

# The Key Military Issues in the War in El Salvador

by  
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The extensive debate on El Salvador in the media, the government, the academic community and among the public at large has focused almost entirely on the political and the moral issues involved in this crisis. While these issues are most definitely important, there is another set of issues, specifically certain military issues, that have not received adequate attention in the debate over El Salvador. The purpose of this article is to discuss the current crisis in light of the research that has been done on unconventional war. Four issues will be discussed in the context of this research: first, the land reform program; secondly, the Salvadoran military; third, the effectiveness of American military involvement in El Salvador; and fourth, the outside support that the insurgents are receiving. Having analyzed these four issues, the article will conclude by briefly assessing the current military situation in El Salvador.

## **The Land Reform Program**

Many of the students of counter-insurgency have argued that a key factor in defeating an insurgency is for the government threatened by the insurgency to undertake a program of land reform. This line of argument sees the success of revolutions in the 20th century in Mexico, China, Cuba and Russia as having been due primarily to the large number of landless peasants in these countries; and that therefore by giving peasants land a government can undercut efforts by revolutionary movements to gain support from the peasantry.<sup>1</sup> The following three points must be kept in mind in analyzing the impact of the land reform program of El Salvador government on the course of the war.

First, as a number of studies have indicated, even in a country not undergoing a desperate civil war it is very difficult to undertake a major social reform like substantially changing the pattern of land-holding. The peasants who benefit from land reform programs usually do not press for such reforms with anything like the determination and level of effort exerted by those who stand to lose from land reform programs. Moreover, even in a society at peace a land reform program will require a considerable commitment of governmental financial resources if the reform is going to be successful in establishing economically viable peasant enterprises, and land reform programs also (at least in the short run) usually result in reduced agricultural productivity; therefore, only a country whose economy is fairly healthy in the first place can afford to undertake such reforms.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, even in peacetime it is difficult to implement a land reform program, and consequently many such programs initiated by various governments have achieved meager results. For example, the democratic governments of Belaunde in Peru (1963-1968) and Frei in Chile

(1964-1970) had very limited success in carrying out the major land reform programs that they had promised when running for office.

Secondly, if land reform programs are difficult to undertake in a country at peace, then the difficulties of implementing such programs in a country such as El Salvador that is undergoing a major civil war are obviously enormously magnified. In the current civil war, where (for very different reasons) the extreme right and the extreme left have engaged in systematic assassination campaigns against anyone involved in the land reform program (i.e., peasants working for cooperatives, government officials, and foreign advisors), it is virtually impossible to implement such a program. Hence the argument over whether El Salvador's government is or is not sincerely committed to land reform misses the larger point that even if it were sincerely committed it is most unlikely that it could successfully carry out such a program.

Finally, for two reasons considerable skepticism is appropriate with respect to the Reagan Administration's claim that the Salvadoran government's land reform program will result in those sectors of the population now actively supporting the rebels starting to actively support the government. First, this has not been the outcome in other land reform programs; studies of South Vietnam's land reform program of 1970-1972 and of Peru's land reform program of 1968-1975 have indicated that while the beneficiaries of such programs were often less inclined to support revolutionary movements, at the same time these beneficiaries did *not* develop a strong sense of political loyalty to the government that had undertaken the land reform program. The peasants' feelings toward the government in question were a mixture of neutrality, apathy, and a desire to be left alone.<sup>3</sup> Second, given that El Salvador is a very densely populated country with a limited amount of arable land, the peasant cooperatives that the land reform program is supposed to establish can, *at most*, benefit only a minority of the rural population; i.e., there will be a vast number of peasants who will receive few or no benefits from the program. So while *the main beneficiaries of the land reform program may become less supportive of revolutionary movements*, those who do not gain anything from this program could conceivably become more attracted to the cause of the insurgents in El Salvador out of bitterness at what they see as inequitable treatment by the government.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Military of El Salvador**

There are two major aspects of the Salvadoran military that are crucial to understand if one is to correctly evaluate the current military situation. The first of these aspects is that the Salvadoran military is a classic example of a heavily politicized military organization, in which the armed forces represent the key center of political power in a country. In assessing the situation, therefore, several facts must be kept in mind about politicized military forces such as those of El Salvador:

1. Such military organizations generally have a rather low level of military effectiveness. The reason for this is that in politicized military forces the criteria for promotion is not demonstrated competence in

military affairs but rather whether one is considered politically loyal and reliable by the existing military leadership. Moreover, in a heavily politicized armed forces the leadership clique frequently does not like to promote even politically loyal officers if they consider these officers too competent — they tend to regard all competent, professional officers who hold high rank as potential threats because whatever their current loyalties such officers could decide at some future date that the current leadership should be ousted, and that if they were to come to feel this way it is precisely because they are competent that they might well be able to oust the current ruling faction. With such a promotion system, it is not surprising that heavily politicized military organizations often perform dismally against their opponents — witness, for example, the poor level of performance of the South Vietnamese military compared to that of the North Vietnamese, and the ease with which Castro's massively outnumbered and outgunned guerrillas were able to inflict defeat after defeat on Batista's army.<sup>5</sup>

2. It is extremely difficult for an outside power to try to reform and restructure such a politicized military force so as to make it more effective. For example, in Vietnam the Americans tried over and over again to convince the South Vietnamese government to purge the South Vietnamese officer corps of its large number of incompetent and corrupt officers. Such appeals had almost no impact. The leaders of South Vietnam knew that to try to purge the military would have been to upset a vast network of political arrangements and deals and to thus risk a great deal of political chaos and the possibility of a coup by disaffected elements. So, rather than take the risks involved in such an effort they preferred to accept the inefficiency that characterized their military establishment.<sup>6</sup>
3. Politicized military forces, because they lack high standards of professionalism, are much more prone to disintegrate than are professional armies. Of course, any military force, no matter how professional, can fall apart if it is subjected to enough pressure — witness the massive mutinies in the French Army in the spring of 1917 and the disintegration of the Imperial German Army in the last months of 1918. However, while even very professional armies can fall apart if subjected to the terrible strains of a war like World War I, in three respects the problem of disintegration is even more acute for heavily politicized forces: first, because they are generally rather inefficient, the sort of reverses that a professional army could absorb without disintegrating are beyond their capabilities. For example, the rapid collapse in South Vietnam in the spring of 1975 was in large measure due to the fact that the South Vietnamese army was unable to carry out the admittedly difficult, but by no means impossible, task of an orderly retreat while under attack — instead the retreat became a total rout and the army fell to pieces. Second, because these forces not only have a corrupt and incompetent officer corps, but in addition these qualities are also endemic among the enlisted

ranks, morale and dedication is never very high, and hence they can disintegrate if subjected to very modest amounts of pressure: Witness, for example, the collapse of Batista's military in Cuba after being subjected to a very modest number of casualties by the various factions of the Cuban revolutionary movement.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, and related to the second point, even if a politicized military force does fight well for awhile, if it does start to disintegrate the process is often extremely rapid — witness the almost literally overnight collapse of the Nicaraguan National Guard once Somoza left the country and the Guard realized that the situation was hopeless.<sup>8</sup>

The second major aspect of the Salvadoran military that must be kept in mind is that it is extremely difficult for this one (as it would be for any) to change the way that it has traditionally conducted military operations. For example, it has been pointed out in a number of studies that in the case of Vietnam the American military establishment tried to conduct the war in Vietnam as if it were fighting the war for which it had been preparing itself for several decades; namely, a conventional war in Central Europe. In Vietnam, therefore, American armed forces tried to fight a big-unit, high-firepower war that was at best irrelevant and at worst counter-productive in relation to the insurgent war that was the reality of Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> In fairness to the American military establishment, it should be mentioned that the problem in adjusting their doctrine to the realities of Vietnam was made almost impossible by the fact that the American political leadership had no clear idea of their goals or of what price the U.S. should be willing to pay for achieving them. In such a political vacuum it was virtually impossible to formulate a coherent military strategy for conducting the war.

Keeping in mind the difficulties that all militaries have in changing the way they have traditionally fought wars, it is almost certain that the American advisory teams in El Salvador (who, it is clear, are sincerely and determinedly trying to accomplish their mission) will have little success in modifying the long-established tendency of the Salvadoran military to react with massive and indiscriminate force to any sign of unrest or insurrection.<sup>10</sup>

### **U.S. Military Intervention**

The key question concerning U.S. military involvement in El Salvador is: does it strengthen the military capabilities and effectiveness of the side that the U.S. is backing in the civil war? For the following reasons a strong case can be made for arguing that it is unlikely that the current level of American military assistance will significantly strengthen the government side. Of course, a large scale intervention of U.S. combat troops would clearly help El Salvador's government, but this does not appear to be a realistic option for the United States, given the strong Congressional and domestic opposition to the current level of American military involvement.

1. In almost all cases it is very difficult for a foreign nation to significantly upgrade and improve the fighting capabilities of another nation's military forces. In addition to the problems identified

earlier, there is the additional problem that the cultural, social and (most of the time) language barriers between the foreign advisors and the local military greatly complicate efforts at training and instruction. The severe problems that the American military encountered in trying to upgrade and improve the South Vietnamese armed forces have been extensively studied and documented. But it must be kept in mind that other countries have had similar problems: the Soviet-trained Arab armies have generally had a dismal record against the Israelis; only direct Soviet military intervention in late 1979 prevented the defeat of the Afghan military and its large contingent of Soviet military advisors at the hands of the rebels in Afghanistan; and the Soviet, Cuban and East European advisors in Angola have had little success in creating an effective Angolan military.

2. In the specific case of El Salvador this general problem is aggravated by the dearth of knowledge in the U.S. about El Salvador. There is very little recent scholarly literature on the history, politics and culture of El Salvador; it has long been one of (if not the) least studied countries in Latin America. The result is that U.S. governmental and military officials have little detailed, objective knowledge to guide them in making decisions about what policies to pursue in El Salvador and about how to implement these policies once they are decided upon.
3. Another reason for being rather skeptical of the effectiveness of American military involvement in El Salvador is that at present the U.S. Army is poorly prepared to conduct a counter-insurgency campaign. The post-mortems on the efforts in the 1960's by the U.S. political leadership to pressure the American forces into developing an effective counter-insurgency capability all agree that the military establishment made only very minor concessions to this pressure. Moreover, after the national trauma of Vietnam the U.S. military abolished almost all of those minor steps that it had taken to develop a counter-insurgency capability. The following facts starkly illustrate the lack of U.S. preparation for a counter-insurgency campaign: the year course of instruction at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College devotes eight hours to unconventional war; Camberley (the British Staff College) devotes 128 hours to unconventional war during its year course;<sup>11</sup> the Army Special Forces are seriously short of the skills needed for such a force and in recent years Special Forces training has emphasized waging unconventional military operations in general war situations rather than in counter-insurgency campaigns;<sup>12</sup> and the army has not made much of an effort to use the knowledge gained in Vietnam to guide it in any future unconventional war. A survey of the articles published in the last half of the 1970's in *Military Review* (published by the Army Staff College) and in *Parameters* (published by the Army War College) indicated that in this time period a total of five articles had been devoted to an examination of the experiences of the Vietnam war. In the same time period the combined total of articles on the

Revolutionary war and the Indian wars was easily twice that of the articles on Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

### **Outside Support for the Revolutionary Forces in El Salvador**

The issue of communist bloc aid to the rebels in El Salvador has been debated in a polarized and distorted manner. The Reagan Administration has sometimes tended to argue that the entire insurgency is due to external forces, while the opponents of U.S. policy have repeatedly challenged reports of outside military aid for the rebels, claiming that the insurgency is almost entirely due to internal political factors such as brutal repression and unjust social structures.

The reality is that both of these analyses are serious oversimplifications of a much more complex question: what role does outside assistance play in creating and sustaining a major revolutionary movement? In brief, the answer is as follows: a revolutionary movement *cannot* be created solely by outside individuals and groups. As the IRA leadership itself was willing to admit, their 1956-1962 campaign against the British rule in Northern Ireland never developed into a major threat to the British government because Northern Ireland's Catholic population gave almost no support to the IRA. In contrast, by 1969-1970, after several years of community mobilization by the Civil Rights movement, by the Protestant backlash against this movement, and by a steady pattern of incidents and confrontations with the British Army, the Catholic population of Northern Ireland was politicized enough and radicalized enough to lend a great deal of support to the Provisional IRA's campaign against the British.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the starkest illustration of the error of trying to create a revolutionary movement solely by outside forces is the case of Che Guevara and the so-called "foco" theory. In brief, the foco theory, as developed by Guevara and his friend Regis Debray, held that a small force of trained revolutionaries (the foco) could create a successful revolution anywhere in Latin America by going into the countryside, beginning a campaign of guerrilla war, gradually creating a bigger and bigger guerrilla force, and then after a few years defeating the army of the ruling class and establishing a revolutionary government.<sup>15</sup> The repeated failures of this foco strategy all over Latin America in the 1960's did not shake Guevara's faith in his theory — so strongly did he believe in his theory that in 1967 he was killed in a hopeless campaign to overthrow the Bolivian government by establishing a foco in the mountains of Bolivia.<sup>16</sup>

However, while outside elements cannot generate the popular support that a revolutionary movement needs if it is going to have a chance of success, this is not to deny that outside assistance is usually essential for such a movement to sustain itself and to have a chance to come to power. For example, at the time of the September 1978 uprising against Somoza, the Sandinista movement clearly had massive popular support; but Somoza's National Guard was able to put down this uprising because the insurgents were so poorly armed. The Nicaraguan revolutionaries learned from the failure of the September uprising; they spent the next several months building up their supplies of arms. The success of the final Sandinista of-

fensive in the spring of 1979 was in large part due to the fact that in this second round of fighting the rebels were much better armed than they had been during the earlier insurrection.<sup>17</sup> Another example of the importance of outside assistance to the survival of even mass-based revolutionary movements is the rapid collapse of the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq in early 1975 when the United States and Iran cut off aid to the Kurds.<sup>18</sup>

There are many potential sources of outside aid to a revolutionary movement that has the right foreign connections, and hence the debate about the degree of communist bloc involvement with the rebels in El Salvador overlooks the point that even if it were possible to cut off what aid the rebels do undoubtedly get from communist bloc countries, the rebels have many other sources. They have ties to a number of leftist but non-communist movements such as the Socialist International, the left wing of the Catholic Church's various national churches, and many of the more liberal Protestant religious groups in the United States and elsewhere. They also have ties in certain non-communist countries such as Mexico. In brief, the fact that the rebels in El Salvador have many potential and actual sources of aid besides communist bloc countries and parties means that a cutoff of communist aid would not destroy the insurgency; with the financial aid the Salvadoran rebels get from non-communist sources they could easily secure all the arms they need on the international arms market.

### **Conclusion: A Brief Summary of the Current Military Situation**

The current military situation in El Salvador can be summed up by the following three key points: first, the revolutionaries in El Salvador have a mass base of popular support. Given the virtual impossibility of implementing reforms while the chaos in El Salvador continues, it is most unlikely that the government will be able to erode the opposition's mass base through reforms. The rebels should have no great difficulty getting sufficient arms. In sum, the revolutionary movement in El Salvador is a powerful force that will be difficult to defeat.

Secondly, the military situation of El Salvador's government is *extremely* precarious. The Salvadoran military forces are not efficient enough to adequately prosecute the war. Moreover, this military force is the sort that could disintegrate quickly; this possibility means that the present detachment of U.S. advisors in El Salvador and the military aid that the U.S. is giving is needed as much to sustain the Salvadoran military's morale (by giving them a sense of having a powerful backer) as to contain the revolutionaries' military threat.

Finally, the very vulnerability and fragility of the Salvadoran military puts the U.S. in a terrible dilemma: if the military continues to engage in gross human rights violations, opposition to American involvement in El Salvador will grow in the Congress and among the public. In light of the outcome of the elections, this may happen anyway. On the other hand, American pressure for a reduction in human rights violations could be taken by the Salvadoran military as an implied threat of U.S. withdrawal, thereby possibly leading to the collapse and disintegration of this military.

Either way, the U.S. is likely to confront a difficult and potentially divisive foreign policy decision with implications for American policy throughout Central America.

#### Footnotes

1. For recent article making this argument see Roy Prosterman et. al. in *International Security* (Summer 1981).
2. For a very good recent case study of the difficulties involved in implementing a land reform program, see Cynthia McClintock, *Peasant Cooperatives and Political Change in Peru* (Princeton, 1981), which analyzes the land reform program of the Velasco government in Peru (Velasco was in power 1968-1975).
3. McClintock discusses the attitudes toward the Peruvian government of the peasant beneficiaries of Velasco's land reform in Chapter 10, pp. 287-315. The attitudes of the South Vietnamese peasants toward the Saigon government after the land reform of 1970-1972 are discussed in Douglas Balufarb, *The Counter-Insurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance* (New York, 1977), pp. 269-274.
4. The question may now be academic in view of the Salvadoran Government's reluctance to proceed further with land reform. In her article "Post-Revolutionary Agrarian Politics in Peru", in Stephen Gorman, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Peru* (Boulder, Colo., Westview Press, forthcoming), McClintock notes how the peasants who benefited from the Velasco reforms gave less support to the leftist parties in the 1978 Constituent Assembly elections and in the 1980 presidential elections than did the population as a whole, while in the eight departments of Peru where no significant agrarian reforms had been undertaken and where impoverished peasant communities dominate, the leftist parties received more support in these elections than among the population as a whole (in some cases a great deal more support: in the 1978 Constituent Assembly elections the leftist parties received 46.8% of the vote in these departments, versus 33.88% nationwide).
5. For a good recent evaluation of the problems of the South Vietnamese military see Richard Shultz, "The Vietnamization-Pacification Strategy of 1969-1972: A Quantitative and Qualitative Reassessment", in *Lessons from an Unconventional War*, Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Shultz, Jr., eds. (New York, 1982), pp. 99-102. The poor performance of Batista's military is discussed in Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, 1971), pp. 1039-1041.
6. Douglas Blaufarb, "The Sources of U.S. Frustration in Vietnam", in Hunt and Shultz, p. 155.
7. Thomas, *Cuba*, p. 1040.
8. The corruption and incompetence that characterized Anastasio Somoza's entire government, including the National Guard, is discussed in Thomas Walker, *Nicaragua: Land of Sandino* (Boulder, Colo., 1981), pp. 30-34.
9. Brian M. Jenkins, *The Unchangeable War RM-6278-1 ARPA* (Santa Monica, Calif., 1970).
10. The way in which the military in El Salvador crushed a peasant uprising in 1932 is a good illustration of the massive repression that this military customarily uses: approximately one hundred soldiers, policemen and members of the middle class were killed in the uprising; in response at least 10,000 (and perhaps as many as 30,000) peasants were killed. See Thomas Anderson, *Matanza* (Lincoln, Neb., 1971), pp. 120-137.
11. Donald Vought, "American Culture and American Arms: The Case of Vietnam", in Hunt and Shultz, p. 183.



12. Ned Sabrosky and Richard H. Shultz, "Policy and Strategy for the 1980's: Preparing for Low Intensity Conflicts", in Hunt and Shultz, p. 199.
13. Stephen Rosen, "After Vietnam: What the Pentagon Has Learned", *The American Spectator*, vol. 12, no. 10 (1979), p. 7. A recent study produced by the US Army War College, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, may be a first step in the right direction.
14. Don Mansfield, "The Irish Republican Army and Northern Ireland", in *Insurgency in the Modern World*, Bard O'Neill, William R. Heaton and Donald J. Alberts, eds. (Boulder, Colo., 1980), pp. 64-66.
15. Ernesto Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York, 1961); Regis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York, 1967).
16. For Guevara's own account of the Bolivian campaign see *The Diary of Che Guevara* (New York, 1968).
17. Walker, *Nicaragua*, pp. 37-40.
18. Paul R. Viotti, "Iraq: The Kurdish Rebellion", in O'Neill et. al., p. 202.