martínez recounts that the Soviet intellectual assessed that the FMLN represented a new type of revolutionary movement because it broke with traditional models that saw the communist party, or homogeneous vanguards, as the sole guarantors of revolution. Enthused over what he perceived as a new phenomenon, he told Martínez that the FMLN’s ideological heterodoxy represented a new historical strategy with universal applicability, particularly in third world struggles. As Ana Guadalupe wrote in an internal communiqué: “he says that in twenty years the new generations of social scientists will study our experience like we now study the party of Lenin.”

An Impotent Junta
The FMLN was not alone in its facing profound internal differences in the first years of the Salvadoran Civil War. The army, civilian political leaders, and oligarchy—which together made up what I’ll call the Salvadoran “Right”—struggled with similar challenges. A variegated group united almost exclusively by their opposition to the FMLN, the Salvadoran Right was split over how best to do defeat the insurgents and if and how to modernize the country’s economic and political structures. More moderate members of the Salvadoran Right endorsed limited reforms as a way to coax popular support away from the guerrillas and popular movements. In turn, conservative members of the military, oligarchy and paramilitary networks sought, at all costs, to preserve the status quo, and they sought to counter the Left’s popularity by terrorizing their suspected sympathizers.

For the Salvadoran Right, the period between 1980-1984 was marked by a fierce competition between its moderate and radical wings. The power and legitimacy enjoyed by the junta governments that nominally ruled the country from 1979 until the elections in 1982, was tenuous from the start. In addition to being defied militarily by the guerrillas, they were contested politically by radical elements of the military, oligarchy, and bourgeoning paramilitary organizations.

Just as the FMLN’s nexus with international actors—primarily Cuba—helped to shape how their internal disputes were overcome, the Salvadoran Right’s international alliances also proved decisive. While isolated at home, moderates in the civilian Junta and army counted with the support of a key foreign ally: the United States.

In the effort to prevent “another Nicaragua,” President James Carter had thrown Washington’s muscle behind the more centrist factions of the Salvadoran Right, and had pushed for limited modernization programs in the country in the effort to break with the oligarchy’s socioeconomic dominance. When President Ronald Reagan came to power in January 1981, his administration followed its predecessor by supporting the more moderate factions of the Salvadoran Right.

President Reagan’s assistance to the centrists was tied to his determination to defeat the FMLN on the battlefield. For the U.S. to continue supplying the Salvadoran military with massive amounts of military funding and training, Reagan needed to secure support on Capitol Hill and coax U.S. public opinion to back—or at least not oppose—his policy. The Democrats and some Republicans in Congress had grown increasingly uneasy with the Salvadoran military’s gross human rights violations. Concern mounted drastically in December 1980 when three U.S. churchwomen and a twenty-seven year old
U.S. lay missionary working in El Salvador to help the poor were raped, killed and thrown into a mass grave in the countryside by National Guardsmen. The tragedy of the four U.S. churchwomen made headlines around the globe and horrified the U.S. public. Congress subsequently suspended military aid to El Salvador.

When President Reagan took office a few months later, he knew that in order to get Congressional approval to defeat the Salvadoran guerrillas the Salvadoran armed forces would need to tone down their gross human rights violations. Because the thousands of tortures, murders and human rights abuses were endorsed by—and carried out by—hard-liners in the military and paramilitaries, supporting the Salvadoran moderate Right was how the Reagan administration hoped to secure the necessary support at home to pursue its policy abroad.

The Junta’s most significant—and controversial—reform plan was a restructuring of the Salvadoran land-tenure system. Stark concentration of land in El Salvador had historically been at the crux of popular grievances in this predominantly rural and agricultural nation. From the 1930s peasant mobilization led by Agustín Farabundo Martí, to the rise of dissident popular and guerrilla organizations in the 1970s, the vastly unequal distribution of land was consistently at the heart of popular opposition to the Salvadoran regime. For this reason, centrist members of the Junta and military looked to moderate agrarian reform as a potential panacea to stave of popular unrest and increase the government’s legitimacy. In their efforts, the support of the Carter administration was decisive. 345 President Carter not only persuaded the military to accept agrarian reform but also sent advisors to assist the Junta in the implementation of this policy.

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345 Myriad scholars point to the Carter Administration’s efforts to persuade the military to support moderate economic reforms and assist in the process. Driven by the fear of El
The far right elements of the Salvadoran military—and the land-owning oligarchy that they had historically defended—were staunchly opposed to any type of agrarian reform. To prevent changes from taking hold, they drew on the strategies that had served them so well in the past: repressing and terrorizing suspected dissidents. Teams of the agrarian reform agency (ISTA), accompanied by military officers, were sent to the large estates to announce their expropriations and take the necessary steps to carry them out. Hard-liners in the officer corps, however, were not accountable to the governing Junta. Their loyalties remained with the land-owning oligarchs. They thus used their new presence in the countryside to sabotage the agrarian reforms that the oligarchy despised.  

Reports of large numbers of murdered peasants by armed forces skyrocketed on account of these agrarian reform missions, and illegal evictions, and burning of expropriated ranches and farms were common. Paramilitary networks and death squads were more than ready to help their military brethren in sabotaging the agrarian reform.

In addition to terrorizing and murdering thousands of peasants, paramilitaries and hard-liners in the military also targeted public servants in charge of redistributing the land. Personnel working for the Salvadoran Institute for Agrarian Transformation (ISTA) were the primary targets. On January 4th, 1981, the head of ISTA, José Rodolfo Viera, Salvador succumbing to a similar fate as Nicaragua, President Carter and his advisors sensed that supporting the moderate opposition could help stave off support for the radical left. According to William LeoGrande, it was only after intense U.S. pressure that the military finally accepted the set of moderate reforms. Historian Charles Brockett also points to the centrality of U.S. support for the Junta’s reform program. See, LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard*, 42; Charles D. Brockett, *Land, Power, And Poverty: Agrarian Transformation And Political Conflict In Central America, Second Edition*, 2 edition (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1998), 138–39.

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346 Brockett, *Land, Power, And Poverty*, 140.
along with two American advisors to the land reform program, Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, were shot dead while having dinner at San Salvador’s Sheraton Hotel. The murder of ISTA’s director and his U.S. advisors in the middle of San Salvador’s most renowned hotel sent a clear message: the radical right was prepared to do whatever was necessary to kill the agrarian reform program and the Junta was impotent to stop them.  

The weakness of civilian political leaders was also evident as the Junta attempted to reform the military. José Napoleón Duarte, the leader of the center-right Christian Democratic Party (PDC) who led the Junta from 1980 until the elections in 1982, attempted to spearhead the army’s modernization. After President Reagan came to power, the Salvadoran military enjoyed an unprecedented influx of money and weapons from the United States. As Duarte recalls, “U.S. pressure and U.S. aid, on a scale we never imagined, began penetrating El Salvador within a month after Reagan’s inauguration.” Duarte thought this offered an ideal situation to promote reforms in an archaic institution whose entire structure was geared for peacetime, not fighting a guerrilla war. The Junta’s efforts to use the massive amounts of U.S. military aid to reform the army fell on deaf ears. Duarte stated: “As a junta, we had no chance of reforming the military bureaucracy or making the lower levels responsive to our orders. Our decrees on controlling the

348 As had occurred with the murder of Archbishop Romero, and the four American church women killed by the National Guard in December 1980, the perpetrators of Viera, Hammer and Pearlman’s death were never held accountable. The Salvadoran Justice system was designed to protect the interests of those who had ordered the assassinations. As President Napoleón Duarte recognized: “those responsible for the crime had the protection of their status as officers and members of the elite. Our traditional legal system would bend over backward not to convict them.” Duarte, Duarte, 167.

349 Ibid., 168.
abuses of authority were never even transmitted to the local commanders.\textsuperscript{350} As he recalled, only one Colonel in the National Guard and one in the National Police made efforts to discipline their men and weed out the most abusive servants under their command.\textsuperscript{351}

The radical right also blocked the Junta’s efforts to navigate international public opinion and the press. From the outset, the FMLN understood the importance of press coverage and winning over domestic and international public opinion. They had their own radio station, \textit{Radio Venceremos}, with daily transmissions, would elaborate and distribute press bulletins, provide the press with daily updates, and supply friendly journalists with underground contacts and inside stories.\textsuperscript{352} The campaign worked well

\textsuperscript{350} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{351} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{352} The FMLN’s propaganda campaign and efforts to win over public opinion, both in El Salvador and abroad, are a fascinating sphere of the revolutionaries’ history that warrants an entire dissertation. As early as the 1970s, the guerrilla organizations printed bulletins and magazines. Joaquín Villalobos’ father owned a printing press, which came in handy for the ERP to elaborate some of its first pamphlets. After the formation of the FMLN, communications strategy became a top priority for the guerrillas. The guerrillas understood the importance of winning the hearts and minds of Salvadorans and especially the international community. They created their own radio stations and coaxed members of the press at home, sharing with them coveted information and granting them exclusive interviews. Furthermore, in their diplomatic endeavors, the FMLN prioritized building bridges with foreign press correspondents. Ultimately, a number of domestic and international news anchors secretly joined the FMLN and became, in a sense, double agents, collaborating with the insurgents while maintaining their positions in television networks. Their participation was invaluable to the guerrillas’ efforts. Not only would the FMLN’s points of views get coverage, but also these reporters leaked vital and privileged information to the FMLN. After the war, Joaquín Villalobos married a Salvadoran news reporter who had secretly been collaborating with the guerrillas. Perhaps the most striking story is that of Mexican media entrepreneur Empigmenio Ibarra. Ibarra, then working as a cameraman for Mexican news, secretly joined the ERP’s ranks and operated as a double-agent (Villalobos calls him “my 007”). He befriended military generals and high commanding officers and would feed ERP leader, Joaquín Villalobos, vital information acquired while drinking and gallivanting with his military “buddies.” The FMLN’s private archive contains myriad communications between Villalobos and Ibarra “Tony,” in which Ibarra informs the guerrilla leader of the military’s inner workings, strengths, weaknesses, and
for the FMLN. By 1981, the guerrillas were clearly winning the information battle abroad as media coverage centered on the guerrillas military advances and the army’s gross human rights violations. Graphic reports of the Salvadoran military and paramilitaries murdering and torturing innocent civilians reached television sets and newspapers across the Western world. Having never been subject to domestic or international scrutiny, or to the accountability that comes with an independent press, the government’s communications campaign got off to a slow and mediocre start. “We fumbled and blamed the press for the wave of international criticism,” Duarte recalled, and it soon became evident to him that it was necessary to elaborate a communications strategy and engage constructively with journalists. As had been the case with the agrarian reform and efforts to reform the military, Duarte’s main opposition came from the radical Right. The military resented the press and journalists believing them to be biased in favor of the FMLN and hardliners—accustomed to enforcing their will through violence—terrorized journalists and denounced international correspondents as secret Communists. Duarte stated:

future strategic plans. For a deeply humane and personal account of the history of Radio Venceremos, filled with anecdotes and insights about guerrilla life in the ERP, see Las mil y una historias de Radio Venceremos. For a more recent account, Tiempos de Audacia: los mass media de una guerrilla. One of the director’s of the FMLN’s radio station, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, published his account of the FMLN’s propaganda campaign that is also noteworthy. Villalobos, Joaquín. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 30, 2011. Vigil, Las mil y una historias de Radio Venceremos; Luis Alvarenga and Asociación Centro de Capacitación y Promoción para la Democracia (El Salvador), eds., Tiempos de Audacia: Los Mass Media de Una Guerrilla, 1. ed (San Salvador, El Salvador: Asociación Centro de Capacitación y Promoción para la Democracia, CECADE, 2013); Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, La Terquedad Del Izote: El Salvador, Crónica de Una Victoria: La Historia de Radio Venceremos, 1. ed (México, D.F: Editorial Diana, 1992).

353 Duarte, Duarte, 168.
The growing hostility towards the foreign press was rooted in a perceived bias...the armed forces resented the type of coverage orchestrated by the Left and made matters worse by treating journalists as their enemy...Just when I had hoped to create a little space for free expression in the country, the Right launched a national campaign against the press.\(^{354}\)

Moderates within the Salvadoran Junta and army thus found themselves consistently sabotaged by hardliners in the Right. While Duarte may have been the nominal head of the government, de facto power still rested with the military organization. In turn, the military was dominated by hard-liners who, having never received orders from civilian political leaders, did not take kindly to this new development. As historian William LeoGrande argues:

*The stalemate between the junta and the rightists in the military revealed in bold relief the historical dilemma of Salvadoran politics. In a closed political system that had never allowed significant civilian participation, public policy was the exclusive presence of the armed forces and its patrons in the oligarchy.*\(^{355}\)

Beyond the military’s historic role, the fact that the Junta had been put in place through a military coup rather than elections further exacerbated the impotence of civilian leaders *vis a vis* their military counterparts. For this reason, the call for popular elections to form a Constituent Assembly was particularly significant.

\(^{354}\) Ibid., 169.

\(^{355}\) LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard*, 41.
The Panacea of Elections:

In 1981, the Salvadoran Junta announced that a sixty-member Constituent Assembly, which would be responsible for writing a new constitution, was to be selected by popular election the coming year. The new constitution was expected to outline how the election of a president, legislature and local officials would subsequently take place. Elections would take place on March 28, 1982, and all Salvadorans were encouraged to participate.

Upon learning of the upcoming elections, the country’s political leaders were entwined in an unprecedented electoral frenzy. The leftist political parties MNR and FDR refused to partake in an electoral process they assumed would be entirely skewed in the Right’s favor. Furthermore, As FDR leader Rubén Zamora confided, members of the political Left feared that if they returned from exile to partake in the elections they risked the torture and exile that had met FDR leaders in 1980.\footnote{LeoGrande. Interview with Rubén Zamora. Washington D.C., March 1982. Cited in Ibid., 158.} The Left had little reason to trust that the Junta would be able to protect them from the radicals in the military and death squads. The FMLN boycotted the entire process. Seeing elections as a process that would inject the Salvadoran Government and Army with legitimacy, they urged Salvadorans to abstain from voting and threatened to attack polling station on the day of the elections.

With the Left out of the running, the competition for the 1982 elections was the exclusive domain of the moderate and conservative wings of the Salvadoran Right. Unlike what many had expected, the radical right did not join forces and form a single party against the moderates in the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). Running
independent campaigns against the PDC were the military’s old party, Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), the Partido de Acción Democrática (PAC), the Partido Popular Salvadoreño (PPS), and the Partido de Operación Popular (POP), and the PDC’s main contender, the newly created Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA).

The founder of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), Major Roberto D’Aubuisson, was born in 1944 in the city of Santa Tecla; coincidentally, the same birthplace as the FMLN’s most radical leader Cayetano Carpio. Having attended private Catholic schools, save for a brief hiatus in which he was expelled for disciplinary issues, D’Aubuisson joined the National Military Academy at age 16. He graduated three years later in 1963 and joined the Salvadoran National Guard. D’Aubuisson’s training was centered on counterinsurgency and he was under the tutelage of General José Alberto Medrano, also known as the father of Salvadoran counterinsurgency. As part of his training, the future founder of ARENA was sent to the Panama Canal Zone where he received a course at the United States’ (in)famous School of the Americas. Working closely alongside his mentor, D’Aubuisson helped build two of El Salvador’s most controversial intelligence agencies: ORDEN and ANESAL. ORDEN, a nationwide network of government informants and rightists paramilitary groups, and the Salvadoran National Security Agency (ANESAL), a centralized intelligence unit, worked in tandem to rid the country of suspected dissidents and communists. El Salvador’s first death squad, the White Hand, emerged from this unit. The second, the White Warriors Union, which emerged in the mid-1970s, was closely associated with D’Aubuisson who then served as ANESAL’s Deputy Director.

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357 Ibid., 41.
D’Aubuisson’s specialization in counterinsurgency and affiliation with the Salvadoran intelligence apparatus during the period of most acute repression and human rights violations in the country’s history, would have sufficed to suggest that he was no stranger to dirty work. In case that wasn’t enough, he was open about his willingness to resort to any means to root out leftist dissidents. Describing to a reporter the military’s frustration with the judicial process during the late 1970s, he said: “We began to act incorrectly, and not take them (suspected subversives) to the judge, but make them ‘disappear’ instead.”

Described by a colleague as an “anarchic psychopath,” he was known to enjoy personally overseeing and conducting the “interrogation” of suspected leftists. His preferred interrogation technique earned him the nickname: “Major Blowtorch.”

D’Aubsuisson’s sociopathic traits were evident even to those with a vested interest in wiping communism of the Salvadoran map. U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador from 1977 through 1980, Robert E. White, said Mr. D'Aubuisson had a "sick mind" and was a "pathological killer." His CIA’s profile described him as “relatively intelligent” but “egocentric, reckless and perhaps mentally unstable.”

In 1979, soon after the progressive military coup overthrew President Molina, D’Aubuisson left the army. Some argue he was expelled due to his links to the death

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358 Ibid., 49.
squad and proclivity for gross human rights violations.\textsuperscript{362} Others stress his unwillingness to be part of what he felt was a subversive government that would bring the communists to power.\textsuperscript{363}

While no longer part of the military institution, D’Aubuisson covertly continued to work for senior military commanders intent on leading a coup to overthrow the Junta. He also contacted radical right wing movements who shared his opposition to any of the Junta’s attempted reforms and his desire to root out “the communist conspiracy” from El Salvador. He developed relations with Salvadoran oligarchs, primarily those who were now residing in Miami. Furthermore, he became a regular face on Salvadoran television where he made use of his contacts in ANESAL to denounce alleged traitors and communists during shows paid for by the wealthy Salvadoran exiles.\textsuperscript{364} A very curious thing happened: many of the people denounced by D’Aubuisson on television were murdered by death squads soon thereafter. Amongst the victims of these unfortunate coincides were Attorney General Mario Zamora and Archbishop Romero.

The 1982 elections presented D’Aubuisson with a golden opportunity to transform his contacts and anti-communist platform into a radical right-wing political party. And thus, ARENA was born: the child of a notorious debonair psychopath, with a

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\textsuperscript{362} Historians LeoGrande and Dunkerley both say he was expelled. Ibid.; Dunkerley, \textit{Power in the Isthmus}.

\textsuperscript{363} D’Aubuisson’s official biography on the ARENA party’s website hold this interpretation. It should be noted that, to date, D’Aubuisson is considered a national hero within the ARENA party. When in November 2013 the author met with an ARENA congress member to discuss El Salvador’s security crisis over gang violence, the elegant conference room in which I was received was filled with adulatory pictures of Roberto D’Aubuisson, including a large official portrait of the former Mayor square in the back of the room. See, “Historia Del Mayor Roberto d’Aubuisson,” Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, http://arena.org.sv/partido/historia/.

\textsuperscript{364} LeoGrande, \textit{Our Own Back Yard}, 49.
robust trust fund from the Salvadoran oligarchy, and built on the foundation of the infamous death squads that had terrorized El Salvador throughout the previous decade.

As historian James Dunkerley accurately described, ARENA represented “the first serious and openly partisan political vehicle of the oligarchy since 1932.”

The party was modeled after Mario Sandoval Alarcon’s fascist National Liberation Movement in Guatemala and organized with his help, and its immediate objective in the 1982 elections was to squash the PDC at the polls and recover the unrivaled power historically enjoyed by the Salvadoran oligarchs and military. For Salvadoran oligarchs, the PDC’s endorsement of economic reforms, including the nationalization of banks and agrarian reform, represented an unacceptable threat to their economic interests. In turn, hardliners in the military saw the Christian Democrat’s as intending to curtail their historic monopoly on political power. D’Aubuisson was fond of comparing the Christian Democrats to watermelons: green on the outside (the color of the Christian Democratic Party was green) and red on the inside. Attesting to his proclivity for histrionics, he would demonstrate this analogy by chopping a watermelon in half with a machete during rallies and press conferences. Whether ARENA’s members actually believed that PDC members were nothing more than communists in disguise, or if they found this argument to be a convenient way to scare conservatives away from the moderate right, is uncertain. Probably, both considerations played a part in D’Aubuisson’s watermelon act.

The Left’s absence from the process meant that the 1982 elections had no hope of putting an end to the war politically. Their significance rested on the fact that they would

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365 Dunkerley, The Long War, 1985, 351.
366 On ARENA’s ties to Guatemala’s MLN, see: LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard, 159.
help to enhance the regime’s legitimacy and provide a non-violent channel for the moderate and radical factions of the Right to resolve their differences. For this reason, the Reagan administration in the United States strongly embraced the electoral process. As William LeoGrande states:

> Traditionally, the Salvadoran oligarchy never had to bother with politics directly, other than assuring that its ties to the military high command were in good repair. For the most part, members of the oligarchy left the task of governing to the army and paid it well to safeguard their interests. Elections would force the right to learn more modern means of translating their wealth into political power. They would have to learn skills like campaigning, bargaining, and perhaps even compromising. In short, Washington hoped elections would modernize the Salvadoran oligarchy, making it a more effective and acceptable political partner both in El Salvador and Washington.\(^\text{368}\)

Beyond modernizing the Salvadoran oligarchy, the Right and their allies in the United States government also undoubtedly hoped that elections would help to reduce the clout of the FMLN and its allied FDR. How could the FMLN claim to represent the people of El Salvador if Salvadoran citizens were at the polls choosing another group to represent them?

According to members of the Left, the elections were used as a plebiscite to delegitimize the insurgents and FDR, isolate them nationally and internationally, and

\(^{368}\) LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard*, 130. P.130
limit the political and diplomatic support they was receiving. Those going to the polls were presumed to be against the guerrillas and their political ally, the FDR.\(^{369}\)

Although enthusiastic about elections in El Salvador, United States actors were split over which Party they would support. D’Aubuisson’s untempered pronouncements during the campaign scared the Reagan Administration. The ARENA candidate would talk freely about napalm and ‘extermination,’ and said that if he came to power he would put all Christian Democrats on trial for treason.\(^{370}\) An ARENA victory and the expected terror that would ensue would make it extremely difficult for President Reagan to secure Congressional approval for increased support to the Salvadoran military. The Christian Democrats were a clear choice and the CIA channeled funds and information to Duarte’s party.\(^{371}\) In turn, hardline Republicans sympathized with D’Aubuisson’s staunch anticommunism and both befriended and advised him on how to present himself during the election. In particular, North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms looked to D’Aubuisson as an ally, a man who would defend conservative interests in Central America. Significant elements of D’Aubuisson’s platform were drawn from that of President Reagan in 1980, and the U.S. public relations firm, McCaann Erickson ran ARENA’s campaign.\(^{372}\) Thus, without the far right support in the U.S., the radical right faction in El Salvador led by D’Aubuisson would have been much weaker.

On election day, some 85% of eligible voters went to cast their ballots.\(^{373}\) Turnout was much higher than anyone at the time could have expected. The guerrillas’

\(^{369}\) Peñate, _El Salvador del Conflicto Armado a la Negociación_, 71.
\(^{370}\) Dunkerley, _The Long War_, 1985, 404; Duarte, _Duarte_; LeoGrande, _Our Own Back Yard_, 159.
\(^{371}\) LaFeber, _Inevitable Revolutions_, 288; LeoGrande, _Our Own Back Yard_, 160.
\(^{372}\) LaFeber, _Inevitable Revolutions_, 287–88; LeoGrande, _Our Own Back Yard_, 159.
\(^{373}\) This statistic was widely disputed. I’m using the statistic cited by LeoGrande. LeoGrande, _Our Own Backyard_, 61.
efforts to boycott elections failed miserably. In the midst of their own internal crisis, the FMLN factions were unable to come up with a joint strategy. Some groups called for abstention, others for annulment, and others launched military attacks to compromise voting. It is impossible to judge what percentage of Salvadorans who cast their ballots did so out of genuine commitment to this electoral process. While Napoleón Duarte attributes participation to enthusiasm over the first real electoral contest in the country’s history and a popular desire for peace, scholars have pondered whether many of those voting did so out of fear. Voting was mandatory in El Salvador and after casting their ballots Salvadorans received certification of voting on their identity papers. “Failure to do this was seen as little less that courting death at the hands of paramilitaries which regularly inspect these documents.”

Albeit far from clear and with irregularities, the 1982 election produced a genuine contest between the PDC and the far right (ARENA, PCN, POP, PPS, and AD). The PDC came out triumphant having acquired 40% of the votes and 24 seats in the Constituent Assembly. ARENA received 19 seats, the PCN 14, and the other three smaller rightist parties split the remaining three votes. The election did little to resolve the conflict between the radical Right and the Christian Democrats, however, or to augment the PDC’s clout in the government.

The oligarchs and hard-liners in the military did not initially accept the PDC’s victory. The PDC represented a platform that was more centrist and the Party’s leadership was not part of the country’s historic power bloc. On the night of the elections, D’Aubuisson gathered the leaders of the other parties (PCN, AD, PPS, POP) and urged

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them to create a common front against the moderate PDC. The rightists had no real ideological differences, and they shared a desire to eradicate the Christian Democrats, and along with them any possibility of reform. The following day, on March 29, the radical Right—with D’Aubuisson as its leader—made its unity official meaning. They would now hold 36 seats in the Assembly, against the PDC’s 24, and they pledged to throw the Christian Democrats out of the government.\textsuperscript{375}

The 1982 elections produced the results Washington had hoped for by had rendering the Junta unnecessary. According to Duarte, D’Aubuisson made the astute move calling all the parties together and confronting the Junta with the elected power of the Assembly. “The Junta’s role has ended”, they said. The Junta debated whether the Assembly was meant to take power or simply right the Constitution, but there was no support for the continuation of the Junta’s rule.\textsuperscript{376} The struggle now turned to electing a provisional president.

The competition for provisional president was chaotic, with no clear procedure about how it should take place. Not surprisingly, D’Aubuisson wanted the job. Knowing that he counted with the support of the rightist parties and majority of the Assembly, he needed only to gain the military’s backing. The military high command, however, was dissuaded from backing the prior death squad leader by its most important international ally.

The Reagan Administration wanted a moderate civilian in the role of provisional president. They feared that if D’Aubuisson were in power he would be a loose cannon that would expel the moderates from the government, roll back reforms, and kill any

\textsuperscript{375} Peñate, \textit{El Salvador del Conflicto Armado a la Negociación}, 71–73.
\textsuperscript{376} Duarte, \textit{Duarte}, 183.
possibility of advancing Reagan’s Central America agenda on Capitol Hill. The Reagan Administration made its preferences explicit, and put strong pressure on the military and politicians to back a moderate that would allow the PDC to remain in the government. U.S. Ambassador, Deane R. Hinton, held meetings with the military’s high command and urged them to support the PDC’s inclusion in government and block D’Aubuisson’s presidency.

Hinton centered his efforts of persuasion on the PCN, which had come in third at the polls and whose ties to the military made it acutely aware of just how important U.S. military assistance was for the Salvadoran Army. The ambassador was so concerned about a possible D’Aubuisson Presidency that he asked Secretary of State Alexander Haig to send reinforcements. Haig sent General Vernon Walters, a former vice director of the CIA and trouble-shooter, then involved in trying to end the war between Argentina and Great Britain, which had broken out five days after the Salvadoran election. General Walters brought a letter from Secretary Haig that warned of the possible suspension of U.S. military aid unless a coalition government was formed.

Two weeks after General Walters arrived in San Salvador, the Constituent Assembly selected an apolitical wealthy banker, Álvaro Magaña as the country’s president. Magaña had not participated in the elections, but he was a moderate rightist with close ties to the military, and he counted with the United States’ blessing. As a

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consolation price, D’Aubuisson was chosen to lead the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly.

Sources differ on the extent of U.S. involvement in the selection of Alvaro Magaña. 380 A few things are clear, however: U.S. intervention was the decisive element that guaranteed the survival of the moderate right after the 1982 election. Furthermore after the 1982 elections El Salvador’s radical right was now a consolidated and organized political force with a name and a face. Finally, overcoming the country’s long anti-democratic history would not be an easy task.

On May 2, 1982, Álvaro Magaña was sworn is as provisional president of El Salvador. The agreements reached between the United States, Salvadoran Armed Forces, ARENA and the PDC were ratified on August 3, 1982 with the signing of the Pact of Apaneca (El Pacto de Apaneca). The pact, which excluded all the political forces of the Left, aimed to foster the governability of the country. All parties agreed to stop attacking each other and Magaña, and to instead rally together and focus on their common enemy: the FMLN-FDR. The pact created what was called the Gobierno de Unidad (Unity

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380 Duarte says the military, aware of U.S. preferences after their meetings with Ambassador Hinton, had already agreed on Magaña by the time Walters arrived in El Salvador. In a similar vein, Oscar Martínez Peña argues that the initiative for the presidency of Magaña came from the Salvadoran military’s high command who proposed Magaña to the U.S. After the Reagan Administration gave them a green light, the army moved forward. U.S. scholar Walter LaFeber places greater emphasis on U.S. agency, arguing that the army on account of U.S. pressure chose Magaña. Historian William LeoGrande goes even further and says that Ambassador Hinton gave the armed forces a list of nine possible candidates whom Washington would support. From this list, the officers picked Alvaro Magaña, the apolitical mortgage banker with close ties to the armed forces. Historian John Coatsworth also states that the military high command chose Alvaro Magaña from a list presented to it by Ambassador Hinton. In Coatsworth’s account, the list had only five names. Debates about what role the U.S. played in the selection of Magaña speak to a broader debate about the extent of U.S. clout in the Salvadoran Army and Governing Junta and Salvadoran agency. Duarte, Duarte, 185; Peña, El Salvador del Conflicto Armado a la Negociación, 74; LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions, 288; LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard, 165; Coatsworth, Central America and the United States, 173.
Government) and as far as the Left was concerned kept the power structures in the country intact.\textsuperscript{381}

While the Christian Democrats remained in the government, the elections had evidenced the power of hardline conservatives and the ensuing political clout of the military. The only force that appeared to be capable of moderating the army—which in turn could somewhat curb the radicalism of the far right, now consolidated around ARENA—was the United States. The Reagan Administration’s unprecedented amounts of assistance to the Salvadoran Army made it a decisive player in the political whirlwind of the Central American country.

While able to limit some of the excesses of the extreme right and keep moderates in power, U.S. involvement also had the effect of weakening civilian political leaders in their attempts to bring the military under civilian control. Crucial to this reality was the fact that El Salvador was experiencing a struggle not just within coalitions but also between them. It was in essence a complex chess game of multiple wars between and within factions. CPD leader, Napoleón Duarte, calls attention to this and argues that in dealing directly with the army the United States weakened an already feeble Junta in the early 1980s. “When military aid was conditioned to human-rights improvements,” Duarte states, “the U.S. ambassadors became more powerful than I was as president. My complaints were less important than the ambassador’s, because he controlled the flow of money.”\textsuperscript{382} Almost two centuries earlier, James Madison had warned wealthy, land-owning, literate New Yorkers about the importance of placing control of the purse strings

\textsuperscript{381} Samayoa, \textit{El Salvador}, 39.
\textsuperscript{382} Duarte, \textit{Duarte}, 172.
in the hands of the most immediate representatives of the citizenry.\textsuperscript{383} In the case of El Salvador in the early 1980s, this control was, to an important extent, in the hands of a foreign power, far removed from the Salvadoran people, leaving Salvadoran civilian government officials impotent to control their army.

The Reagan Administration, however, was not an all-powerful force in El Salvador capable of enforcing its interests singlehandedly. While elections evoked a positive response in Washington, enabling President Reagan to obtain twice as much aid for El Salvador in 1982 than the previous year, Magaña’s government proved more conservative than the Junta.\textsuperscript{384} It put an end to the reforms, including the U.S. sponsored agrarian reform, and concentrated almost exclusively on drafting the new constitution and scheduling the next elections. On Washington’s insistence, the Unity Government created a human rights commission to oversee respect for human rights. The underbelly of the commission, however, left little room for optimism and suggested that it was created mostly to quiet opposition abroad and secure the continuing flow of U.S. dollars. One of the members of the commission was the director of the National Police—one of the security apparatuses responsible for grave human rights abuses. Furthermore, the Commission elaborated and promoted an amnesty law that protected military and paramilitary personnel from past human rights violations. The law effectively exonerated those who had operated during the darkest years of repression and terror in Salvadoran history.\textsuperscript{385}


\textsuperscript{385} Peñate, \textit{El Salvador del Conflicto Armado a la Negociación}, 75.
In terms of the FMLN, Magaña’s inauguration speech proved telling. He announced to the FMLN that there was nothing to negotiate, that his government’s objective was to bring peace, and that the FMLN should lay down its arms and join the electoral arena if it wanted to have a voice.\footnote{Government of El Salvador (GOES). “Comunicado de la Secretaría de Información de la Presidencia de la República,” San Salvador, Secretaría de Información y Prensa de la Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 28 de octubre 1982, UCA, Estudios Centroamericanos ECA, vol. XXXVII, 1982, p.1050. Cited in Ibid., 72.}

Magaña was a weak provisional President who lacked real power or legitimacy within his own government. The military and the radical Right were still running the show. A political solution to the conflict seemed nowhere in sight.

\textit{Maybe This Time}

In 1983, the Constituent Assembly adopted a new constitution and called for presidential elections to take place the following year. Once again, the Salvadoran Right threw their hats into the whirlwind of electoral competition.

The main contenders for the 1984 elections were ARENA, the PDC, and the PCN. The Left, once again, did not participate. The Christian Democrats, initially split over who should be their candidate, ultimately decided to go with their founder and historic leader: Napoleón Duarte. ARENA went with D’Aubuisson and the PCN chose their most experienced politician: Chachi Guerrero.

The parties ran an invective campaign. D’Aubuisson defended the military and derided human rights constraints. “This is a dirty war,” he would say, “and human rights prohibits the army from winning against the subversives.”\footnote{LeoGrande, \textit{Our Own Back Yard}, 248.} As far as a political solution to the conflict was concerned, ARENA’s candidate was adamantly opposed to any sort of
talks with the guerrillas. In a manner that sounded rather similar to former FPL leader Cayetano Carpio, D'Aubuisson would say: “We are never going to negotiate, we are never going to dialogue, we are never going to surrender…. We will only have peace through victory.”\(^3\)

Duarte, now a much more moderate version of his former self when he ran for office in 1972, offered to reinstate some of the Junta’s reforms and bring peace to a country increasingly drained by an ongoing and gruesome civil war. The Reagan Administration, fearful of what an ARENA victory could mean for its ability to support the Salvadoran military, threw its full weight behind Duarte and the PDC. The CIA channeled money to the PDC through third channels and U.S. advisors covertly assisted in the campaign.\(^4\)

Perhaps not surprisingly, Duarte’s main concern during the campaign was ARENA’s known tendency to resort to extralegal means to enforce its will. Magaña’s provisional government had been unable to protect PDC members from attacks by the far right, and a number of known Christian Democrats lost their lives at the hands of death squads after the 1982 elections. Duarte recalls various attempts by ARENA supporters and hardliners in the military to intimidate his followers and sabotage his 1984 campaign. Efforts ranged from conducting recruiting for the army at his rallies (to ensure that young men stayed home), to threatening to detain campaigners for various reasons.

\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Scholars agree that the PDC received money from the CIA for electoral purposes. LeoGrande explains in great detail the intricate “third channel” route through which this happened. It should be noted, that Duarte denies that his campaign received any money from the CIA. Given the complexity of getting the CIA’s money into the PDC, as explained by LeoGrande, perhaps Duarte genuinely didn’t know where the money was coming from. Ibid., 249; Duarte, Duarte, 199.
The efforts of the radical Right to sabotage Duarte’s campaign differed from the guerrillas who boycotted the elections but did not attack the Duarte campaign. This led the PDC candidate to assert: “from my experience in the campaign, the guerrillas seemed less hostile.”

The turn out for the 1984 elections held in March was lower than in 1982, and in areas controlled by the FMLN markedly so. The first-round gave the PDC 43% of the national vote, a clear victory over its more radical contenders; ARENA received 28.3 and the PCN 19.3. Plurality required a second round of elections. In May, Duarte and D’Aubuisson faced each other at the polls. Duarte’s triumph by 53.6% to 46.4 to D’Aubuisson was less than overwhelming and the PDC’s control of only 24 of the legislature’s 60 seats compelled the new President to include members of the reactionary opposition in his cabinet.

Hours before the Central Election Council was to formally present Napoleón Duarte with the official certificate saying he had won the presidency, D’Aubuisson demanded that the election be annulled and a plot to kill Duarte and U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering was made public. According to historian William LeoGrande, D’Aubuisson’s supporters’ intent to kill the U.S. ambassador could be traced back to

390 Duarte’s account of his 1884 campaign includes anecdotes of the military and ARENA’s efforts to sabotage his campaign. He also contrasts this to the behavior of guerrillas and his efforts to campaign in guerrilla controlled areas. Duarte, *Duarte*, 196.

391 In 1982, 28 municipalities held no poll; in 1984 Washington accepted that 40 and the FMLN claimed that 90 had failed to do so. According to the questionable official statistics, the turnout in 1982 was 1,308,505 (68.9 percent) and that in 1984 1,266,276 (43.3%), 11.4 per cent of whom cast invalid votes. Maria Eugenia Gallardo and José Roberto López, *Centroamerica: La Crisis En Cifras* (San José, Costa Rica: Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura (IICA); Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), 1986), 231–32.


393 Duarte, *Duarte*, 201; LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard*, 250.
divisions within the Republican Party over the electoral outcome in El Salvador. The Salvadoran radical Right’s anger over the electoral results and U.S. meddling in favor of Duarte found its voice in D’Aubuisson’s friend and ally, Senator Jesse Helms. In a letter to President Reagan, he demanded that Ambassador Pickering be fired. After the White House reaffirmed its confidence in Pickering, Helms spoke on the Senate floor and accused the CIA of interfering in the Salvadoran election to secure the PDC’s victory. The radical right in El Salvador interpreted Helms’ accusations as signaling that they could take action against Pickering without retribution. By the time U.S. intelligence uncovered the plot by D’Aubuisson’s supporters to assassinate the ambassador, the plan was far advanced.

As had occurred in the aftermath of the 1982 election, the Reagan Administration sent its troubleshooter General Vernon Walters, now Reagan’s envoy to the United Nations, to San Salvador to talk to D’Aubuisson. Walters warned D’Aubuisson that if anything happened to the ambassador Washington would hold him directly responsible and he would regret it.394 He got his message across. No assassination attempt on Duarte or Pickering followed. Understandably, Duarte recalls that upon coming to office his main immediate concern was “controlling the death squads and stopping the abuses of officers.”395

With this climate, expectations that the civilian wing of the FMLN—the FDR—could have participated in the 1984 elections seem disingenuous, or at the very least, painfully naïve. In the early and mid-80s there was no space for the legitimate participation of the Left in the Salvadoran political arena, which canceled out the

394 Duarte, Duarte, 201; LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard, 250–51.
395 Duarte, Duarte, 204.
possibility to resolve the crisis through electoral democracy. At this time, elections were not a panacea or tonic for the civil war. However, this did not mean that they were meaningless. The choice between Duarte and D’Aubuisson was real and Duarte’s victory was an important step in a long process of reigning in the military’s control of civilian politics and taming the excesses of the radical Right.

Conclusion
By mid-1984, after the country’s first democratic presidential elections, the moderate Right now held the highest political office in El Salvador and counted with the blessing and support of the United State’s President. In turn, the FMLN had managed to rid the revolutionary organization of its most dogmatic and radical leader, and was building bridges across the Western World.\(^{396}\)

One of the central developments in El Salvador between 1981 and 1984 was the reigning in of the most radical elements of both the Left and Right. The international liaisons of both groups—most notably Cuba in the case of the Left, and the United States in the case of the Right—were pivotal in these processes.\(^{397}\) Between 1980-1984, the

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\(^{396}\) It is interesting that D’Aubuisson was not the only one who had a plan to kill Duarte. As Duarte narrates in his autobiography: "I learned from captured guerrilla records years later that Cayetano Carpio of the FPL thought I was an obstacle to the revolution and had to be killed. Shafik Handal argued against killing me because he said I could be useful in helping unite the non-communist opposition. Handal wanted to bring me over to their side to give the insurrection a broad-based front." Similarly to the United States and Cuba, who while on opposite plains ideologically pursued very similar strategies in El Salvador, so too, the parallels between Cayetano Carpio and Roberto D’Aubuisson are manifold. This comparison might be unfair. While extremely dogmatic (and I likely involved in Anaya Montes’s gruesome murder) Carpio was not a pathological killer like D’Aubuisson. Ibid., 160.

\(^{397}\) It is important to note that Washington was attempting to curtail the power of a radical right that—while deeply rooted in national realities—U.S. policy had largely helped to create. While in the 1980s the Reagan Administration aimed to curtail the radical right responsible for the worst abuses, in previous decades the U.S. had been more than happy to support El Salvador’s authoritarian military regimes and its allied oligarchy. More importantly, El Salvador’s counterinsurgency doctrine was a U.S. export. In the 1960s and 70s the U.S.
United States had unrivaled clout within the Salvadoran Army and PDC, while Cuba did so within the FMLN. Cuba and the United States not only pursued very similar strategies with their respective allies in El Salvador, but they also had very similar motivations for doing so. Both were pushing for the ascent of the moderates believing this would get the group each support the necessary international support to secure a military victory, which was their ultimate goal. For the Reagan administration, moderating D’Aubuisson and hardliners in the military were fueled by the need to secure Congressional approval for continued U.S. assistance to the Salvadoran military, and to coax U.S. public opinion to endorse such assistance. For Cuba, the reigning in Cayetano Carpio aimed to secure two things. First, that the FMLN would secure greater levels of international support and legitimacy, particularly amongst the Western camp. Second, that the FMLN would quit wasting time with ideological ruminations, *a la* the ineffectual communist partied of twentieth century Latin America, and focus all of its energies on winning the war; hence, Castro’s preference for Joaquín Villalobos.

Paradoxically, while both the United States and Cuba hoped that by moderating the radicals within the group that they each supported, would facilitate an all-out victory on the battlefield, their strategies actually paved the way for what became a political resolution to the Salvadoran conflict. A few months after the elections of 1984, the

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helped to create the death squads, ORDEN and ANESAL, and U.S. agencies trained and supported men like to D’Aubuisson and his mentor Medrano. The radical right in El Salvador justified its repression and human rights abuses by appealing to the Cold War discourse formulated by the United States. Radical rightist leaders would constantly argue that the Soviets and Communists were attempting to invade their country through party’s like the PDC and popular movements, not to mention the FMLN. D’Aubuisson’s speeches, for example, are filled with this rhetoric. El Salvador demonstrates a U.S. tendency to support authoritarian leaders that Washington then has a very hard time controlling. It is the civilian populations of these countries that pay the heaviest price for these foreign policy decisions made in Washington.
FMLN and Salvadoran Government met face-to-face, for the first time, in La Palma, opening the first crack to a long process of mediated negotiations between the groups.
CHAPTER 5: THE SINEWS OF PEACE

“Peace hath her victories
No less renown’d than war”

~ John Milton, Sonnet XVI

Introduction

The following chapter concentrates on the middle years of the Salvador Civil War and tells a Mesoamerican story, centered on regional dynamics, about the internationalization of the Salvadoran conflict. The chapter uncovers the history of two separate attempts to broker peace between the Salvadoran warring parties: the Contadora Peace Effort and the La Palma Negotiations. The first process entailed a transnational Latin American effort while the second was a national Salvadoran process. Although both efforts did not succeed at bringing about the negotiated end to conflict, the chapter argues that they were crucial building blocks to what eventually became a successful peace effort.

The history of the Contadora Peace Process decenters the United States and Cuba as the two decisive international nodes in the Salvadoran process. This story showcases how the Salvadoran conflict had by the mid 1980s turned into a Latin American phenomenon that was transforming the region. The failure of Contadora, I argue, was not just a product of sabotage from the Salvadoran government or the Reagan Administration but also of regional powers excluding the FMLN from the process of negotiations. Contadora attempted to broker a peace along traditional diplomatic lines that involved state-to-state relations, exclusively. By this time, however, the Salvadoran insurgents had already transformed the political realm, both in El Salvador and in the region, to a point
where traditional diplomacy was no longer viable. In effect, by the mid 1980s the FMLN was already a force indispensable to local and regional peace.

In turn, the La Palma Negotiations elucidate the importance of international public opinion in shaping the priorities of both FMLN insurgents and the Salvadoran state. In the fight over global public opinion, the FMLN was much more successful than the Salvadoran state at building legitimacy and winning over support and the Duarte administration followed the lead of Salvadoran insurgents. State power in El Salvador was contested not just at home but also abroad and in this the FMLN proved significantly more adept.

The history of both peace efforts also evidences the limits of U.S. and Cuban endorsement of the moderate factions in El Salvador that were uncovered in previous chapters. Havana and Washington promoted the ascent of moderate factions within the Salvadoran left and right, respectively, because they sensed that these factions would be most capable of securing an absolute military victory. Once these actors start to seriously consider negotiations, however, the U.S. and Cuba seek out ways to step up the military dimension of the conflict. The Salvadoran road to peace thus entailed not only realignments between the interests of domestic forces but also that of international actors.

A Regional Approach to Peace

On the Pearl Island Archipelago in the Gulf of Panama lies the paradisiac island of Contadora. Once the place where Spanish colonizers gathered to count jewels harvested from the pearl-rich area—hence the name of the island translating as “one who counts”—Contadora appeared on the international radar in 1980, when Panamanian leader, General Omar Torrijos, agreed to give the deposed Shah of Iran, Mohammad
Reza Pahlavi, temporary asylum on the island. This put a spotlight on Contadora as an expensive and exclusive getaway for the rich and famous. A couple years later, it once again made headlines as the birthplace of a regional effort to bring peace to Central America.

In January 1983, at Mexico’s instigation, the foreign ministers of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama and Mexico gathered on Contadora to craft a diplomatic peace plan for the conflicts unfolding across the Isthmus. After the Contadora meeting, the four countries present—henceforth known as the “Contadora Group” or the “Contadora Four”— took a unified stance on the crises in the region. They emphatically condemned foreign intervention in the Isthmus and stressed that the roots of the conflicts were local and endogenous rather than the result of Soviet and Cuban intervention. No concrete peace proposal came out of this initial gathering, but it was the first multilateral effort, made up solely of Latin American powers, to seek a diplomatic solution to the Central American imbroglio. In stressing that deep-seated social and economic inequalities—and not East-West rivalries—were at the root of the conflicts in the Isthmus, and denouncing all types of foreign intervention, the Contadora Group dealt a heavy blow to Washington’s search for consensus on its policies in Central America.

After months of meetings between key representatives of the governments of the Contadora Four and the different Central American nations, the Contadora group put forth the “Cancún Declaration on Peace in Central America” in mid July 1983. This Declaration, signed by the presidents of the Contadora Four, put forth a series of concrete

policy recommendations to help secure peace in the Isthmus. Disarmament was at the root of the their proposals. The conflicts in Central American had produced a virtual arms race between the different nations of the Isthmus. This had led to an unprecedented amount of available weapons in the region, a reality that proved deeply troubling for the Contadora Four. The surplus of readily available weapons decreased incentives for Central American actors to opt for diplomatic—rather than military—solutions. It also made other Latin American nations outside the Isthmus, such as the Contadora Four, vulnerable as hundreds of thousands of weapons became available for circulation in the region. The Cancún Declaration thus made a number of recommendations geared towards disarmament that included: freezing weapons at their current level; beginning negotiations to reduce weapon stocks; the eradication of transit and traffic in arms between Central American countries; forbidding foreign military installations within national territories; giving prior notice of important military troop movements within frontiers; organizing troops of frontier observers and mixed border security commissions; and creating additional commissions to prevent the transport of weapons from one country to another.400

In their effort to bring the region’s conflicts out of the battlefield and into the diplomatic sphere, the Cancun Declaration called for ending belligerencies between and within countries, creating demilitarized zones, prohibiting using the territory of a state to develop actions to politically or militarily destabilization another state, and establishing direct communication between all governments in the region.401 Beyond these recommendations, the Contadora Four also made a direct appeal to international powers

400 Petrash and Sims, “The Contadora Peace Process.”
involved—overtly or covertly—in the region, and unequivocally asked them to support diplomacy rather than military approaches. The Declaration read:

_The use of force is an approach that does not dissolve but aggravates, the underlying tensions. Peace in Central America can become a reality only in so far as respect is shown for the basic principles of coexistence among nations: non-intervention; self-determination; sovereign equality of States; co-operation for economic and social development; peaceful settlements of disputes; and free and authentic expression of the popular will....Other States with interests in and ties to the region should use their political influence in helping to strengthen the channels of understanding and should unreservedly commit themselves to the diplomatic approach to peace._  

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In emphasizing the causal salience of North-South issues such as poverty, inequality and exploitation in the Central American crises, the regional peace effort attempted to shift the terms of debate on Central America away from East-West rivalry. Contadora thus gave voice to an alternative interpretation of the crises in the Isthmus and the group’s members became international spokesmen for an understanding of events that required taking off the Cold War lens. 403 Furthermore, by appealing to recognized principles of international law such as non-intervention, self-determination and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, the regional effort drew upon a global system of norms


403 Matthew Connelly, “Taking Off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War for Independence,” _The American Historical Review_ 105, no. 3 (June 1, 2000): 739–69.
that transcended Cold War geopolitics. In this respect, Contadora represented a third-worldist and non-aligned proposal to pacify the Isthmus.

The Contadora Initiative captured the attention of the international community. Journalists across the globe reported on the possibility of a negotiated end to the Central American imbroglio through a Contadora-brokered-peace. The Organization of American States, United Nations, Socialist International and even Pope John Paul II praised the effort.\(^{404}\) Western European leaders, such as Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González, voiced their support and willingness to help, as did a number of Think Tanks and academics in the United States.\(^ {405}\) As policy analyst and former State Department member Susan Kaufman Purcell put it: “like motherhood and apple pie, Contadora is liked and supported by everyone.”\(^ {406}\) The widespread enthusiasm for Contadora denoted a rejection of efforts to secure peace through military victories and instead a pervasive desire for a negotiated and diplomatic solution to the Central American conflicts. It also attested to a lack of international support for framing the crises in the Isthmus as the products of East-West rivalries. In light of this widespread support, the Reagan Administration publicly towed the international line and proclaimed its support for the Contadora effort. In practice, however, Washington did little to support the effort; an effort that ultimately ran directly against its own policies in the region.

\(^{404}\) Jenkins, “Nicaragua Winning Support as US Policy Founders.”


While united in their goal to bring the crises in Central America out of the Cold War, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama each brought distinct domestic interests to the table. By crafting this regional peace effort the Contadora Four hoped to alter not only the history of the Isthmus but also that of their own countries. The polarization of the international system in the context of the Cold War placed particular constraints on the domestic and foreign policies of Latin American nations. With President Monroe’s (in)famous declaration “America for the Americans,” the United States had long regarded the region as its exclusive sphere of influence and Washington had long expected nations south of the Rio Grande to tow the line of U.S. global imperatives, regardless of how this may affect the domestic policies and societies of individual Latin American countries. How Latin American nations navigated the charged geopolitical waters of the Cold War, and attempted to assert independence from Washington while avoiding the wrath of the colossus to the north, is a central part of the history of modern Latin America. The Contadora effort to pacify Central America is an integral part of that story.

Mexico’s geographical proximity to the United States, and the deep social, economic and political ties that bound these two nations together, made it particularly vulnerable to U.S. pressure in the second half of the twentieth century. From the early days of the Cold War, Mexican administrations had struggled to avoid getting trapped in the Cold War’s geopolitical web, asserting some semblance of independence from their northern neighbor while avoiding an outright confrontation with their most significant foreign relation. On the one hand, Mexican administrations offered diplomatic—and at times material—support to actors in the region that defied U.S. hegemony, most notably Cuba after its 1959 revolution. The country was also an active participant in the Non-
Aligned Movement, which excluded the United States and challenged notions of a global order dominated by superpower rivalries, and it cast votes of dissent against U.S.-backed proposals in the Organization of American States. On the other hand, Mexico’s economic ties with its northern neighbor continued to flourish during the Cold War and, from the 1950s onwards, Mexico became a secret collaborator of U.S. foreign intelligence consenting to CIA operatives working out of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City and willingly collaborating with them. 407 As historian Patrick Iber notes, the CIA’s clandestine station in Mexico City eventually became one of the most important in the world. 408 In effect, Mexican diplomacy entailed a two-tracked approach devoid of ideological allegiances that was geared towards building bridges with actors on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This served Mexican Administrations well, allowing them to position themselves as intermediaries between warring groups in the region. Doing so, however, rested on a delicate balancing act that required juggling support for leftist movements while maintaining good relations with the United States.

The crises in Central America in the late 1970s and 1980s presented a particular challenge for Mexico. During the presidency of José López Portillo, who governed between 1976-1982, Mexico took an unprecedented interest in developments in the Isthmus. In clear defiance of Washington’s allegiances, it endorsed leftist movements in Central America, such as the FSLN and FMLN, which challenged authoritarian and exclusionary regimes. This caused clashes with the United States, particularly once Ronald Reagan came to power, and isolated Mexico from many of its Latin American neighbors concerned over the possible ascent of leftist insurgents in their own countries.

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407 For a detailed account of how this played out in the early years of the Cold War, see, Morley, *Our Man in Mexico*. Also see, Kaufman Purcell, “*Demystifying Contadora.*”

408 Patrick Iber, “Paraíso de Espías. La Ciudad de México Y La Guerra Fría,” *Nexos*, abril 2014
Bold policies such as the Franco-Mexican Declaration of 1981, which recognized the FMLN as a legitimate political force; siding with Nicaragua and Grenada in denying support to a U.S. resolution in the Organization of American States that endorsed the 1982 junta elections in El Salvador; and providing moral and material support to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, were amongst López Portillo’s most radical—and controversial—decisions.\(^409\)

In 1982, two developments led Mexico to tone down its independent diplomacy in Central America—in approach if not in substance. The first was the Mexican financial crisis, which came to light in the summer of 1982 when the country defaulted on its international debt. The United States, whose corporations and banks were deeply invested in the Mexican economy, was prompt to offer a bailout, convincing Western Central Banks to arrange an unprecedented 1.5 billion dollar loan to its southern neighbor. Mexico’s reliance on Washington to solve its financial problems was a reminder of the country’s financial dependence on its northern neighbor. It pushed Mexico to reduce bilateral tensions and no issue between the two countries was more contentious than the crises in Central America.\(^410\)

The second was the end of López Portillo’s term in office and the inauguration of Miguel de la Madrid as President of Mexico in November 1982.\(^411\) A technocrat educated at Harvard, de la Madrid was less nationalistic and hostile to the United States than López


\(^411\) For a thorough analysis of Mexico’s shifting policies towards Central America at the start of De La Madrid’s presidency, see Riding, *Distant Neighbors*, 358–63.
Portillo. His Foreign Minister, Bernardo Sepúlveda, was also a more sober and traditional diplomat than his predecessor, Jorge Castañeda de la Rosa. President de la Madrid could not entirely reverse course on his Central America policy. First, Anti-American sentiments remained a cornerstone of Mexican national identity and backing Reagan’s foreign policy in the Isthmus would have been tantamount to political suicide. Second, sympathizing with leftist movements in the region continued to serve the Mexican government well by providing a scapegoat for domestic leftist movements.\footnote{3} Third, after decades of ignoring their neighbors to the south and turning a blind eye to military dictatorships in the Isthmus, Mexican public servants had by the 1980s taken an interest in the plight of Central Americans fighting exclusionary regimes and relentless U.S. meddling in their internal affairs. High-ranking Mexican diplomats met personally with young and charismatic FMLN and FSLN leaders who made compelling cases about their grievances against repressive authoritarian governments.\footnote{4} Whether Mexican diplomats who empathized with the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutionaries were aware of the

\footnote{3} See \textit{Insurgent Diplomacy}, Chapter 2.

\footnote{4} In interviews held by the author with high-ranking Mexican public servants and diplomats made their sympathies with the FMLN, as opposed to the Salvadoran Army and the U.S.-backed Duarte Administration, quite evident in how they describe their interactions with each group. Bernardo Sepúlveda, for example, who represented Mexico in Contadora, recalls how in early 1982 he traveled to Managua and met privately with Joaquin Villalobos and other FMLN leaders. While Sepulveda, to this day, cannot forgive FMLN leader, Joaquin Villalobos, for his involvement in the assassination of Roque Dalton in the mid 1970s, the Mexican diplomat’s demeanor when he describes Mexico’s support for the FMLN leaves little doubt that he felt the insurgents had a legitimate \textit{casus belli}. Similarly, Jorge Montaño, who served as senior director of International Affairs at the Foreign Ministry and Gustavo Carvajal, then President of the PRI, both speak of the FMLN’s plight with sympathy. All three Mexican representatives are visibly and openly proud about the role Mexico played in securing a legitimate space for the Salvadoran left. Sepúlveda, Bernardo. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: August 3, 2011. Montaño, Jorge. \textit{Interview with author}. Mexico City, Mexico: July 27, 2011. Carvajal, Gustavo. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 25, 2011.
irony that their support for these actors enabled the Mexican one party-state to co-opt its own domestic left is another matter.

In launching the Contadora Initiative, the new administration of Miguel de la Madrid hoped to move its Central America policy from a radical to a more discreet approach and from solo leadership in the region to a rapprochement with its Latin American peers. At the same time, as scholar Esperanza Durán noted at the time, it preserved “Mexico’s role as “communicator” between the United States and what the latter regarded as the sources of subversion in Central America, namely Cuba, Nicaragua and the Salvadoran opposition.”414

Colombia, Venezuela and Panama also saw Contadora as an opportunity to assert independence from Washington and further specific domestic interests. For Colombia, its 1982 presidential election replaced Turbay Ayala with Belisario Betancourt. Ayala had systematically supported Ronald Reagan’s policies in Central America in exchange for Washington’s support in the war against Colombia’s leftist guerrillas. Betancourt came to power intending to reverse many of his predecessor’s policies. He was determined to settle Colombia’s perennial guerrilla problem through dialogue and negotiation rather than continue a futile military campaign that could claim little victories and many deaths. Betancourt also sought to improve relations with regional and global leftist actors—an aim not unrelated to the prospects of negotiating with his own guerrillas. Cognizant that Cuba carried significant moral clout with the Colombian insurgents—as it did with the entire Latin American left—he aspired to get closer to Havana. Taking this a step further, Betancourt reached out to the international left applying to join the Non-Aligned

Movement soon after taking office. As Susan Kauffman Purcell, then Director of the Latin American Program at the New York-based think tank Council of Foreign Relations, aptly put it:

Betancourt was trying to “Mexicanize” Colombia’s foreign policy. By pursuing a “progressive” foreign policy that included friendly relations with Cuba and Nicaragua, Betancourt hoped to discourage their support for the Colombian guerrillas and encourage them to cooperate with his government.415

Contadora presented President Betancourt with a platform from which to flex his diplomatic muscles and build international credentials as a credible negotiator. It also allowed the Colombian Administration to distance itself from Washington, a necessary step to repair bridges severed with Cuba and the international left.

Venezuela, in turn, had in the years preceding Contadora experienced a political shift that ran counter to that of Colombia. In 1979, the country voted to replace Social Democratic President, Carlos Andrés Perez, with Christian Democrat, Luis Herrera Campins. While Andres Pérez had supported the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and proved receptive to other leftist groups in the Isthmus, Campins opted to ally with the United States and supported two of the Reagan Administration’s main allies in the region: the contras in Nicaragua and the Salvadoran Christian Democrats led by Napoleon Duarte. Two events in 1982, however, caused Campins to reevaluate his policies towards Central America. The defeat of President Duarte in El Salvador in the 1982 election cooled Venezuelan support for the Salvadoran government. Campins no longer felt compelled by

his partisan and personal affinities for fellow Christian Democrat, Napoleón Duarte to unequivocally support the Salvadoran government. More importantly, however, the Reagan Administration’s support for Great Britain during the South Atlantic conflict and Falkland Island War angered many Latin American countries and temporarily cost Washington the support of even its conservative southern neighbors. In the aftermath of the Falkland War, the Venezuelan mandatory proved reluctant to continue backing United States’ policies in Central America and Contadora offered him a golden opportunity to mark some distance from Reagan.

Panama, situated geographically at the bottom of the Isthmus, was the most directly affected of the four Contadora countries by the conflicts in the region and consequently had the most to gain from a sovereign and peaceful Central America. For this reason, on three separate occasions in 1982, Panamanian President Ricardo de la Espriella attempted to single-handedly launch peace plans for the region. All three initiatives failed, however, evidencing that Panama lacked the international stature to rally sufficient support for a regional peace plan. The Contadora Initiative seemed to answer the Panamanian leader’s prayers offering the backing of three weighty regional powers in the effort to pacify Central America through diplomatic means. Contadora also proved attractive to a Panamanian Administration grappling with the loss of its former

\footnote{Jenkins, “Nicaragua Winning Support as US Policy Founders.”}

\footnote{William LeoGrande describes Venezuela’s attitude towards Central America as “a two-track policy, cooperating covertly with the United States…while also promoting diplomacy.” Esperanza Durán provides a more nuanced account of Venezuela’s shifting foreign policy in the region and argues that it can best be understood as a response to these two key events in 1982. LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard, 349; Durán, “The Contadora Approach to Peace in Central America,” 348–49.}

\footnote{For details on Panama’s three failed attempts to secure a peace plan in 1982 see Durán, “The Contadora Approach to Peace in Central America,” 350.}
leader, Omar Torrijos. A man whose ambitions and talents far exceeded the stage his country offered, Torrijos had been one of those men who are able to transcend their country’s lack of geopolitical clout and poverty and undertake foreign policies that capture the world’s attention. Under Torrijos, Panama became a noteworthy regional and global player and his premature death in 1981 left the country’s leaders struggling to maintain this international clout. Contadora offered Panama an opportunity to reaffirm its international stature, positioning it alongside weighty regional actors like Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela.

The governments of Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Panama were interested in a peaceful Central America and formed Contadora for that purpose. At the same time, supporting his regional peace effort became a means to further internal agendas that, with the exception of Panama who was geographically situated in the Isthmus, had little to do with Central America. For Colombia’s Belisario Betancourt, Contadora allowed him to build bridges with the Cubans and flex his muscles as negotiator. For President Campins of Venezuela, joining Contadora enabled him to mark some distance from the Reagan Administration in the aftermath of the Falkland Island War. Panamanian leader de la Espriella, eager to reestablish his country’s international standing in the wake of General Torrijos’ rule, could do so by joining Contadora. Finally, by spearheading this regional peace effort, Mexican President de la Madrid could abandon his predecessor’s lone-ranger diplomacy and multilateralize his involvement in the Isthmus, thus seeming less antagonistic to Washington while at the same time saving face with leftist actors at home and abroad. The internal considerations motivating the Contadora Four to undertake this regional peace effort attests to what diplomatic historians and international relations
theorists of the Liberal school have been arguing for years: that state actors are largely driven by domestic concerns when designing their foreign policies. What is more significant about the backstory of Contadora as discussed in the previous pages, however, is what it reveals about how countries in Latin America—which the United States considered it backyard—grappled with bipolar constraints and carved out their own diplomatic spaces in the midst of the Cold War. Furthermore, it speaks to the pivotal role the Central American crises played in the local histories of regional powers such as Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama. In this sense, the Contadora Initiative aimed to transform not just the crisis in the Isthmus but the political evolution of Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama.

Contadora's Attempt to “Save” Nicaragua

Differing domestic interests aside, Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia all wished to find a diplomatic and institutional alternative to conflicts of an increasingly military and extra-institutional character. The main obstacle to this goal was, in their view, the escalation of U.S. involvement in the region under the Reagan Administration. President Reagan’s foreign policy in Latin America was characterized by a staunch anticommmunist crusade and a desire to rebuild his country’s morale in the aftermath of the Vietnam fiasco. Consequently, his Administration’s policies in the Isthmus largely concentrated on funding, training and arming the Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalan militaries and the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries so they could secure absolute military victories against leftist groups seeking political representation. The Contadora Four feared that this foreshadowed an eventual direct and overt U.S. military invasion of Central America, a prospect they desperately wished to avert. As a high-ranking Mexican
official and regional diplomat bluntly put it: “We really didn’t want the United States to both the north and south of our borders. Having it as a northern neighbor was more than enough.”

To diminish the likelihood of a direct U.S. military invasion, the Contadora Four attempted to reframe Central American conflicts as regional Ibero-American processes that did not conform to Cold War rivalries. This was tied to the Contadora’s Group intent to exclude the United States from the Isthmus. Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid could not have been clearer when he stated: “Contadora represents a Latin American effort to resolve a Latin American conflict.”

In 1983, at the outset of Contadora, no country in Central America carried more weight in driving the threat of an overt U.S. military invasion than Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 was, Reagan argued, part of the international communist menace directed from Moscow. Vastly underestimating the FSLN’s political, diplomatic and military capabilities, Reagan hoped to overthrow the Nicaraguan Revolution by throwing its full weight behind the counter revolutionary movement known as the contras. The contra movement was not originally a U.S. fabrication. It emerged as a disjointed effort by a disparate group of Nicaraguan peasants (opposed to poorly planned land reform by the Sandinistas. Land scarcity had never a problem in Nicaragua.), upper class Nicaraguans (concerned that the leftist turn the Sandinistas were taking would close off political pluralism), and Miskito Indians from the northeast Atlantic Coast (a historically marginalized group with a long trajectory of seeking autonomy from governments in Managua that neither represented nor protected them). Although

419 Carvajal, Gustavo. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: July 25, 2011.
indigenous in its origins, the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionary movement became inextricably tied to Washington as Reagan threw his full weight behind the fragmented Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries—whom he was fond of praising as “freedom fighters”—supplying them with vast amounts of weapons, military training and financial resources.\footnote{The Reagan Administration’s relentless support of the contras, even in the face of mounting opposition by a U.S. Congress and public appalled with their human rights violations, eventually provoked the greatest crisis of Ronald Reagan’s Presidency. The Iran Contra Scandal, as this crisis was called, broke on November 3, 1986, when the Lebanese weekly \textit{Al Shiraa} blew the whistle on a top-secret operation by the U.S. government. For a little over a year, officials in Washington had been selling arms to Iranian militias. Over the next few weeks, U.S. citizens and the international community learned that high level officials within the Reagan administration had sold weapons to an embargoed Iran, and that the profits of the arms sales had been diverted to the Nicaraguan contras. The contras’ egregious human rights record had led a strong bipartisan bloc in the U.S. Congress to reject continuing support for the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries. In the summer of 1984, both Houses of Congress passed “Boland Amendment II”, which President Reagan signed into law in October 1984. The Boland Amendment put a stop to federal funds previously allocated for the contras and expressly forbade the U.S. government from providing military or paramilitary support to Nicaragua’s counterrevolutionary forces. Faced with lack of access to legitimate funding, government officials close to Reagan found extralegal sources of revenue to continue supporting their Central American “freedom fighters”: selling weapons to Iran for a profit that was then diverted into Nicaragua. When Congress and the U.S. public learnt about their governments’ dealings with Iranian terrorists and about the Executive violating domestic laws to support an unpopular foreign policy, they began to suspect and fear that the biggest danger to their democracy might actually be coming not from foreign foes but from within. This unleashed the Iran Contra Affair—the greatest political scandal of Ronald Reagan’s presidency and one of the greatest challenges faced by a U.S. administration in the twentieth century. For an unparalleled compilation of primary sources on the Iran Contra Affair, see, Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne, eds., \textit{The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History}, 1st ed (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1993). For a historical accounts of this episode, see, Theodore Draper, \textit{A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991). Other noteworthy accounts include, Ann Wroe, \textit{Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair} (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1991); Constantine Christopher Menges, \textit{Inside the National Security Council: The True Story of the Making and Unmaking of Reagan’s Foreign Policy} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).}

By late 1982, the Reagan Administration’s support for the contras and its vitriolic attacks on the Sandinistas had regional actors fearing that a direct U.S. military invasion of the Isthmus would take place in Nicaragua and that it was imminent. Contadora was in no small measure launched in the attempt to avoid this. At the heart of Reagan’s not-so-
covert war on the Sandinistas were accusations—not unfounded—that the FSLN was providing vital support to the FMLN insurgents in neighboring El Salvador. This, Washington argued, was proof that the Nicaraguan regime was part of an international communist conspiracy that threatened U.S. national security.

If Mexico, Colombia, Panama and Venezuela were to have a prayer at staving off a U.S. military invasion in the Isthmus, the FSLN-FMLN connection had to be placed front and center. Mexican intellectual, Jorge Castañeda Gutman, who followed the Contadora effort closely while working for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argues that the Contadora Group opted to “save” the Sandinista regime and sacrifice the insurgency in El Salvador.” Castañeda’s perception is correct but warrants dissecting. If taken at face value, his argument appears to suggest that the survival of the FMLN and FSLN were conceived as mutually exclusive, doubtless a misconception given the extent to which the FMLN relied on the support of the Sandinistas. Alongside Cuba, the FSLN was the FMLN’s most important military ally. Nicaragua was a vital point of transit to get weapons into El Salvador; the base for its clandestine radio service Radio Venceremos; and a heaven for FMLN military leaders who could retreat to safe houses in Nicaragua and hold meetings with one another or with foreign political and military representatives, something which was virtually impossible for the FMLN to do in war-ridden El Salvador. Given how vital the FSLN was to the FMLN, by “saving” the FSLN Contadora would seemingly also help to preserve the FMLN.

How the Contadora Four aimed to “save” revolutionary Nicaragua, however, was of critical importance. The Contadora Four understood the Sandinista regime as a fait

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423 For a more detailed examination of FSLN support for the FMLN, see Insurgent Diplomacy, chapter 2.
accompli. They also sensed, however, that how it consolidated and what international alignments it pursued were still being defined and could therefore be influenced by external powers. The Contadora Group believed there was a window of opportunity to coax the FSLN towards a more moderate domestic platform and foreign policy. They hoped that if the FSLN felt the support—and protection—of regional and international actors that were not aligned with the Soviets and in the Eastern camp, they would be amenable to toning down their socialist rhetoric and platform and thus become more palatable to Washington and to other Central American countries.

At the heart of Contadora’s effort to moderate and “save” the FSLN, was curtailing its covert military support for the insurgent Salvadorans. The proposals put forth in the Cancún Declaration, which stressed ceasing the transit and traffic in arms between Central American countries, advocated giving prior notice of important military troop movements within frontiers, and most important of all, organizing troops of frontier observers and mixed border security commissions to oversee the cessation of transport of weapons from one country to another, would have made the FSLN’s support for the FMLN impossible. The FMLN understood this and took its own set of actions to counter its “scarification” for a regional peace process that did not include it.

The FMLN Strikes Back

One of the biggest original sins of Contadora effort was in fact its failure to recognize the FMLN as a Central American actor of clout—en par with the Salvadoran government—without whom a Central American peace was impossible. To understand why this was the case it is essential to understand the internal dynamics of the FSLN-FMLN relationship.
The degree of Nicaraguan support to the FMLN was, throughout the entire 1980s, uncertain and in flux, or as FMLN commander Eduardo Sancho puts it: “getting the Sandinistas to send more arms to El Salvador was a constant battle throughout the war.”

In explaining the difficulties faced by the FMLN in getting weapons in from Nicaragua—as opposed to the Government of El Salvador’s ability to do so from the U.S.—Sancho says that the Salvadoran Regime had a faucet that they could open and weapons from the U.S. would flow in whereas the Salvadorans had a very narrow straw that they had to suck through. While Sancho’s analogy doubtless ignores the constraints faced by President Reagan to continue arming El Salvador, due to opposition from progressive Democrats in Congress and important civil society associations, his remarks nonetheless reflect the real asymmetry between the two warring parties of El Salvador in their ability to receive international military support.

While the affinities between the FSLN and FMLN were genuine and deep, supporting the Salvadorans was costly for the Sandinistas. The Nicaraguan Revolutionary regime was torn between the allure of non-alignment and the reality that they were a leftist revolutionary government attempting to consolidate in the epicenter of the Cold War and in the United States’ backyard.

Regional powers, through efforts such as the Contadora Initiative, and later its successor—the Esquipulas Peace Plan—offered to support the Sandinistas’ hold on power and territorial integrity in exchange for a Nicaraguan regime that played by the “Western rules of the game,” which they understood as procedural democracy and abidance of international legal principles of non-intervention. When the Sandinistas’

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appeared reluctant, Contadora was not above resorting to manipulation. In a conversation between historian Eric Hobsbawm and Colombian President Belisario Betancourt, the Latin American mandatory spoke frankly about this matter:

> I tell the Sandinistas: it all depends on you. The USSR won’t fight for you. If the USA invades, it might do something elsewhere in the world, but not in Central America. Cuba won’t help you. Look at Grenada. Why not settle for a pluralist socialism (including elections and a free press?)
> The US might just settle for this as the least bad solution, provided revolution was not exported, rather than face another Vietnam.⁴²⁶

Central to what Contadora expected was that the Sandinistas moderate their foreign relations by, above all, ceasing military support for the FMLN. The logic behind Contadora’s strategy was, in essence, one of co-optation: by reaching out to the FSLN and offering their support in exchange for moderation, Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela hoped to incentivize the Revolutionary Government of Nicaragua to adopt a more moderate path and undertake a social rather than a socialist revolution. If it consolidated as a social democracy, Contadora members hoped, Nicaragua would gain the support of key international actors like the United Nations and Western European governments, and most importantly, appear less threatening to Washington and to neighboring Central American regimes, thus thwarting the possibility of a U.S. invasion and the perpetuation of regional conflicts.⁴²⁷

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⁴²⁷ Mexican officials allege that they envisioned the FSLN adopting a course similar to that of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which briefly managed to consolidate as a social democracy in the 1930s and early 1940s. The differences between the Mexico of the 1930s and Nicaragua in the 1980s are too vast to discussion here, but the most evident one is that the two
Nicaragua demonstrated receptivity to the prospects of regional backing in exchange for moderation proving reticent to continue sending arms to El Salvador and limiting their extensive support for the Salvadoran revolutionaries. When this happened, the FMLN had no greater ally than Cuba. As internal FMLN documents written in the midst of the Esquipulas Peace Process reveal, when the Sandinistas limited their supply of weapons to their revolutionary neighbors, the Salvadorans turned to the Cubans for support. In a letter from FMLN leader Joaquín Villalobos to Fidel Castro, Villalobos conveys the FMLN’s concern over the Nicaraguans “conciliatory spirit, and how this may lead them, in their affinity to comply with international accords, to suspend communications with the FMLN.” Villalobos proceeds to recognize that the international context warrants that the FMLN operate with limited logistical support from Nicaragua, but argues that if this support ceased altogether the Salvadoran insurgent movement would face “severe damages.” Trying to appeal to Castro’s geopolitical sensitivities, the FMLN leader states that ceasing FSLN support for the FMLN would constitute “a tremendous concession to imperialism, without it having given anything significant in return.” Villalobos then shares a letter with Castro that the FMLN’s General Command intends to send the FSLN’s Directorate and asks for the Cuban leader’s advice on how best to frame the FMLN’s plea for continued support.428

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In another letter, written by Joaquin Villalobos two weeks later, this time addressed to the head of Cuba’s Americas Department, Manuel Piñeiro, the FMLN leader shares the Salvadoran insurgents’ concern and frustration over decreased and uncertain support from Nicaragua. Villalobos pleads with the Cuban leader to help in establishing some kind of formal or informal agreements between the FMLN and FSLN regarding the Sandinistas support.429

While the aforementioned documents date from 1987, and are written in the context of the Esquipulas Regional Peace Plan, they disclose important dynamics that were not confined to a specific moment in time. First, they confirm the assessment by various FMLN leaders that Cuban diplomacy was pivotal in securing the extensive degree of Sandinista support received by the Salvadoran revolutionaries throughout their civil war.430 While these documents are from the FMLN and lack a Cuban response, the fact that the FSLN did not cease their support for the Salvadorans throughout their whole time in power suggests that they were persuaded. The FMLN leadership felt it could rely on Havana to pressure the Sandinistas to continue their support for the Salvadoran insurgents, even when this seemed to run counter to the interests of the Nicaraguan regime who may have benefitted from decreasing or ceasing its support for the insurgents altogether.

Second, the FMLN’s internal documents speak to how movements seemingly at the mercy of Cold War rivalries were in fact able to manipulate the geopolitical context

in their favor. Just as the United States’ support for the contras was allegedly driven by the FSLN backing the FMLN, the Salvadoran insurgents used United States’ meddling in Nicaragua to pressure the Sandinistas to provide Salvadoran insurgents with more support. FMLN leaders understood full well that their organization was a pawn in the geopolitical chess game of the Cold War, and they set out to use this to their advantage. Internal FMLN documents dating back to as early as 1982 and as late as 1989 reveal that Salvadoran revolutionary leaders would use U.S. weapons provisions to the contras and to the Salvadoran Army to pressure both the Cuban and FSLN regimes to supply the FMLN with comparable weapons. This, the FMLN argued, could help to “even out the correlation of forces” between the U.S.-backed contras and Salvadoran regime, and the Cuban and Nicaraguan-backed FMLN. In 1982, for example, when the United States supplied A-37 planes to the Salvadoran military, the FMLN leadership elaborated a proposal for Fidel Castro and Humberto Ortega in which they asked for the FMLN to be supplied with 10 Soviet surface-to-air-missiles (SAM 7), and that a select group of FMLN combatants be trained to operate them. They would be used, the FMLN argued, only in 1 or 2 operations, after which the FMLN would destroy them, but they would signal to the U.S. that they were not winning the arms race in Central America.  

A few years later, when the Reagan Administration supplied the Nicaraguan contras with “REDEYE” surface-to-air missiles, the FMLN again used this as leverage to pressure the Sandinistas into providing the FMLN with their own. In an internal document written by FMLN leader Joaquín Villalobos to the rest of the FMLN’s General Command, Villalobos speaks of a lobbying effort undertaken by Communist Party leader and FMLN

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Commander Shafik Handal to convince the Sandinistas and Cubans of this. Villalobos speaks of how recent actions by the Reagan Administration will strengthen the FMLN’s plea. “The Yankees have created favorable international political conditions (supplying missiles to the Angolans, Afghans and Nicaraguans (contras) so we can also obtain those weapons which would accelerate the course of the war in El Salvador in our favor.” As this internal document makes clear, the FMLN understood how to manipulate the geopolitical Cold War matrix to its advantage.432

Third, they reveal that efforts to “moderate” the regional left faced not only overt opposition from Washington but also covert opposition from Havana. In effect, the FSLN was torn between its seeming receptivity to the soft power approaches of regional powers like Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela and the reality that it was at the epicenter of a global civil war that aligned it with the insurgent left. Ultimately, the Sandinistas proved willing to thy their luck at moderation in exchange for survival. However, as the following section demonstrate, the Reagan Administration was unable—or unwilling—to accept the Sandinistas malleability and refused to consent to a Nicaragua run by the Sandinistas, regardless of their policies.

Reagan Boycotts Contadora

Having achieved only meetings, working groups, and proclamations in its first fifteen months, in September 1983 Contadora appeared to be making headway when it put forth a “Document of Objectives” that all five Central American nations endorsed. The Document expanded on the Cancun Declaration and presented 21 recommendations

geared towards achieving peace, security, and economic and social development as well as strengthening democratic institutions. All five Central American nations endorsed the Document and in theory committed themselves to ending the arms race, banning the presence of foreign military forces and installations on their territory, halting arms traffic in the region, opposing acts of sabotage in the Isthmus, and bringing about national reconciliation in each country. In practice, however, none of the Central American nations, aside from Nicaragua, took steps to comply with the Document’s Objectives.

By December of that year, the Sandinista regime had offered to halt arms purchases, reduce the size of its army, remove foreign military advisors, end support for regional revolutionary movements, and remove Salvadoran rebel leaders—some of whom had already left in a “goodwill” gesture—from its territory.\(^3\) In further compliance with the 21 Objectives, the Nicaraguan government took steps to end censorship and even granted amnesty to thousands of counter-revolutionaries.\(^4\) The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras or Costa Rica implemented no comparable changes, and, the United States did not soften its involvement in the region. In December 1983, and on behalf of the Contadora team, Colombian President Betancourt publicly requested that the United States “moderate its policies in Central America with concrete actions to support Contadora.”\(^5\) His pleas seemingly fell on deaf ears and elicited no visible change in U.S. policies.

In June 1984, the Contadora Four published their “Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America.” The Act re-stated the points made in earlier

\(^3\) Jenkins, “Nicaragua Winning Support as US Policy Founders.”
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
declarations, but it also put forth proposals that stressed the need to advance pluralist democracies with freedom for distinct and conflicting political groups, including guarantees for opponents and amnesties. Contadora submitted the Act for Peace and Cooperation to the five Central American countries on September 7th for their revision.\footnote{436} After two weeks of intensive scrutiny, and to everyone’s surprise, the Sandinistas agreed to accept the Act without alterations. The United States, promptly argued that the document was a mere draft, not yet intended for ratification and instructed U.S. envoy to Central America, Harry Shlaudeman, to pressure the remaining Central American nations—Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala—who had expressed support for the document earlier, not to sign the treaty.\footnote{437} This caused a severe blow to the Contadora effort and worried international powers wishing to see a diminished role for Cold War rhetoric in global foreign affairs. In the aftermath of the US boycott of the Act, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wu Xuequian, blamed US policy for instability in the region and praised the Contadora Group as “making positive efforts to find a peaceful solution to Central American problems.” Xuequian also remarked: “any outside interference in the internal affairs in any Central American country should not be allowed, especially the armed interference and military threats from the superpowers.”\footnote{438}

The Reagan Administration had no interest in the success of a peace process that safeguarded the survival of a revolutionary regime in the Isthmus, even if the Nicaraguan

\footnote{436} For detailed minutes of the various meetings that took place between the original meeting in Contadora in January 1983 and mid June 1984, when the group presented its “Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America,” see: Víctor, \textit{Relación de Contadora}. For an excellent summary and thoughtful analysis see Pettrash and Sims, “The Contadora Peace Process.”


regime that came out of it was a more centrist one, willing to play nice with its neighbors and mark some distance from the Cubans and the Soviet Union. While publicly Washington professed its support for Contadora, it very rapidly set out to counter it. In the words of then Mexican Foreign Minister, Bernardo Sepúlveda: “publicly, the United States supported us but in reality they implemented a very consistent boycott against our efforts.”

The Kissinger Commission was perhaps the most evident manifestation of the Reagan Administration’s intent to sabotage Contadora.

In July 1983, President Reagan appointed a National Bipartisan Commission to evaluate the situation in Central America and deliver an outline for future administration policy in the region. Chaired by former Secretary of State, Henry A. Kissinger, the twelve-member Commission was designed to provide a rationale for United States policy in Central America, not to design a new one. The Kissinger Commission, as this bipartisan group came to be called, was the brainchild of United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Jean Kirkpatrick and Senator Henry Jackson. Both neoconservatives, they intended for the Commission to prepare an agenda that would calm the debate at home over Reagan’s policy in the region and coax more Democratic congress members onto the President’s side. Whether intentional or not, the Commission’s work also took the spotlight away from Contadora. According to historian William M. LeoGrande, Reagan appointed the Central American Commission aiming to recreate the 1983 Scowcroft commission on the MX missile. This putatively bipartisan commission, created by Reagan when Congress halted production of the MX, was stacked with members guaranteed to support building the missile. The authority of their report was

440 LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard, 238.
then used to win back enough support from moderate Democrats in Congress to resurrect the MX.

A profound ignorance of Central America united the Commission’s twelve members. Kissinger aide William D. Rogers described the members’ initial knowledge as “Zero…they were appallingly ignorant of the realities of Central America.” 441 Given the members’ unfamiliarity with the region, Kissinger could largely mold the Commission’s deliberations by managing the flow of information presented to them. Not surprisingly, the report put forth by the Commission on January 11, 1984, framed the Central American crises within the paradigm of an East-West dichotomy. It’s main thesis was that the exploitation of Central American unrest by the Soviets and Cubans was at the heart of the problem and that unrest in the region represented a direct affront to U.S. national interests. Consequently, it called for increased U.S. military assistance to its Central American allies to defeat externally supported insurgency. The Commission also called for what LeoGrande terms a “mini-Marshall Plan” of economic aid to address the region’s social and economic ills, but it was plain that military prerogatives took center stage. 442 The Commission advocated implementing the “military-shield concept” in Central America. This consisted of the U.S. providing Central American allied governments with a military shield from their respective domestic oppositions so that they could then feel secure enough to make the necessary changes to win over popular support. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was quick to point out, this notion was deeply flawed from the outset as “regimes requiring military shields against their own people are under

442 Ibid., 239–40.
The Kissinger Commission thus failed to account for the reality that by bolstering militarism in the region they were weakening precisely the moderate democratic forces that they purported to defend. Furthermore, the Commission failed to account for the extent to which the United States’ meddling in Central American affairs heightened polarization and escalated conflicts. As the progressive U.S.-based Think Tank Central America Research Institute explained:

*While the Commission recommends reducing the levels of Central American conflicts, it recommends continuation of U.S. military involvement. It ignores that the most important and most obvious power outside of Central America which is involved in the region in the United States, and that the consequences of this involvement directly escalate the national conflicts to regional ones—to levels significantly beyond what would have prevailed without U.S. involvement.*

It is worth noting that the flawed logic that underlined the Kissinger Commission’s “military-shield concept” was almost identical to the reasoning behind former President Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, only this time it was directed only at Central America rather than the entire region. Had the Kissinger Commission’s members taken it upon themselves to learn a little bit about the region’s recent history, they might have found that the inherent contradictions of the Alliance for Progress, that advocated

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economic development while simultaneously strengthening the social forces most fervently opposed to that development, had in fact contributed significantly to the polarization that gave way to Central America’s civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s.\textsuperscript{445}

The Kissinger Commission failed to have much of an impact on congressional debates in the United States, bit it did affect the course of the Contadora Initiative.\textsuperscript{446} The Commission’s work let Central American governments know that the Reagan Administration planned to continue carrying out business as usual in the Isthmus—supporting counterinsurgency efforts and rejecting negotiated peace treaties that were not the product of the military capitulation of leftist insurgents. Secure in this knowledge, governments and militaries in the Isthmus were dissuaded from taking the Contadora peace effort seriously.

\textit{Chronicle of a Death Foretold}

Contadora ultimately failed in its efforts to bring peace to the region through diplomacy. The outpouring of support for its platform by global Western leaders and journalists demonstrated an important current of support for the third-worldist and non-

\textsuperscript{445} In his exhaustive history of the Dominican Republic’s Civil War in the mid 1960s, Piero Gleijeses describes this contradiction as the “catch 22” of U.S. development policy inherent in the so-called Alliance for Progress. The perceived threat of Castro-communism led the United States to launch a development program in Latin America that rested on social reforms and political democratization. This same perceived threat however, pushed the United States to increase support for Latin America’s armed forces, which had historically opposed political democratization and social reforms. Development goals took a back seat to security concerns and above all anticommunism. Ultimately, the inherent contradictions of the Alliance for Progress worked to polarize politics in the region, closing off the possibility of centrist democratic alternatives. The “peaceful revolutions” in the Americas the Alliance promised never materialized. Piero Gleijeses, \textit{La esperanza desgarrada: la rebelión dominicana de 1965 y la invasión norteamericana} (Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2011), 140. For an account of how the Alliance for Progress contributed to the polarization in El Salvador see \textit{Insurgent Diplomacy}, Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{446} Historian William Leo Grande argues that the Commission’s report did secure Congressional support for Reagan’s policy as the President had intended when creating the commission. LeoGrande, \textit{Our Own Back Yard}, 239.
aligned vision of the conflicts the Group espoused. However, the regional peace process was designed in such a way that made success practically impossible. Contadora was, from the outset, crippled by a series of oversights that led to its persistent ineffectuality.

First, for the regional peace effort to succeed at resolving the crises of the Isthmus through diplomacy, the Central American imbroglio would have to be extricated from the geopolitical Cold War chess game. Contadora understood this and attempted to change perceptions of the conflicts presenting them as regional problems—unrelated to East-West rivalries—that warranted regional solutions. In aiming to take the Isthmus out of the broader geopolitical context, however, Contadora failed to account for the most important international players in Central America: Cuba and the United States, both of whom were drawing the regional crises squarely to the center of the Cold War. Contadora’s “soft power” approach of diplomacy was, in the mid 1980s, no match for the clout that Cuba and the United States carried with decisive agents in the Isthmus. Attempting to sweep this clout under the rug and not including the United States and Cuba in their effort was a critical oversight.

Second, the Contadora Four faced the same problems common to many international organizations and advocacy groups: they had no enforcement mechanisms at their disposal through which to ensure the implementation of their recommendations. Although Contadora managed to get the five Central American governments to sign the September 1983 “Document of Objectives,” none of the Central American administrations—aside from Nicaragua—actually took steps to implement the recommendations. Mistrustful of one another, the nations of the Isthmus perceived themselves as trapped in a prisoners’ dilemma where any compromise they made was
their loss and their adversaries gain. The Contadora Group, bereft of mechanisms to enforce its proposals or oversee their implementation, lacked the muscle to acquiesce the fears of the region’s governments.\textsuperscript{447} The Central American administrations ultimately did not recognize the sovereignty of the Sandinista regime. Representatives from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Costa Rica categorically refused to meet with their Sandinista counterparts.\textsuperscript{448} The Central American leader’s unwillingness to engage directly with the Nicaraguans was a bad omen for an effort seeking to build a joint strategy for peace based on mutual compromises, a reality that did not escape scrutiny from the international press.\textsuperscript{449} By refusing to recognize the Sandinista regime as a fait accompli and as its counterpart in the region, Central American governments sabotaged Contadora from within. Ultimately, Central American nations did not see Contadora as a legitimate interlocutor to help resolve their problems.\textsuperscript{450} It is crucial to account for this consequential Central American agency in crippling the efforts of Contadora. To do

\textsuperscript{447} Political scientists Vilma Pettrash and Harold Dana Sims, predicted the following regarding the failures of Contadora: “Third parties may be unable to initiate negotiations between contending states suffering internal war and external interventions aimed at intensifying war. When the states attempting the effort have prestige but little material weight in the region (only Mexico was a major oil supplier, for example), they are in no position to force a decision.” Pettrash and Sims, “The Contadora Peace Process,” 6.

\textsuperscript{448} Mexican Foreign Minister Bernardo Sepúlveda recalls that this initially took Contadora members by surprise and that it represented an unequivocal obstacle to their efforts for a regional diplomatic peace. “What was most surprising to us (the Contadora Four),” Sepúlveda recalls, “was the categorical refusal of the four Central American Foreign Ministers to meet with their Nicaraguan counterpart” Sepúlveda, Bernardo. Interview with author. Mexico City, Mexico: August 3, 2011.


\textsuperscript{450} Salvadoran President Napoleón Duarte statements in May 1984 when he traveled to Guatemala, Costa Rica and Honduras and snubbed Contadora as “an organism formed by four countries that believe they have the right to intervene in the region,” reflect a lack of support for an effort seen as an exogenous imposition. Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior de Mexico. “Recuento latinoamericano: El Salvador, actividades del president electo.” \textit{Comercio Exterior}, Mexico Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior, vol. 34, no.7, Julio de 1984, p.630. Cited in Peñate, \textit{El Salvador del Conflicto Armado a la Negociación}. 

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otherwise would reduce actors in the Isthmus to mere Cold War pawns. Alongside U.S. and Cuban opposition to the peace project, there was genuine and consequential regional opposition—emanating from Central American regimes and from the FMLN insurgents—to Contadora.

Third, Contadora attempted to operate within the bounds of traditional diplomacy, and yet, the crises faced by Central American nations in the 1980s were anything but traditional. The Contadora Group attempted to diffuse tensions and resolve conflicts between states by dealing exclusively with the five Central American governments and treating the governments of those states as hegemonic entities within their own borders. Contadora overlooked—and failed to include in its negotiations—insurgent forces in El Salvador, which had become a de facto power in regional affairs en par with the Salvadoran state, the Salvadoran contras and the Guatemalan revolutionary movement URNG. Contadora’s lack of material weight in the region, and its consequent inability to implement recommendations, was coupled with non-cohesive Central American governments whose hold on power was tenuous at best due to internal fractiousness. This was a much more complex process that required fixing from inside. The insurmountable challenges faced by El Salvador a year after the launch of Contadora, as the country launched its own peace attempt in La Palma, evidence why a regional peace was impossible to achieve while individual nations remained torn domestically and in the eye of the Cold War storm.

*The La Palma Negotiations*

Before dawn, on October 14th 1984, tens of thousands of excited Salvadorans began their journey to La Palma, a picturesque town of about 10,000 inhabitants in El
Salvador’s northeastern province of Chalatenango. Convoys of lorries, cars and buses roared up the twisted, poorly paved mountain road to the town where thousands of people were expected to congregate. For the first time since the outbreak of civil war, citizens had reason to hope that the brutal conflict—which had already left upwards of 50,000 dead—could be nearing its end.

Six days earlier, on October 8th, Salvadoran President Napoleon Duarte announced at the United Nation’s General Assembly in New York City, that he invited the FMLN to participate in the first unconditional dialogue for peace between the guerrillas and the Salvadoran government. Duarte’s dramatic announcement shocked the world. He promised to go unarmed and without security: “I am placing my life as a guarantee to have this meeting attain peace,” he professed.\footnote{Henry Trewhitt, “Salvador Rebels Get Talks Bid: Duarte Invites Guerrillas to Parley,” \textit{The Sun (1837-1991)}, October 9, 1984.} As further proof of good will, Duarte suggested to hold the meeting in La Palma, in the heart of FMLN controlled territory.\footnote{Chalatenango, located in the northwestern part of El Salvador was one of two dominant territorial strongholds of the FMLN. The other was Morazán, located in the northeastern part of the country. Chalatenango was controlled by the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL)—the FMLN faction led by Salvador Sánchez Cerén “Leonel González” since the death of Cayetano Carpio and the insurgent group with the largest number of combatants. In turn, Morazán was largely under the control of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), led by Joaquin Villalobos. While the ERP was smaller in numbers that the FPL, the group in Morazán was considered to be the most militarily audacious, a reality that earned Villalobos preferential treatment from Cuban leader Fidel Castro.} The day after Duarte’s announcement, the guerrilla-run radio, \textit{Radio Venceremos}, broadcasted that the FMLN accepted the President’s proposal and would send two representatives from its political organization, the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), and two of its highest-ranking military commanders to La Palma. In exchange, they requested that members of the Salvadoran Army’s high command also be present at the talks alongside President Duarte.
The guerrillas’ announcement that they would send two military commanders—in addition to two FDR representatives—was significant. Guerrilla combat leaders were seldom seen in public as political and diplomatic activities were reserved for members of the FDR and the Political Diplomatic Commission (CPD). While the military and political-diplomatic wings of the FMLN were in constant communication and operated in tandem, conservative sectors of Salvadoran society accused the FDR and CPD of being mere puppets or civilian facades of a military organization in which guerrilla leaders called the shots. The FMLN made parallel accusations and charged that the civilian government, now led by Napoleón Duarte, was the civil façade of the Salvadoran Army. The participation of guerrilla leaders and Salvadoran Army commanders in La Palma was intended to attest both warring parties in El Salvador that their opponents were taking the proposed peace talk seriously.

The FMLN’s prompt acceptance of Duarte’s invitation to negotiate must not have surprised the Salvadoran mandatory. On two prior occasions earlier that year, albeit in a much less public fashion, the FMLN had reached out to President Duarte proposing to sit down together and discuss a negotiated end to the conflict. Both efforts by the Salvadoran insurgents to reach out to Duarte were through politically active religious figures and their role in attempting to broker negotiations speaks to the FMLN’s elevated level of diplomatic and political organization, as well as the involvement of non-belligerent local and international actors in early efforts to end the war. The FMLN’s first attempt sheds light on the Salvadoran Catholic Church’s role as mediator between the government and guerrillas. The second, speaks to the divided nature of United States’ politics regarding
Ronald Reagan’s involvement in El Salvador and sheds light on the FMLN’s ability to tap into these divisions to further their clout.

The first time the FMLN informed Duarte that the guerrillas were interested in holding peace talks was in May 1984 through Arturo Rivera y Damas, the Archbishop of San Salvador. Rivera y Damas had succeeded Monseñor Oscar Romero after his brutal assassination in 1980. Albeit more moderate than his predecessor, he nonetheless energetically endorsed arriving at peace through dialogue. This earned the Archbishop a fair share of enemies within the political right and Salvadoran Church—an institution divided and polarized between leftists who sympathized with the FMLN and FDR and conservatives tied to the military and oligarchy—that regarded his endorsement of negotiating with the guerrillas as treason.\textsuperscript{453} Notwithstanding marked opposition to Rivera y Damas by important sectors of the Salvadoran right, the Archbishop had a positive rapport with both the FMLN and the Duarte Administration. His sympathies with the basic tenets of Christian Democracy had brought him close to leaders of the Christian Democratic Party of El Salvador (PDC), including President Duarte.

In turn, Rivera y Damas had earned the respect of the FMLN by defending Monseñor Romero from the criticisms he had faced within the Church. Furthermore, the guerrillas recognized and appreciated the Archbishop for taking an independent stance from the Salvadoran military Junta, and for distancing himself from conservatives within

\textsuperscript{453} Divisions within the Salvadoran Church, between those who denounced the military’s trajectory of human rights abuses and advocated for the plight of the country’s poor and conservative members allied with the country’s oligarchs and military leaders, became more acute after the assassination of Archbishop Romero. Barely a month after Romero's murder in May 1980, a group of priests, religious women and laypersons founded CONIP (the National Coordinating Committee of the Oscar Romero Popular Church.) Conservative bishops condemned it outright. In spite of lack of support from other bishops and pressure from Rome to maintain episcopal unity, Arturo Rivera y Damas gradually began to show signs of following an independent course.
the Church. For example, when Mexico and France recognized the FMLN as a "representative political force" in their 1981 Franco-Mexican Declaration, Rivera y Damas dissented from the Salvadoran Government and episcopal powers who rejected it as unwarranted and unwelcome foreign interference, and instead argued that it was an international call for dialogue between the warring factions. Furthermore, Rivera y Damas carried favor with the FMLN-FDR when in 1983 he created the *Tutela Legal* (Legal Defense). This office replicated the model of Archbishop Romero’s “Legal Aid” and set out to investigate cases of disappearances, tortures and human rights violations. It's most important function was publishing detailed reports of arrests, disappearances and killings. These reports became the principal source for the Archbishop’s denunciation of human rights violations.\footnote{Jeffrey Klaiber, *The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America* by Jeffrey Klaiber (Orbis Books, 1998), 168–92.} Rivera y Damas’ good standing with the Duarte Administration and with the guerrilla leadership made him an unusual figure in Salvador politics and a uniquely acceptable mediator. He would play an active role in negotiation attempts and preside over the eventual meeting in La Palma.\footnote{For a gripping historical account of the Catholic Church’s role in the origins of the Salvadoran revolutionary movement see: Sánchez, *Priest Under Fire.*}

The FMLN’s first attempt to reach Duarte through Rivera y Damas failed to elicit a response from the Salvadoran President. Undeterred, the revolutionaries tried a second time in July. On this occasion, they also appealed to United States presidential candidate, Reverend Jesse Jackson, to relay their message. A civil rights activist and Baptist minister, Jackson contended the Democratic Party’s nomination for the upcoming Presidential elections in November 1984. The Reverend’s interest in Latin America and specifically on United States policies in the region was unusual for a U.S. presidential
candidate. Staunchly critical of President Reagan’s policies on immigration and on the crisis in Central America, Jackson made traveling south of the Rio Grande part of his presidential campaign. In May 1984, he visited Mexico to discuss immigration, the international debt crisis and the crisis in the Isthmus. Here, he met with members of the FMLN’s Political Diplomatic Commission stationed in Mexico City, where they had their permanent office since 1981. Subsequently, he embarked on what he called “a peace mission” for Central America that entailed travels to Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Cuba. Reverend Jackson met with the heads of state of each of the country’s he visited, save for Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid. Latin American leaders doubtless welcomed the unusual level of attention that Jackson seemed to be placing on the region. While regional leaders knew full well that Jackson faced an uphill battle to secure his Party’s nomination, first within his Party and then against an incumbent whose high approval ratings at home seemed relentless, they perceived him to be a progressive force; someone with the will—if not yet the power—to curb Reagan's policy in Latin America by emphasizing diplomacy and political solutions.

FMLN leaders shared this perception and were compelled to meet with Jackson when he visited Panama City on June 24th. The guerrillas perceived that the presidential candidate could be a valuable spokesperson for their movement upon returning to the United States public. Furthermore, they knew that Jackson would be traveling to El

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457 While Jackson met with Foreign minister Bernardo Sepúlveda and high-ranking members of the Mexican government, President De La Madrid had to be cautious not to appear like he was meddling in a U.S. election. Mexico’s independent approach to the crisis in Central America had been at the root of tensions between both countries, especially in recent months as Mexico tried to spearhead a regional effort for a negotiated peace.
Salvador and was scheduled to meet with President Duarte, so they asked the Reverend to convey to the Salvadoran mandatory that they were prepared to sit down with the Salvadoran government and army and discuss a possible negotiation. The FMLN offered to go into peace talks without preconditions, to discuss a political rather than a military solution to the conflict, to consider the implementation of a cease-fire, and to begin the process immediately. In El Salvador, Duarte hosted a luncheon in honor of Jackson’s delegation, and afterwards the two men met privately. Jackson relayed the FMLN’s message to the Salvadoran President, but as had occurred earlier with Arturo Rivera y Damas, President Duarte disregarded the FMLN’s overture.458

In his own account of the historic meeting of La Palma, Duarte leaves little doubt that he wishes to appear as the sole architect of the negotiations. In his memoir, published a mere two years after the talks in La Palma, he makes no mention of the FMLN’s earlier overtures for dialogue, instead casting himself as a Don Quixote attempting to champion peace when no one else dared.459 Recounting events in such a way was doubtless a political calculation by the Salvadoran mandatory that sensed there was much to gain from extending an olive branch to the FMLN, seemingly unilaterally, before the eyes of the world at the United Nations General Assembly. Duarte’s decision to offer to negotiate was, in fact, not the product of one man’s desire for peace but of a series of processes that had made the Salvadoran government’s current strategy of exacting an absolute military defeat seem improbable and most importantly, highly unpopular.

459 Duarte, Duarte, 208–9.
The Human Rights Crisis

For many observers, Duarte’s willingness to sit down with the guerrillas was a sign of the FMLN’s military strength and indicative of a stalemate between the FMLN and the Salvadoran Army. By 1984 when Duarte came to power, the FMLN had indeed mushroomed from a fringe guerrilla organization in 1980, chased out of the cities and into the countryside by a U.S.-backed Salvadoran state, to an armed movement with significant territorial sovereignty. By the end of 1982, the FMLN was demonstrating its ability to launch highly successful military operations, and in January 1983 alone, the FMLN initiated 181 military actions that disclosed their ability to attack broad areas of the country.\textsuperscript{460} Thomas Pickering, who was named U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador in 1983, recalls arriving in September in the midst of a “very successful FMLN offensives against the Salvadoran military.” “The country,” he notes, “was almost cut in half.”\textsuperscript{461} The FMLN’s strength, in terms of both territorial control and number of combatants, continued to grow throughout the following year. By October 1984, when Duarte proposed the meeting in La Palma, the FMLN was estimated to have between 9,000 and 12000 guerrilla combatants, in addition to support and sympathy of many rural groups, and to control or have freedom of movement in about one third of the country’s territory.\textsuperscript{462} The FMLN controlled large rural mountainous areas in the northern western


\textsuperscript{461} Thomas Pickering, “The Global Context: How Did Changing Cold War Dynamics Shape the Prospect for Peace?” (New York University and Columbia University, April 1, 2016).

Chalatenango province and sizeable regions in the eastern provinces of San Miguel, Morazán, Usulután and La Unión. They also enjoyed freedom of movement in the areas of Cuscatlán and Cabañas northeast of the capital.  

These numbers are doubtless reflective of a powerful military group. The notion that there was an actual military stalemate, however, is largely exaggerated. When Duarte suggested negotiations at La Palma, the FMLN was largely outnumbered. The Salvadoran state was estimated to have about 31,000 troops in its military and 11,000 in security forces (made up of the National Guard, the police and the Treasury Police), and counted with an additional 15,000 members in the Civil Defense Force that acted as backup to the military. While the FMLN’s territorial hold was significant, the state controlled the large population centers and most of the economically important parts of the countryside, including nearly the entire west where much of the country’s coffee was grown. Salvadoran General Mauricio Vargas argues that idea of a stalemate was ridiculous and that the Army would never have conceded to negotiations if they did not feel that they enjoyed a military advantage that would enable them to dictate the terms of the negotiations.

While the FMLN’s proven military strength expectedly played into Duarte’s willingness to sit down with them in La Palma, his openness to negotiate was largely driven by global public opinion, an often overlooked yet decisive factor of the Salvadoran Civil War.


463 “Issues and Forces at La Palma Meeting.”
464 Ibid.
The presidential election on May 6, 1984 made Duarte the first popularly elected president in modern Salvadoran history, giving him and his Christian Democratic Party (PDC) a degree of legitimacy that they had previously lacked. The egregious human rights crisis in El Salvador, however, had captured the attention of an international community that largely—and not without cause—seemed to blame Salvadoran state forces and right-wing paramilitaries for violations.

The years 1980-1983 had been the bloodiest in Salvadoran history. Between 1980 and 1983, a record 20,172 political assassinations were estimated to have taken place, and between 1981 and 1983 a record 2,844 forced disappearances. Because many of the deaths and disappearances were not reported or traced, the numbers were probably much higher. The country’s jails overflowed with political prisoners, dead tortured bodies appeared daily on the cities’ sidewalks or in fields in the countryside, and the stench of dead bodies burning became a familiar smell for Salvadorans. Although newspapers and radio stations in the country—all under the State’s firm grasp—routinely ignored these crimes or attributed them to the guerrillas, many of the tortured dead bodies were found bearing the emblem of right-wing death squads, doubtless a strategy employed by the paramilitary organizations to terrify civilians and secure their acquiescence to the government. Furthermore, men in military uniform frequently raided villages suspected

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466 1980, the year Napoleon Duarte presided over the junta, was the bloodiest in the history of the Salvadoran Civil War. In that year alone, over 9000 political assassinations were recorded in the country whose total population was estimated at 4.8 million. Without mentioning Duarte, the Washington Post pointed this out to its readers as the year 1980 was coming to a close. See, Gallardo and López, *Centroamerica: La Crisis En Cifras*, 238–39.P.238-239. And Christopher Dickey Washington Post Foreign Service, “4 U.S. Catholics Killed in El Salvador: 4 American Catholics Killed in El Salvador,” *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, December 5, 1980.
of aiding the guerrillas and were notorious for repressing strikes and peaceful demonstrations in the capital.

The small geographical size of El Salvador, which approximates the U.S. state of Massachusetts, and the dissipated nature of the Civil War, meant that practically no community in the country was spared the quotidian experience of the brutal conflict. As part of his 1984 presidential campaign, the Duarte struggled to clear his own image—tarnished by his participation in the Junta government that had overseen some of the worst human rights atrocities—by promising respect for human rights and to bring violence to an end. Now that he had been elected, he needed to take compelling steps in that direction or risk loosing the popular support that had brought him to power.

Of perhaps greater concern for Duarte than popular domestic opposition to the war was the reality that the government he now presided faced a pressing legitimacy crisis abroad. Since the reformist military coup of 1979, and especially after the official outbreak of civil war with the FMLN’s “final offensive” in January 1981, the conflict in the smallest Central American country had come to be a focal point of international media attention. Citizens around the globe, from London, Berlin, and Paris; to Mexico City, Caracas, Panama City, Bogotá and Toronto, and throughout the United States had grown accustomed to opening their morning papers to read yet another account of atrocious violence in El Salvador. The tortures and assassinations were—accurately—largely attributed to Salvadoran military officers and right-wing death squads acting in concert with the military.467

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467 As part of the Salvadoran Peace Accords of 1992, a commission comprised of three international commissioners appointed by the United Nations Secretary General, was charged with investigating serious acts of violence occurring since 1980, the nature and effects of the violence, and to recommend strategies for promoting national reconciliation. Based on
Duarte’s first course of action after his election in May 1984 was an international tour to boost his legitimacy abroad and secure funds. In the three-week interim between his election on May 6 and taking office on June 1st, Duarte embarked on an international diplomatic tour to various countries in Latin America, Western Europe and the United States. He traveled to Washington where he secured an initial $61.75 million in immediate supplemental military aid, and within 3 months of his election, the U.S. Congress had appropriated a total of $132 million in military aid and $120 million in economic aid. After Washington, Duarte traveled to Europe. In the Federal Republic of Germany he managed to secure $18 million in economic aid from the Christian Democratic government. England, under Margaret Thatcher’s Tory administration, and Portugal, then led by Antonio Ramalho Eanes, a military general and notorious anticommmunist, also gave Duarte their full support. Duarte’s vice minister, Julio Adolfo Rey Prendes, recalls that he was asked to return to Britain in October to speak with Margaret Thatcher about political developments in El Salvador. After what he describes as a very pleasant conversation they posed for a photo. Thatcher was indignant because photographers took the photo at an angle that highlighted her profile. “Because of her long nose she always insisted that photos of her be taken straight ahead. She

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wasn’t satisfied until she managed to get the reporters to do this. It was then that we said goodbye to each other.”

It was rather ironic that Duarte’s first course of action after his election was embarking on an international tour to boost his legitimacy abroad and secure monetary support where possible, and yet he spent much of his time abroad arguing against outside interference in the political affairs of El Salvador and the Central American region more broadly. Duarte could not escape the fact that the war in El Salvador was now an international conflict and that power in the country was contingent on international support. While Salvadoran state forces may have led the FMLN on the military terrain, Duarte felt that the FMLN’s savvyness with the international press far surpassed the abilities of the government he would soon be presiding.

*The internationalization of our conflict in 1981, when an army of journalists invaded our small country, took most Salvadorans by surprise. We did not know how to react when the world suddenly began to examine El Salvador through the camera’s eye. The leftists understood the importance of press coverage. They had daily bulletins and kept the press informed. They provided journalists with underground contacts and pointed reporters towards sensational stories. Their campaign worked well.*

FMLN internal documents dating as early as 1982 seem to confirm Duarte’s assessment, reflecting a guerrilla organization that carefully monitored the international

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470 Duarte, *Duarte*, 168.
press and prioritized developing positive relations with foreign press members. In early
1982, for example, FMLN member “Neto” informs his supervisors that international
journalists, including a correspondent from the Washington Post, wish to enter the FMLN
controlled region of Morazán, and asks he asks his supervisors to give the green light so
he may inform the journalists.471 Further reflecting a perhaps unusual level of closeness
between FMLN members and foreign correspondents, on January 20, 1982, a guerrilla
informs that the assistance of Washington Post journalist “Alma,” would be requested to
move the family of FMLN doctor “Eduardo”—a Mexican doctor who worked for the
ERP throughout the entire war—to an undisclosed location.472

*The War Within the War: the battle for U.S. public opinion*

The most important battles over public opinion between belligerents in the
Salvadoran Civil War were doubtless fought in the United States. In February 1982,
FMLN leader Joaquín Villalobos informed a fellow comrade that in the aftermath of the
massacre at El Mozote two U.S. Congress members had traveled to El Salvador and
desired to visit the scene.473 “They are already in San Salvador and wish to visit El
Mozote to prove Reagan is lying,” Villalobos informs. “They will be arriving with

471 Neto. To Comandancia ERP. “Comunicado sobre periodistas extranjeros.”. FMLN private
04-14.

472 “Eduardo” was the *nom de guerre* of Reynaldo Sánchez, a Mexican doctor and graduate from
Mexico’s UNAM, who in 1981 traveled to El Salvador and joined the FMLN’s ERP faction
in Morazán. He was the doctor for the ERP’s commanding members, most notably Joaquin
Villalobos, throughout the remainder of the Salvadoran Civil War. His then wife, Guadalupe
González, was one of the FMLN’s most important lobbyists in Washington D.C. where she
worked for the Mexican Embassy. The Washington Post Reporter “Alma,” who the
communiqué references, is likely Alma Guillermoprieto. Sánchez, Reynaldo. Interview with
Salvador. Document Number: D1005-02-51

473 For the massacre at El Mozote see Insurgent Diplomacy, Chapter 2.
Bowner from the New York Times and with a journalist from NBC television. It is strategically impossible for us to say no.” Villalobos then proceeds to give instructions for his second in command about how to arrange their visit.474 This document reflects not only the FMLN’s close relations with journalists in the U.S. on account of the importance the organization attributed to U.S. public opinion but also the reality that the United States was a country divided over Salvador with key sector of Congress and public opinion pitted against the Reagan Administration’s policies in El Salvador.

The massive amounts of aid and training that the U.S. gave El Salvador from late 1979 until the signing of peace accords in 1992, were the life-blood of the Salvadoran military, and this aid was conditional upon Congressional approval. Historian William LeoGrande’s extraordinary account of U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador, Our Own Backyard, suggests that U.S. support to the Salvadorans was, by and large, an unconditional done deal.475 As described by Benjamin Shwarz in his poignant review of LeoGrande’s monumental work:

Democratic representatives and senators were deeply and publicly troubled by the flagrant lapses of America's ally.... nevertheless they would not countenance the triumph of Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador. This meant that although Democrats indignantly imposed conditions on American aid and threatened to withdraw support if those conditions weren't met, their threats were ultimately meaningless, since they no less than Republicans recoiled from the likely consequence of cutting off aid. In addition to the

475 LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard.
apparent geopolitical risks of making good on their threats, the Democrats were unwilling to risk being charged with "losing" El Salvador.476

The United States’ aforementioned responses to both the murder of the four churchwomen in 1980 and the massacre at El Mozote in 1982 would seem to confirm this view and signal how no action on the part of the Salvadoran government was too horrific to warrant the suspension of U.S. aid. Nevertheless, upon coming to office, President Duarte and his closest advisors did not feel this sense of impunity, and the threat of Congressional opposition in the U.S. and a U.S. public opinion that opposed them were a constant shadow for the Duarte Administration.477 Duarte’s Foreign Minister, Fidel Chávez Mena, recounts how in his multiple travels to the United States he was caught between two opposing political forces.

We had two important groups against us. On the one hand, we had people like Jesse Helms who denounced us because they were against the structural reforms in the country that we knew were necessary. They consistently pressured the Reagan Administration, and us, to get behind an entirely military solution. On the other hand, we had leftist activists and media who were against us. Whenever I visited the United States I had a lot of security and I would face, on one side protesters supporting us and telling us to defeat the FMLN and on the other strong picketers denouncing the Salvadoran Army and Government.478

476 Schwarz, “Dirty Hands.”
Divisions in the United States closely paralleled fissures within the Salvadoran political establishment, divided between those who like Duarte, wished to attempt negotiations and those for whom any compromise with the guerrillas was tantamount to treason. The Duarte Administration rightfully sensed that, at home and abroad, it was trapped between forces pushing for a military solution and those that clamored for negotiations and peace.

Aware of Ronald Reagan’s lack of support for negotiations be key sectors in El Salvador and within the Reagan Administration, Duarte had not informed either the Salvadoran Army’s high command nor United States Ambassador Thomas Pickering that he intended to make negotiations at the United Nations General Assembly until just before he departed El Salvador for New York. In his memoir, Duarte writes:

When Ambassador Pickering stopped by my home three days before I left,
I mentioned that I was thinking about the dialogue, but the hint did not catch his attention. The same thing happened with Generals Vides Casanova and Blandón, who told me later, “From the way you said it, I didn’t think you were serious.” The only person to whom I revealed everything was General Castillo. He had to be ready here in El Salvador for whatever happened as a result of my peace initiative. We could not discount that those opposed to a dialogue with the guerrillas might attempt a coup, especially since I would be away in New York.479

Years later, at an academic conference in New York University, Ambassador Pickering contradicted Duarte’s account and argued that after Duarte communicated that he would propose a peace talk at the UN General Assembly, he phoned Washington and

479 Duarte, Duarte, 210.
encouraged the Reagan Administration to support the initiative. They agreed, and Pickering conveyed this to Duarte “who forgot it in his memoir.”

Historian William LeoGrande provides a different account and argues that after Duarte’s conversation with Pickering, the U.S. Ambassador tried to talk Duarte out of making the proposal, but to no avail. “Washington feared that the armed forces might overthrow the government, thereby demolishing the bipartisan congressional majority Reagan had finally managed to assemble.”

Given the level of U.S. involvement in El Salvador, and President Reagan’s endorsement of an all-out military victory against the FMLN, it seems highly unlikely that Duarte’s mention of proposing peace talks would not catch Pickering’s attention.

Whether Washington tried to dissuade Duarte, as Leo Grande argues, or the Reagan administration endorsed the talk at La Palma, as Pickering and The Guardian correspondent Paul Ellman argue, a few things are certain. First, Duarte’s announcement elicited a level of popular euphoria that left little doubt about the strong backing for an end to the war. Second, once Duarte invited the FMLN to La Palma, the United States administration publicly supported the initiative in public. Given strong opposition in the United States over continued military assistance to El Salvador, and the fact that the proposal came in the closing weeks of the U.S. Presidential campaign, there was little else that the Reagan Administration could do. Behind closed doors, however, and as had occurred a year earlier with the Contadora regional initiative, the Reagan Administration was unwilling to compromise the possibility of an absolute military victory for the FMLN.

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480 Pickering, “The Global Context: How Did Changing Cold War Dynamics Shape the Prospect for Peace?”

481 LeoGrande, Our Own Back Yard.
“Viva la Paz”

The meeting in La Palma on October 14th elicited a level of euphoria and popular mobilization unprecedented in the history of El Salvador. As The Guardian correspondent, Paul Ellman, noted “nowhere was the desperate yearning for peace…more apparent than on the highway between the capital and the small mountain town of La Palma. As word spread that the two sides had agreed to meet and set up a joint commission to explore ways of ending the war, Salvadorans appeared in their thousands, from the huts and shanties that line the road and cheered in the pouring rain shouting “viva la paz (long live peace)” and waving white flags.”

The 42-mile route from San Salvador to La Palma was lined with home-made banners reading “we want sincere dialogue” or “we want peace,” through which Salvadorans appealed to their country’s warring factions to engage in sincere dialogue and end the civil war that in a little less than four years had left upwards of 50,000 dead in a country of only five million. As Duarte recalled, people lined the road, waved their white flags and cried “Peace!”

An estimated 80,000 civilians were expected to attend the meeting.

The meeting, which began and the morning and stretched late into the afternoon, was moderated by Archbishop Rivera y Damas. Representing the government were President Duarte, Adolfo Rey Prendes, Minister of the Presidency, the first and second alternate vice-presidents, Abrahám Rodríguez and René Fortín Magaña. In turn, the

484 Duarte, My Story.
FMLN’s FDR had its two most important political representatives: Guillermo Ungo and Rubén Zamora. On the military fronts, the Salvadoran Army had its Defense Minister Defense Minister Carlos Vides Casanova and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and leader of the military’s political party (PCN) Chachi Guerrero. In turn, the FMLN sent key guerrilla leaders including Eduardo Sancho (one of five members from its highest military organ, the Comandancia General), Facundo Guardado and Nidia Díaz.

The meeting took place in a modest concrete chapel, where the pews were pushed back and a large table placed at the center. Duarte’s testimony of this encounter reveals the truly fratricidal nature of the Salvadoran conflict. He recalls that FMLN commander Cienfuegos approached him during lunch and asked how his parents, who had been Duarte’s friends for years, were doing. In turn, Guillermo Ungo and President Duarte were reunited for the first time since outbreak of the Civil War in 1981. Ungo had been Duarte’s running mate in the 1972 presidential election. In turn, Rubén Zamora was a former member of Duarte’s political party (PDC) before joining the FMLN. Furthermore, throughout the day, many families who had relatives in the FPL faction of the guerrillas, that controlled the territory of La Palma, came looking for their brothers, sisters, sons, or daughters.

Participants perceived the gathering as an important first step. It undoubtedly was. A second meeting was programmed for November. This meeting, held in a former seminary in Ayagualo near the capital was marked by the absence of President Duarte, members of the Salvadoran Army, and FMLN guerrilla leaders. Within a few short

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486 In his autobiography Duarte writes: “Cienfuegos also spoke privately to me, asking about his parents, who have been my friends for years. Eduardo Sancho Castañeda (Cienfuegos’ real name) is the son of a Costa Rican chemist who settled in El Salvador. I had known the comandante (Cienfuegos) as a little boy.” Duarte, Duarte, 219.
weeks, between the meeting in La Palma and the meeting in Ayagualo, both the FMLN and the Salvadoran government had clearly lost hope that any type of arrangement could be reached through negotiations.

The failure of negotiations in 1984 responded to a number of conditions, both domestic and international. Perhaps the most obvious motive accounting for La Palma’s failure was that the two warring factions had markedly distinct positions regarding the changes that were necessary in El Salvador. The FMLN wanted profound constitutional reforms and contended that the only way to end the war was to form a coalition government in the country with rebel participation. They also demand that the Salvadoran army be merged with the guerrilla forces and that death squad criminals be brought to justice. In turn, Duarte wanted the status quo but with FMLN electoral participation. In his words, “I acknowledged that these revolutionaries may have had good reason for taking up arms when there was no hope of economic reform, social justice or free elections under the tyranny of the oligarchy allied with the armed forces. El Salvador, however, had changed over the last five years.”

The same differences, however, would continue to divide both camps, even as successful negotiations began to unfold years later at the United Nations.

La Palma’s failures, largely responded to the fact that Duarte’s attempt to negotiate lacked the support of the right in his country and of his primary international backer: the Reagan Administration. At home, La Palma revealed that Duarte had taken the reins of a highly polarized country where his hold on power was tenuous at best. In the wake of his announcement at the United Nations General Assembly, the Secret anti-

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Ibid., 211.
Communist Army, a notorious right wing death squad, threatened his life.\textsuperscript{488} Abrahám Rodríguez puts the failure of La Palma on the FMLN, stating that their profound mistrust of the Army blocked the prospect of any success at negotiations.\textsuperscript{489} Foreign Minister Chávez Mena recounts that one of the biggest challenges Duarte’s administration faced was the profound mistrust that existed between the Army and the Salvadoran government:

\textit{For us, controlling the Army was extremely difficult. They had never had a government or political party that contradicted them or engaged in discussions with them. What we had with the Army was a marriage of convenience. We went to bed together always suspecting that the other was unfaithful. They thought our lover was the left while we assumed it was the right that they had historically served. Between us, there was never a relationship based on trust, quite the contrary, it was a relationship that always assumed infidelity.}\textsuperscript{490}

It is therefore no perhaps no surprise, that the FMLN had a profound mistrust of the Army at La Palma.

The FMLN was not without fault. The guerrillas also approached La Palma with skepticism. The two most important military leaders of the FMLN, Joaquín Villalobos and Salvador Sánchez Cerén, were not present at the historic meeting. U.S. analysts judged that Villalobos, whom was largely considered to be the \textit{de facto} military leader,

\textsuperscript{488} Carlin, John. Duarte's life is threatened on eve of peace talks. The Irish Times (1921-Current File); Oct 15, 1984; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times. P.6
\textsuperscript{489} Rodríguez, Abraham. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 13, 2010.
\textsuperscript{490} Chávez Mena, Fidel. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: March 21, 2013
considered negotiations to be worth pursuing, at least from a position of strength." As Villalobos recalls, he was indeed interested in attending, but being situated in Morazán he needed logistical support to each La Palma. For this purpose, he requested that a helicopter be facilitated to transport him to and from La Palma. Duarte, unable to trust his own military, denied the request. In his words: “I was not willing to take the risk of being blamed for his death if anything happened to him.” According to Facundo Guardado, who attended La Palma as one of the FMLN’s guerrilla commanders, the decision to attend was highly contentious within the organization, with some members regarding it as treason. The FMLN, he argues, did not take La Palma seriously but understood the importance of attending because popular opinion had formed behind such a dialogue: “we knew we had no currency with which to negotiate, but we did not want to give Duarte the political advantage by refusing to attend.”

No boycott of La Palma, however was as decisive of that of the United States. When Reverend Jackson came back from his travels Latin America in the summer of 1984 he informed the U.S. public:

*Everywhere we went we heard the same message. The United States must stop pouring military aid and troops into Central America--We must stop the arms race. We must put our resources into human development, into economic development that meets the needs of all our people. The war in Central America is not between the Soviet union and the united States, but a struggle between the*

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492 Duarte, *Duarte*, 216.
493 Facundo Guardado, “The Global Context: How Did Changing Cold War Dynamics Shape the Prospect for Peace?” (New York University and Columbia University, April 1, 2016).
very wealthy and the desperately poor, a struggle for food and jobs and dignity against dictator and death squads. We must end the militarization of Central America.494

The Reagan administration, however, proved relentless to enforce a military solution. In the wake of La Palma, the United States announced a program to double the airpower of the Salvadoran armed forces. The dramatic increase in air mobility came in tandem with the more than doubling of U.S. military aid to ES from $81.3 million in 1983 financial year to $196.6 million in 1984.495 This sent a clear message to the Salvadoran military and right wing forces, not exactly on board with La Palma, that the negotiations were a mere farce and that they could continue carrying out business as usual.

U.S., could have pressured armed forces and the antidemocratic private sector to give up past privileges and play by democratic rules. Perhaps in one of the greatest ironies of U.S. foreign policy, by militarizing the conflict in El Salvador, the United States was hurting the political party and leader that it most wanted to support.

In turn, one week after the meeting in La Palma, on October 23, the ERP faction of the FMLN killed Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, the military commander for the entire eastern region, and two of the Army’s best combat officers. Thus, the fate of La Palma and potential negotiations seemed to be sealed.


495 Gardiner, David. US is doubling Salvadoran air force power: on the eve of Presidency. The Irish Times (1921-Current File); Oct 15, 1984; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times. P.6
Conclusion

The failed attempts at negotiation that unfolded in both Contadora and La Palma as discussed in this chapter reveal crucial domestic and international dynamics of the Salvadoran Civil War. First, while this was a domestic Civil War, it was also an international conflict. Obstacles to a negotiated end to the Salvadoran conflict were both endogenous and exogenous. While key domestic and international forces pushed for an absolute military victory of one of the two warring factions, there were parallel processes, led by domestic and regional actors that pushed for an end through negotiations. The jockeying between these national and international forces was a decisive driver of Salvadoran history and international history at this time.

Second, just as the FMLN’s failed final offensive in January 1981 constituted a crucial turning for the insurgents, pushing them to pursue parallel military and civilian tracks, the Contadora and La Palma peace efforts further incentivized the FMLN to develop its political diplomacy and coax international public opinion in its favour. In this, the FMLN far outpaced the efforts of the Salvadoran State. Duarte’s Foreign Minister, Fidel Chavez Mena, recalled how in the aftermath of La Palma this became a pressing concern for his administration:

*The FMLN had more money that the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry,*  
*they were better equipped to organize and attend meetings. It was evident that they were better funded than we were and better able to mobilize support in Europe, Latin America and the United States.*  
*FMLN representatives were also able to meet with government*
officials and policymakers. In effect, El Salvador had two foreign ministries.\footnote{The Salvadoran government’s sense that they were losing the battle over public opinion to the FMLN persisted throughout the decade. Oscar Santamaria, close friend and political aid to president Alfredo Cristiani, who came to power in El Salvador in 1989, said that one of the greatest challenges faced by the Cristiani Administration was “our image before the world as a right-wing government. In this regard, the FMLN had done an outstanding job, they had ambassadors everywhere.” Chavez Mena, Fidel. Interview with the author. San Salvador, El Salvador. March 21, 2013. Santamaría, Oscar. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador: July 26, 2010.}
CONCLUSION

*Insurgent Diplomacy* uncovers the international history of El Salvador in the final two decades of the Global Cold War. It tells a story about the long cycle from the breakdown of an oligarchic state, to a gruesome civil war, to the beginnings of a negotiated “peace” treaty that paved the way for multiparty elections. This chronicle of systemic collapse and war in the Central American nation of El Salvador is situated within wider regional and global contexts. In this respect, the dissertation unfolds on three separate but interrelated scales: the first is a global framework that examines the conjuncture of the international political economy, the crisis of the 1970s, and the birth of a new neo-liberal order in the 1980s; the second is regional and centers on Mesoamerica, the United States, Havana, Colombia and Venezuela; the third is a national lens focused on El Salvador.

The diplomatic endeavors of the Salvadoran revolutionary organization, FMLN, lie at the heart of this international history and demonstrate how the civil war in El Salvador was, from the outset, an international conflict at the heart of the Global Cold War. The Central American country became the theater for international actors to fight out ideological battles that they hoped would tip the broader regional and global scales in their favor. In turn, the Salvadoran insurgents capitalized on foreign involvement to advance their own platforms and further their own bid for political power. This dissertation elucidates how the ties forged between the FMLN and foreign state and non-state actors transformed the priorities and strategies of Salvadoran revolutionary leaders. In turn, intervention in El Salvador altered the domestic politics of states and organizations embroiled in the Salvadoran crisis. Regional and international forces were
decisive agents shaping the conflict in El Salvador and were themselves transformed by the Salvadoran crisis. Thus, the multi-scalar history of the Salvadoran Civil War evidences the interaction of global and local processes as they shape each other.

The story brought forth in *Insurgent Diplomacy* showcases important dynamics at the heart of the global Cold War in its final decades. These problematize the notion of an East-West axis as an adequate framework to conceptualize global politics during this period. The FMLN’s diplomatic engagements and support bases came from a variety of sources. Some of them were motivated by geopolitical ambitions traditionally conceived of as belonging to the East-West rivalries of the Cold War. And yet, many—a majority—of them were actors pushing back against these Cold War dynamics either by emphasizing regional undercurrents or the salience of North-South tensions as driving international relations and geopolitics. Following from this, the FMLN’s relations with foreign actors showcase the simultaneously fragmenting and integrative impact of the Cold War’s intrusion into local political conflicts. While regions became divided by national and geopolitical rivalries, a transnational community of activists, organizations, and international legal treaties brokered global interconnections. State and non-state actors in Europe, America and the global south coalesced around El Salvador and challenged prevailing notions of state-sovereignty and social activism by using human rights, democracy and self-determination as a powerful moral and political vocabulary. This radically shook the foundations of international relations in the modern era. The international history of revolutionary politics and civil war in El Salvador thus elucidates the early development of multi-centered power, and it highlights the role that local
regional forces, international organizations, and global non-state actors played in shaping the current global order.

Despite the prevalence of civil wars throughout history, there are not many narratives that track the entirety of their evolution and there are (to my knowledge) no accounts that situate these seemingly internecine conflicts within all three layers covered here. This dissertation offers new insight into the local, regional and international dynamics that shape the trajectory of civil wars from their birth to their resolution.

Finally, Insurgent Diplomacy also provides a history about ideology and ideologically driven conflict as the twentieth century was coming to an end. In this sense, and when seen from the perspective of the socialist left, it is a story of raised expectations in the 1970s, a dogged battle in the 1980s, and ultimately a type of pragmatism that paved the way for the acceptance of a neo-liberal order in the early 1990s. In this regard (amongst others) this dissertation ends prematurely and the arc of the story remains incomplete. To complete the longue durée trajectory of the Salvadoran Civil War, from its birth in the 1970s through its “resolution” in the early 1990s two more chapters remain to be written.

The first will cover the period between 1985 (where the dissertation currently ends) and 1989. This period was characterized by the escalated diplomacy of the FMLN with an increasingly variegated group of international actors. The documents contained in the FMLN’s private archive that are of a diplomatic nature proliferate dramatically after the failed negotiations in La Palma and the collapse of the Contadora Initiative. These relations included much deeper engagement with the Non Aligned Movement and with state and non-state actors in the United States. By 1986 and 1987, the FMLN had
established what could only be described as embassies in countries all over the world. Reports from FMLN diplomats in countries like Australia and Japan, detailing shifting dynamics in Southeast Asia, for example, are reflective of an insurgent organization that had become a parallel state on the international stage. This chapter will make ample use of these documents and grapple with what the FMLN’s diplomacy reflected about the shifting nature of the revolutionaries and also of transforming international dynamics in the last years of the Cold War. This will be contrasted with the FMLN’s military efforts during these years, which, while never ceasing, seemed to be receding into the background as the political component of the organization acquired greater salience. The chapter will end by discussing the FMLN’s 1989 military offensive that brought the revolutionary organization into the heart of the nation’s capital. The 1989 FMLN offensive resulted in an insurgent takeover of the wealthiest areas of San Salvador, including the Sheraton Hotel where a number of American civilians and public servants were lodged. This shook the government of El Salvador and its primary ally, Washington, to their core. The revolutionaries’ capture of areas of San Salvador evidenced the futility of U.S. efforts to eradicate the FMLN and it dealt a serious blow to the credibility of both power abroad as the international press documented the offensive in great detail. The FMLN’s incursion into San Salvador demonstrated their military prowess, but it did not give rise to a popular insurgency—as had occurred in Nicaragua a decade earlier—as the insurgent leaders had hoped. This reality shook revolutionary leaders to their core and evidenced that a triumphant Revolution would not materialize. In light of this stalemate, both warring factions, and their respective military allies, considered a negotiated resolution as the only way out.
The second chapter will deal with the aftermath of the FMLN’s 1989 offensive and center on the last years of the civil war when negotiations became the only viable alternative to a gruesome war that was becoming increasingly unpopular. Both Salvadoran warring parties conditioned their willingness to negotiate on the mediation of the United Nations, who reluctantly agreed, for the first time in its history, to broker discussions to end a civil war. The history of United Nations’ involvement in bringing about an end to the Salvadoran Civil War showcases the international clout that the plight of El Salvador had acquired for the international community. This is truly outstanding when one considers that before 1980 the smallest nation in Central America was nowhere on the international radar and that, after the peace treaty of 1992, this nation would again recede into the background of regional and global imperatives. Understanding why El Salvador became an epicenter of international relations is a central question that this dissertation seeks to answer and the period of negotiations in its final years is a crucial part of this story. Furthermore, the Salvadoran peace accords cannot be understood without accounting for the implications that the end of the Global Cold War had on Salvadoran actors. The fall of the Berlin Wall, Cuba’s isolation in light of the dissolution of the USSR, the end of the Reagan presidency, the ouster of power of the Sandinistas, and the seeming collapse of ideologies, all featured prominently in the calculations of Salvadoran actors and their international backers. The chapter will conclude by grappling with the implications of a “peace” whose quality and substance stretches the very definition of the word. The peace treaty gave birth to electoral democracy in the country, but by abandoning economic and social reforms it also helped to create conditions for some of the defining features of post-civil war El Salvador: widening socioeconomic
disparities, chronic political weakness, and the emergence of transnational gangs – the recipe for a new model of violence.

In addition to incorporating these additional chapters, the Dissertation still has a number of thematic and empirical gaps to fill. First, global public opinion needs to feature much more prominently in the story. The international press is currently a key missing actors from the history *Insurgent Diplomacy* sets out to tell. As Chapter Five begins to suggest, international public opinion dramatically affected the imperatives of Salvadoran warring parties and of their primary international backers. Second, the project needs to incorporate much more forcefully the advocacy of transnational solidarity movements that supported the FMLN, lobbied for peace in El Salvador, or did both simultaneously. In this regard, this project can speak to some of the new fascinating transnational histories of solidarity movements and activist networks in the second half of the twentieth century. The Salvadoran conflict influenced the nature of non-state movements and advocacy, serving as a catalyst for the crafting of enduring spaces of influence in the international arena for these movements. In recent years, scholars of Latin America have begun to grapple with the ways in which activists challenged authoritarian regimes and human rights abuses in the region by mobilizing public opinion and challenging U.S. foreign policy. I intend to draw upon the analytical and methodological contributions of many of these works to tell the story of how transnational activist networks and solidarity movements set out to legitimate the FMLN on a global scale, and aimed to sway international public opinion against the Salvadoran military and the policies of the Reagan Administration. More importantly, I aspire to push the state of the literature further by incorporating an additional level of analysis:
how the “aggravated party” (in this case the FMLN) engaged directly with the solidarity movements and carved out spaces to pursue agendas often unbeknownst to the activists. This history of solidarity movements and activists in the Salvadoran Civil War remains to be told and it is indicative of the broader international significance of developments in Latin America, as the activist movements engaged with El Salvador fostered the emergence of global networks of non-state actors that continue to shape international and domestic policies in the region.

Finally, in attempting to tell the transnational story of the Salvadoran Civil War through the lens of the FMLN’s diplomacy I that the military nature of the conflict got lost in the narrative and this will need to be drawn out much more forcefully. While a political and diplomatic organization, the FMLN was also a military organization engaged in a bloody civil war and operating in the midst of terrible violence at home. To understand insurgent diplomacy, one also needs to grasp the other side of the coin: what is happening on the military side of the insurgency. The FMLN’s jockeying with international powers and their receptivity towards negotiations was intricately tied to their fortunes on the military field. In turn, international powers such as Havana and the Washington were ever watchful of military developments in crafting their policies towards El Salvador. This story, the flip-side of political diplomacy, needs to be brought to the fore.
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