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Some Thoughts on El Salvador.

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Dear Peter,

I have just returned from four and half weeks in El Salvador. I went there with preconceptions, biases, and some trepidation. While there, my adrenalin ran strongly and for extended periods of time, pumped by fear, compassion, and outrage. I would like to thank you and all of those at the Institute who allowed me to go. I will try to share some of that experience, one of the most important in my life, with you.

Before going to El Salvador, I spent weeks here in Mexico reading and talking to people about the war. Amongst others, I interviewed Ferman Cienfuegos and Robert Roca, two of the five FMLN commanders; Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Salvador Samayoa, and Jose Rodriguez Ruiz of the FDR's Political-Diplomatic Commission; Coronel Adolfo Majano and Hector Dada, both former junta members; and, asundry Salvadoran clergyman, and union leaders.

In El Salvador, I visited the provincial capitals of San Miguel and San Vicente, as well as Apopa and Sochitoto-two sizable towns within an hour's drive of San Salvador. Working with National Public Radio and BBC crews, I also took part in interviews with President Jose Napoleon Duarte; right-wing ARENA party leader, Major Roberto D'Aubuisson; members of the El Salvador Human Rights Commission; Defense Minister General Guillermo Garcia; the director of the Electoral Commission, Dr. Jorge Bustamante; and a variety of priests, academicians, businessmen, workers, peasants, housewives and children.

By now you have read innumerable newspaper and magazine accounts about the war in El Salvador. I will not bore

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you with a lengthy version of all events there "as seen by Kimberley Conroy." Rather, I will concentrate on my impressions of the war and of the elections, paying special attention to the differences between what I had expected to see, and what in fact I saw.

The War.

During my last few nights in Mexico City, I made a special effort to get to bed early, convinced that the explosion of bombs and the rattle of machine guns would shatter all possibilities of a good night's sleep in San Salvador. I had also expected a gradual build-up of fighting so that by election day, the capital would be under siege.

These dramatic scenarios never unfolded. Intense fighting did occur during my stay in El Salvador, particularly during the week preceding the elections. Most of it took place, however, in a few provincial capitals and towns near the territories controlled by the rebels. Even still, the fighting reported throughout the country was much less than I had anticipated. At first I was confused. How could 33,000 people have died in the last 2 years in such relatively small-scale skirmishes? A friend explained the mystery: of the 33,000 killed, only 2,000 had died in combat. The rest had been assassinated.

To refer to these killings as part of a war strategy gives them undeserved legitimacy. A massive political assassination campaign seems a more correct characterization. Many of the victims were brutally tortured before being executed. I saw some of these victims. The day we visited, there were three "recent deliveries" to El Playon, a lava pit about 15 miles from San Salvador which is claimed to be a favorite dumping ground for right-wing death squads. The skin of the recent victims was taut and had turned a mustardy yellow from several days exposure to the sun. One was missing his hands and one foot. There were also the three young boys whose bodies were found within blocks of our hotel, and the four still warm cadavers we encountered on a drive to La Libertad beach.

According to the U.S. embassy in El Salvador, since 1969, not one political assassination has been either investigated or brought to trial in El Salvador. The insurgents can be criticized on many accounts, but not for these killings. It is widely agreed that the army, the various government security forces, and the government-sanctioned right-wing death squads are responsible for the vast majority of these deaths. Furthermore, the Human Rights Commission explained

that most of those killed are not even guerrilla-sympathizers; they are merely suspected of being.

While the security forces and death squads have been assassinating, the rebels have been destroying the nation's infrastructure. The insurgents justify this destruction by saying that to win the war they must grind the economy to a halt. They blow up buses, trucks, electrical stations, bridges and water systems. I can understand their reasoning, but can't condone their actions. Too many privately and cooperatively-owned trucks and buses have been destroyed, leaving their owners and employers without a livelihood. When there are no buses available to take to work, the people are forced to find other less amenable means. They must in order to survive. El Salvador is an extremely poor country. If the rebels were ever to win this war, where would they get the money to reconstruct their nation? The Sandinists haven't been able to get sufficient money for Nicaragua's reconstruction. What makes the FMLN-FDR think they would be able to get enough for El Salvador?

I had expected the Salvadoran army to be composed of snarling, over-fed, middle-aged men, with mouths which turned down around the edges from years of cursing at the communists. I thought that I would be moved by the sight of a dead guerrilla, and not by that of his adversary. It wasn't the case. The dead I saw of either side filled me with piercing anguish. In the end, they were all human beings. And sadder still, most were no more than young teenagers - 15, 16, 17 years old - kids who had sacrificed all even before knowing what they had given up. When asked what they were fighting against, the boy-soldiers responded, "communists" and "foreigners." Most of them couldn't tell you what a communist was, and none of them had seen any foreign soldiers - they just knew they were there. Even though I didn't have a chance to talk with insurgent soldiers, I would guess that their reasons, in general, would have been less theoretical: because the army, government security forces or government-sanctioned death squads had tortured and killed one or more family members. The State Department once estimated that for each murder committed by the government's armed forces, the FMLN would gain 25 new supporters. Of course, there are also students, teachers, members of the middle-class, and others who have joined the guerrillas to fight against what they would call "an imperialist-backed government" and for "social justice."

In Mexico City, it was very easy to romanticize about the war, to feel at ease stating that it was being fought for a good cause, and that the ends justified the means. Seeing a fifteen year-old boy with his brains splattered across a small field in San Salvador left me cringing inside, embarrassed for the

thoughts I had once held. These kids were being used as cannon fodder because those with power still aren't willing to sit around a table and work out a settlement. How many more of these nameless thousands will have to die before peace talks will be convened?

The Mexican press had led me to believe that the insurgents' victory was but several months away. In El Salvador, I saw no end in sight. The army soldiers I observed in combat were such poor marksmen that it was comical. Usually they would hide behind walls, point their rifles in the general direction of the guerrillas, and let the rounds fly. Taking aim would have required putting their face in a vulnerable position: few seemed to think it was worth the risk. Journalists who spent extended periods in the combat zones found it amazing that the army had killed as many guerrillas as they had. I don't know if the guerrillas are any more careful in their aim: they probably have to be due to limited arms supply.

Well-informed sources say that FMLN-FDR morale is at an all-time low. The large voter turnout and the bad press they acquired by attacking on or near voting stations constituted a major political setback. Financially, the insurgents also seem to be in bad straits. One well-informed source explained that the insurgents obtained a major credit 4 years ago, the final portion of which was recently disbursed. The rebels, like their financiers, were convinced that by now the FMLN forces would have won the war. Speciously they reasoned, if the Sandinists of Nicaragua had won it in one and a half years, the FMLN could surely attain victory in four. But the wars are extremely different. To begin with, in Nicaragua, it was a popular insurrection against a detested dictator; in El Salvador, it is a class war. In the weeks before the elections, at least three and it is believed all five of the FMLN commanders were outside the country searching for new sources of financing. Whatever money the Cubans and international solidarity committees provide does not seem to be sufficient.

The morale in the areas controlled by the guerrillas is also believed to be at a low point. The army has cut off almost all traffic into these areas. Subsequently, there is a shortage of food, medicine and other basic supplies in several of the guerrilla-controlled areas. A French camera crew recently returned from one of those areas. They showed film of long food-lines with guerrillas and civilians alike waiting to be issued 3 tortillas and a small portion of cooked beans. Even though some of the guerrillas and civilians are willing to endure and stand behind the FMLN whatever the sacrifice, there are others who are being worn down by these hardships.

The war in El Salvador is a war of attrition. The government troops invade the villages of suspected FMLN sympathizers, burn their crops and kill their animals. With their livelihoods destroyed, some take to the cities hoping to be received by charitable friends or relatives. Journalists have commented that the army prefers that these people live in the cities: a few urban concentrations are easier to control than thousands of rural hamlets. The other victims take to the mountains, joining the guerrillas, seeking their protection, and hoping to survive. But with the supplies behind the lines limited, the government forces anxiously wait, hoping the spirit of the rebels and of their civilian supporters will be broken. Today, for the reasons already enumerated, that spirit is seriously bruised; bruised but not broken.

And who do the people of El Salvador support? Are they with the guerrillas or with the army? There are no certain answers to these questions. Some guerrilla-sympathizers would have one believe that the majority of Salvadorans support the FMLN, but can't say so for fear of reprisals. While that is surely the situation of some people, I don't think it is that of the majority. My sense is that the popular support for the guerrillas has diminished in the last year. There are several reasons. The most important is that the Salvadoran people are tired of war. Or more precisely, they are tired of being unemployed, underfed, ill without money to buy medicines, and of seeing dead, mutilated bodies in the streets. Some of those who may have been guerrilla - sympathizers now place their priority on the war's termination, the return to peace, regardless of who comes to power.

A strategical error on the part of the insurgents has also cost them a further loss of popular support. Between 1978 and 1980, the rebels concentrated on organizing the people, on leading them to the streets in massive demonstrations to protest the government's socioeconomic policies and the repression perpetrated by its forces. When the government's forces began opening fire on the demonstrators, and systematically began torturing and assassinating the leaders of the popular movements, the surviving leaders and organizers took to the mountains to organize the guerrilla war. Since then, the FMLN has placed emphasis on the military war. This has left the majority of those who sympathize with the rebels but who live outside the areas under FMLN control, without political orientation or encouragement. This, in turn, has weakened the people's commitment to the insurgents. If they are to win, the FDR-FMLN must implement a two-pronged strategy. First, they must continue and step up their military actions in order to convince the Salvadoran people that the FMLN does represent a viable alternative, that the FMLN can win the war. Most people

are not willing to bet on a losing horse; in El Salvador, it is a bet that could cost them their lives.

Second, the insurgents must launch a widespread "political offensive" in the areas not under their control, and particularly in the cities. If the FDR-FMLN are to have any hope of winning the war, they must organize and politicize the people. The people must actively participate in the revolution not only to win it, but to sustain it once the shooting ceases. A large percentage of the populous, perhaps the majority, is tired, confused, and just wants the war to end. If the FDR-FMLN can't convince them that there is a tangible advantage for them in the FMLN's winning, then a popular insurrection will not occur. Without such an insurrection, I don't think the guerrillas could win the war, and even less afterwards sustain a popularly-supported regime.

Elections.

I had expected the elections to be a farce. The Mexican press predicted that few people would vote, and that those who did would do so due to intimidation. With a 50-year history of fixed elections, fraud always seemed a strong possibility. No one was willing to say which party would win, although many said that in the long run, it wouldn't make much difference. If Jose Napoleon Duarte and his Christian Democratic Party gained a majority of seats in the constituent assembly, they were expected to offer reforms. It was thought that the reforms would at least temporarily keep the few moderate elements left in Salvadoran society from siding with the guerrillas. They doubted, however, that the conservative army would allow the Christian Democrats to carry out significant reforms, just as they hadn't allowed President Duarte to carry out the second and most important phase of the land reform. Therefore, they reasoned that it would only be a matter of time before the moderate peasant and workers unions would turn to the left. If the right-wing parties won the majority, it was believed that the moderates would move into the FDR-FMLN camp almost immediately. Subsequently, the war effort would be stepped up. In either case, Defense Minister Guillermo Garcia would remain the strongman in the government. Duarte and the Christian Democrats never had the strength to have General Garcia removed; the Right seemed to have no reason to do so. And of course, the rebels would continue fighting regardless of the electoral results.

The elections seem to have been clean. I say seem because one reliable and well-informed Salvadoran claimed in private discussions that fraud did take place. He told two British journalists that Jorge Bustamante, the Electoral Commission director, had told him as much. Dr. Jorge Bustamante told our source that the army had stuffed the voting boxes,

that in fact only 600,000 people had voted, rather than 1.5 million as was officially reported. Furthermore, our source claimed that the preliminary returns had shown Accion Democratica, the moderate businessmen's party, winning 8 seats in the electoral assembly; the final results only awarded them 2. At the same time, with 15% of the vote in (which scientifically is supposed to be enough to determine final results), the army's party (PCN) had won 6 seats less than the number it was eventually awarded. Before the elections, it was assumed that Accion Democratica (AD) would side with the Christian Democrats in the Constituent Assembly. If the AD party had won the votes it was initially estimated to have, the Christian Democrats with AD could have held a majority of the Assembly's seats. That would have given these center-right forces the power to designate the interim president and to determine the composition of the cabinet. As it turned out, the extreme right-wing parties (ARENA, PCN, PPS) were awarded the majority of seats in the assembly.

Our source claims that Jorge Bustamante, realizing that fraud had occurred, threatened to resign. The army told him not to if he valued his life, and the lives of his family. The journalists tried to corroborate the story. While Dr. Bustamante did admit to threatening to resign, he told the journalists that he did so for a different reason: because the army was being exceedingly slow in delivering the votes from the provinces. For one who has personally put so much on the line, and who so patiently put together the electoral process, the reason he cited didn't seem sufficient to have prompted his resignation.

The extreme right-wing parties recently named ARENA party leader Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, president of the assembly, filled all 9 seats of the assembly's directorate with their own people, and voted through a decree which established that votes in the assembly will be approved by a simple majority. The Constituent Assembly has 60 seats: 34 controlled by the right wing parties, 24 by the Christian Democrats, and 2 by Accion Democratica. Simple majority requires that 31 votes be cast in favor of a measure in order for it to pass. The Christian Democrats had tried to establish that an absolute majority (two-thirds of the 60 votes) be required. Having lost this battle, the Christian Democrats have effectively lost veto power, and at best will have limited influence in the Assembly's decision-making.

Regardless of whether fraud did or did not occur,

voter turnout was much heavier than expected. I arrived in El Salvador almost 3 weeks before the elections. In that period, I asked many people if they were going to vote, for whom, and why. All said they were going to vote. Some, reminding us that the ballots were secret, declined from saying which party they would support. Some said they hadn't decided; others didn't see any real difference between one party and the next.

And why were they voting? Most replied, "So that maybe El Salvador will again enjoy peace." The March 28th elections were less a vote for any one or any party, than they were a vote for peace. I believe that many people realized that the odds were 100 to 1 against their votes being able to bring peace. But wasn't it worth taking the chance? There was so much to gain and nothing to lose. The Electoral Commission orchestrated a brilliant T.V. and radio campaign to get people to the polls. Given the rumors that the guerrillas might attack the polling stations, the Commissions' advertisements rallied the brave Salvadoran not to be intimidated, to stand up for his right by casting his vote. The ads also presented the elections as the most sensible means of ending the country's civil turmoil.

To a lesser degree, intimidation does seem to have contributed to the high voter turnout. For decades, the army has intimidated those who did not vote for its party, the PCN. This intimidation ranged from simple hassling to being tortured by the troops, or by the death-squads they have under their command. It is possible that some people voted for the PCN, just to be on the safe side. The PCN, which did almost no campaigning, captured the third largest vote. Only a few days after the election, an agricultural workers union official said the army had been intimidating people into voting in his town of San Martin, and in others nearby. Less than 20 miles from the capital, San Martin was the site of a very ugly right-wing death squad massacre recently reported by Christopher Dickey in the Washington Post.

In El Salvador, the elections were perceived as a major defeat for the guerrillas, and a lesser one for the Reagan administration. They were a defeat for the guerrillas on two accounts. First, that so many people went to the polls. Reasoning that if the guerrillas had had significant popular support more voters would have abstained, many foreign journalists voiced strong doubts concerning the FMLN's strength and popularity.

Even more damaging to the rebel's image were the attacks some of their forces launched on or near polling-stations.

Originally I had thought these attacks were carried out by small bands of urban guerrillas who, having not received clear orders from the high command, had taken it upon themselves to carry out "a show of strength" for the benefit of the international press. However, once back in Mexico, a well informed member of the FMLN told me otherwise. There was disagreement amongst the 5 FMLN commanders as to what actions should be carried out during election week. The five never resolved their differences; subsequently, at least one of the fronts decided to carry out these "polling station offensives." In doing so, they gained absolutely nothing militarily, and suffered a major political setback.

We were at the polling station in the town of Apopa when the insurgents attacked. In this town 20 miles from the capital, the rebels did not attack the schoolhouse where the voting took place, but rather the command post set up less than 2 blocks away. Theoretically, one can argue that the FMLN's action was purely military. But from one who has been there, let me say that mortar fire and repeated machine gun rounds are extremely intimidating, even if they are exchanged at two blocks distance. While some of the locals realized that the guerrillas were not aiming at them, most of the international press did not. Subsequently, many reported that the FMLN forces were obviously undemocratic and unwilling to have the Salvadorans vote.

Even though the high voter-turnout was seen as a major victory for the Reagan administration, the election results were not. Quite openly, the U.S. government had been backing the junta-president Jose Napoleon Duarte and his Christian Democratic Party. The Christian Democrats won 40% of the votes, more than any other party. However, they did not win a majority and, as mentioned, seem to have been largely dealt out of the power game by a coalition of extreme right-wing parties. Although the Reagan administration may still be able to get its El Salvador military and economic aid package through Congress, it will have to find a new sales pitch. Before, the administration promoted the image of reform-minded Duarte who, as the man situated in the middle between the extreme right and extreme left, was the only one capable of returning peace to the country under the rule of the centrist Christian Democratic Party. Having to sell Congress on an extreme right-wing coalition would require the services of some talented public relations expert. Perhaps the recently-elected provisional president Alvaro Magaña will be sufficient. His candidacy is reported to have been heavily promoted by both the U.S. embassy and the Salvadoran army.

Only a few months before the elections, the Reagan administration was convinced that Duarte and the Christian Democrats easily would win a majority of seats in the Constituent Assembly. The administration had made several

erroneous judgements in formulating this prediction. First, the State Department seems to have over-estimated Jose Napoleon Duarte's popularity. In 1972, Mr. Duarte won an overwhelming majority in the presidential elections. Due to electoral fraud, however, Duarte never took power, and was forced to seek political asylum abroad. Even though he was extremely popular when he returned from exile in 1979, he has lost a great deal of support since being a member of the military-civilian junta. Many feel he has repeatedly let military abuses go unpunished in order to stay in power. In short, while still popular, by March 1982, Duarte was no longer the hero the United States thought he was.

The Reagan administration also underestimated the public appeal of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson. In the United States, the epithet most often associated with Mr. D'Aubuisson is "pathological killer." Robert White, the former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, had made this characterization of Mr. D'Aubuisson in a document he presented before a Congressional committee. Robert White, as many Salvadorans, also believes that Mr. D'Aubuisson was the mastermind behind the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Mr. D'Aubuisson has twice attempted right-wing military coups, used to give fanatical anti-communist speeches and was in charge of a special security force before the 1979 coup. Members of the FMLN claim to have been personally interrogated and tortured by him.

But the past activities of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson are little known by the general public in El Salvador. Most have judged him on the basis of his public appearances. He is attractive in a Latin way -with his slim physique, broad shoulders and chiseled face, he looks like he could be a tennis pro at some swish Cancun hotel. He has a forceful, clear manner of speech, and promises quick and easy answers to complex problems. Napoleon Duarte, in contrast, is short, thick-jowled and stubby in appearance. He is long-winded and imprecise in his presentation, and forever hedging as to how and when the solutions he offers might work. And, of course, Mr. Duarte had all the normal disadvantages of an incumbent: the promises he made when joining the junta did not materialize in as perfect a form as had been hoped.

It should be stressed that despite the elections, and despite the recent set-backs to the FDR-FMLN, the two most important factors in the Salvadoran equation have not changed. First, Defense Minister General Garcia remains the strongman in El Salvador, and his military complex continues intact. As long as the military approve of its actions, a new government will be allowed to stand. If this approval is lost, a coup should be expected. So much for El Salvador's democracy.

And secondly, El Salvador's basic problem remains the same. The socioeconomic structure, which generously benefits a minority while leaving unattended the most basic needs of the impoverished majority*, remains unaffected by the elections. This is what motivated many of the rebels to take up arms in the first place. When I went to El Salvador I was convinced the FMLN would win, and most probably within less than a year. After five weeks there, I am skeptical about a rebel victory. While the military situation seems to be at an impasse, for the many reasons already stated, I believe it is possible that the Salvadoran army could win their war of attrition. But, even if they do, their victory will be short-lived unless the government eliminates the repression and undertakes a profound reform of the socioeconomic structure. Regardless of what they say, I don't think those who have recently come to power are sincerely committed to stopping the government-sanctioned repression or to implementing significant reforms.

During my five-week stay in El Salvador I felt more strongly moved by what I saw and heard around me than I have ever before. Sometimes it was compassion that overwhelmed me. At other times outrage, fear, admiration and despair. But there was one emotion I never experienced while in El Salvador. That was hope.

All my best,

Received in Hanover 5/20/82

* I will treat the subject of poverty in greater detail in my next report.