



# Jimmy Carter's Policy Toward the El Salvador Civil War: The Demise of Human Rights as a Priority

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Jimmy Carter's Policy toward the El Salvador Civil War: The Demise of Human  
Rights as a Priority

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the roots of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy towards El Salvador and how it changed throughout his presidency. In his candidacy for the president in 1976, Carter stated his commitment to leading a foreign policy that stood up to dictatorships that routinely violated their people's human rights. It was a message that resonated deeply with the American public, and it helped propel him to victory over Gerald Ford. But by the end of his presidency, Carter was presiding over a foreign policy establishment that was sending weapons and money to the military dictatorship of El Salvador, which was brutally suppressing any opposition to its policies. What caused this shift, and why was Carter unable to fulfill his promises? Research in internal memos, newspapers and periodicals, and memoirs shows an administration beset by conflicting perspectives on how to implement this policy, and continual conflict over which aspects of foreign policy should take precedence in El Salvador. As a result, events on the ground in El Salvador often moved independently of attempts to shape them by US officials. More importantly, the "loss" of Nicaragua to Communism put pressure on the Carter administration to prevent further Communist-led coups, and El Salvador was the next likely location for an uprising. In the run up to the 1980 election, Republican opponents of Carter like George H. W. Bush and Ronald Reagan attacked the Administration for allowing a Communist government to establish itself on the American mainland. As a result, the Carter Administration felt the need to stabilize the military government of El Salvador, who were engaged in suppressing both Communists, as well as anyone who was opposed to their policies.

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my wonderful wife, Kira, whose support throughout the entire process of writing was crucial to its completion.

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## I.

### Introduction

On a bright January day in 1977, a new day in American foreign policy dawned with the inauguration of Jimmy Carter. For many attending, it seemed that the cycle of confrontation and proxy wars with the Soviet Union was finally coming to an end. Carter proclaimed that “[o]ur commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair, our national beauty preserved; the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced.”<sup>1</sup> Carter carried into office a foreign policy focus on preserving human rights worldwide, and make clear that he would base his foreign policy decisions on the human right’s record of the country in question. This transformation in focus was a welcome change to the Americans who were weary of an opaque Cold War-based Containment Policy, which had led the country into the quagmire of Vietnam. As Carter bucked tradition by walking from Capitol Hill to the White House, there was a real sense of a new beginning, a sense that the old forces in government were coming to an end, and that a new optimistic and humane policy would be pursued worldwide.

But the optimism of this new approach was soon challenged by events in Central America, long considered the backyard of the United States. There has been a long history of dominance by the United States in the domestic matters of Central American countries, stretching back to the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, that called for the United States to be the only foreign power able to interfere in the affairs of North and South

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmy Carter, “*Inaugural Address*,” The American Presidency Project. January 20, 1977.

American countries. This led to innumerable interventions throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, with the peak of interventions being in the early twentieth century. But even with the reduction in overt American interventions in the years following World War II, the United States remained deeply involved in the internal affairs of these countries. With the overwhelming dominance of American power in comparison to Latin American governments, the decisions of the Carter Administration had profound implications for the citizens of this area. The later election of Ronald Reagan would further disrupt the lives of those in Central America, especially in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

My thesis is the following: President Carter unrealistically believed that El Salvador was under imminent threat of becoming a Communist country, and he believed that the United States' influence would be able to prevent the El Salvadoran government and right-wing militias from violating the El Salvadoran people's human rights. The aberration from Carter's stated goals can also be explained by the role the national security establishment played in convincing those in the administration that the "loss" of El Salvador to Communism would be a deathblow to the region, and to his presidential ambitions in 1980.



## II.

### Research Methods and Limitations

I have used a large variety of evidence in my examination of this subject. One of the main types of sources I used is secondary sources such as *Our Own Backyard* by William LeoGrande's, that detail both the policies that the US had in El Salvador during this time and the extent to which President Carter and Reagan were complicit and involved in the decision-making. I have corroborated these sources with primary sources from the presidential libraries of Carter and Reagan. But this history is still relatively recent, and some of the actions of these administrations could possibly lead to criminal charges, I know that there are documents that have yet to be declassified. In addition, I have used a wide variety of sources by human rights groups like *The Center for Justice and Accountability*, which have done extensive research on the effects of US government policy on the people of El Salvador. I have also deeply examined the memoirs of prominent Presidential officials, including Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. What has been fascinating about my analysis of their memoirs is how little El Salvador is mentioned in them. For example, Cyrus Vance's memoir gives El Salvador a single passing mention, while Carter's memoir devotes only two paragraphs to the country.<sup>2</sup> Even National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski does not mention El Salvador a

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<sup>2</sup> Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1983), 156.

single time in his entire memoir.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that El Salvador was a low priority in the Carter Administration, and that with this low prioritization came a continuation of previous US policy, namely the support of anti-communist forces, regardless of the consequences.

In addition to memoirs, I have examined press statements by the Carter Administration, as well as many internal memos that have been declassified. The State Department has the largest amount of material related to American policy in El Salvador, so I focused much of my efforts on primary sources finding documents there, and have uncovered a wealth of information concerning the decision-making in the State Department. In the following pages, I will outline some of the more substantiated accounts of the decision-making process of the Carter administration.

This research mainly relied on primary and secondary sources that deal with the internal decision-making process in the Carter Administration. As a baseline for this research, I began first with a survey of the mainstream secondary sources that detail the US foreign policy in El Salvador during their Civil War. This survey helped inform me about the major currents of thinking, and have illuminated a number of useful primary sources. This examination of primary sources began with those sources cited in major secondary sources, and then branched out to a variety of foreign policy documents released by the Carter administration.

One limitation that I encountered in my research is that there are documents, especially those that involve the CIA and other intelligence agencies that are still

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<sup>3</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983).

classified. Many of the people involved in decision-making during the Civil War are still alive, and have a vested interest in keeping these documents away from the public eye.

Another limitation that I ran into is that I do not speak Spanish, and one set of sources that could have been valuable to me was government documents in El Salvador that pertain to their relationship with the Carter administrations. I was not only unable to read any documents in Spanish, but I was unable because of financial restraints to travel to El Salvador to do research in that country.

### III.

#### Background

Instability in the late 1970s led to an increasing threat of civil war in El Salvador. The Carter administration was sharply critical of the current state of human rights soon after the inauguration in 1977, and military aid was cut off. But with the “loss” of Nicaragua to Communism, and the growing threat of the FSLN in El Salvador, the administration vacillated on how to respond, and eventually provided monetary and military aid to the government. This decision violated the administration’s stated focus on protecting human rights, as this money and weapons were used to suppress left-wing groups and civilians demonstrating against the government. In this thesis, I will examine the decision-making process behind this choice, and how human rights were abandoned as a consideration in foreign policy towards El Salvador.

My main questions focus on why President Carter initiated and sustained US policies in El Salvador that led to significant human rights violations, and the reasons behind his administration’s decision-making. The roots of the Civil War in El Salvador stretch back to the 1930s, but this thesis will focus more on the run up to the modern Civil War, which was most active between 1980 and 1990. Violence and reprisals between left-wing and right-wing guerilla groups occurred throughout the 1960s and 1970s, during which time Washington escalated its involvement in the country. President Jimmy Carter, worried about the possibility of the left wing taking political power, chose to significantly intervene in the country through monetary and military aid to the

government. This was a significant aberration from his stated goals of enhancing human rights around the world, and an aberration that needs to be explained in further detail to understand why he made the decisions he did. I will conclude with the actions of the Reagan administration in expanding US involvement in the region, and touch upon why this is a topic that needs to be further explored.

The examination of why Carter's Administration abandoned its focus on human rights is an important one, because US intervention in El Salvador constituted one of the largest nation-building efforts in recent US history that did not occur alongside a wholesale regime change.<sup>4</sup> For example, after World War II the US had defeated Nazi Germany and Japan, and then in both countries, initiated a substantial nation-building project. But after the invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979 by the Soviet Union, a similar invasion and nation-building effort would have looked hypocritical. In addition, an overt US intervention would violate many of Carter's most important values, so the options available to the Carter administration were much more limited. A full invasion was off the table, but Carter made the decision to take lesser steps to support through monetary aid and training the El Salvadoran government and right-wing militias.<sup>5</sup>

The modus operandi of the United States in Central and South America before the Carter presidency was a highly funded and organized campaign to build connections to the military of each country, and ensure that they were intensely anti-Communist. The net result of the United States' military training and indoctrination of Central and Southern American military leaders was a clear signal that the US's top priority was anti-

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Schwarz, "Dirty Hands (Part 1)," *The Atlantic*, December 1998. Web. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/dirty-hands/377364/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

communism, and that the US would prefer a stable military dictatorship far more than a left-leaning democracy.<sup>6</sup> There were times where this message was implicitly sent, but other times where it was blatantly clear. In Argentina during the early 1970s, the American Ambassador, Robert Hill, was tasked with managing US-Argentine relations.<sup>7</sup> As the 1976 election brought the issue of Human Rights to the forefront of US policy, Ambassador Hill began to stress it in his relations with Argentine military dictatorship, and even threatened to withhold international loans. But his superior, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, famously gave the green light to human-rights abuses when he met with the Argentine Foreign Minister Guzzetti, and referring to the campaign against subversives in the country, said “we would like you to succeed... the quicker you succeed, the better.”<sup>8</sup> Ambassador Hill’s subsequent efforts to pressure the government to reign in their torture and “disappearing” of political opponents was thus ignored by the Argentine government, who only accelerated the so called “Dirty War.” Under the Nixon and Ford Administration, and the leadership of Kissinger, this was the primary approach that the US undertook with most countries in Latin America.

In fact, the rising chorus of voices calling for a US foreign policy that valued human rights was actively opposed by Kissinger, whose insular operating style of running the State Department made it considerably easier to ignore dissenting opinions. Kissinger was in full control of the levels of power within the State Department, and was diametrically opposed to emphasizing human rights, as well as giving Congress a larger

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<sup>6</sup> William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and US Cold War Policy towards Argentina*. (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Secretary’s Meeting with Argentine Foreign Minister Guzzetti*, October 7, 1976. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB104/Doc6%20761007.pdf>.

role in determining foreign policy. In a meeting with Congressmen in 1976, who were pressing for human rights to play a larger role in US policy, Kissinger tersely deflected questions about US aid to military-run countries, before unexpectedly saying “this has been an interesting session... could we perhaps arrange a meeting again in late January?”<sup>9</sup> Kissinger’s intransigence infuriated many within Congress, and with the threat of more explicit bans on US aid to military regimes, he finally relented to modest steps to integrate human rights advocates into the State Department.<sup>10</sup> These meager changes amount to little more than window dressing, however, compared to the changes that were to come with the inauguration of Jimmy Carter.

One source that provided a comprehensive view of the negative consequences of the Nixon and Ford Administration’s El Salvador policy is a CNN documentary called *Cold War*.<sup>11</sup> It detailed the effect of leftist guerillas throughout Central America, and El Salvador was impacted by their rise. The documentary detailed the destabilizing impact of the murder of Archbishop Romero, as well as the impact of the killing of the American nuns on US policy.<sup>12</sup> It outlined how the Carter Administration initially suspended payments to the El Salvadoran government after the nun’s killings, but resumed them after only six weeks.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>11</sup> Pat Mitchell and Jeremy Isaacs (Producers), 1998. *Cold War* [Television series]. United States, CNN.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

#### IV.

#### Findings

Born in the small town of Plains, Georgia, Jimmy Carter took an unusually circuitous route to the White House.<sup>14</sup> Raised by a peanut farmer father and a nurse mother who violated Georgia norms by treating black women, Carter was a precocious young man who attended a local college through an ROTC scholarship.<sup>15</sup> His intelligence and determination was evident throughout his college career, and he leveraged his time in the ROTC to enlist as an ensign, eventually moving up the ranks to serve as an executive officer aboard navy submarines.<sup>16</sup> After serving for seven years in the Navy, Carter's father died, so he returned to his roots in Georgia in 1953 and took up ownership of his father's farm.<sup>17</sup> His father had been quite wealthy, but also had had many debts and heirs, so Carter ended up inheriting little.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Carter and his family initially lived in public housing after his return from the navy, an experience that would shape him in the years to come and have a large influence on his views towards public assistance.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Jimmy Carter Biography," Biography.com, <http://www.biography.com/people/jimmy-carter-9240013#early-life>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Jimmy Carter's Naval Service," Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, April 28, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2016. <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/jec/jcnavy.phtml>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Post-Presidency* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 83.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



Carter went on to establish himself in both his farming and his farm supply store, and began to thrive in local politics.

After an election to the Georgia State Senate, and a failed run for Governor in 1966, he was elected as governor of Georgia in 1971.<sup>20</sup> Carter astutely recognized that in the years following Watergate and the end of the Vietnam War, a political outsider from Washington would be an attractive candidate in the 1976 election. His tireless campaign work, combined with powerful connections with the Trilateral Commission, allowed him to secure the Democratic nomination. Soon thereafter, he defeated Gerald Ford and assumed the presidency on January 20, 1977. Carter was dedicated to creating a new American foreign policy that was more humane in scope, and would protect the human rights of people around the globe. This vision is what helped him be elected in the first place, as it was an argument that could be used by “cold warriors” to criticize the USSR, as well as by liberals critical of brutal military dictatorships in both Latin America and around the world.

The reasons for the Carter administration’s shift in US foreign policy are wide-ranging, but have their roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The experience of Vietnam was a traumatic one for the American people, who had seen on nightly TV the ravages of war for the first time. The subsequent failure of the Vietnam War on all counts, along with the significant American and Vietnamese body count, left an indelible mark on the American consciousness. The “loss” of South Vietnam seriously undermined the American people’s trust in the foresight of the foreign policy establishments, and led to a growing belief in the incompetence of Washington decision

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<sup>20</sup> “Biography of Jimmy Carter,” Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, April 28, 2016. Accessed August 15, 2016.  
[http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/jec/jecbio\\_p.phtml](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/jec/jecbio_p.phtml).

makers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, this tide of discontent peaked in massive opposition to the Vietnam War, and the resultant US pullout by 1975.

This backlash against government as a result of Vietnam was only compounded by the long-term effects of the Civil Rights Movement. In the late 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement was opposed by many within the Federal Government, but it grew more and more influential and gained the support of more Americans as the 1960s began. The inspirational example of Martin Luther King Jr. and his strategy of nonviolence was effective in convincing many to give at least tacit support to the movement. This groundswell of support eventually led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the subsequent Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Federal Government's actions had an underwhelming effect in many Southern States, with problems like continued segregation in schools. This frustrated many Americans, and led to an even lower level of respect for the federal government, who was seen as impotent against the forces of racist Southerners. As the sixties progressed, these Civil Rights activists expanded their actions to not just protest the Vietnam War, but to promote a new foreign policy based on the respect for human rights that they believed all people deserved, regardless of their nationality. They saw the foreign policy of the United States as powerful force that could be used to bring other countries closer to a fully democratic system of government. But most importantly, there was a growing belief that there were certain freedoms that all people share, regardless of their nationality, gender, race, political views, or sexual orientation. These conceptions of freedom can be traced back to the founding of the UN, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, published in 1948. As adopted by the UN, these rights include freedom of speech, right to a trial, right to an education, and the right to practice one's culture,

among many others. These conceptions became increasingly widespread among the American people as the seventies progressed. The Carter Administration relied on these undercurrents to build support during both the Democratic primary and presidential election, and Carter's emphasis of these ideas was pivotal to his election.

As a result of grassroots and non-governmental organizations growing significantly in influence in the early seventies, powerful forces within Congress began pushing to pivot America's foreign policy to value human rights. Since the end of World War II, the United States had provided enormous amounts of both military aid and training to the armed forces in Latin America, and leveraged this aid to ensure that Latin America remained staunchly anti-Communist.<sup>21</sup> As the military was strengthened, and the U.S. priority of anti-Communism became clear, there were increasing numbers of military coups and takeovers in Latin America. As long as these new governments were anti-Communist, as they inevitably were because of extensive American grooming of military leaders, Washington quickly recognized them and provided additional aid to ensure their stability. These policies engendered more and more opposition as the 1970s progressed. Senator Church, who was most notable for his chairing of the Church Committee in the aftermath of the Watergate Scandal, was extremely vocal in his opposition to US military aid to Latin America, arguing "[w]e should bring home our military missions, end our grant-in-aid and training programs, and sever the intimate connections we have sought to form with the Latin military establishments".<sup>22</sup> In addition, the Church Committee found multiple instances of assassination or attempted

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<sup>21</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 62.

assassination, mostly notably Patrice Lumumba in the Congo and Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic.<sup>23</sup>

Soon thereafter, Donald Fraser, a Democratic Representative from Minnesota, initiated a series of long running hearings that brought together an enormous number of human rights supporters. These hearings questioned victims of torture, academics showing the widespread nature of these abuses, and a variety of NGOs that effectively publicized the horrible abuses occurring in many military dictatorships.<sup>24</sup> As a result, public understanding of these issues was greatly increased, and Latin America, formerly a low priority for the American public, became a central focus on human rights policy. Ultimately, Congress became committed to affecting foreign policy towards countries abusing their citizen's human rights. In 1974, Congress passed a bill requiring military assistance to be cut off from nations that were engaging in systematic human rights violations.<sup>25</sup> This was effective in limiting military training and military missions to abusive regimes, but was unable to stem the sale of weapons to military dictatorships in Latin America during the Nixon and Ford Administrations, as they regularly ignored these guidelines.<sup>26</sup>

Human rights focused NGOs like Amnesty International were a growing force in Washington as the seventies progressed. Their height of power came with the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, who increasingly emphasized a human rights focused foreign

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<sup>23</sup> Alan McPherson, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Military Interventions in Latin America*, (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2013), 95.

<sup>24</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Adam R. Wilsman, "Our Enemy's Enemy: Human Rights and the U.S. Intervention in El Salvador, 1977-1992" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2014), 93.

<sup>26</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 62.

policy as his campaign progressed. In his acceptance speech for the Democratic Nomination, Carter declared that peace was his goal, and that “Peace is the unceasing effort to preserve human rights”.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as Carter’s term began, he consciously reached out to organizations like the International League for Human Rights, and offered the director, Jerome Shestack, “the position of U.S delegate to the United National Human Rights Commission.”<sup>28</sup> In choosing human rights as a focus, Carter was shrewdly hitting upon an issue that had resonated deeply with the US public since Nixon and Kissinger’s foreign policy initiatives.<sup>29</sup> Ever since the Vietnam War, and the subsequent investigations into the US intelligence community, there had been an increasing bipartisan call for foreign policy reform to better match to US values.<sup>30</sup> As a result, it became a major focus of the Administration, with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance announcing that the maintenance of human rights worldwide would be one of the main goals of the administration’s foreign policy. This announcement assured the public and human rights lobbyists of the sincerity of Carter’s goals. And there were real examples of this public focus producing real change with some of America’s third world allies. The Carter Administration was effective in 1978 in convincing the Argentine government to

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<sup>27</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Our Nation’s Past and Future: Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York City,” July 15, 1976. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25953>. Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>29</sup> Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion on Human Rights in American Foreign Policy*, American Diplomacy: Foreign Service Despatches [sic] and Periodic Reports on U.S. Foreign Policy. September 1996, [http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/AD\\_Issues/amdipl\\_1/holsti\\_I.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/AD_Issues/amdipl_1/holsti_I.html).

<sup>30</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 49.

significantly reduce its systematic human rights abuses, in preparation for an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Commission.<sup>31</sup>

The undermining of trust in government in the 1960s and 1970s was only compounded by a lack of trust in the integrity of US politicians, especially in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Ford's subsequent pardon of Nixon further reduced trust, and it was clear by 1975 that a major shake-up in government was coming. Carter, then a former governor of Georgia, was a political outsider, and thus well positioned to capitalize on the lack of trust in the Federal government. These forces combined to allowed Carter to use his outsider status to capitalize on the new forces for human rights that were growing ever more powerful in politics. One of the more significant reasons for the success of Carter's human rights focus was its vague nature. To liberals, it was an implicit condemnation of the previous US support for authoritarian dictators, who the US had supported only because of their rabid anti-Communism. Conservatives were able to also assume that the Carter administration would use the same arguments to get tough against the Soviet Union, who they believed was violating the human rights of its citizens through the denying of voting rights, the use of secret police and indefinite detention, and limiting the freedom of speech and press. Once Carter realized how strongly the issue of human rights resonated with Americans of all ideologies, he began hammering on the issue, and found it resonated deeply with an American public tired of the foreign policy status quo.<sup>32</sup> During the debates with Ford, Carter effectively highlighted his hopeful and morally sound foreign policy goals, saying "[w]e ought to be a beacon for nations who

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<sup>31</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 91.

search for peace and who search for freedom, who search for individual liberty, who search for basic human rights.”<sup>33</sup> Especially with a Ford Administration on the ropes after the Watergate Scandal, Carter was able to effectively hammer on human rights in the last month before the election to score a victory over Ford by two million votes.<sup>34</sup>

This victory would vault a man named Zbigniew Brzezinski to the heights of power in DC. Carter’s joining of the Trilateral Commission in 1973 built his political connections and allowed him to cultivate connections to the Democratic Party elite, while allowing him to maintain his outsider reputation as a man of the people.<sup>35</sup> It was through the Trilateral Commission that he met one of his closest future allies, Zbigniew Brzezinski.<sup>36</sup> Originally born in Poland, Brzezinski had immigrated to Canada with his family; there, as an eleven year old boy, he voraciously consumed the news, especially after the Soviet and Nazi takeover of his homeland of Poland. This came to be a watershed moment for Brzezinski, as he became fixated with foreign policy for the rest of his life, with a special focus on the Soviet Union. After this early experience with the Soviets, he was forever suspicious of their motives, and continually worked towards a goal of weakening the Soviet Union. His focus on academics led to great success in

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<sup>33</sup> Jimmy Carter, *October 6, 1976 Presidential Debate Transcript: The Second Carter-Ford Presidential Debate*. Commission on Presidential Debates, 1976.  
<http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-6-1976-debate-transcript>.

<sup>34</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 92.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Lydon, “Jimmy Carter Revealed: Rockefeller Republican,” *The Atlantic*, July 1977, Accessed July 30, 2016.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1977/07/jimmy-carter-revealed-rockefeller-republican/404908/>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.

school, and he received his undergraduate degree in Canada.<sup>37</sup> Soon thereafter he immigrated to the United States to attend Harvard, where he received his Ph.D. After working with the Russian Research Center at Harvard, he moved onto Columbia as a full professor. When the Teach-In Movement gained steam in March of 1965, Brzezinski was a prominent participant, but on the side of the Johnson administration.<sup>38</sup> As a result of his support, he was recruited by the Johnson administration to serve as a consultant in the State Department, and was soon hired full time as an advisor on Soviet issues. He found success in his interactions with Johnson, but admitted that he was often kept in the dark about higher level discussions, like those during the Six Day War.<sup>39</sup> He was frequently more anti-Soviet than those in the State Department, for example, he bypassed Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other state department officials, and argued directly to President Johnson that Rusk was being deceived by the Soviet Union regarding the Vietnam War.<sup>40</sup> Rusk had reported to the President that the Soviet Union was trying to bring an end to the Vietnam War, while Brzezinski was convinced that this was only a front that the Soviets were putting on. Brzezinski was quite successful at times in bypassing the normal channels of communication, a task later impossible during the Nixon administration with the heavy-handed control wielded by Kissinger.<sup>41</sup> In 1967, he departed the White House

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<sup>37</sup> "Zbigniew Brzezinski Facts," *Your Dictionary* <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/zbigniew-brzezinski>.

<sup>38</sup> Paige E. Mulhollan, Interview with Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, LBJ Presidential Library, November 12, 1971. <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Brzezinski,%20Dr.%20Zbigniew.toc.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



to advise Humphrey, but with Humphrey's defeat in 1968, was temporarily out of a major governmental position.

It was Brzezinski's interest in international trade and policy that eventually led to him to a close relationship with David Rockefeller, with whom he co-founded the Trilateral Commission in 1973.<sup>42</sup> Brzezinski was the executive director during which time the Trilateral Commission wanted to induct a southern governor, and Brzezinski chose Jimmy Carter, who became an active member in 1973.<sup>43</sup> Brzezinski became a close advisor of Carter during this time, and the two developed a close relationship, with Carter gaining an introduction to foreign policy through the Commission. Brzezinski's grooming helped Carter build a national presence in the national media, and after several further conversations he became a close advisor to Carter during the Democratic Primary on foreign policy matters. Brzezinski admitted that Carter's grasp of foreign policy was minimal, and that one of the reasons Brzezinski felt he was a good fit for Carter's team is that he could "get in the car and say [to Carter], 'Look, four things you need to know, the things you need to do, the things you need to say...'"<sup>44</sup> These recommendations often were based on a strong anti-Soviet agenda, motivated by a deep distrust of their motives.<sup>45</sup> Brzezinski soon became Carter's top foreign policy advisor, and as the primary progressed, Carter more and more relied on Brzezinski's ideas to determine his

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<sup>42</sup> Lydon, "Jimmy Carter Revealed."

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> "Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski," Carter Presidency Project, February 18, 1982, [http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp\\_1982\\_0218\\_brzezinski.pdf](http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_1982_0218_brzezinski.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Robert Strong, "Jimmy Carter: Foreign Affairs," The Miller Center, Washington and Lee University. Accessed July 30, 2016. <http://millercenter.org/president/biography/carter-foreign-affairs>.

foreign policy. When Carter made clear that “he wanted to make foreign policy, direct foreign policy, and the Secretary of State would execute his orders...” Brzezinski adroitly sidestepped that position and sought the Assistant for National Security position, where he would have much more influence on the creation of US policy by directly influencing Carter. Brzezinski then worked with Carter to find a candidate that would act as a less independent Secretary of State, especially in comparison to Kissinger’s example, of which Carter was critical.<sup>46</sup> With this goal, Brzezinski sought Vance as Carter’s Secretary of State, with the view that his managerial style would mesh well with Carter’s desire to make the significant foreign policy decisions.<sup>47</sup> But Brzezinski’s came to regret this decision, and his predominance in foreign policy was soon challenged by Vance.

Cyrus Vance was born in West Virginia, and had a challenging childhood, as his father died when he was five. Vance was thenceforth mentored by his uncle John Davis, who was a former presidential candidate, and a highly successful Supreme Court Attorney.<sup>48</sup> Vance thrived under his tutelage and as a result of his guidance, attended Yale and received his law degree there in 1942.<sup>49</sup> He successfully worked in Law in New York City until he moved into the Defense Department in the late fifties, where he found immediate success. By 1962, he was already the Secretary of the Army, and by 1964, he

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<sup>46</sup> Mulhollan, “Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Cyrus R. Vance Facts,” *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 2010. Accessed June 30, 2016. <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/cyrus-r-vance>.

<sup>49</sup> “Biographies of the Secretaries of State: Cyrus Roberts Vance (1917–2002),” Office of the Historian, Department of State, Accessed 7/31/2016. <https://history.state.gov/departmentshistory/people/vance-cyrus-roberts>.

was the Deputy Secretary of Defense under LBJ.<sup>50</sup> During this time, he backed the LBJ policies and supported the Vietnam War, but soon grew disillusioned with its futility. It was during this time that Vance came into conflict with many within the military, who wanted to “put such pressure upon the other side that they would capitulate and come to a settlement or stop military actions.”<sup>51</sup> Vance and the other civilians in LBJ’s administration were much more pessimistic about the future of the war, but Vance’s modest and unassuming character prevented him from making any waves with his opinions.<sup>52</sup> But LBJ generally did not follow his advice, and he grew more and more disillusioned with the war. In addition, his five children were approaching college age, so Vance resigned and returned to the much more lucrative private practice in New York City.<sup>53</sup> At several points throughout the late sixties, Vance returned to government to engage in diplomatic missions, most notably in the Paris Peace Talks of 1968.<sup>54</sup> During the Nixon administration, Vance was ignored for diplomatic assignments, and as the 1970s progressed, he lived full time in New York City, practicing law and joining the Trilateral Commission in 1973, where he met Brzezinski and Carter.<sup>55</sup> What united them was a strong sense that the United States must continue to be engaged in world politics, but that trade and a more robust respect for human rights must be fostered in American

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<sup>50</sup> “Biography of Vance.”

<sup>51</sup> “Oral Histories – Cyrus R. Vance #1”, LBJ Presidential Library, 11/3/69, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/oralhistory.hom/Vance-C/Vance3.PDF>.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, “Cyrus Vance Plays it Cool,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 18, 1979, 8. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/120929231/fulltextPDF/147EF9A3131F43FFPQ/1?accountid=11311>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Biography of Vance.”

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

foreign policy. Central America was arguably the best region to pilot this approach, as at that time there was little Soviet influence, and human rights abuses by right-wing regimes were rampant.<sup>56</sup> By this point, Vance was a strong negotiator and a proponent of cautious diplomacy, and was well-known for his understated style. Vance was “never been known to sanction a leak for political gain...,”<sup>57</sup> and his modest style led outside observers to underestimate his dedication and willingness to throw himself into his work.<sup>58</sup> What set Vance apart from many in the State Department, as well as those in previous administrations, was his cool and logical view of the Soviet Union. First of all, one of the reasons that Vance supported a strong human rights focus was that it would reduce the worldwide perception of the USSR being “some sort of champion of the Third World.”<sup>59</sup> Vance rejected the view that Soviet leaders sought world domination and viewed the USSR as having “their own interest in the maintenance of peace, and who will respond to reason and enter into mutually advantageous agreements if the United States remains strong,”<sup>60</sup> This stance soon brought him into conflict with the more aggressively anti-Soviet Brzezinski, who he always mistrusted since the beginning of Carter’s Administration. Vance saw Brzezinski as constantly interfering within the State Department, and intentionally undercutting him by meeting with Ambassadors without

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<sup>56</sup> Wilsman, *Our Enemy’s Enemy*, 75.

<sup>57</sup> “Cyrus Vance Plays It Cool.”

<sup>58</sup> “Biography of Vance.”

<sup>59</sup> Wilsman, *Our Enemy’s Enemy*, 87.

<sup>60</sup> “Biography of Vance.”

notifying him.<sup>61</sup> Above all, Vance sought to avoid confrontation with the USSR and slowly and methodically work towards diplomatic agreements that would benefit the United States, as well as the countries he was negotiating with. Vance truly believed that international politics was not a zero sum game; instead, a well-negotiated treaty would result in both parties benefiting from an agreement.<sup>62</sup> This outlook and willingness to work hard made him a logical fit for Carter's Secretary of State, which Carter wanted to be less independent than more aligned with the Administration's views on human rights. But Vance's unassuming demeanor made him a poor spokesman for explaining US policy to the American public; instead, it was often Brzezinski that took on this more delicate and vital task.

As the Carter Administration began settling into the White House and prioritizing its first actions, it was clear that human rights would play a prominent role in determining foreign policy decisions. It had been one of Carter's most successful talking points during the campaign, and there was a groundswell of support for a significant change in policy. Some of the first public comments the administration made were criticisms of countries suppressing human rights, especially in Nicaragua, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR.<sup>63</sup> At first, this change in policy was quite vague in its conception, with ambiguous statements from Carter like "the time had come to reclaim the eternal principles that reflected the

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<sup>61</sup> Donna R. Jackson, *Jimmy Carter and the Horn of Africa: Cold War Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia*. McFarland, Feb 12, 2007.  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=rImoBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA103&lpg=PA103&dq=tension+between+vance+and+brzezinski&source=bl&ots=ffGqvC5J4E&sig=Fs7-ysQdcPIpiRUTw1zJe\\_FdDiE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjpo\\_qv5sbQAhWJ7IMKHRSmCq8Q6AEIJDAB#v=onepage&q=tension%20between%20vance%20and%20brzezinski&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=rImoBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA103&lpg=PA103&dq=tension+between+vance+and+brzezinski&source=bl&ots=ffGqvC5J4E&sig=Fs7-ysQdcPIpiRUTw1zJe_FdDiE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjpo_qv5sbQAhWJ7IMKHRSmCq8Q6AEIJDAB#v=onepage&q=tension%20between%20vance%20and%20brzezinski&f=false)

<sup>62</sup> "Biography of Vance."

<sup>63</sup> "Carter and Human Rights, 1977–1981." Office of the Historian, Department of State. Accessed August 17, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/human-rights>.

true goodness of the people of the United States.”<sup>64</sup> While these lofty statements drew widespread support, it soon became clear that institutional changes were required for real changes in foreign policy to occur. As a result, Carter created a new post focused on addressing human rights, and made an appointment that would prove to be both a boon to his human rights focus, and a thorn in the side of traditional cold warriors in Washington.

Her name was Patricia Derian, and her position in the administration was assured by her steadfast support and hard work through Carter’s 1976 Presidential campaign. Derian was a former civil rights activist, who had long been dedicated to protecting civil rights in America for African-Americans. During her time in Mississippi, she fought against segregationist Citizen Councils, and worked to bring inclusivity to the Democratic Party in the South.<sup>65</sup> An activist throughout her life, her assistance to Carter’s campaign was originally undertaken as a way to further her civil rights campaign, which had been her life’s purpose for the last 15 years.<sup>66</sup> Her tireless work earned her the respect of insiders in his team, and she was appointed as a deputy director for the presidential election of 1976.<sup>67</sup> Appointed in 1977 as the Department of State coordinator for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, she took on the newly created position with zeal, and was bold in her condemnation of the “the status quo (of US

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<sup>64</sup> John Kelly Damico, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: The Career of Patricia M. Derian*, Mississippi State University, 1999. Page 105. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/304510397>

<sup>65</sup> Adam Bernstein, “Patricia Derian, Activist Who Was President Carter’s Human Rights Chief, Dies at 86”, *Washington Post*. May 20, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/patricia-derian-activist-who-was-president-carters-human-rights-chief-dies-at-86/2016/05/20/ba2c1ec6-1d11-11e6-b6e0-c53b7ef63b45\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/patricia-derian-activist-who-was-president-carters-human-rights-chief-dies-at-86/2016/05/20/ba2c1ec6-1d11-11e6-b6e0-c53b7ef63b45_story.html).

<sup>66</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

foreign policy)... that is, no human rights policy at all.”<sup>68</sup> Committed to changing the US’ focus, “...Derian battled for four years to make human rights an integral part of United States foreign policy.”<sup>69</sup> Derian was convinced that the new direction of US policy would ultimately better serve US interests in the long run. She summarized her interactions with the State Department when she said, “I tried to make them see that human rights was something that wouldn’t tarnish their polished and exquisite view of classical diplomacy, but that actually could serve as a powerful new weapon for American interests.”<sup>70</sup> Derian threw herself into the position, and took on the enormous task of compiling and reporting on the human rights record of every country in the world.<sup>71</sup>

The goal of restructuring American foreign policy turned out being a more difficult task than first imagined. The entrenched bureaucracy in the State Department was heavily focused on promoting US interests, whether they were business, political, or security related.<sup>72</sup> Derian sought to make human rights the central issue in foreign policy, but with such a wide range and diverse set of issues with each country, her focus led to continual conflict with different players within the State Department, such as “career State Department diplomats who resisted imposing idealistic, humanitarian standards on friendly, but authoritarian, regimes.”<sup>73</sup> In addition to opposition within the State

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<sup>68</sup> Patricia M. Derian, “Human Rights : A World Perspective” Dept. of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Public Communication, 1978, 3. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100710334>.

<sup>69</sup> Damico, *From Civil Rights*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 88.

<sup>71</sup> Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009), 245.

<sup>72</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 88.

<sup>73</sup> Damico, *From Civil Rights*, 3.

Department, her human rights focus was consistently opposed by the National Security Council.

The Carter Administration's tight-knit team, including Derian, was committed to prioritizing a country's human rights record as a prerequisite to any major diplomatic agreements. After Carter's inauguration, developing a coherent foreign policy proved to be a harder job than initially realized, as this was a relatively untested priority and it was far from clear how it should be implemented. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, ever the pragmatic, steady worker, was one of the first members of the team to take concrete steps towards envisioning a coherent policy. Vance took to the steps of "establishing an informal Human Rights Coordinating Committee at the deputy assistant secretary level to synchronize human rights policy-making within the State Department, [and] requesting the geographic bureaus to develop human rights strategy papers."<sup>74</sup> As far as public recognition of progress goes, this effort was far out-shadowed by the first instance of the Carter Administration getting tough against human rights abusers, by cutting off Foreign Military Sales to Uruguay and Ethiopia on February 25<sup>th</sup>, less than a month after the inauguration.<sup>75</sup> In addition, an announcement by the White House said that "1978 military sales credits were being halved as a result of the human rights picture. Argentina reacted by turning down the balance."<sup>76</sup> El Salvador followed Argentina's lead, and the American press generally approved of the concrete steps towards more ethical aid. But outside observers like human rights NGOs criticized the limited scope of this aid cutoff,

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<sup>74</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 93.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>76</sup> Department of State, *United States-Argentine Relations*. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: IC on the Record, 146. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Argentina-Carter-Reagan-and-Bush-VP-Part-1.pdf>.



considering that Uruguay and Ethiopia received hardly any aid at all, and military sales to Argentina constituted only 7% of the total aid sent to Argentina.<sup>77</sup> Regardless, it was at least a concrete step in the right direction, and Derian and other human rights advocates within the administration were now only more committed to continue their momentum. In her own prophetic words, Derian admitted that “I like to start fires,” and she was committed to lighting as many as possible within the State Department.<sup>78</sup>

But as in the 1976 election campaign, it was difficult to pin down exactly what was meant by human rights, and this debate bedeviled the administration. With over two hundred countries to deal with, not only was it unclear which countries to prioritize, but even within a single country, what were the human rights violations that should be prioritized? For example, anti-communists like Senator Jackson argued that the priority should be to crack down on the Soviet Union and its allies for not allowing Jews to immigrate to Israel, while Patricia Derian argued that the priority should be countries practicing brutal repression against their own people, like Argentina.<sup>79</sup> And the confusion about priorities was not limited to mid-level players within the administration, but went to the very top. Carter’s speeches since his election continued to include inspiring rhetoric about the new focus of foreign policy, but it continued to be far too vague to base actual policy on. Again, it was Vance who had to get down to brass tacks to give the scattershot administration a plan to focus on. His main attempt at this came on April 30, 1977, at the Commencement of the Georgia School of Law. In a comprehensive address,

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<sup>77</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 94.

<sup>78</sup> Damico, *From Civil Rights*, 143.

<sup>79</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 101.

Vance stressed that human rights related to personal integrity would be a primary focus, with to goal being “a rapid end to such gross violations as those cited in our law: ‘torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, (or) prolonged detention without charges. ...’”<sup>80</sup> While this priority was stressed by Vance, he made it clear that other aspects of human rights would still be a part of US policy, depending on the country, on an individual basis.<sup>81</sup> Despite his step towards more concrete details, his speech still lacked many specific priorities, and the State Department was continually in conflict over how the policy should actually be applied on a country-to-country basis. Some of the old hands at the State Department bristled at the accusations being leveled against the countries they had worked with for decades, and Derian found herself at odds with many of the senior administrators within the State Department. John Bushnell, the Senior Deputy Secretary in the Latin American Bureau, believed that the main issue with Derian was she was “driven much more by making sure that our human rights actions were seen by their domestic constituencies and that strong human rights precedents were set than with progress in a particular country.”<sup>82</sup> This central tension was an echo of Kissinger’s main argument against basing human rights as a central focus on foreign relations, which was that behind-the-scene action was much more effective in the long run. During the Nixon and Ford Administrations, whenever efforts were made by diplomats to initiate contact about human rights, Kissinger was quick to limit it. When Robert Hill warned the new Argentinian government to stop its rampant human rights

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<sup>80</sup> Department of State, “The Department of State Bulletin,” vol. 80, 2045, Dec. 1980. <https://archive.org/details/departmentofstatb7677unit>.

<sup>81</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 104-105.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 107.

abuses, Kissinger was on the record as saying, “I want to know who did this and consider having him transferred.”<sup>83</sup> Kissinger’s actions in reality were much more likely to ignore the human rights issue in negotiations, and his excuse that he was “working behind the scenes” for human rights is shown by the diplomatic record to be more smoke and mirrors than an actual policy focus.

Inevitably, compromise and half measures were necessary when trying to apply a vague policy towards a specific country, which only angered the more hardline elements on both sides of this debate. Interestingly, a large amount of the criticism that the Carter Administration received about his new direction in foreign policy was from his own party in Congress. Democrats were increasingly strident about taking a hard line against regimes violating human rights, and sought in May to pass an authorization bill that would require the United States to veto any World Bank loans that were proposed for countries that had a “pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”<sup>84</sup> Even strident supporters of a human rights-focused policy like Derian knew that this could reduce the administration’s ability to reward countries for positive progress, and worked hard to defeat the bill. The Carter Administration was eventually successful in seriously weakening the language of the bill, but it showed that there would be almost as much resistance from liberal supporters of Carter as there would be from traditionally anti-Communist hawks. Even after the defeat of the authorization bill, it became increasingly clear how difficult it would be to fully implement the lofty goals articulated by Carter during the campaign.

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<sup>83</sup> Diana Jean Schemo, “Kissinger Cool to Criticizing Juntas in ’76.” October 1, 2004.

<sup>84</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 102.

Even before she was officially confirmed, on March 31, 1977, Patricia Derian traveled to Argentina, and met with a variety of government leaders, embassy personnel, and human rights activists.<sup>85</sup> The trip was originally proposed by Robert Hill, the US Ambassador to Argentina, with the goal of opening the eyes of Derian to the complexities of international politics. But from the very beginning, it was clear that Derian saw the purpose of the trip as confronting the military government about their human rights abuses. While this was the first time she was visiting a human rights abusing country, she was aggressive, and had “the spirit of a prosecutor” rather than as the representative of an ally.”<sup>86</sup> Only one month before, the US had cut foreign military sales to the country, but Derian sought to go much further than this.<sup>87</sup> Her meeting with the US embassy personnel was described as “‘a meeting between adversaries’ where she ‘laid it on the line that she, and Carter, are very serious about what they are doing.’”<sup>88</sup> She made clear that mixed messages from Washington would only encourage the Argentinian government to speed up its repression, in order to destroy dissident groups before Washington was able to send a unified message against human rights violations.<sup>89</sup> When a US military advisor questioned what relationship the US would have with the Argentine military in the future, Derian reportedly replied, “Well, we’re not going to be selling them

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<sup>85</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Carter Aide in Argentina to Gauge Rights Impact,” *Washington Post*, March 31, 1977. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/03/31/carter-aide-in-argentina-to-gauge-rights-impact/7352a3e5-5e6b-483b-9d6a-df4983caaeba/>.

<sup>86</sup> Iain Guest, *Behind the Disappearances: Argentina’s Dirty War against Human Rights and the United Nations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 158.

<sup>87</sup> DeYoung, Carter Aide.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Carlos Osorio, Thomas Blanton, “The Pentagon and the CIA Sent Mixed Message to the Argentine Military,” The National Security Archive, March 28, 2003. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB85/>.

thumbscrews any more, if that's what you mean.'"<sup>90</sup> This attitude towards Argentina, the most blatant of human rights violators in Latin America, was to be echoed in her dealings with other military dictatorships as she gained authority within the State Department.

This harder line taken by Derian was only her opening moves in her crusade within the State Department. Derian had Cyrus Vance's Atlanta speech outlining the new approach to human rights sent to every US Embassy, and required all regional Assistant secretaries in the State Department to create a specific plan for how to implement Vance's priorities in their region.<sup>91</sup> These bureaucratic moves were some of the first concrete steps taken to implement the human rights priority on the ground level at US Embassies. But ultimately, the largest lever of influence that the US had was money, traditionally given through grants and loans. And this was the level that Derian chose to use to influence El Salvador, which was waging government-sponsored repression against left-wing groups, by tacitly approving right-wing death squads to abduct, torture, and kill leaders in left-wing groups. The Inter-Agency Committee on Human Rights and Foreign Economic Assistance was created with the goal of leveraging the power of the purse to influence governments to modify their human rights record.<sup>92</sup> On May 6<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>90</sup> DeYoung, "Carter Aide."

<sup>91</sup> Kristin L. Ahlberg and Adam M. Howard, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980: Human rights and humanitarian affairs. Vol II*, Government Printing Office, Nov. 26, 2013, 152. [https://books.google.com/books?id=SWTYpb\\_0YIUC&pg=PA1203&lpg=PA1203&dq=Inter-Agency+Committee+on+Human+Rights+and+Foreign+Economic+Assistance&source=bl&ots=d\\_oPdRlfQQ&sig=-lt8r\\_XsHIyJzewNH\\_plDqHGe44&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi5id\\_yu-HOAhVG7B4KHQHPDHAQ6AEIHjAA#v=onepage&q=Inter-Agency%20Committee%20on%20Human%20Rights%20and%20Foreign%20Economic%20Assistance&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=SWTYpb_0YIUC&pg=PA1203&lpg=PA1203&dq=Inter-Agency+Committee+on+Human+Rights+and+Foreign+Economic+Assistance&source=bl&ots=d_oPdRlfQQ&sig=-lt8r_XsHIyJzewNH_plDqHGe44&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi5id_yu-HOAhVG7B4KHQHPDHAQ6AEIHjAA#v=onepage&q=Inter-Agency%20Committee%20on%20Human%20Rights%20and%20Foreign%20Economic%20Assistance&f=false).

<sup>92</sup> Bertrand G. Ramcharan, *Human Rights: Thirty Years after the Universal Declaration : Commemorative Volume on the Occasion of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Brill, 1979, page 76. <https://books.google.com/books?id=favRCKyN-IC&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq=Inter-Agency+Committee+on+Human+Rights+and+Foreign+Economic+Assistance&source=bl&ots=G2duLA5>

1977, a \$90 million loan for a major dam was set to be approved by the Inter-American Development Bank. The Inter-Agency Committee recommended “an indefinite postponement of this loan for at least a few months until we could observe some change in the human rights situation in El Salvador. There was also a consensus that we should advise the GOES that our decision is based on both human rights concerns and concerns with the economic rationale of the project.”<sup>93</sup> This recommendation was made to the IDB (International Development Bank), and as a result, President Romero of El Salvador withdrew the project from consideration. This was one of the first real “victories” of the human rights wing within the Carter Administration, although it remained to be seen how much this decision would actually affect El Salvador’s human rights policies.

While many within the administration were frustrated by the slow start of Carter’s human rights policy, in June of 1977 the policy began gathering steam. This was due in large part to pressure on the administration to begin making progress towards its promised changes in US Policy. Richard Scobie, the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, had just returned from a fact-finding mission in El Salvador, and argued for an extension of Ambassador Lozano’s posting in San Salvador.<sup>94</sup> As of June 1, 1977, Ignacio Lozano, the Ford-appointed ambassador to El Salvador was set to resign, and Scobie criticized “the ‘signal’ we may be sending to

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<sup>93</sup> “Argentina Declassification Project,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence. August 8, 2016. Part 3, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Argentina-Carter-Reagan-and-Bush-VP-Part-3.pdf>.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Scobie, *Letter from Richard Scobie to Jimmy Carter*. May 18, 1977. (Accessed August 9, 2016) [http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/digital\\_library/sso/148878/29/SSO\\_148878\\_029\\_02.pdf](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/digital_library/sso/148878/29/SSO_148878_029_02.pdf).

President Molin and General Romero, his chosen successor, by the acceptance of Lozano's resignation,"<sup>95</sup> Ultimately, this recommendation was not taken, but Carter assured him that his administration would not "relent in pursuing the United States commitment to human rights in our relations..."<sup>96</sup> Reflecting his prioritization of human rights in Latin America, the US signed the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights, which at least committed countries on paper to better protect the rights of their citizens. An unexpected boost from Congress led to a strong role for Derian within the State Department. At the end of 1977, a newly passed bill "elevating the Human Rights Office to the bureau level, promoting Derian to the position of assistant secretary of state at the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (HA)."<sup>97</sup> Carter added to the prestige of her position by holding the confirmation ceremony for her newly created position in the White House, an unusual move that showed his public support for her success.<sup>98</sup> But the insular world of the State Department would prove to be remarkably resistant to the new focus on human rights, no matter how many speeches or confirmation ceremonies Carter held.

At the beginning of the administration's term in February, President Carter's foreign policy initiatives included deemphasizing the focus on confronting the Soviet Union, and to initiate a Central American policy that focused on developing economic

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<sup>95</sup> Scobie, "Letter."

<sup>96</sup> The White House, *Letter from Staff Assistant Valerio L. Giannini to Mr. Joan Masuck*. June 1, 1977. (Accessed August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016)  
[http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/digital\\_library/sso/148878/29/SSO\\_148878\\_029\\_02.pdf](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/digital_library/sso/148878/29/SSO_148878_029_02.pdf)

<sup>97</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 114.

<sup>98</sup> "Patt Derian, A Straight Shooter on Human Rights" (Oral History). Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. (No date). Accessed 8/7/16.  
<http://adst.org/oral-history/fascinating-figures/patt-derian-straight-shooter-human-rights/>

ties and promoting human rights.<sup>99</sup> Central America constituted the most logical place to begin pursuing a human rights-centered policy. With a total of fifteen anti-communist military-dictatorships in Latin America, there was little threat of an imminent Soviet expansion. The US had been building strong relationships with the militaries of these countries since the Eisenhower administration, with these relationships becoming even closer during the Johnson and Nixon administrations.<sup>100</sup> The Carter administration at first did pursue a human rights-focused policy, but were immediately faced with difficulties. Less than a month after Carter took office, it was clear that the situation in El Salvador was unstable, and getting increasingly worse. The government, run by Arturo Molina of the military-allied National Coalition Party (known as the PCN), had been ruling since his fraudulent election in 1972. The Carter Administration was immediately faced with elections in February of 1977, where the PCN ran Carlos Romero as a candidate. There were widespread reports of electoral fraud, with the PCN claiming a three to one victory, implausible considering the widespread opposition to the government.<sup>101</sup> Romero claimed victory, but massive protests of up to 50,000 people racked San Salvador in the Plaza Libertad.<sup>102</sup> The protests were allowed to continue for

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<sup>99</sup> Morris Blachman, William LeoGrande, and Kenneth Sharpe, *Confronting Revolution: Security through Diplomacy in Central America* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 296  
<http://www1.american.edu/faculty/leogrande/Confronting-Grappling.pdf>.

<sup>100</sup> Schmidli, *Fate of Freedom*, 100.

<sup>101</sup> Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 88.  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=P0SYaIaDsNcC&pg=PA88&lpg=PA88&dq=san+salvador+massacre+in+plaza+libertad&source=bl&ots=OI0ANrFik2&sig=EksZ42ZqsecYQ5rT1J63\\_P5PMD0&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwInbuauK\\_OAhWlQyYKHWR3CiUQ6AEILTAE#v=onepage&q=san%20salvador%20massacre%20in%20plaza%20libertad&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=P0SYaIaDsNcC&pg=PA88&lpg=PA88&dq=san+salvador+massacre+in+plaza+libertad&source=bl&ots=OI0ANrFik2&sig=EksZ42ZqsecYQ5rT1J63_P5PMD0&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwInbuauK_OAhWlQyYKHWR3CiUQ6AEILTAE#v=onepage&q=san%20salvador%20massacre%20in%20plaza%20libertad&f=false).

<sup>102</sup> "El Salvador Civil War," GlobalSecurity.org. Accessed August 3, 2016.  
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/elsalvador2.htm>.



several days, before the square was surrounded by the military, shooting began, and the fleeing civilians were arrested, beaten, or shot.<sup>103</sup> This violent repression of the electoral protests resulted in over fifty dead.<sup>104</sup> The Romero administration continued the Molina policy of quickly using violence to suppress dissent, and with brutal right-wing groups made up of military officers, it became increasingly difficult to stop Romero. Protesters against the government's rule had very few options available to them. If they chose to continue openly protesting against the government's repression, they would inevitably be kidnapped, tortured, and killed by either the government or right-wing death squads. Their only other options were to escape the cities and join underground leftist groups, or remain silent and pay lip service to the Romero government.

As a result of this, human right's supporters like Derian were eager to move to pressure the El Salvadoran government to end the repression, but initially the Carter administration floundered on how to pressure the PCN Administration. Congress took the lead in this respect, by holding hearings to debate the massacre in Plaza Libertad, as well as the murder of Father Rutilio Grande.<sup>105</sup> When the Molina-led government heard of these hearings, the president announced on March 17, 1977 that all aid, military or otherwise, would be rejected, "for the sake of national dignity."<sup>106</sup> Molina was aware that aid would probably be cut off soon, so one way to avoid the bad publicity of an aid cutoff

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<sup>103</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 88.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Almeida, *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), Jan 1, 2008.  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=BDkzorCHZhYC&pg=PA162&lpg=PA162&dq=Plaza+Libertad+in+San+Salvador+february+1977&source=bl&ots=Rk\\_UA\\_7gpi&sig=zVuxmNqt9vrghAmj11AkGQcCR\\_8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjCtfuJz6XOAhVM2B4KHx2TAI8Q6AEIITAB#v=onepage&q=Plaza%20Libertad%20in%20San%20Salvador%20february%201977&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=BDkzorCHZhYC&pg=PA162&lpg=PA162&dq=Plaza+Libertad+in+San+Salvador+february+1977&source=bl&ots=Rk_UA_7gpi&sig=zVuxmNqt9vrghAmj11AkGQcCR_8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjCtfuJz6XOAhVM2B4KHx2TAI8Q6AEIITAB#v=onepage&q=Plaza%20Libertad%20in%20San%20Salvador%20february%201977&f=false).

<sup>105</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 90.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 91.

would be to do it himself. In addition, by refusing further aid El Salvador was following the lead of Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile.<sup>107</sup> It seemed to the PCN government that Washington was trying to intervene in their countries' internal politics, and refusing aid was a way of avoiding any interference in their campaigns against political opponents.<sup>108</sup> This initially confounded those within Carter's administration, whose traditional tool for pressure had now been removed.

Ultimately, the Carter Administration decided that El Salvador was an ideal case to fully abandon the Nixon and Ford administration's support of military strongmen. There was a variety of reasons for this, but they ultimately boiled down to a lack of real US interests in the country. El Salvador was oil poor, had almost no trade with the United States, and lacked any strategic position in Latin America.<sup>109</sup> Instead of quickly appointing a new ambassador to the country, Carter purposefully held off and sent Derian instead. Her visit began with a confrontational meeting with President Romero, who she challenged him to suppress the "White Warriors' Union," who had recently threatened to kill all Jesuits in the country.<sup>110</sup> In addition, she met with Archbishop Romero, who at this point was a fierce critic of the government.<sup>111</sup> But military aid was no longer a lever to pressure the PCN government, since President Romero had rejected all US military aid

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<sup>107</sup> Department of State, *Weekly Report: March 17, 1977*. Office of the Director of National Intelligence: IC on the Record, page 290. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Argentina-Carter-Reagan-and-Bush-VP-Part-1.pdf> <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Argentina-Carter-Reagan-and-Bush-VP-Part-1.pdf>.

<sup>108</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 298.

<sup>109</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 95.

<sup>110</sup> Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 140.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

to prevent “meddling” in his countries business. But economic aid was still a potential negotiation tool to end the human rights violations. When it became clear that the Romero government was unwilling to make any compromises, the US not only blocked the approval of the \$90 million hydroelectric loan in July of 1977, but made clear that its opposition to international loans would continue as long as El Salvador’s human rights abuses continued.<sup>112</sup>

The Carter Administration sought to influence El Salvador’s government, but once the IDB loan was postponed, the US had little leverage over the government. As a result, as 1977 progressed, little was accomplished in El Salvador, with the government continuing to target left-wing groups, with Washington impotently lodging complaints against the repression. With little progress forecasted, the Administration’s focus in Central America shifted to Panama. One of the main challenges in Central America facing the Carter Administration’s policy in Central America was the Panama Canal Treaty. The creation of the Panama Canal was a prime example of US imperialism in Central America under Teddy Roosevelt. Washington had instigated and supported a coup in the region against Columbia, then promptly recognized the new government and supported it militarily. The subsequent American enclave in the Canal Zone became more and more resented by the Panamanians as the century progressed, and by the early 1970s there was a real need to change the status quo, especially follow the serious rioting in 1964.<sup>113</sup> It was a challenging political issue, as Carter had stated during the campaign that “he would not relinquish practical control of the Panama Canal Zone any time in the

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<sup>112</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 95.

<sup>113</sup> “Panama to Control Canal,” History.com, September 7, 1977. Accessed 7/31/2016. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/panama-to-control-canal>.

foreseeable future.”<sup>114</sup> Once in the White House, Carter was advised by Brzezinski that it was necessary with Panama to “to build [a] more mature relationship based on mutual respect.”<sup>115</sup> In addition, Vance argued that “the most serious threat to the canal was not foreign aggression ... but sabotage and terrorist actions. Eliminating the Canal Zone as the focus of Panamanian nationalism would reduce the risks to the continued operation of the Canal and ease the task of defending it.”<sup>116</sup> A terrorist attack using improvised explosive device could seriously disrupt international shipping, and with growing discontent in Panama, it was a growing possibility. These arguments were certainly persuasive to Carter, but the final straw was a historical presentation on the circumstances surrounding the US’s gaining of the Canal Zone. With this full understanding of the U.S.’s role and dubious history, Carter realized that the only path forward in Panama was through a treaty giving control back to Panama.<sup>117</sup> But while the Administration was now on board with a Panama treaty, conflict was looming, because the majority of Americans opposing a treaty that gave Panama control. The ominous problem was that the Senate, heavily controlled by the Democrats, was opposed to any sort of treaty giving control to Panama, despite Carter’s calls for party allegiance. It was a fight that would grow to consume the full resources of the White House, and sidetrack any sort of focus on El Salvador.

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<sup>114</sup> Robert Strong, *Decisions and Dilemmas: Case Studies in Presidential Foreign Policy Making Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, May 20, 2015), 117.

<sup>115</sup> Strong, *Decision*, 17.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Natasha Zaretsky, “Restraint or Retreat? The Debate over the Panama Canal Treaties and US Nationalism after Vietnam,” *Oxford Journal* 35, no. 3 (2011): 537. <https://dh-oxfordjournals-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/content/35/3/535.full>.

Carter led an enormous education effort to educate the public about the importance of a Panama Canal Treaty using the full resources of the White House. Thousands of briefings were held both in the White House and around the country, with Brzezinski and Vance leading the way with TV interviews and in-person visits. A full on media blitz was pursued, and was effective in bringing many senators over to the White House's side. But a persistent opposition was maintained throughout the entire affair, and even with the final ratification of the treaty, the campaign motivated conservative activist to commit themselves to opposing both the Carter Administration and any Senators who had supported the treaty. It would leave last acrimony between the administration and Congress, and severely depleted Carter's reserve of political capital, and his ability push legislation, for the rest of his presidency.

The signing of the Panama Treaty brought the issue of El Salvador back onto the agenda of the Carter Administration. On September 8<sup>th</sup> in 1977, President Romero, along with the other heads of State from Central America, visited the White House for the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty. President Romero was given the traditional greeting as a head of state, and had a private meeting with Carter. Carter's subsequent press release stated "President Romero has informed me that he has requested that a commission on human rights from the United Nations or OAS go to El Salvador to see the great progress that has been made there in the last 2 months."<sup>118</sup> It is unclear how much this announcement was pushed for by Carter, but it is obvious that President Romero was not eager for the visit, as the inspection by the Human Rights Commission

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<sup>118</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Meeting with President Carlos Humberto Romero of El Salvador Remarks to Reporters Following the Meeting," September 8, 1977. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6600>.

of the Organization of American States was not completed for over a year. With an informal promise to improve the human rights situation, as well as a more concrete goal to work towards in the future, the Carter administration fell into a holding pattern with El Salvador. Once again, the question of how to address the human rights situation in El Salvador was an open one. Soon after the hydroelectric project was canceled in May, a World Bank loan for \$12 million was approved by The Inter-Agency Committee on Human Rights and Foreign Economic Assistance, as it was determined to be “clearly earmarked for the needy.”<sup>119</sup> While the Commission sought an improved human rights situation in El Salvador, it was not willing to sacrifice the chance to improve poor Salvadoran’s economic conditions to reach this goal. The Commission also used this loan approval as a message that US was willing to work with El Salvador in approving future loans if it was willing to make additional efforts on improving its human rights record. In early August, the Commission again approved a loan focused on education, with the stipulation that it be delivered with an official demarche specifying that the approval was only granted as it directly benefited the poor, and was contingent on continuing improvement of the human rights situation.<sup>120</sup>

By September of 1977, the Commission felt that the situation in El Salvador had improved enough that they were considering telling the Romero government “that we would have no objection to its placing that loan back on the calendar of the IDB.”<sup>121</sup> The approval of the IDB loan was contingent on approval from top Congressmen, but it was a

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<sup>119</sup> “Argentina Declassification Project,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence. August 8, 2016, 175. <https://icontherecord.tumblr.com/post/148650765298/argentina-declassification-project>

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

sign that the Commission believed that real progress was being made in El Salvador. From the historical record, however, it seems clear how little progress had been made. The massacre in Plaza Libertad had occurred only seven months before, and the successful repression of political dissent had driven opposition underground.

By October of 1977, the Romero government had been continuing its repression of those who protested the fraudulent presidential election, and their violence continued, with the political opponents of Romero regularly disappearing. With a lack of overt violence, and continuing pressure from the international community, the government lifted the state of siege that had been in effect for eight months.<sup>122</sup> Despite the fact that this was a modest move on the government's part, the Carter Administration had been frustrated by its lack of progress in the country, and wanted to reward the government for its positive progress. As a result, the Carter Administration appointed finally appointed a US ambassador to El Salvador, a post that had been left empty since the beginning of 1977. Here, another one of Carter's priorities weakened his foreign policy priority. Carter had promised to significantly reduce the number of political appointments to ambassadorial positions, which has long been a problem in US politics.<sup>123</sup> But that left him with only career diplomats, who almost uniformly had priorities besides human rights. As a result, Carter settled on Frank Devine, a diplomat who placed human rights

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<sup>122</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 97.

<sup>123</sup> Doris Weatherford, "Women in American Politics: History and Milestones," SAGE, Jan 20, 2012. Page 332. [https://books.google.com/books?id=wW5wumFHKSEC&pg=SL11-PA332&lpg=SL11-PA332&dq=jimmy+carter+career+diplomats+state+department&source=bl&ots=z06pVmY4Cm&sig=\\_3PVQW-rJPXS6K43nX6HfJ-ZaA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjuz4-dy8TQAhVDlxQKHUo\\_At4Q6AEIQDAF#v=onepage&q=jimmy%20carter%20career%20diplomats%20state%20department&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=wW5wumFHKSEC&pg=SL11-PA332&lpg=SL11-PA332&dq=jimmy+carter+career+diplomats+state+department&source=bl&ots=z06pVmY4Cm&sig=_3PVQW-rJPXS6K43nX6HfJ-ZaA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjuz4-dy8TQAhVDlxQKHUo_At4Q6AEIQDAF#v=onepage&q=jimmy%20carter%20career%20diplomats%20state%20department&f=false).

low on his priority list for relations with El Salvador.<sup>124</sup> Devine began working immediately to restore previous relations with El Salvador, and soon the State Department approved the previously blocked \$90 million loan for the dam.<sup>125</sup>

These changes in policy were stridently opposed by Derian and her team, who viewed President Romero's removal of the state of emergency as a change in rhetoric and little else. As a career diplomat in the State Department, Devine was exactly the type of staff that Derian typically came into conflict with in her crusade for human rights. A conservative supporter of *Realpolitik*, Devine "was 'personally hostile' to human rights policy,"<sup>126</sup> He was little interested in human rights, and throughout his career had prioritized economic and military ties between Washington and San Salvador over human rights. Derian's lack of trust of El Salvador's progress towards a better human rights record was only confirmed in November by the passing of a repressive sedition law in the El Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, that banned any criticism of the government, as well as any other activities the government decided to oppose.<sup>127</sup> Ambassador Devine responded to the repressive law by saying, "We believe that any government has the full right and obligation to use all legal means at its disposal to combat terrorism."<sup>128</sup> With additional statements along those same lines, the US support of the Romero Government had crystallized, and the focus on pressuring the government had been significantly

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<sup>124</sup> Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 141.

<sup>125</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 97.

<sup>126</sup> Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 141. William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 67-68.

<sup>127</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 97.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 98.



reduced. This tacit approval was one factor in the government's increasing use of the terrorism law to further arrest, torture, and disappear political dissidents throughout 1978.

By April of 1978, the repression against peasants agitating for increased economic opportunities was growing. ORDEN, a government-run paramilitary organization that mobilized peasants to inform for the government, and help the government arrest “terrorists”, was increasingly active in the countryside.<sup>129</sup> ORDEN was considered a precursor to the right-wing death squads, who terrorized the civilian population and targeted anyone even minimally opposed to the government.<sup>130</sup> On April 11, 1978, a report by Amnesty International denounced the government for its extra-legal detentions in around the country, and the BPR, an anti-government group, called the recent actions genocide.<sup>131</sup> Despite the international attention, the actions of the US towards El Salvador were mixed. The State Department denied a World Bank loan for Telecommunications and Cattle, but approved “a World Bank vocational training loan to El Salvador.”<sup>132</sup> But Ambassador Devine made clear that US policy had shifted. Devine praised the government for “improved conditions”, and the economic aid kept flowing into El Salvador.<sup>133</sup> The real question is why the Carter Administration was so approving of the Romero presidency. Armstrong argues that it was the growing power of leftist guerillas in

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<sup>129</sup> United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, El Salvador: The role of ORDEN in the El Salvadoran civil war, 16 October 2000, SLV01001.ZAR, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3dee04524.html> [accessed 24 November 2016].

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 102.

<sup>132</sup> Department of State, “Talking Points Prepared in the Department of State 3: Talking Points on Human Rights and Foreign Assistance: The Consistency Question,” FRUS 1977-1980, Washington, DC. Undated. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1977-80v02/pdf/frus1977-80v02.pdf>.

<sup>133</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 102.

Nicaragua that led the Carter Administration to prioritize stability over the possibility of a leftist takeover of the region.<sup>134</sup>

In January of 1979, while President Romero was visiting Mexico City in an attempt to secure an oil contract, a report from the Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States was leaked, and it proved to be devastating in its critique.<sup>135</sup> It outlined incredibly brutal conditions for political prisoners in El Salvador, and the report detailed details such as regular torture using “electrical shocks. [in addition] Beatings are frequent during interrogations and are done with round or flat wooden clubs.”<sup>136</sup> The commission had visited El Salvador in 1978, and the Romero Administration had attempted to shield them from the worst of the secret prisons, disappearances, and torture rooms. But after receiving a tip-off and a detailed map by a former prisoner, the commission revisited a prison and discovered “secret cells... approximately 1 x 1 meter, [with] a steel door, was completely dark and its walls were covered with roaches.”<sup>137</sup> President Romero and his government were deeply shamed by the report, and the release had the beneficial effect of causing the Romero Administration to repeal the repressive sedition law. By February of 1979, the reputation of El Salvador’s Human Rights record was in tatters. The State Department, released a report that ranked El Salvador and Nicaragua as “the most serious violators of individual freedoms in Latin

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<sup>134</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 102.

<sup>135</sup> *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador* (Washington DC: Organization of American States: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1978), 68.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

America and the Caribbean.”<sup>138</sup> There were serious disagreements in the Carter White House over how to reconcile the conflicting priorities of maintaining respect for human rights and preventing the left-wing from taking power in El Salvador.<sup>139</sup> During a visit to Mexico City in February of 1977, Carter made clear that human rights was “one of my most deeply felt concerns... [and] we have a responsibility to speak out when human rights are violated abroad.”<sup>140</sup> With the full-throated approval by Carter of aggressively addressing human rights around the world, the time for addressing El Salvador’s repression seemed ripe. Human rights advocacy organizations pressed the Carter Administration for a full suspension of American aid, but again, they were unsuccessful. As with the Panama Canal Treaty predicament, the Carter Administration was sidetracked by a human rights crisis, this time within Iran.

The Shah was growing increasingly unpopular, and demonstrations encouraged by Ayatollah Khomeini were growing in severity. The Shah requested tear gas canisters from the US as a non-lethal method of crowd control against demonstrations and any uprisings. But Derian forcefully argued that he would only use it to suppress the rights of Iranians, and said “he could buy it elsewhere.”<sup>141</sup> This triggered major disagreements with her colleagues in the State Department, and eventually she was overruled by

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<sup>138</sup> Armstrong and Shenk, *El Salvador*, 108.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>140</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 1979, Book 1: January 1 to June 22, 1979,” Washington DC, Government Printing Office, 1980). [https://books.google.com/books?id=j\\_5-9zWaBI0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=j_5-9zWaBI0C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>141</sup> Glad, *Outsiders*, 245.

Vance.<sup>142</sup> In fact, Derian's opposition had an unfortunate effect. In the time it took for the shipment to be approved, a demonstration in the city of Qom turned violence, and the police, lacking any type of non-lethal crowd control, used live ammunition, with more than a dozen deaths.<sup>143</sup> Ultimately, this brought to the fore the inherent difficulties with prioritizing human rights. The term is broad enough that Derian used it to deny the shipment of tear gas since the Shah would use it to deny the human right to choose their government of choice. Vance and others in the State Department could legitimately argue that the tear gas protected the right to life for the protestors, a right that they were ultimately denied when the Shah's forces used live ammunition. It was this type of disagreement that plagued the Carter Administration's foreign policy team, creating internal conflict and preventing coherent policy from being implemented. In addition, the fall of the Shah triggered a volley of criticism of the Administration, alleging that the focus on human rights had led to the overthrow of a key US ally in the region. But a problem even closer to home would soon strike another blow against Carter, further undermining his credibility, and would forever change the relationship between Washington and San Salvador.

By 1979, the Somoza government in Nicaragua was waging a brutal counter-insurgency campaign against the leftist guerillas. Similar to El Salvador, the military carried out large numbers of kidnappings, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Some of the

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<sup>142</sup> Glad, *Outsiders*, 245.

<sup>143</sup> Zhand Shakibi, *Revolutions and the Collapse of the Monarchy: Human Agency and the Making of Revolution in France, Russia and Iran* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 215 and 255.  
<https://books.google.com/books?id=ZlptU4A2HkUC&pg=PA255&lpg=PA255&dq=iran+request+to+buy+tear+gas+1978&source=bl&ots=DrwUpDcoHU&sig=-rrxYCDSuQ-X2VFdvpIIthW3020&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjBnrCQ8aDOAhVJx2MKHTVKicQ6AEIHAB#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

leftist groups fighting against the Somoza government were Communist, and the Somoza administration had long been allied with the United States. But by 1979, the Somoza government had lost significant credibility worldwide and its grip on Nicaragua was weakening. In April of that year, the Somoza administration finally collapsed, and the left-wing Sandinista organization took over. The Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua as a major cause for the shift in Carter's policies in El Salvador, as the "loss" of Nicaragua to Communism was a public relations blow to the Carter administration, and there was a real fear that a similar loss could happen in El Salvador. As a result of this crisis, there were major disagreements within the Carter administration concerning what to do about the growing power of the FMLN in El Salvador, especially in the wake of Sandinista victory in Nicaragua. Anti-Communist members of the administration warned of the growing chances of a Communist takeover of El Salvador, while human rights advocates decried like the continued killings of civilians by right-wing death squads. The internal conflict made unified decision-making close to impossible, and the decision-making regarding what to do in El Salvador were temporarily gridlocked.<sup>144</sup> While conditions in El Salvador were continuing to deteriorate, with the number of extrajudicial killings increasing, Carter's priorities were elsewhere. In June, the President had flown "to Vienna for the signing of the Salt II Treaty from June 15-18, visited Japan and South Korea from 23 June to 1 July, and around 3 July retreated to Camp David to work on a speech about energy, staying there for about two weeks to reassess the state of the nation

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<sup>144</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

and his presidency, at a time when his popularity was at his lowest.”<sup>145</sup> In addition, early discussions about the 1980 Democratic Primary had begun, and Ted Kennedy had leaked during that summer that he would be running against Carter in 1980. If Carter was to successfully defeat Kennedy and win his reelection in 1980, he would need a turnaround in his foreign policy. In Central America, this meant preventing further Communist influence at all costs. Conservative Republicans in Congress advocated for a more confrontational approach to left-wing groups in Central America, and Carter felt the pressure to meet them halfway.

To achieve his goal of reducing Soviet influence in Central America, which he was being criticized for from the right wing in America, Carter first sought to bring the Sandinista government back from the brink of full Communism. To achieve this goal, “...President Carter met with members of the GNR (Government of National Reconciliation, led by the FSLN) in the White House in September 1979 and encouraged moderation and respect for democratic values and human rights.”<sup>146</sup> Carter followed that up with a request for a total of \$75 million for Nicaragua for their struggling economy. Carter sought to make the Sandinista government dependent on the United States, so that he could influence them to eventually cut off ties with the Soviet Union. He conceded that Nicaragua would have relatively close relations with Cuba, as they had supported the Sandinistas in their struggle against the Somoza regime.<sup>147</sup> But Carter wanted to make sure that the new government was still maintaining respect for human rights, so the law

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<sup>145</sup> Giancarlo Soler Torrijos, *In the Shadow of the United States: Democracy and Regional Order in the Latin Caribbean* (Boca Raton: Universal-Publishers, 2008), 96.

<sup>146</sup> “Central America –1977–1980: Milestones.”

<sup>147</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 32.

“required reports every six months from the Secretary of State on the status of human rights in Nicaragua and stipulated that the aid would be terminated if foreign forces in Nicaragua threatened the security of the United States or any of its Latin American allies.”<sup>148</sup> Carter needed to neutralize Nicaragua as an example of his failure in foreign policy. Ultimately, Carter focused mostly on preventing a repeat of the US response to Castro’s takeover of Cuba. The severe response by the US in 1959-60 pushed Cuba into the hands of the Soviet Union, as Castro believed that was the only way to prevent a US takeover. Determined to prevent a repetition from happening in Nicaragua, Carter was committed to building a relationship with the GNR, despite the fact that he had worked to block their rise to power. The US sent aid shipments of food and medicine to the war-torn country, and resisted the urge to “Contain” communism in Nicaragua by diplomatically isolating them. This sea change in Nicaragua must be kept in mind when examining the following events in El Salvador, as the Nicaraguan coup was instrumental in modifying US policy. The seizing of power by the Sandinistas and moderate left was viewed by the American public as an embarrassing defeat for US influence in Central America, and it is difficult to understand US policy in El Salvador without accounting for how the “loss” of Nicaragua affected US policymakers in the Carter Administration.<sup>149</sup> But the situation in El Salvador was about to change drastically, and Carter would be forced to make decisions that affected El Salvador for years to come.

In 1979, monumental changes in El Salvador would turn US attention back to the country. On October 15, the government of El Salvador was overthrown in a coup led by

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<sup>148</sup> “Central America – 1977–1980: Milestones.”

<sup>149</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 300.

progressives in the army, with the new government being called the JRG, which stood for the Revolutionary Government Junta of El Salvador.<sup>150</sup> It was a center-left government that sought to reverse the abuses of power by President Romero. The JRG took human rights seriously, and disbanded ORDEN as well as the National Security Agency.<sup>151</sup> This led Washington to initially support the new government, as it was seen as a possible “third force” that could avoid the excesses of the extremist right and left wings. But when appointed civilian leaders began stating the possibility of sharing political power with left-wing groups, right-wing militias began violently opposing the JRG government.<sup>152</sup> The JRG government was unable to find a middle ground that incorporated elements from both the left and the right wing, and the Carter Administration was unwilling to support any inclusion of left-wing groups.<sup>153</sup> This was another example of how Nicaragua influenced US policy in El Salvador. A decision to deny support to a moderate coalition was antithetical to the long-term human rights-focused goals of the Carter administration, but can be understood as a reaction to the ongoing crisis in Nicaragua. These factors left the new government paralyzed, and after a standoff with the military, and a large number of death threats, the three civilian leaders of the JRG resigned, leaving the government again in the hands of the right-wing of the military. The swing to the right emboldened the right-wing death squads, and Ambassador Devine reported that “mutilated bodies

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<sup>150</sup> “El Salvador: 12 Years of Civil War,” *Center for Justice and Accountability*, 2014. Accessed April 16, 2016, Web.  
<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Nw25naAHSCIJ:www.cja.org/section.php%3Fid%3D14+%&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>.

<sup>151</sup> Belisario Betancur, R.F. Planchart, & T. Buergenthal, “From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador,” 1993, 20. Retrieved from [http://www.usip.org/library/tc/doc/reports/el\\_salvador/tc\\_es\\_03151993\\_toc.html](http://www.usip.org/library/tc/doc/reports/el_salvador/tc_es_03151993_toc.html).

<sup>152</sup> Blachman, et al., *Confronting Revolution*, 304

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.



were appearing on roadsides as they had done in the worst days of the Romero regime.”<sup>154</sup> But this did not mean the end of US aid, in fact, the opposite was true.

This change in Washington’s approach towards the JRG led to a new phase in US-Salvadoran relations, one that would be marked by open support with the full range of financial and military aid. The JRG, because of its initial announcements after the coup, still had a veneer of support for human rights, and it seemed to be the only government capable of actually ruling El Salvador. As a result, the Carter Administration chose to throw their support behind the JRG. The Carter Administration pressured “...Congress for passage of \$5.7 million in emergency military assistance for El Salvador....”<sup>155</sup> It was purportedly non-lethal, but it included night-vision goggles and devices for locating radio-transmitters, and was clearly for the purpose of counter-insurgency operations, which had been brutally implemented in recent history.<sup>156</sup> But these were only the public moves, there were far more influential decisions made behind closed doors. Congress had never gotten around to banning private sales of weapons, and the State Department approved “\$250,000 worth of arms from private corporations for export to El Salvador, ‘mostly for carbines, handguns and rifles.’”<sup>157</sup> This increase in military aid was intended to ensure the continued weakness of the FMLN, no matter the cost to the civilians of El Salvador that were getting caught in the crossfire. And by the

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<sup>154</sup> Betancur, et al., *From Madness*, 21.

<sup>155</sup> Thomas Conrad and Cynthia Arnsperg, “The Aid for El Salvador is Called Nonlethal,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1980. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/121310022?accountid=11311>.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

time these arms arrived in El Salvador, the real power of the government was again in the hands of right-wing elements of the military.<sup>158</sup>

Ultimately, the Carter Administration was faced with an extremely challenging decision after the resignation of the civilians in the Junta. The Carter Administration clearly preferred a conservative government that respected human rights, but that was not an option available to them. With a limited amount of influence on the ground in El Salvador, Washington had two main choices. To withdraw support for the new version of the JRG and use international pressure and the “stick” of international loan denials to push them towards a more human rights policy, or to maintain cautious support for the JRG and try to use diplomatic relations to pressure them to respect their civilian’s human rights. It was a challenging decision that bedeviled the administration, but ultimately the status quo of cautious support for the JRG continued, even though in many ways it was identical to earlier military-led authoritarian governments. At least, from the State Department’s perspective, it had the veneer of popular support and a humane approach to dealing with dissent. But while the internal situation in El Salvador continued to unravel with increasing repression against anti-government organizations, again the focus of the Carter Administration was diverted to more pressing matters.

It was events in Iran that occupied the attention of Carter by the end of 1979. First, on November 4, protesters stormed the US Embassy in Tehran, and the Iranian Hostage Crisis began. Over fifty American hostages were held by the Iranian government, and Washington was soon consumed by a comprehensive effort to return them, ranging from an intense diplomatic effort to the planning of a large secret military

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<sup>158</sup> Blachman, et al., *Confronting Revolution*, 305.

extraction. But this was only the beginning of the Carter's foreign policy problems. On December 24, 1979, Soviet Union troops were sent into Afghanistan, to assist the Communist government whose power was faltering. Brzezinski and Carter immediately brought sanctions against the USSR, and Brzezinski personally traveled "to Pakistan a month or so after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for the purpose of coordinating with the Pakistanis a joint response, the purpose of which would be to make the Soviets bleed for as much and as long as is possible...."<sup>159</sup> This was one of Brzezinski's lifelong goals, to be able to play a part in significantly weakening the Soviet Union. Brzezinski jumped at the chance to play a part in the war and was instrumental in providing arms to the Mujahedeen. His determination even led to him to a surprising purchase of weapons from Communist Czechoslovakia, for the use against Soviet troops in Afghanistan.<sup>160</sup> Overall, these significant foreign policy events served to distract the Carter administration from the evolving changes in El Salvador.

At this point in the Carter administration, it was clear that the foreign policy team was not aligned, its members often at odds with one another over major decision.<sup>161</sup> There were many strong-willed officials within the administration who were dedicated to the protection of human rights. But at the middle levels of the Administration, there were "Cold Warriors" who wanted to take a harder line against the Soviet Union. Instead of the top-down decision-making process seen during the Ford administration, there was a so-

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<sup>159</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Interview with Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski (NSA Archive. George Washington University, 1997). Accessed August 28, 2016. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-17/brzezinski2.html>.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ofira Seliktar, *Failing the Crystal Ball Test: The Carter Administration and the Fundamentalist Revolution in Iran* (Westport: Praeger, 2000).

called “Multiple Advocacy Model,” in which there are many administration officials with strong opinions. This model ultimately tries to embrace the tensions that are the result of competition between people. But this type of decision-making leads to ideological paradoxes and continual infighting within an organization. In addition, it provides critics easy fodder, as those who oppose the final decisions often leak information to support their argument to the press. These Cold Warriors and critics of the Carter administration argued that it only targeted right-wing government for human rights violations, instead of including the Soviet Union in this group. As has been earlier discussed, when the Molina and Romero-led government of El Salvador took power, their repressive government tactics came under scrutiny by the newly inaugurated Carter Administration. This focus was in large part the result of the tireless efforts of Patricia Derian, who took the lead in blocking any US aid to the El Salvador government as long as it continued its counter-insurgency campaign.

In opposition to Derian was American Ambassador Frank Devine, who fully supported the now right-wing JRG and favored the resumption of both economic and military aid.<sup>162</sup> His autobiography gives details about his embassy’s halfhearted attempts to prevent human rights violations by the El Salvadoran government, which primarily consisted of asking President Romero and the JRG to better protect human rights. But Devine was fearful of his and his family’s life from left-wing guerilla groups, and this was partially responsible for his favoring the resumption of military aid to the El Salvadoran government.<sup>163</sup> But from his account, he was not involved in the actual

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<sup>162</sup> Frank Devine, *El Salvador: Embassy under Attack* (New York: Vantage Press, 1981).

<sup>163</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 39.

decision-making regarding US aid. At multiple points during both President Romero's Administration and after the takeover of the Junta, Ambassador Devine privately attempted to influence decision-makers to reduce the number of civilian killings.<sup>164</sup> He frequently mentioned being unsure about what actions to take as Ambassador, as guidance from Washington was unclear or sometimes contradictory. This was a direct result of the different actors within the Carter Administration pursuing different objectives, a common problem throughout his four years in office.

By late February of 1980, the situation in El Salvador was growing dire, and there was a growing sense of dread about the future prospects of the country. To try and head off a major turn for the worse, the State Department appointed Robert White as the new United States Ambassador to El Salvador, a move applauded by Derian.<sup>165</sup> White had recently served as the American Ambassador to Paraguay, where he had successfully pushed the government to better respect human rights. White was one of the few Ambassadors that had an actual track record of saving "the lives of persons opposing the government[,] and his activities led to the revelation that Josef Mengele, the Nazi war criminal, held Paraguayan citizenship."<sup>166</sup> But when he arrived in San Salvador, even he felt overwhelmed by the state of affairs. As he put it in a cable to D.C., "the rich and powerful have systematically defrauded the poor and denied eighty percent of the people any voice in the affairs of their country. A revolution is now underway and we are one of

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<sup>164</sup> Devine, *El Salvador*.

<sup>165</sup> Glad, 253.

<sup>166</sup> Glad 253.

the principle actors. There is no stopping this revolution, no going back.”<sup>167</sup> White stressed that it was the responsibility of the United States to try to guide the revolution on a path that would benefit the Salvadoran people, and it seems clear that Carter and Derian would agree with him on that point. The only question at this point was how.

By late March, the political situation in El Salvador was deteriorating even more rapidly. The Catholic Church, led by Bishop Oscar Romero, had become increasingly vocal in the recent months in his criticism of the ongoing repression by the government and right-wing groups. In a famous mass on March 22, 1980, Romero spoke out against recent killings, and spoke his most famous words, “In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: stop the repression.”<sup>168</sup> This was exactly the type of comments that the US had been working to prevent, with the Carter Administration increasingly strident in its support for the Junta. In January, Brzezinski had sent a letter to the Pope complaining that their efforts to convince Bishop Romero and the Catholic Church to back the Junta had been considerable, but that “[o]ur efforts to persuade them have unfortunately not proven successful.”<sup>169</sup> The letter sought the Pope’s help in convincing Bishop Romero to back the Junta, but at this point, Bishop Romero was already well practiced in “complying” with directives from the Vatican, and then following his conscience.

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<sup>167</sup> Robert White, *Preliminary Assessment of Situation in El Salvador*. United States State Department. [San Salvador, El Salvador. 1980]. Web. Page 1. Accessed July 1, 2016. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/37727446/1980-US-Embassy-Report-on-El-Salvador>.

<sup>168</sup> Oscar Romero, “Archbishop's Homily, March 23,” Confidential Cable, United States Embassy. El Salvador March 23, 1980. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/doc06.pdf>.

<sup>169</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Letter from Dr. Brzezinski to the Pope,” *Department of State, Office of the Secretary*. January 31, 1980 Memorandum, 5.

Less than a month after the letter from Brzezinski was sent to the Pope, Bishop Romero sent an open letter to Jimmy Carter, after a report was leaked that the United States was preparing to resume military aid and training to the El Salvadoran government.<sup>170</sup> In his letter Romero pointed out the recent repression of his people, and asked Carter “[t]o prohibit the giving of this military aid to the Salvadoran Government.”<sup>171</sup> Cyrus Vance actually responded to his appeal, saying that he was happy “that you and the president have many goals and concerns in common...” and that the majority of the aid would be economic, with the possibility of a small amount of aid “to defend and carry forward its announced program of reform and development.”<sup>172</sup> While the Carter Administration held out hope that Archbishop Romero could be brought around to supporting the Junta, the continuation of forced disappearances, the killing of priests, and the surfacing of bodies hardened him against the government.

While the Carter administration opposed the recent comments of Bishop Romero, the reaction to his words was much more seriously among right-wing militant groups. During this time, Bishop Romero received thousands of death threats, but refused to alter his words or actions. He began sleeping in different homes each night, but prepared himself for martyrdom. On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, Major D’Abuisson led a meeting of officers where he led the drawing of straws for the “honor” of killing Bishop Romero.<sup>173</sup> The next

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<sup>170</sup> Oscar Romero, “Text of Archbishop’s Letter to President Carter,” Unclassified Cable, United States Embassy. El Salvador. February 19, 1980. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/doc04.pdf>.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Cyrus Vance, “Reply to Archbishop’s Letter to President Carter,” Confidential Cable, United States Embassy. El Salvador, March 1, 1980. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/doc05.pdf>.

<sup>173</sup> “Conversation with National Guard Officer,” United States Embassy. El Salvador. November 19, 1980. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/doc10.pdf>.

day, while Bishop Romero was at the pulpit delivering mass in San Salvador, he was shot with a .22 caliber rifle, and died shortly afterwards.<sup>174</sup> In an illuminating cable back to Washington, the U.S Embassy prophetically said: “El Salvador now has it’s [*sic*] Chamorro”, in reference to Pedro Chamorro, the opposition newspaper owner in Nicaragua, whose murder had led to a general strike against the Somoza government, and eventually to the overthrow of the government in 1979.<sup>175</sup> What this cable so clearly shows is the extent to which the US feared an FSLN takeover following the murder. The Embassy was so fearful that immediately after the assassination, “[a]ll remaining official American dependents (21 in total) were evacuated via commercial air to Guatemala.”<sup>176</sup> Unfortunately, their predictions of violence were fulfilled. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, the Funeral of Bishop Romero attracted over one hundred thousand people, who peacefully gathered to mourn the Bishop and implicitly support his message.<sup>177</sup> Towards the end of the mass, “suddenly there was a sound of gunfire, followed quickly by an explosion....”<sup>178</sup> Thousands of people stampeded into the Cathedral, where to the priests credit, even as bodies from outside were carried into the cathedral, the burial of Bishop Romero was completed in the crypt. During this whole burial ceremony, bombs and automatic gunfire constantly rang out.

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<sup>174</sup> “Archbishop Romero Assassinated,” United States Defense Intelligence Agency. Office of the Defense Attaché, El Salvador, March 25, 1980. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/doc07.pdf>.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> John Quinn, “San Francisco archbishop's account of Oscar Romero’s Funeral,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 7, 1980. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/global/archives-san-francisco-archbishops-account-oscar-romeros-funeral>.

<sup>178</sup> Quinn, “San Francisco Archbishop’s Account.”



While the official investigation into his murder stalled, evidence soon emerged that implicated D'Aubuisson, who was later captured with documents of a planned coup against the Junta.<sup>179</sup> But because of his connections to the military, D'Aubuisson was freed and fled to Guatemala. There he regrouped and launched an organization called ARENA, which was involved in both right-wing political organizing, as well as purported assassinations of left-wing leaders. With time, however, it grew to eventually be El Salvador's second largest political party by 1984.<sup>180</sup> For the time being, however, the violence grew worse, and the disappearances continued to increase.

Despite the increasing violence in El Salvador, by April of 1980, the Carter Administration's foreign policy team became embroiled in an attempt to end the long-running hostage situation in Iran. This proved to be a significant distraction that took much of the heat off El Salvador. There had been a long-running debate within the administration about whether to launch a mission to free the American hostages in Iran, and Secretary of State Vance, in his usual cautionary style, opposed the operation. But Brzezinski not only supported the hostage rescue plan, but pushed for it to be a ground invasion of Iran from Turkey, which would have significantly raised the stakes of the situation, and probably resulted in disaster. Between Brzezinski's support for the rescue plan, and Carter's desire to strengthen his hand going into the Democratic primary, an Air Force rescue operation was launched on April 28, 1980. It was a debacle. Under-trained soldiers, combined with helicopters that suffered unacceptably high failure rates, led the operation to be aborted. But the process of aborting the mission was bungled, and a

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<sup>179</sup> "El Salvador: D'Aubuisson's Terrorist Activities," Central Intelligence Agency, March 2, 1984. [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000049368.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000049368.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

collision of multiple aircraft caused the death of eight American soldiers.<sup>181</sup> It was a political nightmare for Carter. Not only were the hostages now scattered around Iran, but the failure of the mission was, in the eyes of the public, and reflection of Carter's ineffectiveness. In a further blow to his credibility, Cyrus Vance resigned after the Iran hostage rescue failure, as a result of his advice being followed less and less, as well as the continued plans for a second rescue, which Vance completely opposed.

With the removal of Vance, Brzezinski's influence on Carter grew more pronounced. The administration began carrying out a US policy with a more anti-Soviet stance. Carter stated in his memoirs that the priority in Central America was to preserve Nicaragua "from turning to Cuba and the Soviet Union...."<sup>182</sup> But it was unclear how this goal was best achieved. The Carter Administration stated that it was determined to prevent further human rights violations in El Salvador, which caused the administration to withhold requested weapons shipments.<sup>183</sup> This decision was based on reports that the FSLN was not strong enough to overthrow the El Salvadoran government. Due to Carter's commitment to deny military aid, it was unclear how both to support human rights progress and to ensure the JRG remained stable. Either way, it is clear that El Salvador was a low priority for Carter, as in his 596-page memoir, El Salvador takes up two paragraphs, and is sandwiched between Poland's Solidarity movement, and the large amount of personal visitors he was receiving at the time.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Mark Bowden, "The Desert One Debacle," *The Atlantic*. May 2006. Accessed August 28, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/05/the-desert-one-debacle/304803/>.

<sup>182</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 585.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 585-586.

Meanwhile, in the State Department, Derian was continuing her human rights crusade, and forcefully pushing for human rights to again be made the priority of the Administration. In April of 1980, Derian took criticism of the Carter Administration seriously, arguing that “[t]he human rights community and the public increasingly think the (human rights) policy has been downgraded if not discarded. We need soon a strong Presidential statement similar to that of December 6, 1978.”<sup>185</sup> Derian went on to address the criticism the State Department had been receiving in response to the security assistance to El Salvador, arguing that the assistance as crucial to continuing the push for human rights, but being vague about how this actually helped.

Regardless of the moves in Washington, the situation on the ground in El Salvador was getting worse, and the Civil War was increasing in intensity. The military and right-wing guerillas were ruthlessly suppressing any left-wing supporters. In a move troubling to both the government and the US, on October 10 1980, the various left-wing guerilla groups formally united under the FMLN umbrella, creating a unified political and military force that was directly opposed to the government.<sup>186</sup> This led to an increase in attacks by the FMLN, and as a result, Carter began to more openly support the government with both aid and military training.<sup>187</sup> During this time, violence had escalated significantly since the assassination of Archbishop Romero in 1980. His funeral

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<sup>185</sup> Patricia Derian, “Briefing Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (Derian) to Acting Secretary of State Christopher,” FRUS 1977-1980, Washington. Undated. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1977-80v02/pdf/frus1977-80v02.pdf>.

<sup>186</sup> Carlos Ramos, Roberto Lopez, and Aida Quinteros, “The FMLN and Post-War Politics in El Salvador: From Included to Inclusive Actor?” Berghof Foundation. 2015. <http://ips-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Paper-2-El-Salvador-English-final.pdf>.

<sup>187</sup> Robert Armstrong, “El Salvador: U.S. Ups the Ante,” NACLA Report on the Americas, vol. 15, 1981, 33. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10714839.1981.11723708>.

is marked as the beginning of the full-scale civil war as it sparked reprisals and a quickly escalating spiral of violence.<sup>188</sup> But despite the increase in repression from the government, the Carter Administration remained committed to funding the Junta, which at this point was essentially a military government, run by the right wing in El Salvador.

No matter what was happening around the world, however, the US presidential election was looming, and Carter's priority was on winning reelection. Carter's approval rating since the hostage fiasco sank even lower and lower. Ronald Reagan's main campaign slogan was a promise to "Let's Make America Great Again," and it was successful in capturing the support of the American people.<sup>189</sup> While the polls leading into the election gave Carter a significant lead, which narrowed in the final few weeks, Reagan ended up winning in a landslide, with over 11% more votes than Carter.<sup>190</sup> It was a depressing loss for Carter, who had a significant lead over Reagan in the months before the election. Despite the loss, Carter was still in charge for the next two-and-a-half months, and these months ended up being a very significant time for El Salvador and Central America.

On December 2, 1981, four American women, who were in El Salvador as Catholic missionaries, were discovered by local Salvadorans in a shallow grave.<sup>191</sup> They had been kidnapped, raped, and killed by members of the National Guard, who were

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<sup>188</sup> "El Salvador: 12 Years of Civil War," *Center for Justice and Accountability*, 2014. Accessed April 16, 2016. <http://cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador/>.

<sup>189</sup> Matt Taibbi, "Donald Trump Claims Authorship of Legendary Reagan Slogan: Has Never Heard of Google," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, March 25, 2015. <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/donald-trump-is-americas-stupidest-person-has-never-heard-of-google-20150325>.

<sup>190</sup> John Stacks, "Nation: Where the Polls Went Wrong," *Time Magazine*, December 1, 1980. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,924541,00.html?promoid=googlep>.

<sup>191</sup> Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 163.

either unaware of their nationality or felt they were above the law. This proved to be a major diplomatic embarrassment for the Carter Administration, who had been publicly funding and supporting the government, singing its praises for its supposed human rights progress. As a result, on December 3<sup>rd</sup> the Carter Administration publicly admonished the Salvadoran government and temporarily cut off aid.<sup>192</sup> Quickly, the Salvadoran government moved to mollify the United States. It announced that it had initiated an internal investigation, and was making progress towards solving the crime. But from Washington, it was unclear exactly what progress had been made, and it was clear in retrospect that the “investigation” included higher-level Salvadoran officials altering evidence and covering up the approval that the National Guard soldiers had to kill the women.<sup>193</sup> It took several years before the Salvadoran government finally sentenced any soldiers for the crime, and it was only lower-level guardsmen who had, by all available evidence, received approval from their superiors for the killings.<sup>194</sup> The National Guard officers that initially covered up the evidence and actively blocked the investigation were never held accountable.<sup>195</sup> But less than 10 days after the killings, the Carter Administration approved aid dollars to begin flowing again, and by December 16, approved a new loan for a total of \$20 million.<sup>196</sup> But the situation in El Salvador was about to reach a new level of violence not before seen in the country.

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<sup>192</sup> John M. Goshko, “US Halts Salvadoran Aid,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 1980.

<sup>193</sup> Crandall, *The Salvador Option*, 166.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Margaret Popkin, *Peace without Justice: Obstacles to Building the Rule of Law in El Salvador* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 50.

<sup>196</sup> Crandall, *The Salvador Option*, 164.

Soon after New Year's Day of 1981, the FMLN began what it called its "Final Offensive". It was an all-out assault based on the model of Nicaragua, which had successfully toppled the regime there. The FMLN could predict that the election of Reagan would bring an increase of aid to the Salvadoran government, especially after Reagan's campaign promise of cutting off aid to Nicaragua.<sup>197</sup> But the "Final Offensive" failed for several reasons. First, the right-wing death squads had decimated the organizations that opposed the Salvadoran government, especially those in San Salvador. The only organized opposition to the government was the extreme-left, which had gone into hiding. As a result, the FMLN's call for a strike in San Salvador went ignored, and the attacks on military garrisons were ineffective, because of their high quality, US weapons and extensive training of Salvadoran officers. In addition, the final offensive was underwhelming in their scope, as it relied on a general uprising that never occurred.<sup>198</sup> The government reported that over five hundred "extremists" had been killed, and while this was a large escalation, the Salvadoran government was far from being overthrown.<sup>199</sup> But the government was terrified, and reached out to Washington with desperate messages for additional aid and assistance. Although at this point, no actual progress had been made in the murder of the American churchwomen, the Carter Administration decided to resume both financial and weapon shipments to El Salvadoran Government on January 14.<sup>200</sup> In addition, Carter Administration cut off aid to Nicaragua, who they accused of assisting the FMLN with weapon shipments.<sup>201</sup> These

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<sup>197</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 67.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>199</sup> Betancur, et al., *From Madness*, 22.

<sup>200</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 70.

<sup>201</sup> Glad, *Outsiders*.

actions represent the high point of the Carter Administration's aid to El Salvador, and represent a full break from Carter's focus on human rights.

Why the major change? It appears that the Carter Administration had the following logic. First, the Junta had been viewed as positive change in the Salvadoran government when it took power. Despite being disappointed when all of the civilians resigned from the government in protest of the continued death squad killings, the Junta was still viewed as the best government that could be realistically sought, even though it was in the hands of the military and those who supported the death squads. In addition, the FMLN was pushing for a final offensive to topple the government right at the end of his presidency, which would be viewed as one more black mark on his legacy. The thought of two Communist countries coming to fruition in Central American on his watch was too much to bear, and thus motivated his turn towards supporting the government. This is an opinion shared by Noam Chomsky, who has written extensively on US foreign policy, and in his address at Harvard University in 1985 Chomsky was critical of the Carter administration's anti-democratic actions in El Salvador.<sup>202</sup> He argued that it was the possibility of the FMLN taking political power that caused the Carter administration to send military aid, and that the pro-human rights policies of the administration were subservient to US power interests in the region. Chomsky maintained that the Carter administration was well aware that military aid would be used for anti-insurgent operations and that it would almost certainly lead to widespread civilian killings. But Carter's final decisions to resume aid to El Salvador, and cut off aid to Nicaragua, were about to be taken to the next level by Reagan, who would make Carter's moves look minor in comparison.

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<sup>202</sup> Noam Chomsky, "American Foreign Policy," Harvard University. Cambridge, MA. March 19, 1985.

Then again, there's another possible reason for the lack of change in US policy towards El Salvador, namely that the country was simply a low priority for Carter and the State Department. With so many other priorities like the Iran-Hostage Crisis, and the looming campaign season, El Salvador was simply of very low importance. In Zbigniew Brzezinski's memoir, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser*, he gives a substantial amount of detail about the internal decision-making within the administration, but even as the National Security Advisor, he played a very small role in decision-making regarding El Salvador.<sup>203</sup> It seems unlikely that he simply left this information out, as he was incredibly detailed about the meetings he was involved in, his memoir is full of the minutia of his meetings and small details. Keep in mind, Brzezinski was the National Security Advisor, and was one of the closest advisors of Carter. It seems from the evidence found in his memoir that the Carter administration just did not spend very much time discussing El Salvadoran Policy.

Another way of looking at the reasoning behind the Carter Administration's decisions is laid out by Lars Schoultz in *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America*. He argues that the Carter administration was beset by a conflict over which to prioritize, security of US interests or human rights.<sup>204</sup> Schoultz points out that the Carter administration's focus on human rights was historically unlikely and doomed to fade, as it required transitory factors such as a liberal Congress and the lingering effects of the Watergate scandal. It was only because of these factors that Carter was able to muster the political capital necessary to promote human rights, and it was a strategy

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<sup>203</sup> Brzezinski, "Interview."

<sup>204</sup> Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy toward Latin America* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 118.



that soon came to an end as the political pendulum swung back to the center and to the right with the election of Ronald Reagan.

## VII.

### Epilogue: The Reagan Administration

After Carter was defeated in 1980 and authority was handed over following the inauguration of Reagan on January 20, 1981, conditions in El Salvador deteriorated significantly. In his inauguration speech, Reagan said that “peace is the highest aspiration of the American people.”<sup>205</sup> But this peace he spoke of was not pursued in El Salvador. Reagan considerably escalated lethal aid to the El Salvador government, increased the amount of training of El Salvadoran forces, and sent US advisors to aid in “counter-insurgency” efforts.<sup>206</sup> These efforts by President Reagan led to a significant increase in the intensity of the Civil War, and produced a major spike in murders, and greatly prolonged the conflict.

While the Carter White House was continually plagued by disagreements over the proper course to take in El Salvador, the Reagan foreign policy team encountered few of these internal disagreements. There was widespread agreement that the FMLN must be defeated and prevented from gaining any power in the future government of El Salvador. Reagan’s overall policy of confronting the Soviet Union, and aggressively opposing any Soviet moves in the third world meshed well with aiding the El Salvadoran government, even if the supposed Soviet Union support of the FMLN was practically nonexistent.

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<sup>205</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Inaugural Address*, American Presidency Project, January 20, 1981. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130>.

<sup>206</sup> “United States Calls Situation in El Salvador a Communist Plot: Feb. 19, 1981.” HISTORY.com. Accessed April 16, 2016. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-calls-situation-in-el-salvador-a-communist-plot>.

William LeoGrande describes the goals of the Reagan administration in “A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador.”<sup>207</sup> LeoGrande argues that from the beginning, US intervention in El Salvador at the beginning of the Reagan’s presidency was designed as a test case of vigorous US intervention. LeoGrande even quotes a Reagan advisor saying, “El Salvador itself doesn’t really matter... we have to establish credibility because we’re in serious trouble.”<sup>208</sup> LeoGrande argues that El Salvador was chosen because it was seen as a relatively easy victory that would serve double duty as a public relations victory, as well as a signal to the Soviet Union that the US would confront left-wing groups they supported throughout the world. Chomsky is even more critical of the Reagan administrations’ policies of allowing elections only once the left-wing had been decimated through anti-insurgent campaigns. In his opinion, both the Carter and Reagan administration’s El Salvador policies were a simple continuation of promoting violence and anti-democratic forces whenever Marxist forces threatened to gain political power.

But the change in policy was not immediate. Ambassador White was still posted in San Salvador, but was fired when, as he put it, “I refused a demand by the secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig Jr., that I use official channels to cover up the Salvadoran military’s responsibility for the murders of four American churchwomen. I was fired and forced out of the Foreign Service.”<sup>209</sup> White was the first Ambassador fired, but was far from the last. The new Secretary of State, Al Haig initiated “the most thorough purge

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<sup>207</sup> William LeoGrande, “Drawing the Line in El Salvador,” *International Security* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1981): 27.

<sup>208</sup> LeoGrande, *Drawing*, 27.

<sup>209</sup> “Ex-Salvador Ambassador, Critic of US Foreign Policy, Dies,” *Associated Press*. January 19, 2015. [http://www.salon.com/2015/01/19/ex\\_salvador\\_ambassador\\_critic\\_of\\_us\\_foreign\\_policy\\_dies/](http://www.salon.com/2015/01/19/ex_salvador_ambassador_critic_of_us_foreign_policy_dies/).

suffered by the Department of State since the hysteria over who lost China.”<sup>210</sup> The Latin American department was eviscerated, and replaced with the officers that had presided over the Asia bureau during the Vietnam War. It was a complete change, with the objective of bolstering the Salvadoran government, and decimating the FMLN. This change in policy led to an outcry in public opinion that would put El Salvador in the spotlight.

With murders in El Salvador increasing, and the guerilla war heating up, there was significant interest in exactly what role the US had in the war, and the extent of the US intervention. Atrocities like the raping and killing of 4 American nuns, and later the El Mozote Massacre occurred, there were substantial increases in the attention the US media paid to this conflict.<sup>211</sup> Following the lead of the Reagan Administration’s press releases, much of the US media took the position that the US was not intervening in any significant way, and that the Salvadoran government was primarily engaged in counter-revolutionary conflict against communist insurgents.<sup>212</sup> The El Mozote Massacre was another example of a human rights atrocity that the Reagan administration actively disputed and challenged, while continually increasing their funding for the government of El Salvador. In addition, this funding to El Salvador was only a small part of the amount of money given to the Guatemalan and Honduran governments, as well as the Contras in Nicaragua.<sup>213</sup> It became clear that any organization in Central America that was dedicated to opposing Communism would be supported by the US. A fascinating glimpse into US

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<sup>210</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 75.

<sup>211</sup> Ebone S. Colbert, “Media Coverage of the Civil War in El Salvador,” *McNair Scholars Journal* 10, no. 1 (2006): 30. <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1062&context=mcnair>.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Colbert, “Media Coverage,” 30.

thinking at the time can be achieved by examining reports from the CIA during this time, such as reports as *Existence of Rightist Death Squad within the Salvadoran National Police: Location of Clandestine Prison Used by the Death Squad*.<sup>214</sup> In this report, the CIA has uncovered the actual names of the killers of Archbishop Romero, and has even identified one of them as having illegally moved to Houston Texas. But it appears that no action was taken towards any of the killers.

Throughout the 1980s, Reagan sent substantial shipments of lethal aid to the Salvadoran government, who used it to brutally repress whatever remained of opposition to the government. And whatever opposition managed to evade the government was targeted by the death squads, who inevitably gained possession of the large amount of US weapons sent to El Salvador. As a result, support for the FMLN was continually weakened as decade progressed, and by the end of Reagan's presidency, it was significantly damaged. But the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused a game-changing alteration of the balance of power. As the threat of the FMLN receded even further, the US no longer needed to continuing sending lethal aid to the government. In addition, George H. W. Bush viewed Central America a foreign policy sideshow to Europe, and not worth sacrificing political capital for. Bush was eager to end the source of conflict with Congress by coming to a bipartisan agreement to force both sides to the bargaining table. With this change in the balance of power, the government was finally willing to come to the bargaining table with the FMLN.<sup>215</sup> It took years of negotiating,

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<sup>214</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. *Existence of Rightist Death Squad within the Salvadoran National Police: Location of Clandestine Prison Used by the Death Squad*. [Unknown (blacked out) 1983]. Accessed July 1, 2016. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/45750334/1983-CIA-Report-on-National-Police-Death-Squad-in-El-Salvador>.

<sup>215</sup> LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 575.

but in 1992, a permanent peace accord was signed, and with that, came the end to the bitter war.

## VIII.

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