

“Learn from History”, 31st Anniversary of the Assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero

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Washington, D.C., March 23, 2011 – Thirty one years ago tomorrow, El Salvador’s Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was shot and killed by right-wing assassins seeking to silence his message of solidarity with the country’s poor and oppressed. The assassination shocked Salvadorans already reeling in early 1980 from attacks by security forces and government-backed death squads on a growing opposition movement. Romero’s murder further polarized the country and set the stage for the civil war that would rage for the next twelve years. In commemoration of the anniversary, the National Security Archive is posting a selection from our digital archive of 12 declassified U.S. documents that describe the months before his death, his assassination and funeral, as well as later revelations about those involved in his murder.

The documents are being posted as President Barak Obama leaves El Salvador, his final stop on a five-day trip to Latin America. Obama spent part of his time in the country with a visit to Monsignor Romero’s tomb last night. Although the United States funneled billions of dollars to the tiny country in support of the brutal army and security forces during a counterinsurgency war that left 75,000 civilians dead, the president made no reference to the U.S. role, seeking in his speeches instead to focus on immigration and security concerns. The day before his visit to Romero’s gravesite, [Obama had told an audience in Chile](#) that it was important that the United States and Latin America “learn from history, that we understand history, but that we not be trapped by history, because many challenges lie ahead.”

Just weeks before his murder, Archbishop Romero published an open letter to President Jimmy Carter in the Salvadoran press, asking the United States not to intervene in El Salvador’s fate by arming brutal security forces against a popular opposition movement. Romero warned that U.S. support would only “sharpen the injustice and repression against the organizations of the people which repeatedly have been struggling to gain respect for their fundamental human rights.” Despite his plea, President Carter moved to approve \$5 million in military aid less than one year after the archbishop’s murder, as Carter was leaving office in January 1981.

Included in the posting are documents reporting on a secret, behind-the-scene effort by the United States to enlist the Vatican in pressuring Romero over his perceived support for the Salvadoran left; an account of the archbishop’s powerful March 23, 1980, homily, given the day before his assassination; a description of the murder by the U.S. defense attaché in El Salvador; and an extraordinary embassy cable describing a meeting organized by rightist leader Roberto D’Aubuisson in which participants draw lots to determine who would be the triggerman to kill Romero.

Although the declassified documents do not reveal the extent of the plot to kill Romero or the names of those who murdered him, details in them support the findings of the [1993 report by the U.N.-mandated Truth Commission for El Salvador](#). Released shortly after the signing of the peace accords that ended the war in El Salvador, the report identified D'Aubuisson, Captains Alvaro Rafael Saravia and Eduardo Avila, and Fernando ("El Negro") Sagrera as among those responsible for the assassination. On March 25 of last year, Carlos Dada of El Salvador's on-line news site El Faro published an extraordinary interview with Alvaro Saravia, one of the masterminds of Romero's killing. In the interview, Saravia revealed chilling details of the plot to murder Romero; see a transcript of the interview, "How We Killed the Archbishop", [here](#) and [here en español](#).

The documents posted below are from the National Security Archive's Digital National Security Archive's two El Salvador collections, [El Salvador: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1977-1984](#) and [El Salvador: War, Peace, and Human Rights, 1980-1994](#). These two full collections, among others, are available through a subscription with the ProQuest research database.

Read the Documents

[Document 1](#)

October 11, 1979

Confidential, Cable, "The Archbishop and the Military", 2 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

In his homily, Archbishop Romero decries repression by the Salvadoran military and criticizes the army for abandoning its role as the nation's defender to become "guardian of the interests of the oligarchy."

[Document 2](#)

December 17, 1979

Unclassified, Cable, "Archbishop Strongly Urges Agrarian Reform", 3 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

Archbishop Oscar A. Romero speaks in support of agrarian reform, criticizing the oligarchy for arming those who seek to preserve the status quo and citing the Catholic Church's Medellin Council recognition of "right of oppressed to exert pressure, but not through armed violence."

[Document 3](#)

January 31, 1980

Secret, Memorandum, [Draft Letter Attached], "Letter from Dr. Brzezinski to the Pope", 5 pp.

United States. Department of State, Office of the Secretary

Presents draft of letter to Pope John Paul II outlining areas of concern in Central America and requesting assistance in persuading Archbishop Romero not to "abandon" Revolutionary Governing Junta in favor of more radical leftists in El Salvador.

[Document 4](#)

February 19, 1980

Unclassified, Cable, "Text of Archbishop's Letter to President Carter", 1 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

Archbishop Romero addresses President Jimmy Carter, imploring him not to provide military aid or any other form of assistance that could exacerbate state violence targeting Salvadoran citizens. "I am very worried by the news that the government of the United States is studying a form of abetting the arming of El Salvador," Romero writes. "The contribution of your government instead of promoting greater justice and peace in El Salvador will without doubt sharpen the injustice and repression against the organizations of the people which repeatedly have been struggling to gain respect for their fundamental human rights."

[Document 5](#)

March 1, 1980

Confidential, Cable, "Reply to Archbishop's Letter to President Carter", 1 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance responds to Archbishop Romero's letter regarding criticisms of U.S. security assistance to El Salvador, assuring him that President Carter shares his concerns about the human rights of Salvadoran citizens. "Any equipment and training which we might provide would be designed to overcome the most serious deficiencies of the Armed Forces, enhancing their professionalism so that they can fulfill their essential role of maintaining order with a minimum of lethal force."

[Document 6](#)

March 23, 1980

Confidential, Cable "Archbishop's Homily, March 23", 4 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

This cable reports on Archbishop Romero's homily, the day before he was assassinated. He speaks of the increasing tension with Salvadoran security forces and condemns rampant killings: "In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression!"

[Document 7](#)

March 25, 1980

Confidential, Cable, "Archbishop Romero Assassinated", 2 pp.

United States Defense Intelligence Agency. Office of the Defense Attaché, El Salvador

This document reports the assassination of Archbishop Romero and includes brief description of events.

[Document 8](#)

March 26, 1980

Confidential, Cable, "Archbishop's Assassination: Peaceful Procession", 2 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

This cable reports on the procession of thousands of people accompanying Archbishop Romero's coffin from the basilica to the National Cathedral.

[Document 9](#)

March 26, 1980,

Unclassified, Cable, "White House Statement on Archbishop Romero's Assassination", 2 pp.

United States. Department of State

The United States government issues statement condemning the assassination of Archbishop Romero.

[Document 10](#)

November 19, 1980,

Secret, Cable “Conversation with National Guard Officer”, 3 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

A source from the National Guard tells a U.S. embassy political officer that National Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacional—ARENA) founder Roberto D’Aubuisson organized a meeting a day or two before the assassination of Archbishop Romero in which “participants drew lots for the task of killing the archbishop.”

[Document 11](#)

February 25, 1981

Unclassified, Cable, “El Salvador: Army Officers Implicated in Romero Killing”, 1 pp.

United States. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Panama

Radio Venceremos clandestinely broadcasts an interview with “disillusioned army officer” Lt. Col. Ricardo Bruno Navarrete implicating Roberto D’Aubuisson, and members of the Salvadoran armed forces in the assassination of Archbishop Romero.

[Document 12](#)

December 21, 1981

Secret, Cable, “Assassination of Archbishop Romero”, 2 pp.

United States Embassy. El Salvador

This document is a follow-up to the November 19 embassy cable concerning a meeting to plan the assassination of Archbishop Romero. In it, a U.S. political officer reports additional information from the same National Guard source indicating that Romero’s killer was Walter “Musa” Antonio Alvarez. [The UN Truth Commission Report on El Salvador would later identify Alvarez as involved in conveying money supplied by Roberto D’Aubuisson as payment to Romero’s assassin, see pp. 130-1.]

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