

On the 32nd Anniversary of the Assassination of Archbishop Romero

Mar 25, 2012



The body of Archbishop Romero surrounded by friends moments after his assassination. Romero was assassinated on the evening of 24 March 1980 while delivering a mass in the chapel of "La Divina Providencia," a small hospital in San Salvador. Both a UN-backed truth commission and U.S. officials concluded that SOA/WHISC-graduate Roberto D'Aubuisson was responsible for ordering the Archbishop's assassination. Image Copyright 1995-2009 National Security Archive [<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/index.html>]

Yesterday marked the 32nd anniversary of the assassination of the fourth Archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez or, as he is more often called in Latin America, *San Romero de América*. Unlike the commemoration of Saint Patrick one week earlier, the anniversary of Romero's death prompted few remembrances, and passed virtually unnoticed in both the U.S. and Mexican media. This is hardly surprising, as Romero was assassinated by a client of the U.S. government for promoting an ideology that ran contrary to U.S. interests.

According to both the United Nations-backed truth commission and the United States government, the assassination of Romero was arranged by Roberto D'Aubuisson, a major in the Salvadoran military at the time and a graduate of the School of the Americas (SOA, or, since its renaming, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, or WHISC). The primary reason for his assassination appears to have been his criticisms of atrocities committed by the Salvadoran military and his support for Vatican II's positions on social justice and the "preferential option for the poor," which had prompted several concerned messages between the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, Washington, and, eventually, Rome.

As the details surrounding Romero's assassination and how they fit in to several decades of violent repression and U.S.-backed terrorism in Latin America have already been described in detail elsewhereⁱ, I wish to highlight the hegemonic discourse reflected in the U.S. government's 30-year war

on liberation theology in Latin America, and Romero's assassination as a manifestation of the struggle for legitimacy.

Liberation theology largely reflected an effort on the part of the Catholic Church, initiated by Pope John Paul XXIII, to apply the humanist dimensions of the philosophy of Christ to the contemporary world. It sought to emphasize and revitalize the radically peaceful aspects of the Christian gospels and replicate some of the early Church's work among the poorest and most marginalized segments of society. One of the points it emphasized was the rights of the poor to equal standards of human dignity and rights as their rich counterparts. To Romero and other adherents, this theology included the right to organize in the struggle for justice without being terrorized or murdered. It also called on those with power to respect the autonomy and right to self-rule of impoverished communities. Although the granting of such autonomy to the poor would likely not be opposed by Marxists engaged in class struggle, both the substance and intent of liberation theology and Marxist praxis differ substantially, as evinced by Romero's repeated rejection of Marxism as an atheistic philosophy in his pastoral letters. Claims, such as the one we will consider shortly, that associate liberation theology with Marxism, reflect an effort to discredit liberation theology by capitalizing on popular sentiments instilled by decades of anti-communist propaganda rather than an actual comprehension of Marxism or liberation theology. The right's claims that President Obama is a socialist offer a contemporary example of this tactic.

Despite its moderate position, liberation theology's respect for the autonomy of the poor brought it into direct conflict with the goals of national governments, often in cooperation with the United States--- whose primary goal was to ensure that such states embraced the U.S. model of state-subsidized capitalism (often erroneously referred to as “free-market” capitalism) and subordination of domestic interests to the geopolitical (i.e., anti-communism) and economic (i.e., open markets and cheap raw materials) interests of their northern neighbor---seeking to consolidate state power. It was in this context that liberation theology's demands that the rights of the poor be respected resulted in a bloody hegemonic struggle, which was itself an ideological component of the political and military struggle over access to resources that has characterized most U.S. foreign policy regarding Latin America.

The School of the Americas/Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation has played a central role in this bloody struggle for more than half a century. The SOA/WHISC was founded in 1946 to provide military and indirect ideological training to officers throughout Latin America. Since its founding, it has graduated more than 64,000 Latin American soldiers, including such notable figures as Colombia's Pedro Nei Acosta Gaivis, Honduras' Romeo Vásquez Velásquez and Luis Prince Suazo, Venezuela's Efraim Vasquez Velasco, and Mexico's Jose Ruben Rivas Penaⁱⁱ. The School operated in Panama until it was expelled under the terms of the Canal treaty in 1984, at which point it was moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, U.S., where it still resides. In an effort to mitigate criticism, the name and a handful of cosmetic features of the School were changed in 2001, while its primary purpose of cultivating military forces friendly to U.S. interests throughout Latin America remained consistent. As an institution responsible for indoctrinating many of Latin America's most important military figures, the attitude of the SOA/WHISC towards liberation theology offers substantial insight into both how this ideology was viewed by U.S. governing elites, and how it was portrayed by their savants. The following excerpt from the School's former “Frequently Asked Questions” web pageⁱⁱⁱ, where the author responds to a question regarding the controversy surrounding the School, reflects this perception and portrayal succinctly:

According to leaders of the opposition movement, the controversy is not limited to the School nor its graduates; but rather with U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. In their

view, that policy is responsible for all the violence and repression that characterized many countries during the Cold War. The School is the easiest target for those people who believe solutions lie in eliminating military or police forces in the region. Many of the critics supported Marxism -- Liberation Theology -- in Latin America -- which was defeated with the assistance of the U.S. Army. In other words, their objective of achieving socialist revolutionary governments failed, and they now are going after one of the mechanisms which assisted in promoting and maintaining democratic ideals.

First is the claim that the criticisms emanate from the “leaders” of an hypothetical “opposition movement.” Here, the effort is to marginalize criticisms of the School as the product of a single, fringe movement, rather than as the moral outrage of people in numerous movements whose consciences have been shocked by the savage brutality of their government. This same tactic was used against those who opposed the Vietnam war, and, more recently, the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. One of the keys to dismantling domestic opposition to its policies has been the U.S. government's ability to convince those who question it that they represent a minority perspective.

Next is the straw-man claim that such critics attribute all the violence and oppression in Latin America to U.S. foreign policy. This tactic is also frequently employed by ruling elites in the U.S. to marginalize criticisms, nowadays by branding such critics as “anti-American” (as though one's personal feelings on the existence of two continents in the Western Hemisphere have any bearing on U.S. policies). In reality, the primary criticism of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America has been that it has exacerbated existing tensions and precluded nonviolent alternatives. It is doubtful whether any serious analyst or scholar would argue that Latin America would be free of problems if the United States were to suddenly develop a newfound respect for democracy and national sovereignty, although many might conclude that its citizens could probably work out such conflicts much more constructively if the U.S. would quit giving guns and bombs to the most reactionary factions of society.

Then we come to one of the key points, where the author associates critics with Marxism, and then---even more improbably---equivocates between Marxism and liberation theology. This reflects a number of dominant assumptions within U.S.-policy debate. The first is that all criticisms that call into question the U.S. government's self-declared mission of reshaping the world (and democracy) in its image are part of an international conspiracy to destroy freedom. If we were to replace “Marxism” with “Islam,” the argument's parallels in contemporary political discourse would become even more evident. Because liberation theology, in its call to respect the autonomy of the organizations of the poor and their right to influence their national governments without outside intervention, reflected such criticism, it was immediately associated with the “great satan” of communism and, as the acknowledges, opposed with military violence.

Finally, the last sentence of this statement reflects the “siege mentality” of U.S. policy. From communism to terrorism, U.S. elites have always portrayed their policies as struggles to protect democracy and freedom from a terrible enemy. Thus, rather than criticizing the SOA/WHISC for its reprehensible track record in human rights, critics are “going after” and institution whose only crime is that of “promoting and maintaining democratic ideals.” As Noam Chomsky and Gore Vidal have both observed, this framing of criticisms of official policy as a sinister attempt to subvert the noble intentions of a beneficent power has been employed by virtually every empire in human history.

Given this framing of U.S. policy, it should come as no surprise that---public condemnations notwithstanding---Washington was not particularly troubled by the assassination of Romero. Even after issuing a public condemnation of Romero's assassination, then-President Carter, arguably one of the

less bloodthirsty of contemporary U.S. presidents, moved to provide more than 5-million U.S. dollars in aid to the military that he knew (or at least was fairly certain, based on the information provided to him) was responsible for killing the Archbishop less than one year later. Similarly, President Obama failed to recall the U.S. government's role in arming Romero's assassins or in supporting an oppressive regime that killed hundreds of thousands throughout El Salvador's U.S.-backed "counter-insurgency" campaign during his 2011 visit to El Salvador and Romero's tomb.

Recognizing this institutional amnesia is just as important to the discussion of environmental conflicts as to social conflicts. For more than a century, land reform has lain at the heart of many of Latin America's political conflicts. By intervening on the side of oppressive and authoritarian regimes, the U.S. government has helped to exacerbate the social conflicts responsible for the destruction and degradation of tropical forests, the growth of urban slums and shantytowns, and the other social contradictions that lie at the heart of our environmental crises. While the United States is not the only factor, it is important to recognize that the unsustainable patterns of growth that have characterized the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are not the inevitable byproducts of human nature, but the consequences of policies and practices that were deliberately implemented in the service of a particular group of interests.

In this context, the assassination of Archbishop Romero should also serve as a warning. Few would contest the claim that U.S. hegemony is in decline. From the famous shutdown of the Seattle WTO negotiations in 1999 to the formation of the World Social Forum in 2001, from the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions to the growing resistance to the brutal Israeli occupation of Palestine, from the ongoing student protests in Chile to the Occupy movement in the U.S., and from the Greek, Spanish, and Belgian protests against "austerity" to the "Budget Day" protests in the UK, the neoliberal model of development championed by the U.S. and its technocrats has been bleeding legitimacy for more than a decade. Romero's assassination provides a vivid reminder that those in power rarely hesitate to employ violence when other attempts to justify their position fail, regardless of how innocent or committed to nonviolence their victims may be. As the readiness with which the Obama administration and the rest of the U.S. government has resorted to the assassination of U.S. citizens and the repression of peaceful demonstrations both seem to indicate, little has changed since Romero was murdered 32 years ago.

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- i Kate Doyle and Emily Willard have provided an excellent, concise account of the assassination and Washington's response for the National Security Archive [<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/index.htm>]. Both Penny Lernoux's *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America---The Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. Policy* (0 14 00.6047 2) and William Blume's *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (1567512526) describe the background of conflict between progressive movements, the Catholic Church, and U.S. policy in Latin America.
- ii More information on the activities of these and other notable SOA/WHISC graduates is available for those who are unfamiliar with these names at SOA Watch's "Notorious Graduates" web page [<http://soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/soawhinsec-grads/notorious-grads>].
- iii This excerpt is taken from an archive of the SOA/WHISC's web site [<http://web.archive.org/web/19990428095558/http://www.benning.army.mil/usarsa/FAQ/FAQ.htm>]. This excerpt predates the reconstitution of the SOA as the WHISC, as the "FAQ" page for the latter is still empty. Given the superficial nature of the changes between the SOA and WHISC, it is reasonable to assume that this excerpt still reflects the dominant attitude at the School.