

U.S. Plunges Central America Back To Era Of Coups And Death Squads

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March 24th of this year was the thirtieth anniversary of the assassination of Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the Roman Catholic archbishop of El Salvador.

His killing drew attention to the murderous rampages of death squads in that nation and throughout Central America as no other slaying had, although hundreds of thousands of civilians were slaughtered in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras before and during the 1980s by paramilitary formations usually led by graduates of the U.S.'s School of the Americas and covertly funded by the same nation's Central Intelligence Agency.

Graduates of the Pentagon's School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia (now the equally euphemistic Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) include the man responsible for ordering Romero's killing, the late Roberto D'Aubuisson; Efraim Rios Montt, head of the military junta in Guatemala in 1982-1983 which perpetrated some of the worst atrocities in the nation's bloodstained history; and Romeo Vasquez Velasquez, who was dismissed as chief of the Honduran military on June 25 of last year and led the coup against President Manuel Zelaya three days later.

After being appointed El Salvador's top ecclesiastic in 1977 Romero, hitherto considered a doctrinal if not a political conservative, spoke out forcefully against the abuses of the country's military and the deaths squads linked to it.

Two months before he was killed he wrote to then U.S. President Jimmy Carter imploring him to desist from arming and training the Salvadoran army, particularly plans to "train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications and intelligence," and criticizing the fact that three months before "a group of six Americans was in El Salvador...providing \$200,000 in gas masks and flak jackets and teaching how to use them against demonstrators." [1]

His appeal was ignored.

On the last full day of his life Archbishop Romero celebrated mass at the Cathedral of San Salvador and ended his homily (a sermon ordinarily based on the day's Gospel reading) with impassioned words that were an indictment, plea and command:

"I would like to make an appeal in a special way to the men of the army, to the police, to those in the barracks. Brothers, you are part of our own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. And before an order to kill that a man may give, the law of God must prevail that says: Thou shalt not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God.

“No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to recover your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, the dignity of the person, cannot remain silent before such abomination. We want the government to take seriously that reforms are worth nothing when they come about stained with so much blood. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuously, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!” [2]

The following evening he said mass at the small chapel of the Divine Providence cancer hospital. During the most solemn segment of the Catholic service, the liturgy of the Eucharist, the officiating priest consecrates and elevates in turn the communion wafer and wine.

As he lifts first the host, then the chalice, he utters an account of Jesus at the Last Supper:

“Before he was given up to death, a death he freely accepted, he took bread and gave you thanks. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and eat it; this is my body which will be given up for you.

“When the supper was ended, he took the cup. Again he gave you thanks and praise, gave the cup to his disciples, and said:

“Take this, all of you, and drink from it; this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.”

It was while Romero recited the last words that a shot from an M-16 assault rifle pierced his heart, leaving him to bleed to death in front of the altar, his blood mingling with the spilled communion wine.

Thirty years later no one has ever been convicted of, no one has ever been charged with, his murder.

The Salvadoran death squads and their opposite numbers elsewhere in Central America tried to hide their violent and grisly crimes under the cloak of religiosity, but to murder El Salvador’s top religious leader at the moment and under the circumstances they did was the work of men without moral or spiritual motives. It was the act of brutes.

Eight years ago a BBC report stated that the killing was, “according to declassified US documents and other witnesses, carried out by Salvadorean police intelligence agents on the orders of Major Roberto D’Aubuisson.” [2] The U.S. military-trained D’Aubuisson carried the details of his role to the grave with him in 1992.

After Romero’s death, after his – even in the most secular acceptance of the word – martyrdom, the mantle of the U.S. presidency was passed from Carter to Ronald Reagan, who appointed then recently retired Army general and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Alexander Haig as his secretary of state.

In his eighteen-month tenure at what is formally the top diplomatic post in the U.S., Haig was involved in military, covert and in some instances openly terrorist operations against the governments of Afghanistan, Angola, (post-Khmer Rouge) Cambodia, Ethiopia, Grenada, Mozambique, Poland and Suriname among other nations, but from the day he took the helm

at the State Department his main focus was on Central America.

It was during his watch there from 1981-1982 that the death squad campaigns in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and the Contra war against Nicaragua began in earnest.

During the early years of the first Reagan term U.S. military aid to El Salvador was increased from \$5.9 million 1980 to \$35.5 million in 1981 and to \$82 million in 1982. A fourteenfold increase in two years.

This March 24th a government of El Salvador for the first time officially apologized on behalf of the state for the murder of Romero. President Mauricio Funes, elected last June on the ticket of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front – the very group Washington armed and trained the Salvadoran military to exterminate thirty years ago – said on the anniversary that “This is something that should have been done a long time ago.” [4]

His comment was uttered during a ceremony unveiling a mural dedicated to Oscar Romero at San Salvador’s international airport.

A thousand Salvadorans marched from the chapel he was killed in to the cathedral in the capital chanting Romero’s own words: “They can kill me, but they will never kill justice.”

His words, his example have unfortunately assumed more urgency thirty years after his death than any would have wished.

Last June 28 D’Aubuisson’s fellow graduate of the School of the America’s, Hondura’s General Romeo Vasquez Velasquez, led a military coup d’etat against the standing government of President Manuel Zelaya and forced the head of state into exile in Costa Rica.

The very next day President Barack Obama welcomed Colombian head of state Alvaro Uribe, linked to Latin America’s longest death squad horrors, to the White House, and the visit was followed by news that the Pentagon was acquiring the use of seven new military bases in the South American country. Colombia borders Venezuela and Ecuador, both Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) members along with Honduras before the coup.

To use an apt Cold War term, the coup was the opening salvo in the “rollback” against the most serious attempt in Latin America’s history to assert itself against centuries of U.S. domination.

On January 13th of this year the post-coup regime of non-popularly elected Roberto Micheletti withdrew Honduras from ALBA, the only time a member has left the alliance.

“Honduras’s entrance into the bloc in 2008 under the leadership of President Manuel Zelaya is considered to be one of the motivations for the right wing military coup that kidnapped and expelled Zelaya last June.” [5]

Washington’s desperation has increased dramatically since the meeting of the Rio Group in Mexico last month, which “agreed to form a Latin American alternative to the Organization of American States that excludes the United States and Canada.” [6]

Cutting across major ideological lines, 24 Latin American and 15 Caribbean nations (with some overlapping) met at what was declared a Unity Summit, and in the words of the host country's President Felipe Calderon, "We have decided to create an organization that includes all the organizations of Latin America and the Caribbean. We have decided to base an organization on shared values including sovereignty and the non-use of force, including threats of force, international cooperation, ever closer integration of Latin America and the Caribbean and permanent political dialogue." [7]

The new and expanded organization proposed, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), will include all nations in the Western Hemisphere except for the U.S. and Canada, will supplant and render moribund the U.S.-dominated Organization of American States (OAS), and will "resolve a host of problems, including the launching of interaction with Mercosur, the Andean Community of Nations, the Union of South American Nations, the Organization of Ibero-American States and ALBA - the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas." [8]

A Russian analyst suggested that "There is little, if any, doubt that the future Community will be at loggerheads with the OAS, since Washington is used to bossing Latin America around and imposing on the region what strategically important decisions suit it best."

He also warned that "The United States is certainly not about to trust some newly-formed organization with control of the processes under way in the countries south of the Rio Grande.

"The Empire is getting ready to 'act energetically' to foil a constituent summit of the future Community of Latin American and Caribbean States." [9]

Early in March U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Costa Rica to embrace her nation's new surrogate in Honduras, Porfirio Lobo, and to chastise Latin America for defying Washington's will. Lobo, for example, was the only Latin American head of state (though one only recognized by the U.S. and a few allies) not invited to the Unity Summit in Mexico on February 22-23. His exclusion was a frank commentary on the June 2008 coup by every government in the Western Hemisphere except his own and those of the U.S. and Canada.

"The United States helped to broker November elections that brought Honduran President Porfirio Lobo to power, but his government has been shunned by several countries in the region because the polls were organized by the de facto government that overthrew Zelaya."

Clinton was "winding up a six-nation Latin American tour during which she was challenged by leaders who repeated charges that the United States did not take a hard enough line against the coup, which echoed a long history of military takeovers in the region." [10]

With a command of diplomatese that renders her a worthy successor of the late Alexander Haig, Clinton stated it was time to "move forward," as "We think that Honduras has taken important and necessary steps that deserve the recognition and normalization of relations."

Unintentionally emphasizing why there is a need for ALBA and CELAC, she added, "Other countries in the region say that they want to wait a while. I don't know what they're waiting for...."

In Costa Rica she met with Lobo and “said she had notified Congress that the United States would restart the flow of more than USD 30 million in non-humanitarian aid to Honduras that was cut off after the June 28 coup that ousted Zelaya.”

While offering lip service to the relative undesirability of military coups in the U.S.’s backyard, she nevertheless asserted “But we think its time to move forward and ensure that such disruptions of democracy do not and cannot happen in the future.” [11] Scant comfort to other ALBA member states awaiting Washington’s next maneuver.

To refute what Clinton characterized as the Lobo regime’s “commitments to re-establish constitutional order in the country,” on March 24 Honduran professor Jose Manuel Flores, an active opponent of the newly-installed government of Porfirio Lobo, was murdered at the Instituto San Jose del Pedregal where he taught, “shot in the back when hooded individuals entered the school through the roof....” [12]

Hooded assassins murdering dissenting academics conjures up nightmares from the darkest period of death squad atrocities in the 1980s.

According to human rights and resistance groups in Honduras, since last year’s coup there have been 130 murders and over 3,000 arrests of opponents of the junta. [13]

On March 25 the National Popular Resistance Front announced plans for a mass rally in the capital that “will coincide with a general strike and a national mourning campaign convened by teachers’ organizations after Professor Jose Manuel Flores was killed by hooded men two days ago,” blaming “the Honduran oligarchy and Porfirio Lobo’s de facto regime” [14] for the latest killing of those Clinton demands “move forward” by submitting to Washington’s diktat.

In late February over 10,000 supporters of deposed President Manuel Zelaya left the main university in the capital of Tegucigalpa, but “were blocked by soldiers from nearing the presidential palace and diverted to the parliament in the city center....” Troops ordered from their barracks by a regime that “has taken important and necessary steps that deserve the recognition and normalization of relations,” as Hillary Clinton would phrase it a week later.

“Six teachers’ unions backed the protests and called for classes to be suspended nationwide.” [15]

Military coups d’etat and masked hit squads are back in Central America with Washington’s blessing and the threats are not limited to Honduras, which is intended as both object lesson and prototype by the White House and the State Department.

In February Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez warned “that the right-wing in Latin America was being organized to attack the Bolivian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA) and the Union of South American Nations (Unasur),” adding however that “the U.S. government would not be able to stop the development of ALBA in Central America despite the coup in Honduras.”

“The U.S. Empire” will employ reactionary and covert forces to subordinate the next government of Brazil (a general election will be held this October), “which also will be terrible for the unity of South America.” [16]

In addition, it was reported on March 25 that Nicaragua’s ambassador to the Organization of

American States, Denis Moncada, accused the U.S. ambassador to his nation, Robert Callahan, of “meddling in Nicaraguan internal affairs.” Callahan, Moncada continued, “has publicly supported attempts by Nicaraguan opposition parties, rating as fraudulent the 2008 municipal elections, when the Sandinista National Liberation Front won the majority of the country’s mayoralities.” [17]

The Nicaraguan press recently published an article by Uruguayan journalist Jorge Capelan titled “The United States and its Web of NGOs in Nicaragua,” which detailed that “the destabilizing strategy the United States has pursued in Venezuela through non-governmental organizations and ‘contractor’ firms is also being applied in Nicaragua against the Sandinista government.”

The report documented that since 1994 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) created “so-called Offices of Transition Initiatives (OTI) in several countries worldwide.

“They were originally created to support transition to capitalism in Eastern European countries, but they later spread to other states where it was necessary to address situations in which US interests were threatened.”

An OTI was launched in Venezuela in July of 2002, two months after the 47-hour coup there, and in late 2005 in Bolivia in an attempt to prevent Evo Morales’ victory in the December 18 presidential election.

Although there “is no OTI in Nicaragua,” USAID is concocting “a similar strategy against the Sandinista government through the CampTransparencia program run by the paramilitary DynCorp firm.

“CampTransparencia has organized forums and other similar activities in Nicaragua. Its main cadres have experience in ‘regime change’ operations.” [18]

The current preferred method of effecting the subversion and overthrow of governments considered to present obstacles to U.S. geopolitical designs is the “color revolution” model first employed in Yugoslavia in 2000 and replicated in the former Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. The first attempt to export a variation of the technique to Latin America was in Bolivia two years ago.

Last May Hillary Clinton railed against “growing Iranian, Chinese and Russian influence in the Western Hemisphere,” which has ostensibly encouraged “leftist leaders like Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, Bolivia’s Evo Morales and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega to promote anti-U.S. sentiment and rely on aid from China, Iran and Russia.” [19] She particularly singled out Nicaragua, stating “We are looking to figure out how to deal with [President Daniel] Ortega” as “the Iranians are building a huge embassy in Managua. You can only imagine what it’s for.” [19]

In the 1980s the Reagan administration frequently invoked alleged Russian and Iranian influence in Nicaragua to justify its support for the Contra war against the nation.

To Central America’s immediate north, on March 22 Defense Secretary Robert Gates and chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen accompanied Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Mexico, and upon returning top U.S. military commander Mullen spoke of Mexico’s “own version of counterinsurgency,” and said, “We’re working with them

to generate as much capability as they can in that fight.” [19] In speaking as he did, Mullen reiterated his statements in January of 2009 that the U.S. military was prepared to employ the same counterinsurgency tactics used in Afghanistan and Iraq for Mexico and that the infamous Plan Colombia could be the “overarching” model for the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Earlier this month the joint commander of United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), General Victor Renuart, spoke before the Senate Armed Services Committee and said of his dual commands that their missions range “from supporting law enforcement on the U.S.-Mexico border to monitoring Russian military planes and ships off U.S. borders,” and that “Northcom has shared military lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan to combat violence and illegal activity on the Southwest border.” [20]

The White House and the Pentagon are not prepared to allow the rest of the nations in the Americas to determine their own destiny without interference. Without intervention.

The 2002 coup in Venezuela and the 2009 coup in Honduras are not the last that Washington will support given the opportunity. Latin American vigilance and unity are required more than ever before.

Notes

- 1) <http://liturgyhouse.blogspot.com/2008/03/archbishop-oscar-romeros-letter-to.html>
- 2) <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj8005&article=800512>
- 3) BBC News, March 24, 2002
- 4) Los Angeles Times, March 24, 2010
- 5) Venezuelanalysis.com, January 15, 2010
- 6) Americas Society/Council of the Americas, February 23, 2010
- 7) Cancun Mexico News, February 23, 2010
- 8) Nil Nikandrov, OAS without US: An Alternative
Strategic Culture Foundation, March 21, 2010
- 9) Ibid
- 10) Reuters, March 5, 2010
- 11) Ibid
- 12) Prensa Latina, March 24, 2010
- 13) Ibid
- 14) Prensa Latina, March 25, 2010
- 15) Agence France-Presse, February 26, 2010
- 16) Xinhua News Agency, February 8, 2010
- 17) Prensa Latina, March 25, 2010
- 18) Prensa Latina, March 22, 2010
- 19) Associated Press, May 1, 2009
- 20) United States Department of Defense
American Forces Press Service
March 24, 2010
- 21) United States Department of Defense
American Forces Press Service
March 11, 2010

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