

**Williams, Philip J. and Knut Walter.** *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.

In the past decade negotiated settlements ended armed conflicts in Central America that killed hundreds of thousands. The Esquipulas regional peace framework and subsequent national agreements brought civil wars to an end, demobilized guerrilla insurgents, and led to a significant reduction in the power and size of the armed forces. Philip Williams and Knut Walter's study is a nuanced examination of how democratization is more than transfer of power from a military government to elected civilians. Their book considers how "the extent and nature of militarization in El Salvador during the period 1931-1992 produced powerful obstacles that limited the possibilities for demilitarization in the wake of the peace accords." (p. 9)

*Militarization and Demilitarization* employs a "historical-structural perspective" (p. 3) to point out the legacies of military involvement in politics, and how such patterns limit current options for civil-military relations. A theoretical introduction places the study of the Salvadoran military in the context of secondary literature on democratization and military politics. Four historical chapters document the expansion of the military's political control as a result of key events: the 1932 *Matanza*, efforts at reform in the 1940s-1960s, the 1969 Soccer War with Honduras, and the October 1979 coup. Special attention is given to the 1980s, a period in which elections, democratic reforms and cycles of state repression characterized civil-military relations during the civil war (1980-92). An additional section considers the positive and negative aspects of the 1992 peace accords for democracy and civilian-subordinated armed forces in El Salvador. Finally, the authors attempt to draw lessons from the Salvadoran experience for other cases of civil-military relations, demilitarization and democratization. Williams and Walter stress that "the fundamental challenge for policy makers is to craft policies that reduce the military's political power but at the same time limit the potential for conflict." (p. 2)

Williams and Walter's scholarship is evident in their use of Salvadoran government documents, military data, US government and United Nations sources, interviews with civilian and military actors, and the extensive secondary literature. The use of tables on officer factions, the Salvadoran command structure, troop strength and budgets, and US aid during the civil war, greatly compliment the narrative. The work is convincing because it focuses on internal aspects of the armed forces, as well as the shifting societal and international contexts in which the military has acted. The military's original mission (dating to the 1870s) was coercing peasants to cultivate coffee, and supporting the status quo interests of landed elites.<sup>1</sup> Although agricultural elites were able to block agrarian reform, the military evolved toward putting the institutional interests of the armed forces ahead of those of landed elites.

Also noteworthy is the comparison made between El Salvador and the experiences of demilitarization in Nicaragua and Guatemala. The authors lament the lack of research on Central American militaries, yet this situation has changed recently.<sup>2</sup> Williams and Walter note (pp. 186- 96) four lessons gained from their analysis of El Salvador: negotiated

settlements to internal wars offer good opportunities to reduce military power and restructure civil-military relations; initiatives from politicians and civil society matter; when openness to change comes from within the military, success is more likely; and the role of international actors is central to such transitions. If we consider the first point, the Sandinista Army was greatly reduced and redefined after the 1988 ceasefire and 1990 electoral transition. Guatemala's military was also reduced, but it remained relatively more autonomous. The elimination of paramilitary organizations in El Salvador was in part, the result of civil society pressure. However, legislative oversight, civilian mastery of military science, and civil-military contacts remain inadequate in El Salvador. The situation is similar in Guatemala and Nicaragua, where the development of independent legislative and judicial branches is still incomplete.

Nicaraguan officers' proposals for the reduction and reorientation of the army exemplify Williams and Walter's third point. In other nations officers have resisted efforts to revise the armed forces' structure, practices and doctrines. Salvadoran military officers were divided before 1992 on the basis of whether to respond to citizen demands with reform or repression, and by generation (the *tanda* system). After the war there was opposition to losing control over domestic police powers and the right of military officials to administer state agencies. The dangers to democratization and human rights from the armed forces' efforts to promote paramilitary groups were painfully clear in Guatemala (the Civilian Self-Defense Patrols, abolished by the 1996 accords), and presently, in Colombia. In the latter country, the executive branch and courts have sanctioned the formation of private militias tied to the armed forces.

The role of international actors, such as the United States and the United Nations, was crucial for what was achieved in El Salvador and Guatemala. The US pressured military officers to reform in return for continued aid, and the UN monitored the implementation of the accords, and sponsored truth commissions (that in turn discouraged legal impunity for the military). In contrast, Nicaragua did not convene a truth commission to detail the events of the war, and few new institutions were created, such as the Human Rights Prosecutor and National Civilian Police in El Salvador. If we consider these lessons for a potential demilitarization of Colombia after four decades of guerrilla war, the impact of military-generated initiatives and international mediation may prove essential. Three previous Colombian presidents have tried negotiations, but military and guerrilla opposition to talks, and paramilitary violence against leftist unions, parties and demobilized insurgents, have been causes of failed negotiations. *Militarization and Demilitarization* should be read by students of Central American politics, as well as by those interested in the broader issues of civil-military relations, democratization and conflict resolution.

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## Endnotes

1. See Robert G. Williams, *States and Social Evolution: Coffee and the Rise of National Governments in Central America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996).

2. On Nicaragua, see Roberto J. Cajina, *Transición política y reconversión militar en Nicaragua, 1990-1995*, (Managua, 1997); on Guatemala, see James Dunkerley and Rachel Sieder, "The Military: The Challenge of Transition," in Rachel Sieder, ed., *Central America: Fragile Transition*, (London: St. Martin's, 1996), pp. 55-101; and works in Spanish by Gabriel Aguilera and Raul Benítez.