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A STRATEGIC VIEW OF INSURGENCIES: INSIGHTS FROM EL SALVADOR

By MAX G. MANWARING
and COURT PRISK

THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

—James Madison to W.T. Barry
August 4, 1822

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THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES
NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
Fort Lesley J. McNair
Washington, DC 20319-6000
(202) 475-1190

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By MAX G. MANWARING and COURT PRISK

N THE LATE 1970s, chronic political, economic, and social problems created by a self-serving military-supported oligarchy began to generate another crisis in a long list of crises in El Salvador. During that time, General Carlos Humberto Romero came to power, brought by those who thought that he would be able to establish a regime strong enough to protect the interests of the oligarchy and to control the various forces agitating for change. Yet by 1979, the situation was beyond control by repression.

The catalyst that ignited the violence in El Salvador was the military coup of October 1979 that ousted Romero as the last protector of the interests of the obligarchy. After Romero, the history of the country breaks into four clearly defined periods. The period immediately after the coup was one of almost complete disarray. None of the three major actors in the conflict—the military, the insurgents, and the United States—was ready for the aftermath of 50 years of authoritarian government. Then from the end of 1981 to the end of 1984, the Salvadoran revolutionaries seemed to unify and appeared to be well on their way to a military victory and the assumption of political power in their own right. Clearly, the insurgents were ascendant. By the end of 1984, however, the armed forces had taken the best the insurgents could give and were beginning to regain control of the political-military situation. Perhaps it is still too early to tell, but the period 1985-87 appeared to be the beginning of the end of the idea that Salvadoran revolution comes only from the "barrel of a gun." The war changed direction. In the period from 1987 to the present, nothing really decisive seems to have taken place. There

have been some spectacular events, but the revolutionaries have been deprived of their military victory. The United States-backed Salvadoran forces have not won either. The Salvadorans have an impasse within a protracted war.

This following commentary is an exploration of the overwhelming need to maintain a strategic perspective in fighting an insurgency, illustrated by close examination of the continuing insurgency in El Salvador. We believe that in El Salvador, as in all other insurgencies of this sort, three strategic considerations must be kept in mind: The insurgent is dedicated to *total* victory and all his actions must be judged accordingly; the fundamental goal of the insurgent is not military, but political, namely to undermine the legitimacy of the government; and finally, conducting a counterinsurgency strategy cannot be done in a business-as-usual manner—a special organization and tactics are necessary.

The Context of the War

Examining the military-historical divisions of the Salvadoran conflict and the major insights derived from each requires consideration of the context of the struggle to provide an elaboration of the central strategic problem that permeates the entire war. The guerrilla war in El Salvador began in the early 1960s in response to the abusive and repressive nature of the successive governments that had been essentially at the service of the Salvadoran oligarchy. Through the efforts of the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCES), the National University became a center for agitation and change. The PCES, after converting the university, began to successfully promote the Marxist-Leninist ideas of preparing the people, subverting the political parties, disrupting the functioning of government, and agitating through demonstrations. This militant but relatively nonviolent strategy seemed to be working when the coalition of the PCES, the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), and Christian Democratic Party (PDC) won the 1972 presidential election. But, when the election was taken away by fraud the PCES strategy fell apart and a new set of more combative radicals began to espouse violent

armed confrontation. As the resultant demonstrations, riots, strikes, and chaos grew in intensity, the government became more repressive.[1] El Salvador was almost literally in flames.

By 1979, it was patently clear that the country was going to follow the way of either Nicaragua or Chile. The military-civil junta that generated the 1979 coup chose to attempt a modification of the Chilean model. Like the insurgents, the junta saw the need for radical change. However, instead of attempting to achieve that change through revolutionary violence, it proposed a set of dynamic, evolutionary processes to correct the existing problems and leave the general fabric of society intact. These changes the junta would accomplish through a "democratic process" in which the long-repressed people could take a major role.[2]

Speaking for the insurgents, Dr. Guillermo M. Ungo saw the legitimacy of the regime as the primary strategic problem in El Salvador.[3] The former provisional president of El Salvador, Dr. Alvaro Magaña, agreed. He argued that the junta, which included Jose Napoleón Duarte, understood the strategic nature of the problem and countered with a program designed to nullify the efforts of the extreme left, saying "The development of a relatively honest and competent government interested in the welfare of the people—what you call legitimacy—was indeed crucial to Salvadoran stability and security."[4]

The third actor in the struggle, the United States, tended to view the situation in El Salvador solely as an extension of the general East-West superpower confrontation, and as a follow-on to the Sandinista takeover in Nicaragua. As such, the primary objective of the United States seemed to be to do what was necessary to return to "normalcy" so as to concentrate on the primary threat.[5]

The context of the war in El Salvador, then, had two dimensions. In terms of time, it would be a long-term struggle for survival for both the revolutionaries and for the government. As far as the United States was concerned, it was something to be resolved as quickly as possible, but with complacence. In terms of perspective, the conflict for both insurgent and incumbent would be a total political and moral, as well

as military, effort. Only an outside superpower had the luxury of thinking in "limited" terms.

In sum, the thrust of the revolutionary program centered around the redress of real as well as perceived grievances and deprivations. The government counterinsurgency planners understood this and did not respond only to the "enemy" military force and the guerrilla war. The power structure centered its efforts around basic reforms and the establishment of the foundations of participatory democracy.[6] Thus, a legitimacy war (the achievement and maintenance of the moral right to govern) was considered to be the major concern upon which everything depended, and the basic context of the conflict.[7]

Disarray: A Look at the Antagonists During 1979-81

In late 1979, the guerrillas initiated a series of indirect and direct attacks throughout the country. The first form of attack was an intensive psychological campaign to challenge the legitimacy of the Romero regime and the *junta* that succeeded him. Then, in January 1981, the insurgents attempted a "final offensive," hoping to gain a quick and total military victory. The effort was unsuccessful and was rationalized as the beginning of a "general offensive" that would ultimately lead to the final objective—to bring down the government.[8]

Some of the Salvadoran military saw the forces of change moving out of control at about the same time of the "final offensive." Moreover, they saw and understood what had happened to General Somoza's National Guard at the hands of the Nicaraguan people. The parallels were hard to ignore, leading to a general conclusion that the Salvadoran armed forces would suffer similar consequences if they did not act quickly to put out the fire of revolution in their own country.[9] To save the military institution (and themselves) the armed forces would have to break the alliance with the oligarchy and realign with political forces that could win popular support.[10]

These officers were buffeted by both the left and the right, and also internally. The right opposed them because the officers were tied to the oligarchic interests that were threatened by proposed reforms.[11] They were labeled as traitors by the left because they were co-opting the political-social rationale of the Marxist-Leninist movement.[12] That rationale "tracked" within a context in which the civil-military elites could not possibly make "correct" interpretations of and solutions to the country's problems because it must be the "vanguard of the proletariat" who would make those interpretations and determine proper solutions. Internally, within the armed forces themselves, the need to implement fundamental reforms, coupled with the struggle to establish a government based on a nontraditional, noncorporate model created confusion and fragmentation.[13]

The inability of the civil-military junta to cope with the war of information magnified the problems and their components. This inability had an impact on the general war in two ways. First, it gave the insurgents—traditionally better prepared to fight a propaganda war—a veneer of cohesion, strength, and even legitimacy.[14] Perhaps more important, it caused United States policymakers—ever sensitive to the media image of an ally—to waver on the type and amount of support to provide. Jose Napoleón Duarte recognized the strategic implications of the issue: "Overall, we were being crushed under the avalanche of international press coverage. We had been totally unprepared for it. If there had been some structure to handle the press, some capacity to investigate charges and demonstrate what was true or false, we might have done better."[15] As it was, "FMLN propaganda almost defeated us by itself."[16]

In the time-honored tradition of Latin American politics, the dominant military leadership sought to establish a civil-military junta. Their effort focused on sharing power with as many of the key power centers in the country as were willing to cooperate in an attempt to establish a unified control of the situation against the militant left. This network was to

provide the basis for the subsequent organization to be established and empowered to pursue the political-military dimensions of the struggle effectively. Putting the concept of unity of command into effect would also help ensure that all civil-military activity would be concentrated on the ultimate goal—survival.[17] The difficulty of achieving this goal when faced with an enemy specifically attempting to fragment and subvert a society can be, in essence, considered an organizational war.[18]

For the Salvadoran reformers, the United States was the only source of external support that could make a difference. Yet during this period of disarray, the United States was also apparently confused.[19] This problem was highlighted by the unwillingness or inability of senior policymakers to develop any kind of coordinated effort to deal with the situation in El Salvador—despite the general willingness and commitment of both the Carter and the Reagan administrations to help.[20]

A perceived "too little, too late" conundrum during this crucial period is but one example of US confusion. Dr. Alvaro Magaña, who acted as President during 1982-84, argued that there appeared to have been no agreed, coherent strategy to achieve objectives and, indeed, no agreement as to those objectives. Decisions concerning the allocation of "North American" resources to El Salvador appeared to have been made on the basis of what the minimum effort was that could be made while maintaining congressional support for administration policy. As a matter of fact, the only alternative policies examined involved different force levels for the Salvadoran army and specific amounts of economic and military aid.[21] Thus, issues addressed and decisions made were always tactical and short-term in nature—the typical bureaucratic "in-box drill" of finding a "quick-fix," selling it, and getting rid of the immediate problem.

For the guerrillas' part, despite 15 or more years of preparatory work and a decision to try to take control of the country, the revolutionary movement was not ready to control or to take advantage of the near anarchy of the time. The various revolutionary factions that made up the FMLN

(Faribundo Marti Liberation Movement) had not yet unified in any significant way. Thus, to both insurgents and incumbents the strategic solution to the mutual problems of confusion and disarray was respectively to create a real unity of command and effort.[22] Both entities recognized that without a body at the highest level that could establish, enforce, and continually refine cogent objectives, authority would be fragmented and there would be no way to resolve the myriad problems endemic to war and survival. That could mean failure or, at best, no win for either side. Again, only the United States had the luxury of ignoring the central reality of the period—the need for an organizational structure with the authority to plan and implement the entire counterinsurgency assistance effort.

The Period of Insurgent Ascendancy, 1981-84

The leadership of the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), the largest of the guerrilla groups within the FMLN at the time, understood the importance of moral power in the strategy of conflict. They understood and were also responsive to the need to operationalize the classical principle of unity of command in war by engaging in the organizational war. However, the more militaristic leadership of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), flush with the insurrectionist victory of the Sandinistas and supported by a strong push from the Cubans, prevailed. The People's Revolutionary Army elected to do two things. First, they decided to maintain five separate armed elements and give the FMLN organization only umbrella status.[23] Then they determined to pursue a quick military victory over what was perceived to be a completely incompetent enemy.

The first attempt at a quick insurrectionist victory was launched in January 1981. And, despite the failure of what was called the "final offensive," the FMLN demonstrated sufficient organizational unity, manpower, arms, sanctuaries, and

outside support to generate a more-or-less continuous and growing military effort. This general offensive lasted from the end of 1981 to the end of 1984. During that period, the guerrillas were able to organize, train, and logistically support units that were capable of mounting attacks with as many as 600 men at virtually any time. And, during that period, they were also capable of controlling large portions of the national territory.[24]

Given the admittedly poor internal support given to the guerrillas on the part of the Salvadoran people, the ability to achieve a sustained level of warfare was remarkable. This degree of military capability can only be explained in terms of the exceptional external support enjoyed by the militant left.

Indeed, the external support enjoyed by the FMLN can also be explained by the failure to understand, support, or engage appropriate efforts on the part of either the Salvadoran government or its North American ally in the war against external support. Rather than actively attempt to counter the flow of arms and material, the Salvadoran security organizations and their mentors from the United States concentrated their primary efforts on finding a "smoking gun" that would clearly and legally implicate Nicaragua, Cuba, North Vietnam, and the Soviet Union in the support of the Salvadoran guerrillas.[25] They appeared to concentrate on building some sort of court case, ignoring or failing to take those actions that counter and interdict the flow of support.

Despite the employment of various sophisticated and costly "platforms" designed to detect possible means and routes of entry into Salvador, the effort never did establish the credibility of the "smoking gun" argument. Moreover, by ignoring or refusing to engage the guerrillas' sources of support (and the cross-border sanctuaries providing political and military life support to them), the United States and the Salvadoran government provided the insurgents with their own protected "Ho Chi Minh Trail." According to the leader of the ERP, Joaquín Villalobos, this figurative trail was as important to the FMLN as the real trail was to the victory of the North in the Vietnamese struggle.[26] As a result of the

failure to interdict the flow of physical and psychological support to the FMLN from abroad was never seriously impaired.[27]

According to Dr. Guillermo Ungo, "FDR-FMLN efforts ...received the deepest international support from a broad range of countries in both the capitalist and socialist worlds—from Cuba, France, Mexico, Nicaragua, Sweden, and Third World countries....Even in the United States, important sectors of the population have a better understanding of the situation of the Salvadoran people and the reason for their political and armed struggle than does the United States Government."[28] When France and Mexico granted formal recognition to the guerrillas, it was easy to understand why Jose Napoleón Duarte considered it the low point in the conflict.[29] Other parties to the Salvadoran conflict were not inactive although the external support for a formidable guerrilla military effort was the most obvious and best-reported aspect of the period.

In a struggle for the "hearts and minds" of a people, the fundamental question is one of rectitude; it was here that the government response began. While the "revolutionaries" were concentrating their efforts on the military aspects of the war, the Salvadoran leadership made the struggle to gain legitimacy—and, thus, internal and external support—the first priority.[30] As a consequence, one of the first things the civil-military junta did on taking control of the government after the 1979 coup was to announce land, banking, and commodity export reforms. Subsequently, other reforms were promulgated—not the least of which were popular elections that really mattered.[31] The degree of success these reforms and human rights enforcement may or may not enjoy today is moot. The point is that enough Salvadoran people have been sufficiently convinced of progress that they have not supported the insurgent cause to anywhere near the extent that might be expected.[32]

The armed forces' leadership responded to the legitimization process on at least two fundamental levels. The military broke with its traditional right-wing allies and joined with moderate civilian politicians in an alliance to support the

democratic constitutional process. The military went to extreme lengths to provide security for free elections and consistently demonstrated loyalty to civilian institutions—particularly to the office of the presidency. In the opinion of General Fred F. Woerner, this was probably the most significant reform of the decade.[33]

The military leadership also understood that guerrilla war had to be fought on diverse fronts and that soldiers and officers had to do more than shoot people in order to win the long-term struggle.[34] Consequently, they took the necessary time and resources to begin to change a 11,000-14,000-man "Praetorian Guard," accustomed to abusing its authority, into a more professional 50,000-55,000-man organization that could engage an enemy force without alienating the general citizenry. This was another significant reform with long-term positive implications.[35] As far as the controlling military elite was concerned at that time, the central strategic effort could not be directed against a specific piece of territory or the enemy force—the primary center of gravity was the basic underpinnings of the Salvadoran government itself.[36]

As the armed forces began the process of reform and professionalization, they also developed the ability to fight a relatively intense war.[37] The role of the United States was a positive one in these terms; however, during the 1981-84 period of insurgent ascendancy, US assistance left much to be desired. At least a few senior decisionmakers were not particularly concerned, assuming that once the US Government had showed that it was prepared to provide some help, the guerrilla movement would see the inevitability of defeat and simply go away.[38] What this assumption did not take into account was the ideological commitment of the FMLN hard-core membership, the FMLN's strong belief that a prolonged war would cause the US Congress to force withdrawal of support to the Salvadoran government (e.g., Vietnam), and the strategic importance of the Nicaraguan-Cuban-Vietnamese-Soviet connection. In short, there was no thorough analysis or appreciation of the situation.

During this time, despite the fact that the Salvadoran government "never knew when the next shipment of ammunition would arrive" or what they could plan on in terms of other assistance, North American aid was as important to the government as the external support from allies was to the insurgents.[39] In summary, in this seemingly dark period in the history of the conflict in El Salvador, three things stand out in strategic perspective. First, legitimacy was reaffirmed as the factor that in the long-term would prove to be more decisive than traditional military action. The government and the armed forces got an apparently slow start in the military war against the insurgents but began the process of seizing the "moral high ground." On the other hand, the *comandantes* of the FMLN chose to all but ignore the counsel so generously provided by Mao, Giap, and their own "politicos" regarding the absolute need to supplement military action with a rigorous appreciation of the moral dimension of contemporary war.

Second, the classical principles of unity of command and objective were also reaffirmed in the obverse. Both sides organized only to the extent necessary for survival and perhaps even for moderate success but not to the degree required to win. None of the principals was able to overcome individual problems of turf, distrust, or lethargy to the degree necessary to develop an organization with the requisite authority to coordinate and implement a winning set of strategic military-political objectives. Ambassador Thomas Pickering described the North American situation:

> We had neither the doctrine nor the support, nor the coordination in the United States government that would really be required to deal effectively with that kind of operation. I don't think we ever developed it; we still are kind of *ad hoc* in our way of viewing the problems. That is really quite a critical comment.[40]

The third item of strategic significance, although North American aid also probably saved the incumbent Salvadoran government, outside aid also made the guerrilla ascendancy possible. Yet, there appears to have been little cognizance of the war against external support. Neither the United States nor

the Salvadoran government seriously addressed the external sources of insurgent support. But what gave the FMLN the physical strength and psychological support in this context was not the assistance itself or the routes that assistance might have taken to get the battlefield. The center of gravity was (and is) the source of whatever support might be provided.[41]

The War Changes Direction

By the end of 1984, the FMLN had been forced to take the military defensive. As a result, the Salvadoran guerrillas prepared to initiate a psychological offensive against two primary targets. First, they refocused on the illegitimacy of the regime in power. Second, they began to mount a very strong attack against the government's source of power—the United States. The strategy became that of taking a low military profile, making an opening that would lead to negotiations, and working for United States disengagement from the conflict.[42]

As part of this strategy, attacks on the Duarte government stressed the inability of the Christian Democratic regime to promulgate serious reforms in the system, stem governmental and business corruption and fraud, and bring to justice individuals known to have violated human rights. This campaign discredited the Duarte administration in the eyes of a large segment of the population, and began to disrupt the community of interest between the Salvadoran and United States governments.[43]

At the same time, the insurgents set out to attack the economic infrastructure, the transportation network, and local symbols of central government authority throughout the country. The primary objective of this "armed propaganda" was not a military one. Rather, it was to convince the population and the United States that the government continued to be incompetent or unwilling to provide an adequate security environment for the socio-economic development of El Salvador. Moreover, tying down regular military forces in protecting specific infrastructure and population centers allowed the insurgents great latitude for political and psychological efforts in the rest of the country.[44]

The guerrillas' third outreaching move was also important; their multiple calls for "cease fire" and various attempts to open a dialogue with the government resulted in internal and external perceptions that the FMLN wanted peace. In a country and a world tired of almost continual strife over the past several years, the appeal of peace at virtually any cost was (and continues to be) strong.[45]

Insurgent efforts to stem United States' assistance to El Salvador centered on the proverbial corridors of power in Washington.[46] The general results of this type of psychological offensive are strong indications that many "North American" decisionmakers are beginning to believe that the cost in lives and money of supporting the war in El Salvador has reached unacceptable high levels, and that the objective of a "democratic" government there is not possible or worth the price.[47]

According to Joaquín Villalobos the consequent continuing demoralization of the Salvadoran society and the United States Congress, begun during the guerrilla military defensive, continues to work to the advantage of the FMLN.[48]

The forces at work within the Salvadoran government also began to shift their position during the bitter guerrilla war that took place between 1981 and 1984. As a matter of survival, the power structure had to think and act in terms of what was absolutely necessary at any given moment. As a result, those in power began to assume more and more that the military component was the major insurgent center of gravity; if it were destroyed the FMLN would lose its viability and ability to act as a meaningful force in El Salvador.[49]

Even before 1984, the government's armed efforts against the FMLN military force were impressive. Ever since then, logistically and tactically, the armed forces "have succeeded in everything [they] have set out to do."[50] They have developed the capability to move more than 50,000 troops around the country, feed them, cloth them, house them, train them, supply them with arms and ammunition, and generally sustain them better than ever. On the battlefield the Army has been unbeatable since 1984. In engagement after engagement, including some spectacular media events such as the November

1989 attack on the city of San Salvador itself, the guerrilla forces have been thrown back or defeated with significant losses.[51]

The Salvadoran armed forces have probably become Central America's most formidable military force; with much pride they argue that if Nicaragua ever started a war, the Salvadorans could finish it. The armed forces also state—somewhat more uncomfortably—that if Honduras should again show belligerent intent, the Salvadoran military would defeat them in detail, and in short order.[52]

The arguments may be accurate, but they are also irrelevant, pointing out a major reason why the Salvadoran armed forces still cannot defeat the insurgent enemy it faces. The FMLN is not a conventional military force. It is not a simple collection of infantry and armor. The fact is that this insurgent group or any insurgency does not have a single military center of gravity. "It is a political organism which uses terror and other more conventional military means as only part of its arsenal."[53]

The United States has allowed and encouraged the Salvadoran security forces to grow into the image of their maker. The Salvadoran military and their North American mentors have developed a conventional military force that is comfortable operating in battalion-sized formations, dependent on heavy, indirect firepower, and reliant on helicopters and trucks for mobility.[54] Indeed, they would probably be comfortable in the Fulda Gap; certainly they would be comfortable in the Chuleteca Gap.

These more conventional attributes served a useful and necessary purpose during 1981-84 when guerrilla strategy attempted to destroy the armed forces by pitting large, more-or-less conventional FMLN units against smaller and weaker government formations. However, when that effort failed, the insurgents accepted the need for a protracted struggle. They also accepted the need to generally operate in smaller units that would emphasize hit-and-run tactics against primarily political-economic-psychological targets. Further, until the second insurrectional offensive of November 1989, FMLN units avoided major confrontations with stronger government forces—except

on their own terms. In short, the FMLN adapted to the situation.

Although the FMLN changed its approach, unwieldy conventional government battalions continue to expend their energy on "sweep" and "search and destroy" missions supported by fixed-wing aircraft, attack helicopters, artillery, and anti-tank weapons. Their efforts are accomplished without real purpose or results but with great destruction and taking of the lives of innocent bystanders. The force established between 1981 and 1986 has become largely irrelevant to the conduct of the present wars of legitimacy, subversion, and external support.[55]

This incongruous approach by the United States to organizing and equipping the Salvadoran armed forces in a generally conventional manner has complicated the task of persuading them to adapt relevant tactics and force structure to the counterinsurgency.[56] North American advisers tend to be more comfortable making recommendations on how to create better logistical or personnel management systems, or on the minor tactics of counterinsurgency. When queried as to whether these things will help win the war, they really can't answer the question.[57] The United States has not yet developed an understanding of the phenomenon and what it will take to deal with it successfully. In the meantime, without understanding or firm objectives, the hard work and operational-tactical level efforts to assist Salvadoran security forces tend to be piecemeal, misdirected, and indecisive.[58]

Because the FMLN shifted the strategic center of gravity away from the armed forces and back to the legitimacy of the Salvadoran government and the external support provided by the United States, it has generated a situation in which the Salvadoran armed forces "can go anywhere they want in the country." Yet given relatively stagnant government military institutions and a less than integrated political-psychological-economic-military effort, it is obvious that the situation in El Salvador is one in which neither side has won and neither side has lost.

The result is the fourth stage, an impasse within a protracted war. General Giap explained that in this type of war

"a weak people which rises up resolutely [in the spirit of a long resistance] to fight for its freedom is sure to triumph over all enemies and to achieve victory."[59] While acknowledging the significant defeat of the November 1989 second "final offensive," those who might feel some satisfaction for "not having lost" to the FMLN take mistaken consolation.

Toward the Future: Insights, Imperatives, and Implications

Some specific and definite lessons can be learned from the Salvadoran experience. One important insight at or near the top of any priority list focuses on the fundamental problem of the threat. The threat in El Salvador is multifaceted but aimed at one objective. Speaking for the FMLN, Joaquín Villalobos explains that objective lucidly. He states that the guerrillas' objective (and thus the threat) remains the same today as it was in 1981: "Our people and their vanguard are determined to win and WE WILL WIN."[60] The insurgent objective is total victory. Once internalized, it provides the rationale for all political, psychological, diplomatic, and military actions taken in its pursuit.

Another insight also ranks as one of the most important; the defeat of military force should not be the central objective (of either side) in a prolonged struggle such as that in El Salvador. The primary objective of the FMLN is to destroy the legitimacy of the incumbent government and take control of the state. The primary objective of the Salvadoran government, then, must be to protect, maintain, and enhance its moral right to govern. The strategic center of gravity remains the relative rectitude of the contending organizations.

The failure of the FMLN to keep this central objective in focus contributed directly to their failure to win the overall war during the 1981-84 period. Conversely, during the same period, the government recognized the importance of the legitimacy dimension. Sacrificing traditional political positions and diverting scarce resources and energies from the guerrilla war was a difficult but correct choice. Jose Napoleón Duarte

understood that the people would make the final decision one way or the other:

> I acknowledge that the revolutionaries may have good reason for taking up arms when there was no hope of economic reform, social justice, or free elections. But revolution is not the act of taking power. The process of revolution may begin with a change of government, but the revolution takes place only when there has been a transformation of the economy, the social patterns, the armed forces, the education, and the culture of a country. I have had to sacrifice some values in order to provide the country a hope towards a better future. I am paying the political price today for the benefit of tomorrow. But if the Christian Democrats show that a democratic system can bring about structural changes peacefully, then the polarized choice between domination by the rightist oligarchy and violent revolution by the left will no longer be valid.[61]

The dominance of the legitimacy dimension to the general war in the case of El Salvador appears obvious. Failure on the part of the government—regardless of political orientation—to place priority on earning the moral right to govern will prolong the war and could ultimately lead to defeat.

Perhaps the North American corollary to the dominance of the legitimacy dimension in an insurgency is that the United States continually fails to recognize the need to organize to fight this form of conflict.[62] All the rhetoric concerning the political and psychological dimensions dominating the military dimension appears to be just that. In the United States there is no operative high-level coordinating mechanism, no "wartime" political battle staff, and no special operational authority to require the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Department of Defense, or the other "stovepipe" agencies to respond to a "low intensity conflict" problem outside of business-as-usual or crisis management channels.[63]

Instead, except for the personnel directly involved, United States' agencies continue to view the situation with complacence. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that while day-to-day activities are generally handled expertly, the responses to problems tend to be reactions—short-term tactical or operational in nature and with a strong military bias.

There is a virtual void in strategic perspective or vision, as General Galvin noted:

> There simply isn't enough of a unified effort of the U.S. administration—the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the other departments and agencies—somehow tied together in order to carry out a unified strategy. The organization is not there and the strategy is not there.[64]

Clearly, the final outcome of an "uncomfortable war" such as the one in El Salvador is not determined primarily by the skillful manipulation of violence in the many battles that take place once a war is recognized to have begun. Rather, the control of the situation is determined by the qualitative and quantitative levels of preparation undertaken before, during, and after the confrontation.

Implications from insight dictate several strategic requirements of preparation that could be considered as basic tenets for successful engagement in this form of conflict.

First, decisionmakers and their staffs must understand the phenomenon, and therewith focus attention on solving the central strategic problem. The most refined tactical doctrine and operational art carried out by an optimum force structure in pursuit of a flawed or nonexistent strategy will be irrelevant. The realization that the nature of counterinsurgency is strategic and that military actions within that context are politics and not simply an extension of politics by a more violent means is a critical first step to understanding. This is a conceptual requirement demanding that planners and decisionmakers begin with the formulation of strategic objectives that, if attained, will solve the root political and social causes of that conflict. Military actions can then be focused on facilitating the overall objectives, and will not become ends in themselves.[65]

A corollary, the second requirement, is understanding that legitimacy—the moral right to govern—is the central target of the insurgent. The implications should be obvious for the North American planner and decisionmaker. Every action, every operation, every effort to assist a country faced with an

insurgency must be taken only after it is deemed a means of assisting the incumbent regime to enhance its legitimacy.[66]

The third tenet also demands action based on an understanding of the toal threat. It is primarily organizational. It is the idea that all efforts are guided by the strategic perspective. The major implication of this tenet, in General Galvin's words, is straightforward—"No organization, no strategy—no victory."[67] Each of these tenets focuses on strategic requirements that have long-term implications for North America's ability to protect and promote vital interests in the less-developed regions of the world.

Three additional tenets have more specific and short-term implications. These fundamentals center on the means by which a subversive organization might be neutralized and require individual planners and decisionmakers to take difficult but positive steps to modify force structure and provide specific skills and capabilities, to seek additional flexibility in operational authority and rules of engagement and to reorient traditional thinking and training.

The first point in this set of short-term tenets is that intelligence is key. No situation can present a more ambiguous problem to the strategic planner or policymaker than the indirect threats posed by an insurgency. Before, during, and after an internal crisis, there is an indispensable need to know not only the enemy but also the "neutrals" and the strengths and weakness of "friends."[68]

In the multifaceted guerrilla war, while sophisticated technical intelligence means can locate things and structured organizations, only through the effective use of human intelligence and psychological operations can the situations caused by people be controlled by other people.

Another short-term tenet is that the forces must be adaptable and actions flexible. At bottom this tenet demands a realization that the form of conflict experienced in El Salvador is neither a routine, peaceful competition nor a declared state of war. It is a different state of affairs requiring a unique set of "rules-of-engagement."[69] The implications are significant

for the national command authority and the United States Congress, which should begin by reconsidering the laws and procedures under which assistance is provided in this nebulous "third state-of-affairs." At minimum, new laws, policies, and procedures must provide a capability to coordinate the commitment of resources over a long period of time and provide that assistance without forcing the assisted country to structure its armed forces and government in the likeness of the provider. In this context, the absence of "micromanagement" of specific situations, especially from afar, and the presence of a high degree of individual initiative to integrate and employ the elements that constitute power would be helpful.

Another short-term fundamental, which in many ways summarizes and sets the foundation for the other tenets, is the requirement for a proactive orientation. This is both a conceptual requirement and an all-encompassing operational requirement. To establish the ability to engage before the crisis and to efficiently assist during and after a crisis, there must be a large complement of civilian and military advisers and policymakers who are culturally aware, politically knowlegeable, and technically prepared.[70]

This capability will require reallocation of priorities and funding and a willingness to develop unique and coordinated planning and new operational agencies. It will require the establishment of new and different sets of civilian and military career patterns. It will cost. However, as General Wallace H. Nutting mused in reference to all of Latin America, "For the cost of steaming a carrier battle group up and down the coast (of Central America) for a week, we could fund most of the training programs and most of the material assistance needed for a year."[71]

Judgments are easy to state and difficult to carry out; even so, ultimate success is dependent on taking those actions in a pre-crisis environment that ensure that no crisis will develop. Failing that, we need the capability to control situations such as El Salvador immediately and consistently

in a planned and coordinated manner. B. H. Liddell Hart summarizes this central concept:

> The effectiveness of armies depends on the development of methods which aim at permeating and dominating areas rather than capturing lines; at the practicable object of paralizing the enemy's action rather than the theoretical object of crushing his forces.[72]

Conclusion

It seems to us that what we have suggested here conforms to the present realities of strategic power in the Salvadoran part of the international security arena. The carrying out of these ideas would produce a favorable outcome in a conflict such as that in El Salvador without a great deal of fighting. As Sun Tzu wrote approximately 2,500 years ago, "To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."[73]

Notes

1. Interviews with Miguel Castellanos (alias), former FMLN comandante, in San Salvador, September 1987 and February 1989 prior to his "assassination." Unless otherwise stated, interviews were conducted by Dr. Max G. Manwaring. Also see Michael S. Radu, *Insurgent and Terrorist Groups in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy Research Institute for the Defense Intelligence Agency, September 20, 1984), p. 268.
2. Interviews with Dr. Alvaro Magaña, former provisional president of El Salvador, in San Salvador, December 1986, June 1987, November 1987, February 1989, July 1989, and October 1989.
3. Interviews with Dr. Guillermo M. Ungo, president of the FDR, in Panama City, RP, December 1987.
4. Interviews with Magaña.
5. Interviews with Dr. Luigi R. Einaudi, director of the Office of Policy Planning and Coordination, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, US Department of State, in Washington, DC, September 1987.
6. Interviews with Magaña.
7. Ibid.

8. Interview with Joaquin Villalobos, commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary People's Army (ERP), conducted by Marta Harnecker, in Marlene Dixon and Susanne Jonas (eds.), *Revolution and Intervention in Central America* (San Francisco, CA: Synthesis Publications, 1983), pp. 69-105; interview with Rafael Menjivar, spokesman for the FDR, in Dixon and Jonas, *Revolution and Intervention,* pp. 63-69. Also see: Joaquín Villalobos, "El Estado Actual de la Guerra y sus Perspectivas," *ECA Estudios Centroamericanos,* No. 449, March 1986, pp. 169-204.

9. Interviews with General Jose Guillermo Garcia, former Salvadoran minister of defense, in San Salvador, July 1987; interview with General Jaime Abdul Gutierrez, member of the civil-military junta that took control of the Salvadoran government after the 15 October 1979 coup, in San Salvador, December 1986.

10. Ibid.

11. Interviews with Magaña.

12. "The Role of Unity in the Revolutionary War," an interview with Juan Chacon, former member of the Executive Committee of the FDR, in Dixon and Jonas (eds.), *Revolution and Intervention,* pp. 40-46.

13. Interviews with Garcia and Gutierrez; interview with Jose Napoleón Duarte, President of El Salvador, in San Salvador, November 1987; Jose Napoleón Duarte, *Duarte: My Story* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1986), pp. 98-104.

14. Interviews with confidential C-V spokesperson. Also, according to the comments made by Castellanos and reflected in captured documentation, fully half of the young insurgent leaders' training and the major senior leadership training was aimed at preparing to fight the propaganda war. Castellanos, along with other leaders, took specific courses in Vietnam, "How to Influence the Press" and "How to Take the War to the U.S. Congress."

15. Interview with Duarte.

16. Ibid.

17. Interview with Garcia; interview with Gutierrez.

18. Interview with Magaña.

19. Ibid; interview with Einaudi.

20. Ibid; interviews with Ambassador Deane Hinton, former US ambassador to El Salvador, Washington, DC, September 1987, and General Wallace H. Nutting, former commander-in-chief, US Southern Command, Orlando, FL, January 1987 and May 1988.

21. Interviews with Magaña.

22. Harnecker interview with Villalobos in Dixon and Jonas (eds.), *Revolution and Intervention;* interviews with Garcia.

23. Interviews with Chacon and Menjivar in Dixon and Jonas (eds.), *Revolution and Intervention.*

24. Interviews with Colonel Joseph S. Stringham III, former commander, US Military Group in El Salvador, conducted by Colonel Charles A. Carlton, Jr., USA, in Carlisle Barracks, PA, May 1985.

25. Interviews with Magaña.

26. Harnecker interview with Villalobos in Dixon and Jonas (eds.), *Revolution and Intervention.*

27. Guillermo M. Ungo, "The People's Struggle," *Foreign Policy* (Fall 1983), pp. 51-63; interviews with Ungo.

28. Ibid.

29. Duarte, *Duarte,* p. 170.

30. Interviews with Magaña and Gutierrez; interviews with General Juan Bustillo, commander of the Salvadoran Air Force, in San Salvador, January 1987; Colonel Carlos Reynaldo Lopez Nuila, former vice-minister of public security, in San Salvador, December 1986, June 1987, September 1987, February 1989, and October 1989; General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, former Salvadoran minister of defense, in San Salvador, December 1987.

31. Interviews with Gutierrez.

32. Harneker interview with Villalobos in Dixon and Jonas (eds.), *Revolution and Intervention.*

33. Interviews with Lieutenant General Fred F. Woerner, former deputy commander-in-chief, US Southern Command for Central America, in San Francisco, CA, November 1986; again, with General Woerner as commander-in-chief, US Southern Command, in Panama, March 1989.

34. Interviews with Lopez Nuila.

35. Interviews with Bustillo, Garcia, and Vides Casanova.

36. Interviews with Garcia.

37. Carlton interviews with Stringham; interviews with Colonel John D. Waghelstein, former US Military Group commander in El Salvador, in Washington, DC, February 1987 and January 1989.

38. Interviews with Einaudi.

39. Interviews with Magana.

40. Interviews with Ambassador Thomas Pickering, former US ambassador to El Salvador, in Tel Aviv, Israel, August 1987.

41. Interviews with Lopez Nuila.

42. Interviews with Castellanos; "Concerning Our Military Plans: The Military Strategy of the FMLN" is a document captured and transcribed by the Atlacatl Battalion near Perquin, El Salvador, date unknown, probably late 1983, in *The Commandantes Speak: The Military Strategy of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front,* translated and edited by Gabriel and Judith F. Marcella, Department of National Security and Strategy, US Army War College, March 1987, pp. 2-7, 19-22. Also see "Concerning Propaganda: Our Line of Propaganda," a document presented by the

Popular Revolutionary Army (ERP) at the meeting of the Command of the FMLN, July 1984, in *The Commandantes Speak,* pp. 3-8.

43. See as an example, interview with Joaquín Villalobos conducted by Ana Guadalupe Martinez, in *Semana,* October 31, 1988, pp. 6-12.

44. Interviews with Castellanos.

45. Interviews with Ungo. Also see: Joaquín Villalobos, "El Salvador Perspective de Victoria Revolucionaria," *Semana* October 31 1988, pp. 18-20.

46. Interviews with Castellanos and Duarte.

47. See as an example, Charles Lane, "El Salvador: Death's Democracy," *Atlantic Monthly,* January 1989, pp. 18-25.

48. Villalobos, "El Salvador Perspectiva."

49. Interviews with Garcia, Lopez Nuila, Magaña, and Vides.

50. Interviews with General Adolfo O. Blandon, former chief of staff of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, in San Salvador, July 1987, September 1987, and October 1989.

51. Ibid.

52. Interviews with C-V spokesperson.

53. Interviews with Lopez Nuila.

54. Interviews with Colonel Lyman C. Duryea, former US Defense attache in El Salvador, at Carlisle Barracks, PA, March 1986 and January 1989.

55. Ibid.

56. Interviews with Waghelstein.

57. This assertion is pieced together from US military and diplomatic sources, as well as interviews with Lopez Nuila.

58. Interviews with Nutting.

59. General Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1962), pp. 36-37.

60. Harnecker interview with Villalobos, in Dixon and Jonas (eds.), *Revolution and Intervention;* reaffirmed in Martinez interview, *Semana,* and again in "A Democratic Revolution for El Salvador," *Foreign Policy* (Spring 1989), p. 122.

61. Interviews with Duarte.

62. Interviews with Pickering.

63. Interviews with Nutting.

64. Interviews with General John R. Galvin, former commander-in-chief, US Southern Command, in Mons, Belgium, August 1987; reaffirmed in a personal letter dated 26 July 1988.

65. Interviews with Lopez Nuila drawing on Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 88-89; 618-19.

66. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* translated by Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 88.

67. Interviews with Galvin.

68. Interview with Sir Robert Thompson, former commander and adviser in Malaya, in Washington, DC, January 1986; interviews with Colonel John C. Ellerson, former commander, US Military Group in El Salvador, San Salvador, September 1987. Also see Sir Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945-1969* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1970), p. 8.

69. Interviews with Lopez Nuila.

70. Interviews with Galvin; interviews with Major General James R. Taylor, former commander, US 193d Infantry Brigade (Panama), Panama City, RP, December 1986.

71. Interviews with Nutting.

72. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d ed. (New York: Signet, 1974), p. 333.

73. Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, p. 77.

Max G. Manwaring earned his doctorate at the University of Illinois, writing on the military in Brazilian politics, and was a Fulbright Fellow in Brazil. He has professionally studied Latin America since 1964 and is currently a senior analyst with Booz, Allen & Hamilton, Inc., in Panama.

Court Prisk, a US Military Academy graduate and former faculty member of the US Army Command and General Staff College, has been involved in strategic analysis of international and regional affairs since 1971. He is a strategic analyst for Booz, Allen & Hamilton, Inc., in Panama.

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