

Weakness, Deceit and Consequences

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My congratulations to the University of Texas for sponsoring this important conference on El Salvador. There are many lessons to be learned.

Let me quickly take you back to El Salvador in 1980 – revolution was in the air. The drive for change inexorable – but key figures in El Salvador still worked for peaceful progress and reform; several of those are participating in this conference – most notably that brave leader, Bishop Medardo Gomez.

The social order of El Salvador had traditionally rested on a tripod, the rich, the military and the church. The rich ran the country – they controlled it through the military and the role of the church was to counsel the poor to suffer in silence and to wait for their reward the next time around.

Then in 1968 in Medellin, Colombia, at a conference of all Latin American bishops, Pope Paul VI endorsed liberation theology and its “preferential option for the poor.” You can sum up Medellin with Pope Paul’s words: “the poor have the right not only to share in the fruits of the society, but in the direction of that society.”

After Medellin, the Salvadoran bishops returned home and began to preach not revolution, not class struggle, but dialogue, compromise and some beginnings on a just society. In taking the part of the poor, the church cut off one leg of the tripod and the whole structure of Salvadoran society began to topple.

The poor began to organize, to demand clean water and schools, higher wages and a more equitable distribution of wealth. The rich labeled these new movements communist and socialist, and accused its leaders of subversion. When these accusations did not have the desired effect, the rich had recourse to their traditional measures; they ordered the military and security forces to torture and kill, to instill fear throughout El Salvador.

So this is the origin of the Salvadoran revolution: poor people inspired and led by new political and social forces, and supported by church leaders, go on strike, mount demonstrations and organize large protests that sometimes break into violence.

The key figure in El Salvador at that moment was Monsignor Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador. His weekly sermons reporting on the abuses of the rich and powerful, and calling out for justice, were heard not only by those inside the cathedral, but throughout all of Central America. You could walk down any street in rural Guatemala or Honduras and never miss a word of his sermon. Every radio in every “casita” would be tuned to hear his homily.

At this point, I arrived on the scene as ambassador and quickly grasped that if U.S. policy to avoid a violent takeover by the left is to have any chance of working, that Romero was the key figure. If the United States could help the Salvadoran parties work out a peaceful agreement, only Monsignor Romero had the power to guarantee that agreement, because he was the only one trusted by the workers and campesinos.

I met almost immediately with Monsignor Romero, convinced him I understood the need for rapid change and that I would do everything I could to support him. I appointed an embassy officer to be in daily communication with the archbishop's office.

There were already plots to kill Romero, but some believe that the prospect of a working relationship between the charismatic archbishop and the American embassy resolved any doubts. The rich and powerful ordered the death of Monsignor Romero.

The murder of Monsignor Romero radicalized the country. Violence escalated, but the Carter administration still backed change. There was now a mixed civilian-military junta headed by Napoleon Duarte. With our support, land reform, nationalization of banks and other groundbreaking measures went forward. There was even some reduction in officially-sponsored violence.

When Jimmy Carter lost the election to Ronald Reagan, there were wild celebrations in the rich barrios of Escalon and San Benito. The Reagan transition team sent signals to the Salvadoran military that human rights were off the table and that any real dirty work the military had to do should be done while Carter was still in office.

In late November 1980, the military kidnapped and killed six political leaders of the non-violent FDR. In early January 1981, the military killed two American labor advisors and the Salvadoran chief of land reform.

On December 2, 1980, a detachment of soldiers from the Salvadoran National Guard kidnapped, raped and murdered four American citizens, three missionary nuns and a lay worker.

For the next two weeks, El Salvador became the focus of worldwide attention. The murders of these four churchwomen had shocked and outraged the world.

As soon as the administration of President Reagan took office, I received a phone call from the acting assistant secretary informing me that Secretary of State Alexander Haig requested I send him a telegram reporting that the Salvadoran military had initiated a serious investigation into the murders of the American churchwomen and that the investigation was making progress.

Why was Secretary of State Haig demanding such a telegram? Because when President Jimmy Carter learned of the murders, he reacted strongly, cutting off military

and economic aid until the Salvadoran government demonstrated a good faith commitment to bring the murderers to justice.

Let us stop for a moment and consider what was at stake. Once Secretary Haig received the kind of telegram he requested, he would use it to overcome congressional skeptics and massive military aid would begin to flow.

All I had to do was send in a telegram stating that the Salvadoran military high command had publicly denounced this senseless crime, that they had established a special high level commission to investigate the crime and that the president of the new commission had said he could promise a quick and satisfactory outcome.

Such a telegram would have been superficially accurate. It would have helped the Reagan administration to advance its new policy and it would have insured my promotion to positions of increasing responsibility.

Now, I am not one who sees every decision as a moral or ethical challenge. Over twenty five years I had developed the necessary elasticity of conscience to function effectively as a diplomat. I had, on more than one occasion, shaded the truth in order to give a policy time to work or had been somewhat less than candid in order to protect secrets.

In this case, however, Secretary Haig was asking me to affirm what I knew to be false, to use official channels to lie to my own government.

Within the hour, I had sent in a telegram stating that my embassy's reporting over the past six weeks had provided ample proof that the Salvadoran military had killed the four women, that once the bodies had been discovered, the Salvadoran high command had begun a massive cover-up designed to protect the guilty, that there was no investigation under way and that we could expect nothing from the Salvadoran military high command except a continuing cover-up.

Throughout history, diplomats have faced the problem of policy makers who would prefer not to know inconvenient facts that might undercut established policy. All classic texts on diplomacy warn the professional foreign service officer against telling the government what it "would like to hear, rather than what they ought to know." To fall into the practice of withholding information or distorting reports, says one commentator, "is to commit a disloyal act against one's own government."

As an example to others, I was immediately fired as ambassador to El Salvador and, soon after that, forced from the Foreign Service. Three other career diplomats serving in Central America refused to compromise their principles and also lost their careers.

It is a matter of historical record that between 1981 and 1989, key policy advisors lied to Congress around the course of events in Central America and, particularly, El

Salvador. Liar-in-chief, assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams, led the way. He understood that the human rights record of the Salvadoran military was indefensible. He therefore set out to create a fictitious reality. He partially succeeded.

It is also matter of record that, during the 1980s and 1990s, top-ranking diplomats in Central America suppressed the truth about events in the region and did their best to explain away human rights abuses by the military establishments we were supporting.

I am sad to report that many of those whose reporting pandered to the political obsessions of Washington during the Reagan years were rewarded by promotion and positions of great responsibility. At least one career diplomat, who suppressed the truth about events in one Central American country, has reached the highest levels in the administration of foreign policy.

Governments that reward candor will get it. Those who demand that diplomats suppress and distort facts will blindly take this nation in the wrong direction.

It was not Central American revolutionaries yesterday, nor is it Muslim fundamentalists today, that threaten the national security of the United States, but those at home who react to those foreign policy challenges by stifling debate, by suppressing dissent, by politicizing the career services.

Both the war in El Salvador and the war in Iraq seemed to have been designed by shallow, immature men, deliberately ignorant of the causes of the conflict, uninterested in any peaceful resolution of differences and uncaring of the consequences – for them or us.

Time and distance separate our earlier interventions in Central America from the crisis in the Middle East. Yet the rhetoric that accompanied our invasion of Iraq echoes the language used 25 years ago to justify our misadventures in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Again, we hear that “freedom and democracy” and the “overthrow of tyranny” are goals of military intervention.

Now, as then, our arguments fail to convince friends and allies in the region; then as now, our rationale for intervention proved counterfeit. Now, as then, we act in defiance of treaty commitments, insisting that the United States has the preeminent right to define threats to regional and global security. Now, as then, we learn that American foreign policy fails when we violate our own ideals.