The Power of Narrative in US Foreign Policy: Competing Perspectives on the Salvadoran Civil War and the Role of the United States from 1979-1985

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Abstract

Despite the significant historiography on US involvement in the Civil War in El Salvador in the 1980s, few scholars have examined the narratives that informed that involvement. Drawing on the methodology of both diplomatic and cultural history, this thesis examines the role the US played in the first part of the Civil War in El Salvador (1979-1985) from the perspective of three different narratives: the conservative, the liberal, and the radical. This approach elucidates important shared and contrasting assumptions and myths about both the real and imagined role of the US in Central America. Notwithstanding the different schools of thought within both the conservative and liberal narratives, broadly speaking, in the conservative narrative, El Salvador was the victim of Soviet intrusion and subversion; the US therefore had no choice but to confront the dangerous spread of communism and protect its traditional allies in the region. In the liberal narrative, the real problem in El Salvador was the anachronistic social order and harsh military rule; only by supporting forces of moderation and avoiding further militarization could the US hope to secure its interests. What both narratives shared, however, were certain assumptions and myths about US power: the inherent benevolence of the US and its institutions; a conventional understanding of the Cold War; and the unquestioned right of the US to intervene in El Salvador. In contrast, the radical narrative, articulated by political dissident Noam Chomsky, rejected any notion of the benevolent intent of the US government. Instead, Chomsky's narrative depicted US policy as ruthless, violent, and as the primary cause of misery in El Salvador; any commitment to human rights and decency was empty rhetoric that obscured the real intentions of US policy: to consolidate and expand its power in El Salvador as part of its global world order, no matter the cost.

Résumé

Malgré l'importante historiographie de l'implication des États-Unis dans la guerre civile au Salvador dans les années 1980, peu de chercheurs ont examiné les points de vue qui ont éclairé cette implication. S'appuyant sur la méthodologie de l'histoire diplomatique et culturelle, cette thèse examine le rôle joué par les États-Unis dans la première partie de la guerre civile au Salvador (1979-1985) de trois points de vue différents : le conservateur, le libéral et le radical. Cette approche élucide d'importantes hypothèses et mythes, partagés et distincts, sur le rôle réel et imaginé des États-Unis en Amérique Centrale. Malgré les différentes écoles de pensée dans les propos conservateurs et libéraux, de façon générale, du point de vue conservateur, le Salvador a été victime de l'intrusion et subversion soviétique; les États-Unis n'avaient donc pas d'autre choix que d'affronter la dangereuse propagation du communisme et de protéger leurs alliés traditionnels dans cette région. Dans le discours libéral, le vrai problème au Salvador était l'ordre social anachronique et le régime militaire sévère ; ce n'est qu'en soutenant les forces de modération et en évitant une militarisation accrue que les États-Unis pouvaient espérer défendre leurs intérêts. Ce que les deux points de vue ont partagé, cependant, ce sont certaines hypothèses et certains mythes sur la puissance américaine : la bienveillance inhérente des États-Unis et de leurs institutions, une compréhension conventionnelle de la guerre froide et le droit incontesté des États-Unis d'intervenir au Salvador. En revanche, le point de vue radical, articulé par le dissident politique Noam Chomsky, rejetait toute notion d’intention bienveillante du gouvernement américain. Au lieu de cela, le point de vue de Chomsky décrivait la politique américaine comme impitoyable, violente et comme cause première de la misère au Salvador ; tout engagement en faveur des droits de l'homme et de la décence représentait une rhétorique vide qui masquait les intentions réelles de la politique américaine: consolider et étendre son pouvoir au Salvador dans le contexte de son ordre mondial, coûte que coûte.

Introduction

Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election marked a watershed moment in the history of the United States with far-reaching consequences for both the domestic and the foreign policies pursued by the US government. But Reagan's victory heralded more than just a change in US policy; it also represented the rise of a powerful conservative narrative about the United States and its mission in the world, a narrative intended both to unite a US public that had become sceptical about the righteousness of foreign interventionism and to reassert US dominance in a world, US officials feared, that was becoming increasingly reluctant to follow the dictates of Washington and increasingly open to the expansion of the Soviet Union. One of the places in which this powerful narrative played out most dramatically was in the small Central American country of El Salvador. It was there that the US government intervened in a Civil War that tore the country apart between 1979-1992, and claimed the lives of at least 75.000 people.[1] Siding with the highly repressive government and army that were pitted against a broad oppositional movement including a Marxist guerilla insurgency, the Reagan administration committed itself to the victory of the government against what it perceived to be communist subversion directed by Moscow and Havana. Indeed, the US provided roughly 4 billion dollars in military and economic aid to this small country in the 1980s.[2]

Although the scale of US intervention in Central America during the crisis in the 1980s was arguably unprecedented (except, perhaps, in the first few decades of the 20th century), US influence was nothing new. As the most powerful nation in the region since at least the late 19th century, the United States has been inextricably tied to the history of Central America. Summing

[1] "El Salvador – Accountability and Human Rights: The Report of the United Nation Commission on the Truth for El Salvador," *United Nations*, August 1993.
[2] William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The Untied States in Central America, 1977-1992*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5.

up almost two centuries of this relationship, revisionist historian Walter LeFeber argues that the Untied States was a "status quo power" as it largely "wanted stability, benefited from the on-going system, and was therefore content to work with the military-oligarchy complex that ruled most of Central America from the 1820s to the 1980s."[3] While this assessment is about the region as a whole, El Salvador had not been as directly affected by the US until the late 1970s as the neighboring countries in Central America had been. This was partly because El Salvador was not considered particularly important for US officials, but also because the military-oligarchy complex in El Salvador was especially adept at preserving the power structure that the US benefitted from.[4] This is exemplified by the infamous event "La Matanza" – the slaughter – where a peasant uprising in 1932 was met with genocidal and systematically coordinated violence in which between 10.000-30.000 people were murdered by the Salvadoran Armed Forces and armed right-wing groups in just a few months. La Matanza showed the people of El Salvador the lengths to which the army would go to eliminate any leftist challenge to the status quo, and it reflected the army and oligarchy's profound fear and hatred of the left. It also sent a message to Washington: El Salvador's elites had things under control. [5]

Already in the early 1960s, fearing the spread of the Cuban Revolution, the US embarked on a mission to develop and reform the region and launched the Alliance for Progress that aimed to undercut the appeal of communism by providing economic aid and support, and at the same time to strengthen anti-communist forces. Despite the Alliance's promises of economic reforms

[3] Walter Lefeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, (New York: Norton, 1993), 13
[4] In contrast to neighbouring Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, and particularly, Panama, US economic and strategic interests were marginal, and El Salvador contained few significant resources to exploit or US corporate investments to safeguard. For the lack of interests in El Salvador, see for instance the interview with US ambassador to El Salvador from 1971-1973: Interview, Henry E. Catto, Jr., "El Salvador," 1988, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, http://www.adst.org/Readers/El%20Salvador.pdf.
[5] For La Matanza, see Thomas P. Anderson. *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1971); see also Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

and democratization, the power of the military-oligarchy complex was in fact strengthened by these programs, since the economic development was geared towards agribusiness which primarily benefitted the elites. In addition, the modernization and centralization of El Salvador's armed forces meant increased capabilities in repressing dissent.[6] Thus, in spite of many economic and political changes in the years between La Mantaza and the outbreak of the Civil War, there were no fundamental changes either to the socio-economic structures that impoverished most Salvadorans, or the repressive atmosphere that made real political reform impossible.[7]

By the 1970s, the stage was being set for the Civil War that would erupt in 1979. After the "Soccer War" in 1969 between Honduras and El Salvador, many former migrants returned from Honduras, increasing already strained demographic pressure, and in the aftermath of the economic depression in the early 1970s, demands for political and economic reforms were spreading throughout El Salvador.[8] In the wake of the "stolen elections" in 1972 and 1977, it became increasingly clear to the opposition, ranging from reform-minded centrists, unionists, student

[6] For the Alliance for Progress, see Jeffrey F. Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America*, (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*: *Modernization, Development, and US Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present,* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 124-134.

[7] Notably, in the period during the Second World War and immediately following, some reforms were carried out which opened up political space giving rise to a student movement and the emergence of some modern political parties, such as the Christian Democratic Party. See Hector Perez-Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 145-149. For an examination of the relationship between these economic and political developments, see for instance Wim Pelupessy, *The Limits of Economic Reform in El Salvador*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). For an examination of the political role of the Catholic Church in El Salvador, see Lisa Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); and for an overview of "liberation theology" – the fusion of progressive politics with Catholicism – see David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology*, (Boston: Brill Academic, 2002).

[8] For the Soccer War, see Thomas P. Anderson, *The War of the Dispossessed: Honduras and El Salvador, 1969*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980); for a regional approach to these developments, see Charles Brockett, *Land, Power, and Poverty: Agrarian Transformation and Political Conflict in Central America*, 2d ed., (Winchester, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1998) and Carlos Vilas, *Between Earthquakes and Volcanoes: Market, State, and the Revolutions in Central America*, (New York: Monthly Review, 1995).

organizers, and religious groups, that it was highly unlikely that changing the status quo could be carried out peacefully through reform.[9]

Fuelled by fears that El Salvador was following the footsteps of Nicaragua after the fall of Somoza and the Sandinista victory in 1979, reform-minded officers overthrew the conservative Romero government (1977-1979). The junta that took power was immediately recognised by the Carter administration in the hope that it could prevent "another Nicaragua." However, after only six weeks most civilians resigned from the junta as it soon became evident that the real power still lay with the military-oligarchy complex with violent repression and torture escalating to new levels at the end of 1979 and in 1980 under the guise of land reforms. Indeed, anyone suspected of leftist sympathies – union leaders, priests, students, political leaders – were targeted, and in 1980 alone, over 10.000 people were murdered, often after they had been brutally tortured.[10]

As part of its proclaimed new approach to foreign policy, the Carter administration had initially suspended all military assistance to El Salvador because of the Romero government's severe political repression and human rights abuses. This approach was grounded in the liberal narrative about the role of the US in the world that had emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, as part of and in response to the public opposition to the Vietnam War. In this narrative, the US had behaved erroneously in the past, often with grave consequences (Vietnam), and due to ignorance about local conditions and unsubstantiated fears about Soviet subversion, the US had misguidedly supported anachronistic and repressive regimes across the globe. Now, however, the US had rediscovered its true roots and was able to fulfil its real destiny: to facilitate the march of history,

[9] Memorandum, American Embassy, "Former Christian Democratic Party (PDC) Candidate Analyzes National Political Scene," June 15, 1979, Digital National Security Archive, http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/home.do. These groups came together to form the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) which would latter ally with the umbrella guerilla group, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, (FMLN), named after the peasant leader, Farabundo Marti, who was killed during La Matanza. The FDR-FMLN would be the primary opposition to the government during the Civil War. See Perez-Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America*, 145.

[10] Perez-Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America*, 147.

to lead the world towards freedom and democracy, and to establish a new world order founded on justice and equality between nations. This narrative emphasized human rights over naked self-interests, diplomacy and multilateralism over militarism and unilateralism, and an end to the obsession with the USSR; for countries such as El Salvador, it also signalled an end to the typical unequivocal US support of authoritarian and repressive regimes in the name of anti-communism and stability.[11]

However, after a series of crises for the US (including the fall of the Shah in Iran, Somoza in Nicaragua, and the USSR invasion of Afghanistan), the Carter administration was increasingly under fire from conservatives who were railing against what they perceived to be liberal incompetence and hesitancy to stand against the enemies of the US. Despite continued rhetorical support of the human rights approach in foreign policy and a resistance towards falling back into old patterns of interventionism, the Carter administration was anxious that El Salvador did not suffer the fate of neighboring Nicaragua, and it was eager to resume military and economic aid to counter the power of the guerillas. Accordingly, familiar tropes of the communist menace and the Soviet/Cuban threat began to creep into and then become more prominent in Carter's narrative. Even when it was clear that continued aid would only bolster the repressive forces, the Carter administration had chosen anti-communism over human rights, and it resumed military and economic assistance to El Salvador after the coup in 1979.[12]

For conservatives, despite the reversal of Carter's policies in 1979 towards El Salvador, the new approach to foreign policy was understood as part of a series of domestic and international

[11] See for instance Jimmy Carter, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame," May 22, 1977. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7552. See also John A. Soares , "Strategy, Ideology, and Human Rights: Jimmy Carter Confronts the Left in Central America," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Fall 2006: 57–9.
[12] See for instance Laurence Whitehead, "Explaining Washington's Central America Policies" *Journal of Latin America Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2. (Nov.,1983), 321-361. See also Soares, "Strategy, Ideology, and Human Rights: Jimmy Carter Confronts the Left in Central America."

crises in the 1960s and 1970s with detrimental consequences to the security and well-being of the United States and, in fact, the rest of the world.[13] During this period, conservative activists became increasingly vocal, and with the help of business and corporate funding, a plethora of right-wing think tanks and journals dedicated to spreading the new conservative message emerged.[14] What united this New Right was a rejection of what it saw as the liberal narrative of defeatism and limitation. It sought to reverse these developments, to reignite the flames of nationalism and pride in US power, and to reassert US moral superiority and military dominance. And, as Greg Grandin argues, "it was Central America, and Latin America more broadly, where an insurgent New Right first coalesced, as conservative activists used the region to respond to the crisis of the 1970s, a crisis provoked not only by America's defeat in Vietnam but by a deep economic recession and a culture of skeptical antimilitarism and political dissent that spread in the war's wake."[15] At the center of this, El Salvador became one of the most important countries for the New Right in the

[13] The most well known amongst these were the Watergate Affair and the end of/loss in the Vietnam War, as well as the economic crises in the US in the 1970s. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the tumultuous 1960s and 70s, significant parts of the US public had become cynical about the political establishment and many citizens had turned against US foreign interventionism, a sentiment rooted in the unpopularity of the Vietnam War that therefore became known as the "Vietnam syndrome." (Howard Zinn rightly points out the mentality behind such a description (or diagnosis): "[In the minds of US officials,] opposition to military intervention abroad was a "sickness", to be cured." Howard Zinn, *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), 393). Some liberal elites responded similarly with a newfound wariness about US power projection and interventionism, reflected in the legislation passed in the 1970s by Congress to curb the power of the "imperial presidency" and to provide Congress with oversight over the various workings of the foreign policy establishment. See LeoGrande, *Out Own Backyard*, 8; for details about what can be seen as a "congressional form of anti-imperialism," see Ian Tyrrell and Jay Sexton's *Empire's Twin: U.S. Anti-Imperialism from the Founding Fathers to the Age of Terrorism*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 225.

Moreover, although this paper focuses on the conservative narrative as it pertained to the role of the US in El Salvador (and, more broadly, its foreign policy in Central America), it is important to note that the conservative narrative that was emerging in the 1970s and 80s was equally about the domestic situation in the US: a rejection of the changes that had started to take place as a result of the social movements and progressive politics of the 1960s and 1970s. For an instructive account of the right turn in US politics with an economic focus, see chapter seven in Richard B. DuBoff, *Accumulation and Power: Economic History of the United States*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); see also Douglas Dowd. *Capitalism and its Economics: A Critical History*, (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2004), 167-195.

[14] See for instance Lee Edwards, *The Power of Ideas: The Heritage Foundation at 25 Years*, (Illinois: James Books, 1997), and Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945*, (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

[15] Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, (New York: Owl Books, 2007), 16.

early 1980s as the battleground not only between the government and the opposition, but between competing narratives about how to understand this conflict and the US' role in it.

This thesis is a critical examination of three such (competing) narratives: the conservative, the liberal, and a radical narrative articulated by political dissident, Noam Chomsky.

It has four main arguments:

1. The conservative, liberal, and radical narrative described the crisis in El Salvador in significantly different ways, and all three narratives relied on certain underlying assumptions about the nature of the United States and its role in the world, as well as the historical relationship between the US and El Salvador.
2. At the same time, the conservative and liberal narratives shared certain of these interrelated underlying assumptions and myths. Chief amongst these were (1) a belief in the fundamental and inherent goodness of the United States, and in the benevolent and universal self-interests of the US, a belief that posited that what was good for the US was good for the world, and what was good for the world was good for the US; (2) a belief in the superiority of US democracy, its institutions, and the US economic system (US-style capitalism); (3) a belief in the conventional understanding of the Cold War: that US policy since the late 1940s had been to contain an expansionist and aggressive USSR for the benefit of "the Free World"; and finally, (4) a belief in the "naturalness" of US influence in Central America and the unquestioned right of the United States to intervene in the affairs in El Salvador.
3. In contrast, Chomsky's radical narrative fundamentally challenged both the conservative and liberal narratives as well as their common underlying assumptions and myths. As such, this narrative constituted a complete rejection of conventional narratives about the US and

its role in the world, arguing that the US institutions were primarily concerned with preserving and expanding the power of the political and economic elites within the US, for instance through proxies in US dependencies such as El Salvador.

4. Finally, this thesis contends that the liberal and radical narratives were more "truthful," better at incorporating actual facts and historical developments that contributed to the crisis in El Salvador into their narratives, and overall less dogmatic and ideologically informed than the conservative narrative. In contrast, the conservative narrative relied more on conventional myths and assumptions about the Cold War and was less based on facts than on fiction compared to the two other narratives. Because the Reagan administration largely depended on the conservative narrative to understand events in El Salvador, and to produce and legitimize its policies, this narrative was partly responsible for the path chosen by the US government and, therefore, for much of the death and destruction suffered by the people of El Salvador in the 1980s.

Accordingly, the bulk of this thesis is an analysis of these three different narratives about the first part of the civil war in El Salvador (1979-1985).[16] Each section analysing a narrative

[16] Notably, although the Civil War lasted from 1979 until 1992, the focus is on the period from 1979-1985. This is for two interrelated reasons. The first reason is about the importance of El Salvador in the minds of US officials. Indeed, it was arguably during the first part of the Salvadoran Civil War that the small country was at the top of the foreign policy agenda in the US. After 1985, the US focus in Central America had started to shift towards Nicaragua and the Contras, and, especially while the Iran-Contra scandal unfolded, El Salvador did not play as prominent a role in the US as it had done in the early part of the 1980s. (See LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 5.) The second reason is that in 1985, Noam Chomsky published his book *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace*, (Boston: South End Press, 1985) that provides the material for the radical narrative analyzed in this thesis. Even though there were many variations of radical narratives that challenged both the liberal and conservative narratives about the US and El Salvador and questioned the fundamental assumptions of conventional and mainstream narratives in the early 1980s, I have chosen to focus on Noam Chomsky's critique. This is partly because Chomsky has been and continues to be arguably the most influential and prolific critic of the US political system and its foreign policy, and because in the mid 1980s, he produced the most comprehensive and thoroughly researched critique of the US past and contemporary policies in Central America. For other narratives, see for instance, "El Salvador and Imperialism" *Workers' Tribune*, May 1981; accessed from https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/wt-may-81.pdf; James F. Petras and Morris H. Morley, "Supporting Repression: US Policy and the Demise of Human Rights in El Salvador, 1979-80." *The Socialist Register*, 1981 (London); George Black, "Central America: Crisis in the Backyard," *New Left Review* (London), No. 135 (Sept-Oct. 1982).

consists of three parts. The first is about how the crisis in El Salvador was understood within the narrative, including why it mattered to the United States. In other words, it looks at how the narrative framed what was actually happening in El Salvador in the late 1970s and early 1980s that warranted the increased attention of the US and, thereby, reveals what US interests were at stake in El Salvador. The second part examines how each narrative explained the causes of the crisis in El Salvador, and the third part looks at what each narrative argued that the US should do in response to developments in El Salvador. Furthermore, each section seeks to both elucidate and to compare and contrast the assumptions and myths about the US and El Salvador that underlay, rationalised, and legitimized each of the three narratives.

The main methodology employed in this thesis is a textual analysis of a variety of primary sources that constitute parts of each of the three narratives. For both the liberal and the conservative narratives, these include a number of congressional hearings about El Salvador in which US officials, intellectuals, and journalists articulated a variety of perspectives on the crisis. The analytical framework of this thesis draws from the efforts of scholars to bridge the gaps between diplomatic and cultural history, and it is premised on Emily Rosenberg's assertion that "doing international history should begin with the recognition of the representational nature of history itself and of the ongoing constructedness of the world and its diverse subjects."[17]

Moreover, it is important to note that this division into three narratives is as much analytical as it is historical, and there were not neatly categorized narratives, each representing one clear-cut ideological perspective about El Salvador and the US at this point in time, besides Chomsky's radical narrative (for obvious reasons); instead, there were a multitude of different ideological perspectives and political and historical narratives concerning El Salvador and the US' role. However, at the same time, there were certainly ideological "camps" about El Salvador amongst US officials and intellectuals, each containing different voices and perspectives with enough similarities that, seen together, constituted a narrative. These have been grouped together as the conservative and the liberal narratives. As we will see, there were certain points of divergence within these narratives.

[17] Emily S. Rosenberg, "Presidential Address – Revisiting Dollar Diplomacy: Narratives of Money and Manliness," SHAFR Presidential Address delivered at Seattle, 10 January 1998, *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 176; see also See Susan Smulyan "The Cultural Turn in U.S. Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 33, Issue 3, 1 (June 2009), 539–542

While this thesis draws from the rich and extensive literature about US foreign policy (USFP) in El Salvador and Central America broadly, its focus is not so much on the actual events and developments in El Salvador (and the region), or in Washington, as on both the competing narratives in which these policies were articulated and understood, and on the underlying assumptions and myths that legitimized and justified US policy.[18] One of the reasons for this approach is that narratives have not been a typical analytical subject for scholars in diplomatic history, particularly in the study of USFP in El Salvador.[19] Furthermore, as Ronald Krebs argues, "it is through narrative that human beings order disordered experience and impart meaning to themselves and their world."[20] Linking this idea to Rosenberg's assertion, an emphasis on the "constructedness of the world" does not mean that, for example, sending weapons to the

[18] Most historiography has tended to be critical of US policy, has argued for indigenous sources for the revolutionary situation, and has seen the Reagan administration as responsible for perpetuating and intensifying the widespread misery of El Salvador by supporting a corrupt and violent regime. One of the classic revisionist histories of US-Central American relations is Walter LeFeber's *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993). LeFeber argues that not only were the revolutions occurring in the late 1970s and 1980s an inevitable product of the US-supported social, economic, and political systems in place there, but they were in fact desirable and necessary for Central American progress. For recent examples of revisionist literature on US-Latin American relations, see Steven Rabe's *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Alan McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*, (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books Inc., 2006); and Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*. While much of this work relies primarily on US sources and argues for US primacy in the Central American Crisis, another strand of scholarship paints a different picture and argued for more responsibility on the part of Central Americans, incorporating a broad array of Central American sources into their analysis. See for instance, Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War's Last Battlefield: Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011) both of which are more sympathetic to US policy and more critical of Soviet and Cuban interventionism than the standard revisionist accounts. For a more broad account of this historiography, see Thomas M. Leonard, "Central America and the United States: Overlooked Foreign Policy Objectives," *The Americas*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (June, 1993), 1-30. For a general and more updated view on USFP in Latin America during the Cold War, see the book review by Stephen G. Rabe, "Human Rights, Latin America, and the Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (January, 2012), 231-236. For a more detailed accounts of the roots of the Salvadoran civil war, see Cynthia Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1982) and James Dunkerley, *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador* (London: Junction Books, 1982).

[19] One notably exception is Eldon Kensworthy's *America/Americas: Myth in the Making of U.S. Policy Towards Latin America,* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1995) that looks at the myths underlying much USFP towards Latin America. Of particular interests is his chapter about Reagan and Nicaragua.

[20] Ronald R. Krebs, *Narratives and the Making of US National Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2. Krebs' work is one way of studying USFP and national security from the perspective of narratives using political science methodology. While Krebs largely relies on quantitative data, this thesis uses more qualitative data as it relies on close textual analysis of a smaller number of sources.

government of El Salvador was merely a "construct," but rather to point to how narratives and myths were embedded in such an action. There must have been a narrative in which this decision was seen as a good idea, as necessary, as important, a narrative that legitimized it not only to the public, but to the policy makers themselves. In this way, narratives arguably determine the very possibilities that policy makers have, the range of actions that are available, or even thinkable to pursue. Thus, to examine the narratives through which USFP towards El Salvador was built, we gain insight into the possibilities that policy makers perceived were possible. Furthermore, by unearthing the assumptions and myths underlying such narratives and in exposing them for what they are – assumptions and myths (as opposed to natural and eternal truths) – it becomes possible to question and transcend them.[21]

Importantly, this thesis is not a conclusive history of the role of the US during the first six years in El Salvador's civil war, nor is it a conclusive examination of the three narratives analysed. The aim is more modest: to call attention to the importance and power of narrative, the relationship between "facts" and narratives in the realm of international relations and its history, and to point to the differences and similarities between the different narratives and their underlying assumptions about El Salvador and the US, particularly the similar underlying assumptions in the conservative and liberal narratives, and how the radical narrative challenged these.

1: The Conservative Narrative

As part of the larger conservative movement emerging in the 1970s, the conservative narrative about the crisis in El Salvador and the US' role was articulated by neo-conservative and

[21] The theoretical framework of this thesis and the emphasis on the importance of narrative in understanding human history is also greatly indebted to the work of Yuval Noah Harari and his popular history of humankind, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2014).

other right-wing intellectuals and US officials who wished to reassert US moral superiority onto the world stage and to cure the US public of the ills of the Vietnam Syndrome. In this narrative, it was the perceived rise of Soviet power in Central America and the failure of the Carter administration's approach to USFP that had created the crisis in El Salvador. Indeed, for conservatives, Carter's approach had undermined the power of the US and the ability of important US allies – such as Nicaragua and El Salvador – to be able to counter the growing threat of the Soviet Union and its proxies. Lack of knowledge about the differences between authoritarian (US-friendly) regimes and totalitarian (communist) regimes, and not truly understanding that political violence was an integral part of Salvadoran (and, more broadly, Latin) culture as well as a necessary method to be used by any government facing a communist insurgency, had meant that the Carter liberals had supported the enemies of the United States and weakened its friends. The result was the Salvadoran crisis, and its importance could not be stressed enough, because the fall of El Salvador could very well be the first domino to fall to the communists, the conservative narrative warned, the last being the United States itself

If the real crisis in El Salvador was not understood and responded to properly, the consequences for not only the people of El Salvador but also for the US would indeed be dire. While there was some disagreement about certain policy prescriptions amongst conservatives, primarily concerning non-military economic aid and the role of the US in political and economic reforms in El Salvador, all conservatives agreed that the main goal of the US should be to prevent a communist victory. Because most conservatives did not wish to involve US troops directly, as the memory of the Vietnam War had made such an approach very unpopular for the US public, the only way to defeat this insurgency was to make sure that it did not topple the legitimate

Salvadoran government; so, instead, it was military aid, support, and training that would be the backbone of US policy.

What was the crisis in El Salvador and why did it matter to the US?

In the conservative narrative, the crisis in El Salvador was understood in fairly simple terms: the country was in danger of being taken over by communist guerillas orchestrated by the Soviet Union and controlled through its Cuban and Nicaraguan proxies. Whereas other issues concerning El Salvador were problematized at different times by different conservatives – such as its lack of democratic institutions and structures, widespread poverty and inequality, and the perception of certain cultural tendencies towards violence and state-repression – it is clear that the central problem facing El Salvador in the conservative narrative was that the legitimate (US-sponsored) government was threatened by externally supported revolutionaries antithetical to US interests. If left unchecked, El Salvador would become "another Nicaragua" or, even worse, "another Cuba," and thereby tip the balance of world power in favor of the Soviet Union and international communism – arch-enemies in the conservative narrative. In a speech delivered in 1983, US President Ronald Reagan gave succinct voice to the conservative view on the matter:

> The problem is that an aggressive minority has thrown in its lot with the Communists, looking to the Soviets and their own Cuban henchmen to help them pursue political change through violence. Nicaragua, right here, has become their base. And these extremists make no secret of their goal. They preach the doctrine of a "revolution without frontiers." Their first target is El Salvador.[22]

Reviving the "domino theory" that dominated political narratives in earlier Cold War years, conservatives told a story about a poor and backwards country in danger of "falling" to the

[22] Ronald Reagan: "Remarks on Central America and El Salvador at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Manufacturers," March 10, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41034.

communist conspiracy whose aim was not just a communist El Salvador, but a communist world. The Soviet axis had already managed to overthrow the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, the longest-standing and most loyal ally of the US in the region, and its proxies were now spilling into El Salvador. [23]

As Reagan came to power in 1981, the State Department produced the first of a series of "white papers" to provide evidence of the Soviet infiltration of El Salvador and the flow of arms from the Eastern Block through Nicaragua and Cuba. However, within six months, *the Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* and, soon after, *the Washington Post,* began investigating the "facts" that the first White Paper relied on. It was soon found that much of this evidence was, at best, hyperbole, extrapolation, and mistranslation of various Salvadoran, Cuban, and Nicaraguan documents and speeches, and, at worst, blatant distortions of facts and direct lies.[24] Indeed, as LeoGrande concludes:

> The picture painted by the documents [used by the State Department to produce the White Paper] themselves was one of Soviet indifference and reluctance to become involved even in transporting arms, let alone providing them Above all, the documents did not support the White Paper's central thesis – that massive external interference by the Communist bloc had transformed the Salvadoran conflict from a civil war to a case of indirect external aggression.[25]

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[23] Indeed, as this understanding of the crisis in El Salvador implies, the conflict with the Soviet Union was at the center of the conservative narrative. Ironically, although the conservative narrative often understood/presented itself in opposition to liberals and what was seen as their weakness towards and accommodation of the USSR, the return to the Cold War in fact began during the Carter administration. For our purposes, this can be seen in the contradiction of the Reaganites lambasting Carter for failing to stem the tide of revolution in Central America and stand up to the perceived Soviet/Cuban aggression towards "America's backyard" while the policy framework and, to a certain extent, the rhetoric of the Second Cold War began during the Carter administration, particularly after 1979 when the USSR invaded Afghanistan, and Iran and Nicaragua were "lost." For an analysis of the Second Cold War, see for example, Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1986) and K. Subrahmanyam, "The Second Cold War," *Strategic Analysis*, 7:2-3, 73-97, (1983) DOI: 10.1080/09700168309431858

[24] Grandin, 118; see also the first "white paper", *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, released by the State Department on February 23, 1981

[25] LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 88

While even the conservative *WSJ* was seriously questioning the "evidence" that the Reagan administration was producing to justify its understanding of the crisis in El Salvador, the conservative narrative remained unchanged; indeed, regardless of any facts or refutation of alleged facts that emerged, conservatives stuck staunchly to their story about the threat of an imminent communist (read Soviet) takeover of El Salvador. They saw a clear-cut case of external aggression: an otherwise peaceful (and loyal) country being overrun by outside (Soviet) forces.

To understand why facts seemed to matter so little in this narrative, it is important to understand just how important the Cold War and the battle with the USSR was within the conservative framework. Perceived by most conservatives, and particularly by the neoconservatives, as the battle between freedom and totalitarianism and between good and evil, the Cold War was, for them, *the* fundamental characteristic in world affairs, and the most important fact in international relations – a matter of the very survival of the US. In this narrative, any "evidence" or "facts" contradicting this worldview were merely seen as proof of the ingenious and insidious Soviet propaganda machine whose sole purpose was to discredit the US in the eyes of its own public and its allies around the world – thereby hoping to undermine US resolve.[26] Indeed, it was a recurring strategy of conservatives to either directly or indirectly paint any criticism of US policy, or any deviance from their understanding of events in El Salvador, as the product of Soviet/communist propaganda.[27]

Following the logic of this binary world view, according to the conservative narrative anyone who supported the US in the fight against the evils of communism was worth supporting.

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[26] See for instance the interview with Vernon Walters, "Ambassador-at-large for President Reagan, and former translator, military attaché and Deputy Director of the CIA" in "Crisis in Central America: a Conservation with Vernon Walker," 1984, https://web.archive.org/web/20130515014240/http://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/552530

[27] For an instructive example of this, see for instance the statement of Senator J. Denton in "El Salvador: Reprograming – Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Ninety-Eight Congress, First Session," March 22,23, and 24, *Committee on Foreign Relations*, Washington D.C., 1983

Therefore, through the conservative lens, events in El Salvador could not merely be what they seemed to be – a poor and repressed population attempting to change the status quo – but had to, almost by definition, also be another battleground in the global struggle of the Cold War. The outcome in El Salvador was not merely an internal matter for the people to decide, and of concern only to Salvadorians; it was an existential choice with grave consequences for the Free World. The choice was between two ways of life, poignantly presented by Reagan, quoting President Truman:

> One way of life is based upon the will of the majority and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.[28]

While the US represented the first way of life, as did, by extension, any actions supported or directed by the US, so the USSR represented the second way, as did any actions supported or directed by the Soviets, whether perceived or real. It is not hard then to see, as Reagan asserted in the 1980 presidential campaign, that we should "not delude ourselves. The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominos, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world."[29] Therefore, if the USSR was not attempting to turn El Salvador into the next domino in their game of world domination, there would be no crisis there: El Salvador would be just fine. However, because this was exactly what was happening in El Salvador (and Central America more broadly) in the early 1980s, according to the conservative narrative, developments here were of supreme importance to the US because they were part of the life-and-death struggle with the USSR. This is why Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's ambassador to the UN

[28] Ronald Reagan, "President Reagan's Address on Central America to Join Session of Congress," *NYT,* April 28, 1983.
[29] Quoted in Latham: *The Right Kind of Revolution,* 180

from 1981-1985, stated in early 1981 that "Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States today."[30]

Clearly then, El Salvador was important to the US because it was seen as essential to the national security of the US: if El Salvador were to be the next domino in Central America to fall to communism, then the United States would soon enough find itself threatened by a gang of communist aggressors right next-door. Indeed, throughout the early 1980s, Reagan and his neo-conservative supporters routinely used the language of imminent threat and peril, often pointing to the geographical proximity of Central America on maps, and warning the US public about the dangers of being surrounded by Soviet proxy forces. As Kirkpatrick lamented: "The deterioration of the U.S. position in the hemisphere has already created serious vulnerabilities where none previously existed, and threatens now to confront this country with the unprecedented need to defend itself against a ring of Soviet bases on its southern flanks from Cuba to Central America."[31] In the conservative narrative expounded by Kirkpatrick and her cohorts, El Salvador was being taken over by Soviet proxies who would not be satisfied with victory in El Salvador. Instead, they would continue to spread, moving closer and closer to the US. Therefore, events in El Salvador and how they played out were of vital consequence and importance to the US.

But it was not just national security that justified US intervention in the conservative narrative. Conservatives also argued that their mission was "humanitarian:" combatting the evil nature of communism itself, as well as any of its adherents. If the communists were to win in El Salvador, as they had done in Nicaragua and Cuba, it would be to the severe detriment not only of

[30] Quoted in Walter LeFeber, "The Reagan Administration and the Revolutions in Central America," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol 99, no. 1, (Spring, 1984), 1-25, 1. The intellectual Jeane Kirkpatrick was one of the most important neo-conservatives to articulate the conservative narrative and is largely seen as the "intellectual architect" of the Reagan administration's policies towards Central America at this time. See Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Towards Latin America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 359

[31] Jeane Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," 53 in *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Realism in Politics*, (New York: American Enterprise Institute and Simon and Schuster, 1982).

the US, but also of the local population. Communist regimes, the conservative narrative claimed, were totalitarian in nature, and sought to enslave people for the "good of the proletariat," murdering anyone who dared stand in the way of "the march of history." Indeed, not only were the Salvadoran guerillas represented as Soviet puppets in the conservative narrative, they were also repeatedly painted as murderous maniacs, hellbent on racking havoc and spreading chaos and revolutionary violence. As Kirkpatrick characterized the situation in 1981: "El Salvador, having arrived now at the edge of anarchy, is threatened by progressively well-armed guerrillas whose fanaticism and violence remind some observers of Pol Pot"[32]

If these were the people seeking to change and take over the government in El Salvador, who would want this new revolutionary government? And who would not want to prevent such people from taking power? In this way, the "humanitarian" argument – that the US should stop the fanatical communists from taking power for the good of the people of El Salvador – served to underline the benevolence of the United States and its freedom-loving instincts. This very benevolence made it impossible for the US to allow the good people of El Salvador to be overrun by murderous communists. One of the remarkable, and most macabre, aspects of this argument was the ability of conservatives to whitewash, refute, or simply ignore the widespread atrocities committed not by the revolutionaries (although there were also atrocities committed by them) but by the Salvadoran army and the right-wing paramilitary groups, aptly known as "death squads," with close ties to the army and government.

It should be noted that though the humanitarian explanation was often voiced in the conservative narrative, the manner was largely perfunctory. It was primarily the argument about national security and vital interests – the threat to US national security produced by

[32] Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," 55.

Soviet/communist expansionism in "America's backyard" – that was invoked to justify US policies and actions/interference in Central America. Yet, on another level, the humanitarian explanation was not just for show. Combined with the national security explanation, the two emerged as one in the idea of benevolent self-interest. This can be seen in the 1984 Republican platform:

> The security and freedom of Central America *are indispensable to our own. In addition to our concern for the freedom and overall welfare of our neighbors to the south*, two-thirds of our foreign trade passes through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal. The entire region, however, is gravely threatened by Communist expansion, inspired and supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba. "[33] [Emphasis added.]

In the conservative narrative, the benevolent universal humanism of the United States went hand in hand with its commercial interests and national security. The threat of communism spreading in El Salvador, therefore, was seen as very grave on three levels: first, there was the threat to "the freedom and overall welfare" of Salvadorans; second, there was the conviction that any threat to the "security and freedom" of El Salvador was synonymous with the "security and freedom" of the US; and, finally and most gravely, there was the belief that Kirkpatrick so staunchly maintained: "[w]e are dealing with our own border when we talk about the Caribbean and Central America and we are dealing with our own vital national interests."[34] In other words, what was good for El Salvador was good for the US, and vices versa. And it was no accident, as Reagan warned, that the communists were aggressing in El Salvador:

> Those Soviet theorists noticed what we failed to notice: that the Caribbean Sea and Central America constitute this nation's fourth border. If we must defend ourselves against large, hostile military presence on our border, our freedom to act elsewhere to help others and to

[33] "Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1984," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273427
[34] Jeane Kirkpatrick in "Human Rights in Nicaragua," US Congress, Senate, *Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs*, 98th Congress, 1st Session, 1982, 77

> protect strategically vital sea-lanes and resources has been drastically diminished. They know this; they've written about this.[35]

In addition to what the conservative narrative perceived to be the "vital interests" of the US – access to Caribbean sea-lanes and having US-friendly governments close to its southern border – another recurring and important argument used to bolster their claim about the importance of El Salvador was the idea that it was vital to both project credibility on the world stage, and to maintain an image of unquestioned power and resolve. This idea was closely linked to the perceived weakening of US power and resolve that had taken place in the 1970s in the aftermath of Vietnam and, particularly, during the Carter administration. For many conservatives, Kirkpatrick being especially adamant in her condemnation of Carter's policies, the US had become not only militarily weaker compared to the Soviet Union, but it had become perceived as weaker by allies and friends alike, including some US officials themselves. Whereas the US had resolved to, and had been seen as the unquestioned power of the world after the Second World War – unyielding in its commitment to bringing freedom and prosperity to the rest of the world, (including itself, of course), and in its pledge to being the global defender of the Free World against the communist threat – this resolve, according to Kirkpatrick, had been undermined in the 1970s with "roots in the Vietnam experience, less as it was fought in Southeast Asia than as it was interpreted in Washington and New York." US liberals had lost their "fear of communism, lost [their] appetite for East-West competition, grown embarrassed by the uses of American power, become ashamed of past U.S. policies, and grown determined to make a fresh start."[36]

Understanding herself to be a level-headed realist, any weakening of resolve to stand against communism, and any wavering in the belief that the East-West competition was *not* the

[35] Reagan, "Remarks on Central America and El Salvador," March 10, 1983
[36] Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," 60.

principle battle of the contemporary world was, for Kirkpatrick, nothing less than borderline delusional. She believed that this change in perspective amongst US officials in the Carter administration had started to undermine the use of US power. For Kirkpatrick and the conservatives, this weakening resolve to use its power was nothing less than a threat to the very survival of the US. In their optics, the USSR was seen as a ruthless and fanatic power with the single-minded goal of overthrowing US world leadership and destroying the fabric of US society itself; therefore, any weakening of resolve to stand against this power must be seen as a serious threat itself to the US. This was the core of the conservative narrative, and it centered many conservatives' understanding of the world. It also played a major role in shaping US policies in El Salvador in the 1980s.

It follows, then, in further unfolding the conservative narrative, that for the world and the US to be safe, not only did the US have to be ready to counter Soviet and communist expansionism, it also had to be perceived as being ready to do so. In this way, El Salvador become the ideal testing ground for and symbol of the conservatives' deep-seated desire to reassert the willpower and resolve of the US, and to show the world the United States was still to be reckoned with. As Reagan put it,

> If Central America were to fall, what would the consequences be for our position in Asia, Europe and for alliances such as NATO? If the United States cannot respond to a threat near our own borders, why should Europeans or Asians believe that we are seriously concerned about threats to them? If the Soviets can assume that nothing short of an actual attack on the United States will provoke an American response, which ally, which friend will trust us then?[37]

It is crucial to remember that in the conservative narrative, the crises in Central America and El Salvador were viewed and understood primarily through the prism of the Cold War. Accordingly, it was therefore vital in the struggle against the Soviet Union that the US be seen as

[37] Reagan, "President Reagan's Address on Central America to Join Session of Congress." *NYT,* April 28, 1983.

having the resolve to stand up to this kind of threat, especially in "their backyard." In addition, it is important to examine the specific case of El Salvador: it was a small and relatively weak country that had been within the US sphere of influence for almost a century without any inherent strategic importance, compared to other hot spots in the Cold War, such as Southeast Asia and the Middle East.[38] Victory over the communist aggressors in El Salvador would therefore not only prevent the actual threat posed by the insurgency in El Salvador (as understood in the conservative narrative), but it would also be a symbolic victory that would put an end to the perceived weakness of the US. In other words, achieving victory in El Salvador would be a way to defeat the communists and to project an image of power. As Scott Thompson, a mid-level official in the Reagan administration, argued:

> El Salvador is the place to take a stand against further spreading of Soviet/Cuban influence within the U.S. security sphere…The Untied States can choose to win. Nations sitting on the fence will cheer once the United States achieves a victory. They will see merit in American policy. They will be heartened to see that the United States had stopped abandoning even its pockmarked friends.[39]

Starting with the last sentence in the quote, we can see that it was particularly important for conservatives to show the friends of the US that it could be counted on. The government of El Salvador, (as well as the Guatemalan and other authoritarian and military governments throughout Latin America, and, indeed, the world) was a friend of the United States; it was therefore crucial that the US not abandon it to communist subversion. Because if it did, other (more important) US-friendly governments may start to question the resolve and support of the United States, including her "pockmarked friends" (presumably referring to the repressive and violent nature of these

[38] Of course, this was a contentious issue, and the conservative narrative painted a very different picture as we have seen: in their view Central America *was* vital and there was an actual threat to the US; however most scholars agreed that it was in fact fairly insignificant compared to other areas in the World: SEA, the Middle East, Europe, etc. For a discussion of this issue, see Jorge Dominguez, *U.S. Interests and Policies in the Caribbean and Central America*, (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1982),

[39] W. Scott Thompson, "Choosing to Win," *Foreign Policy*, no. 42 (Summer 1983), 83.

"friends"). Such a situation would destabilize the network of alliances that the US had built up since WW2 and, as a result, would undermine the security of the US. On the other hand, if the US could show its limitless support for any friend in need, regardless of the human rights record and unpopularity of this friend, it would strengthen the credibility of the US and, furthermore, deter other revolutionary groups from pursuing such change in countries allied to the US.

What were the causes of the crisis?

In the conservative narrative, the main cause of the crisis in El Salvador was that that USSR/Cuba had infiltrated El Salvador, and that these communists were causing political, economic, and social instability and widespread violence. Indeed, for most conservatives, the crisis itself and the causes of this crisis were the same: external, communist aggression in the affairs of El Salvador. It is fruitful here to recall Reagan's assertion that all "hot spots" in the world were the product of "Soviet expansionism," and to recall his warning about the "game of dominos" the Soviet Union was playing in its mission to spread its dangerous ideology. In addition, particularly before the Reagan administration took power, the conservative narrative claimed that it was not just the USSR and its henchman, Cuba's interference, that had led to the crisis in El Salvador; it was also the mistaken policies of the Carter administration that had undermined the US' traditional allies and thereby emboldened communist adventurism, resulting in a crisis of national security for the US.[40] As we can see, this was the official stance of the Republican party in 1980:

[40] Conservative critics particularly lamented that Carters policies had resulted in the "loss" of Nicaragua (similar to the tragic "loss" of Cuba) although the Carter administration had in fact resumed most aid to the Somoza regime up until a few months before it was overthrown. Of course, by then the Sandinista movement had gained such momentum, and Somoza had lost most of his support even from the more conservative business sectors of Nicaragua, that Somoza's demise was inevitable. Still, the Carter administration attempted to preserve the power structures (represented by the despised National Guard – Somoza main instrument of repression and exploitation) and argued for "Somozismo without Somoza." To no avail. The point is that far from "abandoning" the US' traditional ally despite a period of no aid, when push came to shove, and Somoza faced a popular movement, Carter backed Somoza. See Soares, "Strategy, Ideology, and Human Rights," 62.

> In the Caribbean and Central America, the Carter Administration stands by while Castro's totalitarian Cuba, financed, directed, and supplied by the Soviet Union, aggressively trains, arms, and supports forces of warfare and revolution throughout the Western hemisphere. Yet the Carter Administration has steadily denied these threats and in many cases has actively worked to undermine governments and parties opposed to the expansion of Soviet power. This must end.[41]

In this passage, the two explanations for the crisis in El Salvador according to the conservative narrative were made clear. The revolutionary activity not only in El Salvador but across the region was not due to indigenous causes, but was both a product of "Castro's totalitarian Cuba," itself merely an instrument of the USSR, and a product of the failure of the Carter administration's policies. Specifically in El Salvador, Kirkpatrick argued that "[b]y failing to offer the junta the arms and advice required to turn back the well-equipped insurgency, the Carter administration undermined the junta's ability to survive and encouraged the insurgents in their conviction of ultimate victory."[42] In the context of this criticism, it is important to note that while Carter had suspended aid between 1977-1979, he resumed aid following the coup in 1979, even in the face of widespread government repression. Furthermore, while the brutal murdering of four US nuns in late 1980 again led to two weeks of suspended aid, it was soon after resumed in the last few weeks of Carter's administration. Moreover, US support was expanded to include more military equipment and advisers in the final weeks of Carter's administration, legitimized by promises by the Salvadoran government to reign in the violence of the military and the right-wing death-squads, promises that most US officials knew were unlikely to be kept.[43]

But in the conservative narrative, it was madness to stop the flow of aid, or even threaten to stop it, to any ally that was faced with the threat of communism, for any reason. Even though

[41] "Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1980," Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273420
[42] Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," 85
[43] LeoGrande, *America's Backyard,* 58-64

there might be some historically grounded problems behind the uprising against the government, such as the political violence, repression, inequality, and poverty in El Salvador, these were not grounds for stopping aid to the government in its fight against the totalitarian threat. Underlying this assertion was the idea that Kirkpatrick had popularized in 1979: that there was a fundamental distinction between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" regimes. In short, this argument went, although there were often high levels of inequality and concentration of wealth under authoritarian (or "traditional") regimes, they tended to be accepted as the status quo by most parts of the population simply because they had been in place for a longer period of time. Similarly, despite their reliance on some degree of violence and repression to maintain their power, these types of regimes had proved to be open to democratization in the long run; most importantly, these authoritarian regimes were generally adamantly anti-communist as well as open to foreign investments, thereby making them ideal allies for the United States. Conversely, totalitarian (or "revolutionary") regimes, such as communist states, tended to be unpopular with the general population as they aimed at a "total" transformation of all levels of society in a given country; they tended to rely on violence and repression as well, but had no history of morphing into more peaceful and democratic societies; they were generally antithetical to US interests as they tended to be allies of the USSR; and they were generally opposed to foreign investments.[44] Thus, Kirkpatrick argued, "the foreign policy of the Carter administration failed not because of lack of good intentions but for lack of realism about the nature of traditional versus revolutionary autocracies, and the relation of each to the American national interests."[45] This "lack of realism," Kirkpatrick argued, had led the Carter administration to waver in its unequivocal support for the

[44] For the full argument, see Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards" in *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Realism in Politics*, (New York: American Enterprise Institute and Simon and Schuster, 1982).
[45] Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," 49

Salvadoran junta, and it led it to misunderstand the severity of the threat of a "revolutionary autocracy" that would surely develop if the insurgents were to win – with grave consequences for the US and the Salvadoran people.

Ironically, while the distinction between these two types of regimes remained important in the conservative narrative, its relationship to the Carter administration completely changed in the early 1980s, for largely pragmatic reasons. In an address to a joint session of Congress in 1983, whose purpose was to garner support for his policies in Central America, including increased military aid to El Salvador, Reagan explained that "[f]or several years now, under two Administrations, the United States has been increasing its defense of freedom in the Caribbean Basin…President Carter did not hesitate. He authorized arms and munition to El Salvador. The guerrilla offensive failed, but not America's will."[46] Similarly, responding to congressional criticism of Reagan policies, Assistant Secretary at the State Department's Bureau of Human Rights, Elliot Abrams, an importance voice in the conservative narrative, argued that "[o]ne should always recall the fundamental change in American attitude towards Nicaragua and El Salvador took place in the last period of the Carter Administration. It was under the Carter Administration that aid to Nicaragua was stopped and that military assistance to El Salvador was started."[47] Given the earlier condemnations of Carter, it is ironic that the Reagan administration suddenly began depicting themselves as heirs of Carter and viewing their policies merely as continuations of Carter's.

Yet despite the Reagan administration moving rhetorically closer to the Carter administration in its attempt to bolster support for its policies, it is important to note that it did not

[46] Ronald Reagan, "Address on Central America to Joint Session of Congress" transcript in *NYT,* April 28, 1983.
[47] Quoted in Bernard Weinraub, "Reagan's policy in Central America: After 2 Years, Tough Tone Softens," *NYT,* Jan 25, 1983

share certain fundamental views about the reasons for the crisis in El Salvador with the Carter administration, namely, that widespread poverty and economic inequality as well as the government repression and violence against the population were to blame.[48] Starting with the problem of poverty and inequality, although it was not a primary concern, most conservatives acknowledged the economic problems and, indeed, the misery of much of the population in El Salvador.[49] While some went so far as to ascribe this misery to the high levels of inequality (Kirkpatrick and Reagan), thereby partly adopting a more liberal perspective, more traditional conservatives pointed to the lack of free market structures and reliance on the state in the economy as the real culprits.[50] Regardless of this distinction, the conservative narrative did not see these problems as very important for either El Salvador or the United States. The real problem, they maintained, was the communist aggressors. Indeed, for Kirkpatrick, the misery and poverty that most Salvadorans lived in were merely part of "traditional life," and not inherently a cause for concern. She argued: "Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope, as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill. Such societies create no refugees."[51] Beyond Kirkpatrick's assertion that "traditional" societies do not create refugees, which was simply not true in the case of El Salvador, the idea that the "miseries of traditional life are bearable" for most people seems most likely an attempt to provide a moral justification for the status quo, because the "traditional autocracy" in El Salvador

[48] How the Carter administration viewed these causes will be looked at in greater detail below.
[49] See for instance Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," 40
[50] See particularly the statements by Senator Helms and Economist Melvyn Krauss in the "National Bipartisan Report on Central America: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations," United States Senate, Ninety-eighth Congress, Second Session, February 7 and 8, 1984

[51] Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," 49-50

supported the perceived interests of the US. [52] In any case, the poverty, inequality and misery of many Salvadorans played at best a minor role in understanding the crisis in the conservative narrative.

Moving on to the problem of political violence perpetrated by the army and the death squads as a cause for the crisis, this problem was framed in four ways in the conservative narrative's attempt to dispose of it. The first way was simply to downplay or ignore the violence. For instance, while Reagan acknowledged in 1983 that "there are still major problems regarding human rights, the criminal justice system and violence against noncombatants in El Salvador" he staunchly maintained that the government "has continued to strive toward an orderly and democratic society" and was attempting to seek "a political solution" to El Salvador's problems.[53] Indeed, in the conservative narrative, the government and the army, although not perfect, were attempting to reign in political violence on all sides.[54]

Similarly, the second framing of the problem was to understand any repression on the part of the legitimate government to be, in fact, the product of the communist insurgents, and a part of their terrorist campaign. In the words of Senator J. Denton:

> The strategy is to swallow a nation by introducing escalating terrorism until the inevitably increasing government repression to fight the terrorism is focused on by a standard propaganda method. This propaganda method is their most powerful modern weapon. The weapon is the portrayal of the Government as inhumane while it tries desperately, as in El Salvador, to conduct liberal reforms while fighting against terrorists.[55]

[52] For the issue of refugees, see for instance the UN Truth Commission: "On 31 August [1981], the Comisión Nacional de Asistencia a la Población Desplazada (CONADES) reported that there were 226,744 internally displaced persons. By June of that year, the number of Salvadorian refugees in Latin American countries totalled between 175,000 and 295,000." "El Salvador – Accountability and Human Rights: The Report of the United Nation Commission on the Truth for El Salvador," *United Nations,* August 1993, 31.
[53] Reagan, "Address on Central America," 1983
[54] See footnote 58
[55] Prepared statement by Senator J. Denton, "El Salvador: Reprograming – Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Ninety-Eight Congress, First Session," March 22,23, and 24, *Committee on Foreign Relations,* Washington D.C. 1983

Whatever government repression that was happening in El Salvador, the conservative narrative hereby argued, was simply and regrettably the only way to stop the communist terrorism; indeed, the communists wanted and expected the government to respond to them with violent repression in order to "prove" the "inhumanity" of the government. Therefore, in the logic of the conservative narrative, it is clear that the real perpetrators of violence were the terrorist communists.

The third way to frame and explain away the problem of political violence as a cause of the insurgency was to distinguish between the government/military and the right-wing death squads. This was best exemplified by Kirkpatrick in 1980 when she insisted that "the degree of commitment to moderation and democratic institutions within the Salvadoran military is very frequently underestimated in this country… it's a terrible injustice to the government and the military when you suggest that they were somehow responsible for terrorism and assassination."[56] Combining elements of the second and third way of framing the problem, Thomas O Enders, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, and one of the more moderate voices in the Reagan administration, explained that:

> The most difficult of all to assess are the repeated allegations of massacres. The ambiguity lies in the fact that there are indeed incidents in which the non-combatants have suffered terribly at the hands of the guerrillas, rightist vigilantes, Government forces, or some or all of them, but at the same time the insurgency has repeatedly fabricated or inflated alleged mass murders as a means of propaganda.[57]

In fact, as has already been noted, most independent observers at the time as well as subsequent inquires revealed that the massacres *did* in fact take place, and that they were the result of both the regular army and the "rightist vigilantes" who were allowed to operate with impunity by the army,

[56] Cited in "Cauldron in Central America: What Keeps the Fire Burning?" *NYT*, December 7, 1980.
[57] Official Statement by Thomas O. Enders, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador – Hearings before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs" *House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, Second Session*, Feburary 2, 23, 25 and March 2, 1982, Washington DC.,: 24-25

and whose activities were actually often coordinated by army officials.[58] Clearly, the distinction between the government/military and the right wing death squads does not hold up under scrutiny, and in reality there was little difference between the two.

Finally, political violence was framed as something, however regrettable or lamentable, that was simply part of the political culture in this part of the world. Indeed, Kirkpatrick argued that "violence or the threat of violence is an integral, regular, predictable part of these political systems – a fact which is obscured by our way of describing military "interventions" in Latin American political systems as if the systems were normally peaceable."[59] The political violence that was abhorred in the US, for good reasons, was far more "normal" in countries such as El Salvador, and the existence of such violence, therefore, was certainly not a reason to stop providing economic and military aid to an ally in danger of being overrun by communists. In the conservative narrative, the main cause of the crisis in El Salvador was the same as the very nature of the crisis: communist aggression. Any other factors that might be understood as contributing to the crisis were therefore deemed insubstantial, and merely a distraction to what needed to be done: defeat the communist insurgency.

What should the US do?

All of the voices in the conservative narrative agreed that the primary aim of the US should be to eliminate the threat of the communist aggressors. As Senator Helms put it: "The first step

[58] For contemporary documentation for these links, see *El Salvador: One Year of Repression*, Legal Aid Service of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, (World Council of Churches, 1981) cited in Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*,15 (footnote 31); for a more comprehensive view, see Cynthia J. Arnson, "Window on the Past: A Declassified History of Death Squads in El Salvador" in *Death Squads in Global Perspective*, ed. Bruce B Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 85-125; see also Michael Miner, "Changing Times: The Vindication of Raymond Bonner," *Chicago Reader*, April 15, 1993 for an article that validates journalist Raymond Bonner's claims in the early 1980s about the massacres by US-trained elites forces in El Salvador. It was Bonner who first broke the story about the now infamous massacre at the small hamlet of El Mozote. See Raymond Bonner, "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village," *NYT*, Jan. 27, 1982.

[59] Kirkpatrick, "U.S. Security and Latin America," 66

should be the eradication of the guerilla movement; only after that can we expect progress towards a stable society."[60] To do this, all conservatives agreed, it was necessary to support, arm, modernize, and train the Salvadoran army to be able to deal with the communist threat effectively. Consequently, during Reagan's first term, both Reagan and his conservative allies spent much time attempting to convince sceptical members of Congress to allocate increasing amounts of military aid to El Salvador's government and army. Conservatives argued throughout this period that it was vital to provide military aid for the survival of El Salvador's "legitimate" government, and any reluctance to do so would effectively be a surrender to the communist insurgents who were receiving ample amounts of Soviet support themselves. Furthermore, the conservative narrative also argued that the US's goal in El Salvador was not just to defeat the communists, it was also to help Salvadorans continue to change towards a peaceful and democratic society, modelled on the US. However, when it came to the specifics on what role the US should play in facilitating this change, the conservative narrative divided, and there were significant variations in the perspectives of different conservatives.

The most contentious issues concerned non-military economic aid, and the role of the US in pushing for economic and political reforms. On one side, moderate members of the Reagan administration supported continuing many of the policies initiated by Carter. These included large amounts of economic aid as well as an active role in instituting economic and political reforms in one of the most unequal and repressive countries in the region. James H. Michel, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, argued, "[i]t is a matter of trying to support democracy, to support economic development, while maintaining the security necessary to allow the reforms to be implemented

[60] Senator Helms, "National Bipartisan Report on Central America," 8

and for the economy to develop."[61] It was not just about defeating communists, these moderate conservatives maintained, it was also about affecting positive change in a poor and unstable country; and for them, the continuation of US influence in El Salvador was one of the best tools to ensure such progress. Indeed, the moderates argued that the US should leverage its support of the country to press for these positive changes. Reflecting this view, in response to allegations by liberal members of Congress that the US was supporting a repressive and backwards regime, Enders reasoned that "we must use our assistance to help El Salvador control the violence in that country, make land reform work, develop a democratic process, and bring the murderers of our countrymen and countrywomen to justice."[62] Notably, this sort of rhetoric was often used to persuade a reluctant Congress to continue Reagan's policies in the face of liberal criticism. The framing of US policies in this way, Enders further argued in 1981, was "the only way to gain legitimacy," which was crucial for the administration, as some of the aid required for sustaining the Salvadoran government required congressional approval.[63] Accordingly, the Reagan administration continued to press for the reforms initiated by Carter as it continued to provide economic assistance and to lend legitimacy to the Salvadoran government; it even pushed for elections in El Salvador, which were held in 1982 and 1984, to much fanfare by the Reagan officials.[64]

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[61] "El Salvador: Reprograming – Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Ninety-Eight Congress, First Session," March 22,23, and 24, *Committee on Foreign Relations*, Washington D.C. 1983, 33

[62] Thomas Enders, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador – Hearings before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs" *House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, Second Session*, Feburary 2, 23, 25 and March 2, 1982, Washington DC.,: 24

[63] Quoted in LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 143.

[64] The entire left in El Salvador refused to participate in both elections because they rejected the pre-condition of laying down their arms, fearing that they would end up like the thousands of people that had been murdered by the armed forces thus far (a legitimate concern, it should be noted, given the record of violent repression and torture in 1980-81), and, therefore, given that a civil war was essentially underway at this time, the legitimacy gained by the Salvadoran government in these election was questionable. For a critical examination, see Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (New York: Pantheon Book, 1988): 87-143

On the other side, we find the most right-wing conservatives who argued that the sole focus of the US government ought to be defeating the communists. These same conservatives had long believed that government interference in the economy was tantamount to communism. Senator Jesse Helm summed up this position when he argued that "there is a war in Central America. As long as there is a war, there will be economic disruption and social suffering. We cannot expect that the Salvadorans can divide their energies between social and political reform while trying to win a war at the same time."[65] For these conservatives, the line between communism, socialism, and New Deal liberalism was often blurred, all being variations of the same evil, and, accordingly, they vehemently argued against any non-military assistance. Indeed, as Jessie Helms lamented in 1984, "because of the desperate situation in El Salvador, there are some, even conservatives, who would urge us to swallow the $8 billion elephant of socialism in order to catch the $400 million gnat of military aid."[66] This was not something these conservatives were willing to do. In contrast, they argued that only by promoting free-market reforms would the Salvadoran economy get back on track, and certainly *not* by government hand-outs. In any case, they argued that the US government should not waste its time pushing for reforms, (especially if these reforms promoted "socialism"), at the same time that El Salvador was under siege by communism.

A similar schism amongst conservatives emerged over the question of conditionality: should continued military assistance to El Salvador be conditional on improvements to their human rights record? Some of the more ardent conservatives maintained that this should not be the case. One of them, economist Melvyn Kraus, argued:

> …military assistance should not be made conditional on improvements in human rights, in my opinion. No matter how important the concept may be to us, it is degrading for a great

[65] Senator Helms, Hearings on Kissinger Commission, 1984, 8; for more information about the Reagan administration's policies on economic and political reform, see Schoultz, 55-56 and LeoGrande, 143-145
[66] Senator Helms, "National Bipartisan Report on Central America: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations," Ninety-Eight Congress, Second Session, 7-8 Feb. 1984, 1984, 8

> power such as the United States to have to impose human rights conditions on its military assistance. It implies this country is somehow not in control, and that the recipient countries are out of control.[67]

In a way, Kraus' rejection of conditionality can be seen as a very direct affirmation of US imperialism and the right of the US to control a sovereign country. Indeed, if democracy is understood to include the self-determination of a people in a given geographical territory and political entity, as it usually is, then Kraus' insistence that the US was in control and should be seen as being in control directly contradicted any sort of democracy promotion agenda. How could "a great power such as the US" be in control of a country that is democratic, i.e. controlled by the people living there? It is an oxymoron. However, with the help of the myths of the benevolent self-interest and freedom-loving nature of the United States, it is in fact possible to make such an argument: Its assumption is that the US is the bastion of freedom and democracy. If the US controls some territory, then it does so in the name of freedom and democracy; therefore, any territory controlled by the US is inherently "democratic." Whether they actually believed in the validity of such an argument is debatable, but we can undoubtedly see that these conservatives were unapologetic about using US power, and they were not interested in any limitations for any reasons being placed on it.

The more moderate position within the conservative narrative was articulated by Elliot Abrams in a way that combined the liberals' rhetorical support for human rights with the ardent anti-communism of the conservatives. He argued that while "both our moral concerns and our security interests required us to insist on the principle of conditionality," it should not be the liberal version of conditionality that relied on an "all-or-nothing certification process." In fact, in early 1984, Reagan had vetoed a bill that called for exactly this kind of policy: cessation of aid if the

[67] Melvyn Krauss, Hearings Kissinger Commission, 211

Salvadoran government did not improve its human rights record substantially. Supporting Reagan's veto, Abrams argued that cutting off aid would bring victory to the insurgents: "to facilitate a military victory for Marxist-Leninist guerillas who wish to build a Cuban-style dictatorship, by arguing that the cause of human rights required an aid cut-off that will allow this victory, is truly an astonishing position. The cause of human rights does not require facilitating communist advances."[68] For Abrams and the more moderate conservatives, the principle of conditionality was accepted theoretically, but it should be implemented at the discretion of the administration itself who would judge whether or not human rights were so severely violated as to warrant a reduction in military support. Given the Reagan administration's rejection of most human rights reports that were pointing to and documenting the massive and widespread repression and violence in the country, as well as the links between the networks of death squads and the army, it was unlikely that the Reagan administration would in fact do much about human rights in El Salvador besides issue proclamations of intention and principle, such as those of Abrams and Enders. The (tragic) irony of the debate about conditionality is that much of the violence and repression was carried out by US-trained troops, and with weapons provided by the US.

Finally, there was the question of how the possibility of direct military intervention by the US in El Salvador played out in the conservative narrative. The conservative narrative, as we have seen, repeatedly depicted the crisis in El Salvador and its outcome as vital to the national security of the US. It would therefore not be surprising to expect that it would support directly intervening with US troops on the ground to prevent the worst-case scenario. However, most conservatives maintained that no such development would occur. This reluctance can largely be seen as a

[68] Prepared Statement by Elliot Abrams, "The Situation in El Salvador: Hearings before the Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs," *House of Representative*, Ninety-Eighth Congress, Second Session, January 26 and February 6, 1984: 17-18

response to their fear of the reaction to an "Americanization" of the conflict amongst the US electorate and public. Their position reflects more of a pragmatic political compromise and a way to garner support given the widespread antipathy to the Vietnam War, than of any ideological opposition to direct military intervention. Indeed, before Reagan took power, both he and many of his supporters lamented that the tragedy in Vietnam had resulted in the lack of US willpower to finish the mission and accept the burden of the leader of the Free World. However, once in power, Reagan repeatedly maintained that no US troops would be involved in El Salvador, and that this was *not* another Vietnam. As he staunchly put it: "Are we going to send American soldiers into combat? And the answer to that is a flat no…Are we going to Americanize the war with a lot of U.S. combat advisers? And again, the answer is no."[69] At the same time, there were a few conservatives, who, following the internal logic of the conservative narrative, did not have the same objections or concerns about "Americanizing" the war. For them, if the stakes were as high as they were purported to be, should the US not be ready to do whatever was necessary? As Senator Symms argued:

> If, with all of the billions of dollars we are spending, if the United States cannot diplomatically, and then by whatever means necessary, stop the flow of arms and equipment into El Salvador, then we may be-that is a question of will. That is not a question of hardware. I mean, we have the fleet. We have the U.S. Air Force, that is within flying range of that part of the world. This is one place where we could exercise our will as a Nation.[70]

Regardless of the temptation to "exercise" the "will as a Nation" for Senator Symms, and perhaps also for other conservatives, the Reagan administration adamantly maintained that the US would

[69] Reagan, ""Remarks on Central America and El Salvador," 1983
[70] Senator Symms, "El Salvador: Reprograming – Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Ninety-Eight Congress, First Session," 28

not become directly involved, as it had been in Vietnam, and there would be no US troops in El Salvador.

2: The Liberal Narrative

Building on the seeming new approach to US foreign policy of outgoing president Carter, the liberal narrative was articulated by left-leaning members of Congress, journalists, and intellectuals who strongly opposed the Reagan administration's understanding of events in El Salvador and its policy prescriptions. Countering Reagan's insistence that the real enemy in El Salvador was the Soviet Union and international communism, the liberal narrative argued that El Salvador was *not* necessarily the next battleground in the Manichean struggle between the US and the USSR, between good and evil. Where conservatives saw communist subversion, the liberals saw a popular struggle against a repressive authoritarian government and an anachronistic society in which a small oligarchy had allied itself with the conservative army to maintain extreme economic and social inequality. At the same time, the liberal narrative espoused two slightly different variations on the political situation in El Salvador. On the one hand, the more left-leaning liberals in Congress and elsewhere, viewing the far-right as the main perpetrators of violence, emphasized the dangers stemming from supporting the status quo, as well as the danger of the US being affiliated with such a regime, both on moral grounds, and because of strategic self-interests in the context of the Cold War. On the other hand, the moderate Carter liberals saw a fragile political center being assailed by both the extreme right and left, and worried more about the possibility of an insurgent victory than about the violence of the army. Despite these differences in emphasis, both sides of the liberal narrative agreed that the communist threat might very well become urgent and dangerous if the United States did not understand the real sources of the crisis, and if it continued supporting the wrong side in the Salvadoran people's struggle for freedom and

progress. A more prudent policy, the liberals argued, would not align the United States with a repressive and violent regime against a poor and struggling population, but would settle the conflict politically with the help of regional allies, international cooperation, and economic aid.

What was the crisis in El Salvador and why did it matter to the US?

In the liberal narrative, the crisis in El Salvador was understood in a more nuanced way than in the conservative narrative. Though the liberal narrative accepted and took seriously the danger of externally supported communists taking over the country, and thereby posing a grave threat to the national security of the United States, it viewed the crisis and its causes in far more complex terms than that. In the liberal understanding, the crisis was the product of the combination of the highly unequal distribution of land and wealth, the extreme levels of poverty in which most of the population lived, and the near total dominance of oligarchs and the army which carried out indiscriminate violence and repression of the population to maintain the status quo. The insurgency in El Salvador should not be understood primarily as a case of Soviet aggression, liberals argued; rather, it should be understood as the product of a desire on the part of ordinary Salvadorans to change their economic, political, and social conditions in the face of government intransigence, and the seeming impossibility of bringing about change peacefully. It was precisely these conditions that made it possible for external communist intrusion and subversion in El Salvador. As Senator Dodd, one of the most outspoken voices contributing to the liberal narrative, explained in 1983 in a response to the Reagan administration requesting more military aid:

> If Central America were not racked with poverty, there would be no revolution. If Central America were not racked with hunger, there would be no revolution. If Central America were not racked with injustice, there would be no revolution. In short, there would be

> nothing for the Soviets to exploit. But unless those oppressive conditions change, the region will continue to seethe with revolution – with or without the Soviets.[71]

As his response suggests, it was not that the liberal narrative did not consider a Soviet intrusion in El Salvador as deeply problematic for the US – it did. But where it differed from the conservative narrative is that it did not depict the Soviet Union as being the main problem or threat to El Salvador. Rather, the "oppressive conditions" of "poverty," "hunger," and "injustice" constituted the real and underlying problems facing El Salvador in the liberal understanding. Therefore, it did not make sense to understand the crisis solely within the framework of the Cold War. Indeed, although the liberal narrative, like its conservative counterpart, viewed the possibility of Soviet bases in Central America as a fundamental threat to the security of the United States, it did not see this development taking place in El Salvador in the early 1980s, nor as a very likely occurrence in the near future. As Richard E. Feinberg, vice president of the Overseas Development Council and later member of the liberal think tank, the Brookings Institution, argued, it would be completely irrational for any Central American government to either allow Soviet military bases or, as the conservatives repeatedly warned, attack or threaten sea lanes used by the US. In fact, he argued, such a tactic would likely make them "face overwhelming destructive retaliation; no rational calculation would lead a Central American government to act so suicidally."[72] In other words, such tactics would be an invitation for the US to directly overthrow their government, something which the liberal narrative assumed was not in the interests of any Central American government.

While the liberal narrative did not view the immediate threat in El Salvador to be a Soviet led revolutionary challenge, it was wary of future Soviet intrusion into the country and the region,

[71] Christopher J. Dodd, "Transcript of Response to Reagan Speech on Central America," *NYT*, April 28, 1983.
[72] Prepared statement by Richard E. Feinberg, "National Bipartisan Report on Central America: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations," 1984, 190.

and in no way did it endorse the guerillas, their ideology or their tactics. As Robert White, the US ambassador to El Salvador during the Carter administration, warned: "The ultimate enemy of Western civilization and of the U.S. in El Salvador is a Marxist-Leninist group dedicated to the overthrow of the Government by force, and the elimination of all U.S. influence from the region."[73] What is especially interesting about this statement is that it could easily have been issued by any number of conservatives. Moreover, some liberals, echoing the conservative narrative, described the guerillas in vividly dramatic and dangerous terms. Again, in Ambassador's White's words: "[t]he armed Marxist/Leninist left is violent and bloodthirsty and also uses terrible repression against the population and of course against the Salvadoran Armed Forces too."[74] In the liberal narrative then, it was not that these guerilla groups were not "violent and bloodthirsty," and it was not as if they did not pose a fundamental threat to both Salvadoran society and the United States – they were and they did. Where the liberal narrative differed fundamentally from the conservative one was that it viewed the situation in El Salvador as a far more complex story than the one told by the conservative narrative. Indeed, in failing to understand the complexity of the situation, including its real sources, the liberals argued that the Reagan administration was actually inadvertently exacerbating the crisis, and thereby increasing the future threat to and for the US. For most liberals, the officials under Reagan, being ardent and ideologically driven Cold Warriors with little knowledge of the local or regional conditions or history, did not seem to understand this complexity. As White lamented in 1982, "[t]oday not a single senior state department official in a policymaking position on Central America has ever served in Central America."[75]

[73] "Arms Aid and Advisors: Debating the New Policy in El Salvador," *NYT*, March 8, 1981
[74] Prepared statement by Robert White, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador – Hearings before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs" *House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session*, March 5 and 11, 1981.Washington DC., 139.
[75] Robert E. White, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1982, 135

In the liberal narrative, it was the official US' response in El Salvador – acting more or less unilaterally and providing military aid and training to government forces, a response initiated by Carter and deepened by Reagan – that posed the most serious threat to US security in the long run. This was because this policy was much more likely to exacerbate the underlying problems of poverty, government intransigence and violence. This in turn would unintentionally increase the chances that the reformers would become revolutionaries, and that the revolutionaries would naturally look to the Soviets. Indeed, while first the Carter and then the Reagan administration legitimized their policies in the name of anti-communism, some liberals argued that these same policies might very well have the opposite effect by fanning anti-Americanism, radicalizing groups within El Salvador and the region, alienating allies, and undercutting US credibility. As House Representative Mary Rose Oakar argued, the policy of the Reagan administration was "likely to have the exact opposite effect of the intent of our efforts. It is likely to lead oppressed peoples toward communism rather than away from it."[76] Similarly, as White argued after a year of the Reagan policy: "What is new over the last twelve months is the conviction now shared by the majority of the Salvadoran campesinos and workers that a victory by the revolutionaries is the only way to stop the constant and increasing wave of mass killings by the Salvadoran military."[77] According to the liberal narrative, instead of helping to defeat the insurgency, the continued military support for the government and army in El Salvador served mostly, in the eyes of ordinary Salvadorans, to increase the legitimacy of the armed opposition.

Whereas the liberal narrative was generally very critical of the Reagan administration's approach in El Salvador, it is important to bear in mind that the framework for Reagan's policies was created during the Carter administration. Furthermore, as in the conservative narrative, there

[76] Prepared statement by Representative Mary Rose Oakar "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1981, 10.
[77] White, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1982, 137

was some divergence of views within the liberal narrative. It is therefore useful to distinguish between the more moderate camp, represented by Carter, and the more progressive camp, represented by the more left-leaning members of Congress and various intellectuals and academics. What tied the liberals together was the belief that the crisis in El Salvador was not primarily the result of an external communist intrusion, but rather the result of the widespread structural problems described above. However, for more moderate liberals, regardless of the causes, the current situation had in fact created an opening for communist subversion and Soviet intrusion in the region. This was clearly perceived as very problematic for the US. Articulating a more nuanced version of the conservative fear of the threat and spread of communist subversion, President Carter, in speaking about Central America in 1980, explained that

> [t]he exploitation of dissatisfaction and the desire for change is a recognized fact. These factors have created an open avenue for Cuban adventurism—a Cuba supported by and encouraged by, financed by the Soviet Union. We tend to misunderstand the threat of Cuba. Certainly they contribute to violence and instability in the Caribbean region, but the real threat of Cuba is that they claim to offer a model to be emulated by people who are dissatisfied with their own lot or who are struggling to change things for the better. Cuba's promise, as you well know, is an empty one, just as Cuba's claimed independence is a myth. The inability of Cuban leaders to breathe one critical word of Soviet imperialism, even refraining from criticizing the Soviets' actual invasion of Afghanistan, shows a total absence of independence on the part of Cuba.[78]

As we can see, Carter was highly critical of "the Cuban model," and he worried about the possibility of dissatisfied Salvadorans being inspired by this "empty" model, and thereby, like Cuba, becoming one more country whose "claimed independence" would be "a myth." If this happened, then the US would suddenly have to contend with another Soviet ally in "its backyard." Clearly, the liberal narrative still operated within a Cold War framework, albeit with a far less rigid understanding of the Cold War than that found in the conservative narrative. While the liberal

[78] Jimmy Carter, "Caribbean/Central American Action Remarks at a White House Reception." Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250551

narrative certainly did not depict communists as friends of the US, nor view the USSR as just another country with legitimate interests and concerns, and though it did maintain that it was the US' prerogative to combat Soviet expansionism, it did not, as Reagan and the conservatives did, perceive every problem everywhere in the world to be the product of the "game of dominos" that the USSR was engaged in.

Furthermore, the more left-leaning voices in the liberal narrative spent far more time describing the atrocities of the US-supported army and Salvadoran government then it did in painting the revolutionaries in a negative light. One of the most outspoken voices in this regard was House Representative Barbara A. Mikulski, who had travelled to Central America in early 1981 as part of a delegation that was sponsored by the Unitarian-Universalist Service Committee. Although not able to actually enter El Salvador, the delegation stayed on the Honduran border, and it was there that Mikulski reported to have spoked to Salvadoran refugees about the situation in the country:

> I learned that the uniformed military forces of El Salvador are using American equipment to carry out a deliberate policy of terror against an unarmed civilian population. The soldiers of El Salvador arrive in American helicopters to kill and torture men, women, and children. They use rape as a weapon of terror… I have said that I believe that our policy in El Salvador is morally wrong. It is morally wrong for this country to lavish arms on a government that cannot or will not stop its own troops from making war against its own people. It is morally wrong to offer U.S. helicopters that will be used to gun down peasants fleeing a church after mass. It is morally wrong to use a small helpless country in our own back yard to send a message of toughness to Moscow no matter what the cost to the citizens of Central America. It's wrong and it will be self-defeating.[79]

The more left-leaning voices in the liberal narrative repeatedly called attention to this "deliberate policy of terror" against the population of El Salvador, particularly after Reagan's victory. In addition to direct experiences, which for obvious reasons were limited, these left-leaning voices

[79] Prepared statement by Representative Barbara A. Mikulski, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1981,

often drew from the work of international human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as local human rights and church organizations in El Salvador and Central America, to back up the claims that the army and the government were directly responsible for most of the violence in El Salvador.[80] It should be repeated here that subsequent inquiries into the nature of the widespread violence confirmed what these human rights organizations, and by extension the liberal narrative, claimed at the time: it was indeed the government forces and right-wing death squads acting with government impunity that carried out most of the violence in El Salvador.[81] Furthermore, by calling attention to the fact that the weapons and equipment used to perpetrate this violence were provided by the United States, these left-leaning liberals depicted the US as being directly responsible for the atrocities committed.

Returning to Mikulski's report, as quoted above, we can see that though the argument that condemned the US military support of the government and army of El Salvador was largely moral, the liberal narrative attempted to connect this moral argument with the national self-interests of the US. Indeed, Mikulski argued that it would be "self-defeating" for the US to continue supporting the Salvadoran government and army. This statement can be interpreted in two interrelated ways that both can be understood within the framework of the Cold War. First, it would be self-defeating in the short term because it would lead to a loss in the "battle for hearts and minds" in El Salvador, as it would align the US with repressive forces. In this way, it would actually help the Soviet propaganda machine by undermining the credibility of the US as the real champion of the oppressed, and the true leader of the Free World. Second, in the long run, it would be self-defeating

[80] One example is House Representative Don Bonker's refutation of the Reagan administrations claim that human rights violations were decreasing in his statement in "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1982, 13

[81] See for instance the UN report "El Salvador – Accountability and Human Rights: The Report of the United Nation Commission on the Truth for El Salvador," and Arnson, "Window on the Past: A Declassified History of Death Squads in El Salvador."

because it would most likely increase the likelihood that El Salvador, as well as other Central and Latin American countries, would turn to the Soviet Union because the conditions already giving rise to the revolutionary situation would be exacerbated by continued US support for the repressive military – thereby making the "Cuban model" look more attractive than ever. Thus, just as was the case in the conservative narrative, universal humanism and national self-interests also merged in the liberal narrative into the myth of the benevolent self-interests of the United States. Although this myth played out in different ways, and although both liberals and conservatives each maintained that their narrative and policy prescriptions were for the good of both the US and El Salvador (and humankind), both narratives assumed that what was good for the United States was good for the world (in this case, El Salvador), and what was good for the world (El Salvador), was good for the United States.

We can see the fusion of self-interests and universal humanism into the benevolent self-interests that both liberals and conservatives maintained was the backbone of US foreign policy in Carter's words from 1980: "El Salvador continues to struggle against terrorists on the right who seek to restore an old tyranny and terrorists on the left who seek to create a new one. That struggle of theirs is ours as well. Their path, the peaceful path of stability and moderation, is precarious, but it's the only path that can lead to both liberty and justice."[82] In other words, "their struggle" was in fact indistinguishable from "ours;" the struggle for freedom and peace was always the struggle of the United States. Furthermore, this quote is instructive for another reason: We can clearly see the differences between the two camps within the liberal narrative. Whereas liberals such as Mikulski were highly critical of the Salvadoran government and argued that the US was complicit in the terror, Carter's characterization of the problems in El Salvador – coming from

[82] Jimmi Carter, "Organization of American States Remarks at the 10th Regular Session of the General Assembly." Nov. 10, 1980, *The American Presidency Project* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250965

both the extreme right and the extreme left – was much more moderate; in fact, in some ways it resembled the more moderate conservatives who conceded that the right wing in El Salvador was also responsible for some of the violence. In addition, more critical liberal voices tended to view the Salvadoran government and army as complicit in the right-wing terror whereas the more moderate voices, such as Carter, saw a clear difference between the government's actions (after the 1979 coup), and the right-wing's terrorism, despite widespread evidence to the contrary.[83]

Finally, as we saw in the conservative narrative, one of the reasons why El Salvador was understood to be so important for the US had to do with the issue of credibility and image. In the liberal narrative, the issue of credibility and image was framed in a very different way than in the conservative narrative. The liberals argued that it was not that the US could not defeat communists in Central America that was the problem; rather, it was the Reagan administration's policies that were impacting both the credibility and the image of the United States negatively. How allies around the world perceived the US, according to the liberal narrative, was that of a belligerent giant intervening needlessly in a local conflict on the side of a murderous and repressive regime, attempting to use force to stem the tide of inevitable change, and attached to an anachronistic world order. It was not that the US would be perceived as weak if it did not bolster the Salvadoran regime; rather, by doing so, it was being perceived in exactly the same way as the Soviet Union was perceived when it invaded Afghanistan: as an aggressive and imperialist power.[84]

[83] Perhaps this difference was partly due to the different pressures that liberals were constrained by; for Carter, increasing conservative criticism over being "soft" on communism as well as warnings from the more traditional institutions of the national security establishment (CIA, NSA, Pentagon) over the "communist threat" in Central America forced him to diverge from his rhetorical commitment to human rights; for members of Congress, this was not the case, and particularly after Reagan's victory, when liberals were in the political opposition, they were more free to criticize the US government's policies. In any case, there were important differences between these two camps.

[84] See for instance Hearings, Richard E. Feinberg, "National Bipartisan Report on Central America," 1984, 184-190

What were the causes of the crisis?

First and foremost, in the liberal narrative the crisis in El Salvador was understood to be the product of deeply rooted historical injustices. It was in fact a predictable outcome of the highly unequal wealth and land distribution, widespread poverty, and political repression in the country. As reporter Anthony Lewis summed it up: "the revolutionary movement did not originate abroad but began as an indigenous response to a century of right-wing exploitation enforced by state terrorism."[85] This understanding of the causes of the crisis was shared by most liberals, and was repeatedly invoked during congressional debates to challenge the conservative narrative. For instance, as LeoGrande testified to Congress in 1981:

> For generations, the government of El Salvador has served as the guardian of the landed oligarchy, suppressing by force any challenge to the nation's grossly unequal social order. The army has held political power since 1932 when it seized the government in order to crush a peasant revolt, a mission it accomplished at the cost of 30,000 lives. For the next half-century, the military retained its monopoly on political power, meeting all civilian demands for reform with electoral fraud and repression. By the late 1970s, this intransigency had spawned massive popular opposition to the regime and a guerrilla insurgency of major proportions.[86]

In the liberal narrative, the villains were not the Soviet or Cubans, and nor were they the communist guerillas; the real culprits in the crisis in El Salvador were inequality, poverty, and repression overseen and perpetuated by the army and the oligarchy; and the real heroes were the poor and desperate people challenging this system of oppression. Because these people had been unable to change things through peaceable means, having been met only with "election fraud and repression" by those in power, they had been forced to turn to the revolutionaries.

By the time the Reagan administration was deepening its involvement in El Salvador, the liberal narrative was quite clear about the consequences of US intervention: Reagan's policies

[85] Anthony Lewis, "Abroad at Home; Haig's Best-Laid Plans," *NYT*, March 8, 1981
[86] Prepared Statement by William LeoGrande, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1981, 92

were exacerbating the crisis. However, when it comes to the question of the historical role of the US in fermenting the crisis in El Salvador, we once again can see two different perspectives within the liberal narrative: one that held the US partly responsible, due particularly to its lack of attention and general ignorance about the country; and one which held that the US bore significant responsibility for the crisis by systematically supporting the reactionary forces that had maintained the miserable conditions leading to the revolution. The first perspective was represented mainly by the Carter administration officials, and by more moderate Democratic congressional critics of the Reagan administration, while the second perspective was represented by more left-leaning Democratic congressional critics, as well as the left-leaning intellectuals and think tanks.

In the first perspective, there was some ambiguity about the role and responsibility of United States in creating the conditions for the crisis in El Salvador. For instance, addressing the general assembly of the Organization for American States (OAS) in 1980, President Carter proclaimed that, "[f]or too long, the United States seemed wedded to the status quo, even when that meant a continuation of poverty, social injustice, and even political repression. That attitude betrayed my Nation's dynamism and our faith and confidence in the future." [87] Here, it seemed, Carter was quite bluntly attributing responsibility to the US for the conditions that had led to the crisis by being "wedded to the status quo," and thereby, however unintentionally, supporting "poverty, social injustice, and even political repression." However, Carter softened his criticism by using the word "seem;" this is what the US "seemed" to have been doing, and not necessarily what they had been doing, and certainly not intentionally. Similarly, speaking in the White House in April 1980, Carter explained how "[i]n many nations of the South, the "U.S. Government" itself is at least partially suspect [as responsible for the problems these countries face]—likely without

[87] Carter, "Organization of American States Remarks," 1980.

good reason, on occasion with reason."[88] In speeches such as these, we can hear the ambiguity vis a vis the US' relationship to Central America quite clearly: on the one hand, Carter was admitting that the US bore some responsibility for the crisis: it "seemed" like it had supported injustice and repression, and it was "at least partially suspect" in its dealings with this region "on occasion, with [good] reasons." In this way, Carter seemed to be seeking to placate the more critical voices both in the US and in Central America; and he seemed to be attempting to foster some understanding between these critics and the US government by demonstrating some level of humility in accepting a certain degree of responsibility, however limited and qualified, for the troubled situation in many Central American countries. At the same time, he maintained that whatever criticism the US' past behavior warranted, that behaviour was the result of the US "betraying" its true essence, which was to fight the good fight, and to support anyone attempting to transform their country from its disaffected status quo into a democratic and just society. Indeed, during his tenure, Carter proclaimed that this past US behavior, "thank God, has now been changed. We understand and support the necessity of peaceful and moderate political progress in Central America and elsewhere in this hemisphere."[89]

Ambassador White, a staunch supporter of Carter's policies, also viewed the history of the US' involvement in Central America as somewhat ambiguous. In the years preceding Carter, White argued that the US's policies had been mistaken, and had contributed to the problems Central America faced at the time: "As we search for reasons to explain the causes of our problems in the region, look first to these fourteen years [1962-1977] when our policymaking officials ignored Central America except to reiterate support for the corrupt dictatorships of Nicaragua, El

[88] Carter, "Caribbean/Central American Action Remarks," 1980.
[89] Carter, "Organization of American States Remarks," 1980

Salvador, and Guatemala"[90] Not only did successive US governments "ignore" Central America as an unimportant region for the US, they also wrongly supported "corrupt dictatorships." The US had followed a path that was counterproductive both to the development of Central America and to its own self-interests. At the same time, White pointed out, this had not always been the case, and he identified a number of examples of reasonable US policies in the more distant history of US-Central America relations. Thus, he argued,

> [i]f we temper the exclusive concern of the Reagan administration for the Security of the area with the wisdom of Woodrow Wilson's support for constitutional government, the sensitivity of Franklin Roosevelts Good Neighborhood Policy, the vision of John Kennedy's Alliance for Progress and the idealism of Jimmy Carter's Human Rights Doctrine, we will have the building block of a realistic, enlightened policy.[91]

In other words, the US had not only and always been mistaken in its policies towards the region and towards El Salvador; there had, in fact, been many instances in this history in which the US had acted rightly. Thus, for both White and Carter, while there had been mistakes in the past when it came to US policy in Central America, these mistakes did not constitute the whole story, and, therefore, by drawing both on those positive parts of its past as well as on its inherently benevolent nature, the US was certainly able to develop a "realistic and enlightened" set of policies to deal with El Salvador.

The second perspective within the liberal narrative was far less ambiguous than the first perspective concerning the question of the role the US had played in fermenting the conditions giving rise to the revolutionary situation, and the degree of responsibility the US should accept and acknowledge for supporting the forces of injustice and repression. A report issued by the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), one of the most left-leaning liberal think tanks at the time, summarized this second perspective's view about the roots of the crisis in Central America:

[90] White, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1982, 120
[91] Ibid., 119

> The revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala are rooted in poverty and political repression. In each country, the economic system has been dominated for generations by a wealthy few, securing their privilege through military repression. During the first 30 years of this century, repeated U.S. interventions helped protect that order against periodic social revolts.[92]

This second perspective maintained, like the first, that poverty, political repression and the unjust economic system maintained by the various oligarchies were responsible for the revolutions. But where it differed from the first perspective was its contention that it was the US that had protected this system of misery and suffering by providing support for the status quo. An examination of the 30-year period at the beginning of the twentieth century that the IPS report summarized, including the part that White had characterized as "the wisdom of Woodrow Wilson's support for constitutional government," further elucidates the differences between the two perspectives within the liberal narrative. In fact, a brief examination of the military interventions and continuing US occupations of Central American and Caribbean countries during Wilson's presidency supports the IPS's characterization of the US' role in maintaining the status quo in Central America during the period despite White's claims about Wilson's idealistic rhetoric elevating constitutional rule and progress.[93] Indeed, in assessing the US' involvement in the region from the beginning of the 20th century, from Roosevelt's Good Neighborhood Policy to Reagan's counterinsurgency programs, the more left-leaning voices that constituted the second perspective in the liberal narrative agreed with LeFeber's assessment that the United States had generally maintained

[92] Policy Alternatives for the Caribbean and Central America [PACCA], *Changing Course: A Blueprint for Peace in Central America and the Caribbean,* (Washington D.C.: The Institute for Policy Studies, 1984), 13.
[93] See for instance the important revisionist work, William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, New Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972); see also Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Thomas D. Schoonover, *The United States in Central America, 1860–1911: Episodes of Social Imperialism and Imperial Rivalry in the World System.* (Durham and London Duke University Press, 1991); Whitney Perkins, *The United States and Caribbean Intervention* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981). For a different interpretation, see Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

support for the status quo. The IPS report went so far as to argue that "even Carter, who promised a change, followed old patterns and ended his admin by bolstering the anti-democratic forces."[94]

Similarly, there were some voices in the liberal narrative who were even more vocal and detailed in their criticism of recent US policy. One of these voices, that of representative Mary Rose Oakar, bemoaned the fact that "[t]hirty years ago, we began training Salvadoran military officers. Today, there are over 2,000 American-trained Salvadoran officers in control of the security forces in El Salvador. What has been the result? I will not document here the evidence of systematic terror and genocide which some of these officers have inflicted on their own people."[95] Here we can see that Oakar directly linked the training of Salvadoran officers by the US to the "systematic terror and genocide" in El Salvador, making the US complicit in that terror and genocide. Oakar and the other left-leaning voices in the liberal narrative frankly admitted that the US was partly responsible both for the atrocities and for the revolutionary situation at play in El Salvador.

While this difference among liberals in the interpretation of the US' role and responsibility in El Salvador is important, it is equally important to remember that both the Carter liberals and the left-leaning liberals agreed that the crisis in El Salvador was the product of deep-rooted historical problems, indigenous in nature, and culminating in violent upheaval. This was one of the key differences between the liberal and the conservative narratives, as explained by Senator Dodd in 1983:

> What we have here is a fundamental misunderstanding that Ambassador Kirkpatrick and the Administration have in their absolute refusal to understand the indigenous nature of these revolutionary movements and what's happening in this hemisphere… They refuse to understand that these revolutions are caused by conditions [and] the effect of that is to draw

[94] PACCA, *Changing Course,* 23
[95] Prepared Statement by Mary Rose Oakar, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1981, 10

> in Marxist elements. But the Marxists didn't create the revolution or the conditions for it. They take advantage of them.[96]

What should the US do?

In the liberal narrative, only by truly understanding the sources of the revolutionary situation in El Salvador could the US possibly hope to pursue policies that could address the crisis there and best secure the interests of both the US and El Salvador. And to truly understand these sources meant having a proper understanding of the inevitable march of history from authoritarianism and backwardness to progress and democracy. Accordingly, the United States should be on the side of history and progress. Therefore, it should not oppose the revolution in El Salvador, but guide it. In Senator Pell's words: "I believe that countries like El Salvador where you have a small oligarchy and a large peasantry, you have countries that are ripe for revolution. And if this revolution is blocked, it will eventually become even more explosive. Out task is thus not to block revolution but to guide it."[97] All liberals agreed that the conditions in El Salvador had to change, that this change was inevitable, and that it should therefore be accepted and embraced by the US, whose true role was to act as a "guide" so that the changes would be most beneficial for both El Salvador and the US.

Indeed, the liberal narrative spoke with one voice when it came to the principles that should guide US policy in El Salvador in response to the crisis: non-interventionism, respect for human rights, and an emphasis on regional diplomacy and political solutions as opposed to unilateralism and militarism. At the same time, however, we also find important differences between the moderate Carter liberals and the left-leaning liberals in terms of what the best US response in El Salvador should be. These differences are partly reflected in the discrepancy between Carter's

[96] Cited in "Mrs. Kirkpatrick Critical of Dodd," *NYT*, 1 May 1983.
[97] Claiborne Pell, "National Bipartisan Report on Central America," 1984, 3

rhetoric and his policies. Notably, Carter's foreign policy philosophy was shaped by the principals of the anti-war movement, and, as such, it closely reflected the general turn to the left by the Democrats. Particularly early on in his presidency, Carter repeatedly emphasized the human rights approach to foreign policy, he eschewed both US militarism and interventionism, and he was wary of the US obsession with the East-West conflict. As late as in 1980, he argued that the US "must insist upon a strict policy of non-intervention as the people of these two nations [El Salvador and Nicaragua] design their own future."[98]

However, after Carter resumed military and economic aid to El Salvador in 1979, there emerged a significant and quite clear discrepancy between the rhetoric of the Carter administration and the policies it pursued. Specifically, by supporting the government and the army in El Salvador, despite the rationalizations of the Carter administration about the newfound desire of the Salvadoran government to reform and curb human rights abuses, the US was clearly and directly supporting the forces of violence and repression. Accordingly, Carter's policies were staunchly opposed by many observers both in and outside El Salvador. For instance, before he was assassinated by a death squad with ties to the highest echelons of the Salvadoran army, Archbishop Oscar A. Romero warned Carter that military aid to the government, however sincere it appeared to be pushing for reform, would only exacerbate the situation and increase violence, repression, and intransigence:

> I am deeply troubled by the news that the government of the United States should be studying the way to favor the militarist path of El Salvador by sending military equipment and advisors to "train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications and intelligence." In the event that this journalistic information is true, your government's contribution, rather than favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador will make injustice and repression against the organization of the people, who have been struggling for the respect of their most fundamental rights, even more acute.…the political power is

[98] Carter, "Organization of American States Remarks," 1980

> in the hands of military men without scruples, who only know how to oppress the people and favor the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy.[99]

Despite this warning, in late 1980 the Carter administration initiated the very policies Romero had warned against. For Romero, any policies in support of the government would squarely place the US on the "wrong" side of history and progress. Romero clearly refuted Carter's claim that there was a political center with power in El Salvador independent of the "military men without scruples." For Romero, no such political center existed. In any case, the discrepancy and contradiction inherent in both supporting human rights and supporting the worst human rights abuser is clear. Indeed, it is only by narrowly defining interventionism as the *direct military presence of US troops* that Carter's policy of providing military aid and equipment, training military officers in counterinsurgency techniques, and sending military advisors to El Salvador can be seen as *not* constituting US interventionism. Clearly, Carter's adherence to his own human rights principles were tenuous at best in his last two years in power. It required, in fact, a certain blindness to the reality in El Salvador to see the effects of US policies pursued as much different from the history of past US support for the status quo. Indeed, Carter's policies, and the justifications for those policies, closely resembled those of the Reagan administration. Furthermore, they were substantially in line with the conservative narrative, particularly among its more moderate voices who emphasized the positive role the US had played, and could further play in curbing violence and pushing for reform.

In any case, regardless of the internal contradictions and disagreements in the liberal narrative between the actual policies pursued by the Carter administration and the ideology and principles that were supposed to undergird these, by the time the Reagan administration had

[99] Oscar A. Romero, "Romero's Letter" *Department of State*, 1980, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/doc04.pdf

decided to escalate and intensify US involvement in El Salvador and its support for the army, there was a clear consensus in the liberal narrative that following this path was detrimental to both the people of El Salvador and to the interests of the United States. (It is an ironic fact, though, that during Reagan's presidency, many liberal voices harshly criticized his administration for the very policies that the Carter administration had initiated.)

By providing military assistance, the liberals argued, the US would become too entangled in the repression carried out by the army and government. As former Ambassador White warned, "[a]s the Salvadoran military have never been too careful to distinguish between who is a guerilla and who is just someone who may be sympathetic or who may be in the same area, I fear that a great many people may be killed after having received the council of our advisors and that concerns me." [100] For White, it would not serve either the interests of the US or El Salvador to support a regime that indiscriminately killed people. Therefore, as White argued, sending military assistance and military advisors simply did not make sense unless the army were serious about curbing human rights violations: "unless we put strings attached on our assistance, our military assistance, we are going to be accompanying and identified with a very repressive force."[101]

Liberals believed that the US needed to understand the true nature of the government in El Salvador. After Reagan took power, the liberal narrative became united in its condemnation of the Salvadoran government, fully in line with Archbishop Romero's view. In the liberal narrative, despite the potential for reform that the junta had shown initially after the coup in 1979, the junta had since shown itself to be completely under the control of the oligarchs and the conservative generals. In LeoGrande's words: "Despite the efforts of the State Department to portray the Salvadoran regime as a centrist government assailed by extremists of both the right and left, there

[100] White, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1981, 141
[101] Ibid., 141

are only two contending sides in El Salvador's civil war: a government dominated by rightist military officers and its opposition."[102] The argument repeatedly made by the Reagan administration throughout the 1980s, and the one Carter had made in 1979-1980 – that the Salvadoran government was attempting to curb violence – was therefore seen as absurd because the government itself was controlled by the very people that were carrying out or supporting the violence that the government was supposed to be curbing. In other words, there was no political center, as Carter had initially claimed there was; there were only the preservers of the status quo and their opponents.

It is important to point out that underlying the policy prescriptions put forth in the liberal narrative was a version of history in which people fighting injustice and oppression were bound to succeed, and those standing on the wrong side, on the side of oppression, were bound to loose. This had been the case in Vietnam, as Senator Dodd argued, and it was the case in El Salvador:

> American dollars alone cannot buy military victory – that is the lesson of the painful past and of this newest conflict in Central America. If we continue down that road, if we continue to ally ourselves with repression, we will not only deny our own most basic values, we will also find ourselves once again on the losing side. It is folly, pure and simple, to pursue a course which is wrong in principle – in order to wage a conflict which cannot be won.[103]

The logic of the liberal narrative was as follows: If the problems in El Salvador were indigenous in nature, and if the opposition to the status quo, many of whom had taken up arms to challenge the injustice of the status quo, reflected legitimate grievances of the people of El Salvador; and, further, if it were in the interests of the US to take the side of oppressed, and if the Salvadoran government was the oppressor, which it clearly was in the liberal lens, then it did not make sense for the US to support, let alone send weapons to such a government. Instead of simply

[102] LeoGrande, "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador," 1981, 93
[103] Dodd, "Transcript of Response to Reagan Speech on Central America," *NYT,* April 28, 1983,

continuing to provide the Salvadoran government with money, arms, and support, and hoping thereby that the guerillas would be defeated, as the Reagan administration was doing, the liberal narrative argued that the US should call for a cease-fire, force the government to enter into negotiations, and involve regional actors in these negations. So, instead of acting unilaterally and attempting to force its will on the small country of El Salvador, and in the process multiplying the misery and violence suffered by the Salvadoran people, the US ought to recognize that "the days when the United States could easily work its will in Central America" were gone, and that only by acting multilaterally could US interests be preserved.[104] Thus, the liberals argued, frameworks such as Contadora – which involved regional countries such as Venezuela and Mexico helping to end the conflict peacefully – were the only way forward for El Salvador. And for the US, the liberal argument went, such a course would furthermore "preserve the moral authority—the credibility—of the United States."[105]

Finally, although most liberals agreed that the Reagan administration's approach to the crisis in El Salvador was misguided both in terms of strategy and morality, there was some disagreement among liberals when it came to the question of whether or not the United States should accept a leftist regime in El Salvador. While Senator Dodd staunchly asserted that the US should "oppose the establishment of Marxist states in Central America,"[106] other liberals argued that leftist governments, even communist and Marxist ones, need not be antithetical to US interests so long as they were not aligned with the USSR. Indeed, as Feinberg argued, the US should not be opposed to any leftist regime on principle, even if they were self-proclaimed Marxists or Communists, because not all communists were puppets of the USSR with the same goals. Instead,

[104] Feinberg, "National Bipartisan Report on Central America," 1984, 188
[105] Ibid., 207; for an examination of the Contadora efforts, see James Dunkerley, "Central American Blueprint," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Oct., 1984): 1097-1101
[106] Dodd, "Response to Reagan's Speech on Central America," 1983

if a leftist regime were "separate from the Soviet strategic network" and, importantly, if it were "integrated within the Western economic system," the US should allow such regimes some level of respect.[107] In other words, as long as El Salvador remained open to US economic influence and did not became a bastion of Soviet expansionism, the US could and should cooperate with it.

In contrast to the conservative narrative then, the liberal narrative was generally more tolerant of different forms of government. While it is obvious that in the conservative narrative US influence in El Salvador was assumed to be the natural state of affairs, and that, therefore, it was well within the right of the US to intervene in El Salvador if conditions were deemed unfavorable to US interests – indeed, this right was not even discussed, it was merely assumed – this assumption can also be seen in the liberal narrative, albeit in a more subtle form, when it came to the debate about whether or not the US should accept a Marxist regime in El Salvador. For moderate liberals arguing that the US should not accept "Marxist states in Central America," it logically follows that the US ought to do something to prevent such an outcome; in other words, the US ought to intervene in one way or another so that the Marxists would not rule any states in Central America. Even in the more left-leaning liberal view that the US could accept such a Marxist regime so long as it was non-aligned and it operated within the "western economic system," it also follows that if those conditions were violated, if El Salvador were to become overtly pro-USSR, or allow USSR military advisors into the country, nd/or if it withdrew from the western capitalist system, closing off the possibility for foreign investment, etc., then also here, in the left-leaning liberal view, it logically follows that the US should intervene to prevent such an outcome. In either case, whether or not the US had *the right to intervene* in El Salvador was not challenged. Both in the liberal and conservative narratives, regardless of how hard line or moderate or progressive the voices were, it

[107] Feinberg, "National Bipartisan Report on Central America," 1984, 207

was assumed that US power should be used in El Salvador to further US interests, notwithstanding the wishes of the population of El Salvador. The differences between the various views lay in what conditions could justify such a US intervention.

3: Attempting to Bridge the Gap: The Kissinger Commission

Before moving on to the third and final narrative analysed in this thesis, it is useful to first briefly examine the report whose purpose it was to attempt to align the liberal and conservative views of the crisis in Central America: the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (the Kissinger Commission). In response to the widespread resistance to the Reagan administration's policies in El Salvador, (and the rest of Central America), both in Congress and among the US public, the Kissinger Commission was created in 1983 by executive order to "study the nature of United States interests in the Central American region and the threats now posed to those interests," to advise the US government on the best long-term policies, and to build "a national consensus on a comprehensive United States policy for the region."[108] Released in 1984, the report produced by the Kissinger Commission is significant because it can be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap between the liberal and the conservative narratives by combining them into a single, coherent narrative that could, and hopefully would, provide a newfound consensus on USFP towards/in Central America. While the Kissinger Commission's Report stimulated much debate about US policy in Central America, it ultimately fell short of its goal to overcome the schisms between liberals and conservatives, and it was rejected by both groups for different reasons.

[108] Ronald Reagan, "Executive Order 12433—National Bipartisan Commission on Central America," *The American Presidency Project*, July 19, 1983.

What was the crisis in El Salvador and why did it matter to the US?

Weaving together elements from both the conservative and liberal narratives, the Kissinger Commission's Report argued that the crisis in El Salvador had come about as the result of a combination of historically rooted problems and the exploitation of these problems by the Soviet Union and its proxies in Central America and Cuba. The Kissinger Commission's narrative agreed with the liberals that the Salvadoran people faced severe hardships, including gross inequality and poverty as well as the government and military's intransigence and violent repression, and, therefore, that they had legitimate grievances that needed to be addressed. While this was in and of itself problematic for the United States, the overriding concern of the US, and the reason the US considered ES so important/why El Salvador was so important, was that these legitimate grievances and the general instability in the country had made El Salvador vulnerable to external intrusion. As the report stated: "the intrusion of aggressive outside powers exploiting local grievances to expand their own political influence and military control is a serious threat to the United States, and to the entire hemisphere."[109] These "outside powers" were the Soviet Union and its proxies. In fact, the Kissinger Commission's narrative ultimately agreed with the conservative narrative that the Soviet threat was the primary danger facing the US. In this way, while the Kissinger Commission's Report stressed the indigenous elements of the crisis, and was critical of the role the past and the present political, economic, and social structures in El Salvador had played in causing the crisis, these issues were subordinated to the threat of a possible communist intrusion.

The narrative in the Kissinger Commission's Report thereby situated itself squarely within the conventional Cold War framework. Because the most important facet of USFP was

[109] The National Bipartisan Commission on Central America [Kissinger Commission], *Report of the National Bipartisan on Central America*. (January 1984), (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing Co, 1998), 4

the struggle against the USSR, any signs of Soviet expansionism were seen as "a serious threat" not only to the US, but "to the entire hemisphere." In other words, the USSR and its evil ideology of communism threatened the peace and prosperity of all the freedom-loving peoples in the hemisphere, and only by countering this expansion of "political influence and military control" could the US and the rest of the hemisphere be safe. Analogous to the liberal and conservative narratives, underlying this line of argumentation was the myth of benevolent US self-interest: in short, that the self-interests of the US were inherently in line with the interests of all other people in the western hemisphere.

What were the causes of the crisis?

The narrative in the Kissinger Commission's Report about the causes of the crisis in El Salvador also combined elements of both the liberal and conservative narratives. First, in contrast to the conservatives, the report's narrative actually examined the historical record to understand why and how the crisis had developed in Central America. It found, in line with the liberal narrative, that the crisis could best be understood as the culmination of deeply rooted structural problems under which the people of El Salvador had suffered for many decades. Indeed, the report's narrative was sympathetic to the plight of average Salvadorans who had suffered under "the tortured history of Central America," and it was also sympathetic to the legitimate aspirations of Salvadorans to change their situation. [110] However, the report's narrative ultimately situated itself closer to the conservative one in in its description of how these aspirations had been highjacked by the Soviet Union and its proxies who had were trying to turn

[110] Kissinger Commission, *Report*, 4.

what had been a genuine attempt to change the status quo into an attempt by communists to take over the small country.

Likewise, when it came to the question of US involvement in El Salvador, the narrative in the Kissinger Commission's Report also attempted to balance the perspectives of both conservatives and liberals. It is important to note here that the section in the Report tracing the historical background of the crisis in Central America was separated into two parts: one that examined the internal history of Central America, which constituted most of this section, and the other part that examined US involvement in the region, which constituted only five pages out of 39.[111] In this way, we can see that in its' examination of the background to the crisis in El Salvador, the narrative in the Report acknowledged both "the tortured history of Central America" as well as the legitimate grievances of the peoples of the region, but, and it is a significant but, this "tortured history" was presented/described as separate and largely unrelated to the history of US involvement in the region.

In sum, the Kissinger Commission's Report argued that "the United States has been involved, sometimes intimately, in the affairs of Central America for more than a century. The record of that past is a mixed one; it must be understood if we are to address today's crisis constructively."[112] Although the Kissinger Commission attempted to portray itself as fair and balanced by admitting that the "record of the past" was "mixed," this admission can be seen more as a veneer than as any real attempt at self-examination. In the short section on the US's historical involvement in the region, the report glossed over and whitewashed much of the history of that US involvement. This included either downplaying or ignoring the many direct US military interventions in the region, as well as the US's continued support for current brutal

[111] Ibid., 1-39.
[112] Ibid., 34.

military dictatorships. In this regard, the report differed significantly from the left-leaning voices in the liberal narrative who posed a far more serious critique. At the same time, the most critical part the Kissinger Commission did echo the moderate liberal view:

> It may be that U.S. diplomacy gave too little attention to the growing problems in Central America during the past two decades. Certainly, the U.S. has at times been insensitive, at times interfering, at times preoccupied elsewhere. This is a far cry, however, from saying, as the Sandinista National Directorate and others say, that this nation's policies have been the principal cause of the region's afflictions.[113]

As we can see, the ideological position of the narrative in the Kissinger Commission's Report can be situated somewhere between the moderate liberal and the moderate conservative view. The only real criticism in the report of US involvement in causing the crisis was left deliberatively vague (the "mixed record" of the US having been "insensitive" or "interfering"). Furthermore, through the separation of the sections in the report on the internal history of Central America and the history of US involvement in the region, any responsibility the US had for "the tortured history of Central America" was erased. Though the report's narrative was certainly more critical than the conservative one, whose only criticism of US involvement in the region was that the Carter administration had abandoned the traditional allies of the US (the brutal military dictatorships) to the communists, the Kissinger Commission Report's narrative did not go so far as the more left-leaning liberals did in assigning blame and responsibility to the US for the crisis in El Salvador.

What should the US do?

In its recommended policies, the narrative in the Kissinger Commission's Report contained a mixture of liberal and conservative proposals. First, its statement of purpose for the

[113] Ibid., 37

US's role in Central America is clearly in line with the liberal narrative: "The international purposes of the United State in the late twentieth century are cooperation, not hegemony or domination; partnership, not confrontation; a decent life for all, not exploitation. Those objectives must be achievable in this hemisphere if they can be realized anywhere."[114] This stated purpose, however, stood in stark contrast to the continued militarization of the crisis in El Salvador and the rest of Central America that the Kissinger Commission also recommended – in line with the conservative narrative. Although the report rejected the direct involvement of US troops in El Salvador, it argued for expanding the programs of arming and training the Salvadoran Army, though, notably, with the proviso that it improve its human rights record.

Lefeber summed up well the various proposals of the Kissinger Commission, and how they both reflected and were opposed by the positions of the various actors involved in the Central American crisis:

> The report combined ideas from Reagan's military policy, Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, and Eisenhower's use of the C.I.A. None of these policies had created happy results. Specifically, the commission urges a huge aid program that Congress (facing an incredible $200 billion budget deficit) opposed; a large military package that Contadora and other regional nations opposed; and the linking of military aid to observing human rights practices—which Reagan opposed.[115]

As LeFeber's summation indicates, the proposals of the Kissinger Commission were critiqued from all sides: Liberal critics argued that the continuation of the militarization of the crisis was dangerous, and they dismissed the Report's analysis as one-sided and biased. The conservative

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[114] Ibid., 8

[115] LeFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions,* 299. Note that Contadora was the name of the regional attempt by primarily Mexico and Venezuela (as well as other countries) to arrive at a diplomatic and political solution to the Central American crisis. See chapters five, six, and seven in the Bipartisan report for its policy proposals in full, as well as James Dunkerley, "Central American Blueprint," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Oct., 1984), 1097-1101 for a critical examination of these proposals. For other critical assessments of the Kissinger Commission's report, see for instance Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Failings of the Kissinger Report," *NYT*, Jan. 17, 1984 and Larry Hufford, *The United States in Central America: An Analysis of the Kissinger Commission Report*, (NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984).

critics questioned the large amounts earmarked in the report for non-military aid, as well as the preconditions placed on human rights improvements that military aid would depend on. To sum up, while the Kissinger Commission succeeded in weaving together a narrative combining elements of both the liberal and conservative ones, its attempt to bridge the gap between them proved unsuccessful. The gap between the liberal and conservative narratives was simply too large for the Kissinger Commission to be able to bridge and forge some kind of consensus. At the same time, as we have seen, the similarities between the two narratives were more significant than the antagonism between them suggested in that both narratives rested on certain underlying assumptions and myths about the nature and role of US in the region that were strikingly similar. For a critical view of both these narratives, as well as their underlying assumptions and myths, we can now turn to the third and final narrative analyzed in depth.

4: Chomsky's Radical Narrative

Chomsky's radical narrative about the crisis in El Salvador can best be understood as part of a broader critique of US imperialism that Chomsky had been engaged with since the early 1960s, (and continues to be engaged with today). As a political dissident and radical intellectual, Chomsky was highly critical of the liberal institutions as well as the liberal ideological frameworks that undergirded US foreign policy (and US domestic policy).[116] Consequently, despite sharing some important similarities with the more left-leaning voices in the liberal narrative, what makes Chomsky's narrative radical is that he challenged the underlying assumptions and myths about the very nature of the US and its role in the world that both the conservative and liberal narratives relied on. In Chomsky's narrative, the United States may have possessed some unique features

[116] See for instance Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins,* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969)

compared to other great powers, (such as being the most powerful nation-state the world has ever seen in terms of both economic and military might, as well as its position of being relatively geographically isolated), but he rejected the orthodox narrative put forth by US officials, politicians, intellectuals as well as most of the mainstream media.[117] The orthodox narrative Chomsky rejected depicted the US as being inherently benevolent, a nation whose goals were to spread the principles of freedom, democracy, prosperity and justice throughout the world, the leader of the Free World that was pitted against the forces of evil – mainly represented by Soviet communism). In his counter-narrative, Chomsky argued that the primary goal of the US was, and had always been, to maintain and expand its power for the benefit of its ruling classes, a goal that the US unexceptionally shared with all other imperialist powers that had existed in the history of the world.

For Chomsky then, the crisis in the small country of El Salvador should be understood primarily in terms of US imperialism, as it was located in a region that had been squarely in the US' sphere of influence for at least a century. Indeed, Chomsky argued that by examining this crisis in El Salvador, and both the US' policies in the country and their rhetoric used to legitimize those policies, one could gain valuable insight into the workings of US power projection. In Chomsky's narrative, the picture such an investigation painted was stark. There was no doubt about the role the US had and continued to play: it was directly responsible for the terror, violence, and general misery faced by the Salvadoran population during the crisis. Notably, while Chomsky's narrative fundamentally challenged the conventional narratives about the US and the crisis in El Salvador, it did itself rest on certain assumptions and myths about the US. As such, in its condemnation of US policy and its rejection of that any benevolent motive lay behind US

[117] See for instance Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," *New York Review of Books*, 1967

policy, Chomsky's narrative at times glossed over certain nuances and ambiguities that a closer examination of US policy revealed, (as discussed below). While such nuances and ambiguities are important, it is undoubtedly true that any narrative will rely on certain assumptions and generalizations given the immense complexity of human society and history. Regardless of its shortcomings, though, it is the argument of this thesis that Chomsky's narrative provides an important critical perspective on the conservative and liberal narrative as it challenges the underlying assumptions and myths on which they rely.

What was the crisis in El Salvador and why did it matter to the US?

In Chomsky's narrative, the crisis in El Salvador could be understood from two different perspectives: the perspective of the US government and the Salvadoran elites and army on the one hand, and the perspective of the majority of the Salvadoran people on the other hand. From the perspective of the US government et. al, the crisis arose as a result of what Chomsky called "the threat of genuine democracy;" this was a direct "threat" to both US control in El Salvador and the rest of the region, as well as a "threat" to the power of the oligarchy/army alliance. Chomsky rejected the argument of the conservative narrative, namely, that the crisis arose as the result of Soviet/Cuban/Nicaraguan proxies that threatened to take over El Salvador as the first step in becoming the dominant regional power, and thereby posing a threat to the national security of the US. Likewise, he rejected the claim of the liberal narrative, namely, that the crisis arose as the result of the threat of instability which was caused by poverty and repression as well as the policies formed by uninformed Reagan officials. According to Chomsky's narrative, the real crisis arose as the result of a variety of popular grassroots organizations and their allies in the guerilla organizations challenging and threatening to fundamentally change the status quo in which the oligarchy and military ruled the country – both for their own wealth and power and as proxies for

the United States as part of the US' ongoing efforts to maintain dominance over the entire region and its resources. In other words, the real threat that the US government feared, Chomsky argued, was not external intrusion in the form of a Cuban/Soviet takeover in their own backyard, but rather the loss of control and dominance in El Salvador and its neighbors in a region that it had long considered its rightful domain. From the perspective of the majority of Salvadorans, it was the decimation of these popular movements that had emerged in the late 1970s – in the general context of severe poverty, misery, and political violence and repression, by the US-backed Salvadoran oligarchy/army alliance that threatened anyone challenging the status quo or was suspected of doing so – that lay behind the crisis. Indeed, by the time Reagan took over the presidency from Carter, the crisis could be seen as the utter failure of reform and peaceful change. This was reflected in the dire choice faced by most Salvadorans at that time: either accept the status quo and its miserable conditions or join the guerilla movement.

In Chomsky's narrative, the real reason El Salvador was so important to the US in the late 1970s and 1980s was because the US-controlled order in the region, including, importantly, future profits for US corporations and their subsidiaries, was threatened by the democratic movements that had emerged in the 1970s. In contrast to claims by US officials and politicians that the US was concerned with the welfare and wellbeing of the Salvadoran people, and that the goals of the US government and the Salvadoran people were actually the same – claims put forth in both the conservative and liberal narratives – Chomsky argued that the US government did not care about democratic development in El Salvador (or its neighbors). The US government cared only for preserving and expanding its influence, and it feared that real democratic development would threaten its dominance and influence in the region. For instance, when the 1972 election was "stolen" in El Salvador, and the military candidate took power, "interest [in the US] was slight,"

and the US government did nothing to pressure the anti-democratic Salvadoran government to reform. Similarly, Chomsky explained, "another electoral fraud in 1977 also aroused little interest here. Terror, torture, starvation and semi-slave labor continued in the normal manner of US Third World dependencies."[118] Interestingly, these were the very conditions that comprised what Kirkpatrick called the "bearable miseries of traditional life" – bearable because they were "familiar" for most ordinary Salvadorans. For Chomsky, these conditions were far from bearable, as evidenced by the widespread oppositional movements that had emerged in the 1970s as a response to them. Nor, for Chomsky, were these conditions, as Kirkpatrick had argued, somehow "natural" – meaning that they were a reflection of the backwards and violent cultural tendencies of Salvadorans. Rather, they represented the "normal manner of US Third World Dependencies." Indeed, Chomsky argued that it was largely *because* countries such as El Salvador were under US domination that they faced these conditions. After over a century of subordination to US interests and power – which had ensured US profits, and the continuation of supporting repressive military regimes that had created conditions of severe poverty and inequality for most Salvadorans, it was clear for Chomsky that it was the essential fact of US domination that was the core problem in El Salvador. For the US then, if we follow the logic of Chomsky's argument, any challenges to the status quo that threatened US domination constituted the real crisis. As Chomsky explained, this was evidenced in the developments that *did* cause concern in the late 1970s, (in contrast to the "terror, torture, and starvation" in El Salvador that US officials simply accepted as the status quo):

> [The first was] the fall of Somoza in 1979 [that] aroused fears in Washington that the brutal dictator of El Salvador might be overthrown, leading to loss of US control there as well. The second and still more threatening development was the growth of "popular organizations" in the 1970s: Bible study groups that became self help groups under Church sponsorship, peasant organizations, unions and the like. There was a fearsome prospect

[118] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 92

> that El Salvador might move towards meaningful democracy with opportunities for real popular participation in the political process.[119]

In Chomsky's radical narrative, the US was primarily concerned about their potential "loss of control" in El Salvador. Therefore, according to Chomsky, the signs of real democratic developments, "the growth of popular organizations," were perceived as constituting the main threat to the stability of El Salvador because they were perceived as constituting the main threat to the US-backed order. Notably, this concern about their potential loss of control occurred during the Carter administration, the same administration whose proclaimed ideological principles were respect for human rights and self-determination, as well as a breaking away from the past tendencies of the US to ally itself with repressive and anachronistic dictators. In Chomsky's narrative, however, the rhetoric of the Carter administration was nothing more than rhetoric; it was employed to justify and legitimize US foreign policies in the face of increased public scrutiny over those policies, as well as a growing global resistance to Western imperialism and domination.[120]

For Chomsky, to truly understand US interests and goals then, one should not look at the rhetoric, but at the actions of the US government. And he argued that in light of the actual policies of the Carter administration in El Salvador, its rhetorical commitment to human rights and self-determination must be seen as remaining solely in the realm of rhetoric, with little or no bearing on the reality of US behavior. Moreover, Chomsky argued that US policy was not the product of misunderstanding and ignorance about the political situation in El Salvador. Indeed, the Carter administration was fully aware of the potential consequences of providing military assistance to the Salvadoran government, evidence of which can be seen in Chomsky's description of Archbishop Romero's letter sent to Carter:

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[119] Ibid., 92

[120] See for instance Craig Murphy, *The Emergence of the NIEO Ideology*, (Boulder, CO, 1984).

> In February 1980, Archbishop Romero pleaded with President Carter not to provide the junta with military aid, which, he observed, "will surely increase injustice here and sharpen the repression that has been unleashed against the people's organizations fighting to defend their most fundamental human rights." Political power, he wrote, is "in the hands of the armed forces" who "know only how to repress the people and defend the interests of the Salvadorian oligarchy"…But increasing the repression, destroying the people's organizations, and preventing independence were *the very essence of US policy*, so Carter ignored the Archbishop's plea and sent the aid, to "strengthen the army's key role in reforms".[121] [Emphasis added.]

Whereas the more critical voices in the liberal narrative had also criticized the Carter administration for its failed US policies in El Salvador that had led to severe and dire consequences for the Salvadoran people, (terror, repression, starvation, etc.), there was a qualitative difference between these critiques and Chomsky's. In the liberal narrative, these consequences were understood as unfortunate side-effects of US policies, as the product of erroneous policies and ignorance about the realities in El Salvador, primarily the mistaken idea that it was a battleground in the global Cold War. Chomsky's narrative understood these consequences in a fundamentally different way: they were neither based on mistakes nor ignorance; they were "the very essence of US policy." In other words, it was no mistake that Carter had sent aid to "strengthen the army's key role in reforms," despite the knowledge that the army was the central perpetrator of repression and violence. This was a role that, unsurprisingly for Chomsky, the army did not perform well, or even at all. On the contrary, it was because the army was seen as the best way to "destroy the people's organization [and] preventing independence" that the Carter administration bolstered its military capabilities. For Chomsky, the results of this policy were clear: "Carter's war was successful. The popular organizations, dissident political forces, and the independent media were

[121] Ibid., 93; for the full letter sent to President Carter by the Archbishop, see "Romero's Letter" *Department of State*, 1980, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB339/doc04.pdf

eliminated, along with some 10,000 people, many killed after hideous torture. The threat of democracy in El Salvador had been stilled."[122]

Thus, in Chomsky's narrative, from the actual as opposed to the purported perspective of the US, the crisis was the "threat of democracy" that Carter had managed to "still," temporarily at least; and from the perspective of the majority of Salvadorans, "Carter's war" had successfully eliminated the possibility for any democratic development, and for any real or substantial social progress. However, Chomsky pointed out, this was not how the crisis in El Salvador was being debated in the US:

> The debate in mainstream circles, as noted, is contained strictly within the framework established by the state propaganda system: Is Nicaragua offering assistance to guerrillas in El Salvador that is, in the real world, to people defending themselves from American terror? The US government claims that it is, and is thus engaged in "armed attack" against El Salvador, which entitles the US to respond in "collective self-defence." Critics note that the evidence is unconvincing, and therefore question whether Nicaragua is guilty of such an armed attack. But the major issue, clearly, is the American attack against much of the population of El Salvador, and this issue is excluded from the framework of debate set by the state and accepted by the critics.[123]

Certainly, for the Reagan administration and in the conservative narrative, the issue of Nicaraguan military assistance was much discussed, and there was much "evidence" released "showing" the flow of weapons into El Salvador from Nicaragua and Cuba, which was used to justify the continued and expanded military aid to the Salvadoran military. Similarly, liberal critics of the conservative narrative and of Reagan's policies spent some time debunking this "evidence," while at the same time agreeing that Nicaragua was a threat and that if a significant flow of weapons *was* detected, it would be necessary to prevent this flow. Most critics, whether conservative or liberal, accepted the Reagan administration's assumptions about Nicaragua and

[122] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 96
[123] Ibid., 113

about the danger of a guerilla victory in El Salvador. This is not particularly surprising given the widespread liberal acceptance of the basic premises of the Cold War.

However, as we have seen, many liberals did not see the issue of arms flow as the only problem; in fact, particularly in the early 1980s, the left-leaning voices in the liberal narrative went to great lengths to challenge the conservative narrative and the Reagan administration's policies on ethical grounds; they argued repeatedly that it was morally wrong to supply El Salvador with weapons and aid in the face of continued repression and violence. For these liberals, the Reagan administration completely misunderstood the crisis in El Salvador, and because of their ignorance, the US was becoming complicit in the terror against the Salvadoran population. While this criticism, arguably, went beyond "the framework of debate set by the state," by directly implicating the US in the atrocities occurring in El Salvador, the liberal narrative did not go as far as Chomsky, who characterized "the major issue" as "American terror" and "the American attack against much of the population of El Salvador." In Chomsky's narrative, it was not merely that the US was supporting a repressive government, it was that the US itself that was engaged in that repression against the population of El Salvador. This idea, which is one of main assumptions in Chomsky's narrative, that the civil war in El Salvador was essentially a US war against the majority of the Salvadoran population, implies that the Salvadoran government and army were merely proxies of the United States. It was undoubtedly true that the Salvadoran government and army were reliant on US military support, and that the role the US played was also very significant in the Civil War as evidenced by the flow of aid and weapons into the country, but to understand the Salvadoran ruling class and its military as only proxies for Washington is to undermine their agency. Indeed, we can easily reverse this idea and argue that the Salvadoran oligarchy and army were using the United States to prevent any changes to the status quo, a situation that was not only beneficial to

US interests, but also kept the Salvadoran oligarchs and generals rich and powerful. Chomsky's focus on El Salvador as being a "US dependency" obscured in a way how the elites in El Salvador also capitalized on the US' fear of communism, (or, in Chomsky's narrative, genuine democratic development).

Similarly, in its description of the Carter administration, Chomsky's narrative left out certain facts that, to a certain degree, painted a more nuanced picture of the Carter administration. Most importantly, Chomsky did not note that Carter had suspended aid to the Romero government from 1977-1979 on account of its human rights abuses, and that in this way he had put pressure on the Salvadoran elites to initiate political and economic reform if they wished to benefit from future US support. In this period, at least, it is fair to say that the policies and the rhetoric of the Carter administration were actually closely aligned. However, as Chomsky did point out, after the fall of Somoza in Nicaragua and the growth of the "popular organizations," particularly after the coup in 1979, military assistance flowed once again from the Carter administration to the Salvadoran government and army. And Carter was well aware that the army itself was main culprit of violence. Whether or not we accept Chomsky's harsh judgement on the earlier period of the Carter administration's policies in El Salvador, it is clear that from 1979 the Carter administration's support for democracy and human rights was certainly questionable – something a number of liberal critics had also pointed out.

Importantly, in Chomsky's radical narrative, it was not that the Carter administration had been particularly hypocritical; it was rather that US policies were the logical outcome of the underlying dynamics of the US government and its institutions, which were primarily concerned with expanding and consolidating US power across the globe for the benefit of the ruling business class in the US. As Chomsky wrote,

> US foreign and domestic policy has roots in institutional structures; only in a limited way does it reflect the personal preferences and commitments of particular individuals who happen to hold office. The institutional structures fix these policies within certain bounds, leading to ceaseless efforts to maintain or enlarge the Fifth Freedom ["the freedom to rob and exploit" the resources of other countries across the world][124], reliance on the Pentagon system of state economic management, concerted measures to limit democracy at home and destroy it in the dependencies, a persistent assault on human rights and social justice, construction of a vast system of social control and indoctrination.[125]

For Chomsky, this was the framework in which US policy towards El Salvador should be understood; many of the conventional explanations and legitimizations for US policy – the professed ideals and principles that were supposed to undergird and guide the US – were nothing more than smokescreens that distorted unpleasant truths about the true nature of US power and its terrible consequences around the world. Because it was unlikely that the US public would support US policies if they were aware of these consequences, US actions were generally cloaked in "elevated language," myths about the benevolence of the United States and the evil nature of the enemy (the USSR, Cuba, communists, etc.).

At the same time, while the language employed by US officials and politicians should be understood as part of a propaganda lexicon that was used to distort unpleasant truths, it was possible to gain insight into the workings of US power, and the thinking of officials, if certain concepts were deconstructed – thus revealing their actual meaning. An instructive example is how Chomsky viewed the use of the term "communist" within this propaganda system, a term that was central to the narratives about the crisis in El Salvador for obvious reasons:

> The concept of "Communist" was further elaborated by a prestigious study group of the National Planning Association and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, headed by William Yandell Eliot of Harvard in 1955. The study observed, quite accurately, that the primary threat of what they call "Communism" is the economic transformation of the Communist powers "in ways which reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial

[124] The term "the fifth freedom" is in reference to the famous "four freedoms" articulated during the Second World War by Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt as the fundamental ideals represented by the Allies. See Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*., 46-49.
[125] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 216

> economies of the West." This insightful comment provides a good operational definition of the term "Communism" as it is used in American political discourse. If a government or a popular movement is so evil as to undertake a course of action of this sort, it at once becomes an enemy. It has joined the "monolithic and ruthless conspiracy" to steal what is ours, namely, their resources, and by definition, it has been taken over by the Russians — *and we will act to ensure that it is, so that we may legitimately proceed to terminate this scandal by subversion or intervention*, all with the noblest intent and in defence of the highest values.[126] [Emphasis added.]

When the conservative narrative warned the US public about "communist intrusion," or when even voices in the liberal narrative worried about the prospect of Salvadorans following the "Cuban model," the real threats, according to Chomsky, were not so much to be found in the USSR or in Cuba, but in the denial of/challenge to "the fifth freedom". As such, any individuals or groups that opposed the US system of power and sought economic independence could be labelled "communists," and anyone who dared defy the economic system maintained by the "industrial economies of the West" could be considered a threat. While El Salvador did not in fact contain many resources, and while the presence of US companies there was marginal compared to its neighbors, there was still significant US private investment in the coffee-exporting industry, investment that would be threatened if the oligarchy were to lose power and a redistribution of land were to take place – which were central goals for the opposition movements in El Salvador.

More importantly, Chomsky argued, it was not the actual loss of being able to exploit resources in El Salvador that US officials worried most about; rather, it was the symbolic power an insurgent victory might have on its neighbors whose resources were more significant. As was the case in the conservative and liberal narratives, the issue of image and credibility was seen as very important for the US in Chomsky's narrative; if countries in the Global South were to perceive the possibility of real economic and political independence from the US global system without any

[126] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 58

consequences, they could undermine the whole system. They could threaten the US' power and its ability to carry out "the fifth freedom" to "rob and exploit" the resources in the Global South to ensure more profits for the business class in the US.[127] This was the real domino theory that US officials were concerned about, Chomsky argued, and their primary concern was not that countries would become Soviet clients and threaten the US with military force, but that they would become economically independent and politically democratic. In Chomsky's narrative, this concern largely explained why the US was so worried about developments in El Salvador, (as well as Nicaragua).

Furthermore, in the above passage about the use of the term, communism, we find another important difference between the liberal narrative and Chomsky's radical narrative. In the liberal narrative, the policies of the Reagan administration of increasing military support to the repressive government might lead to the opposite outcome of the intended goals: it might lead to the increased popularity of the communist guerillas as the only legitimate opposition, and as the only viable alternative to the status quo. Therefore, inadvertently, the liberal narrative argued, Reagan's policies might strengthen the position of the USSR in El Salvador even though their goal was to reduce this position. For Chomsky, however, this was all part of a greater plan to legitimize the US policy of "subversion and interventionism." Because the US government understood very well that emphasizing Soviet influence and the strength of the guerilla movement in El Salvador were an effective way of legitimizing US intervention, US policy deliberately sought to strengthen the guerillas by making them the only viable option for the opposition. Before the US intervention in 1979 under Carter, a plethora of different popular organization had posed a serious challenge to the power structure in El Salvador, but after a few years of the US pouring money and arms into the government of El Salvador, these organizations had been crushed by the army and death

[127] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 60-70

squads. This left the guerillas as the only viable opposition in El Salvador; and because the guerillas were clearly inspired by communist ideology, (if not actually supported by the Soviet block in any substantial way), US officials could safely argue that the opposition in El Salvador was made up of communists threatening the legitimate government, and that, therefore, the US was "fighting communism" in El Salvador. What in the liberal narrative was understood as the unfortunate by-product of a mistaken policy based on ignorance, but carried out with noble intentions, (i.e. to combat communism), was, in Chomsky's narrative, a favourable and intentional outcome for the US, as well as a way to continue to legitimize its intervention into the affairs of El Salvador.

What were the causes of the crisis?

In some ways, Chomsky's narrative echoed the liberal narrative when it came to its understanding of the causes of the crisis in El Salvador. Chomsky also pointed to the severe inequality, poverty, and violent repression as the conditions that had given rise to this crisis, and, similar to the left-leaning voices in the liberal narrative, Chomsky viewed the role of the US in El Salvador as a central part of the explanation as to why the crisis had developed. However, there were also important differences between these two narratives. Whereas the liberal narrative blamed the US for some erroneous past policies that had aided repressive regimes and furthered anachronistic societies and their general misery, in Chomsky's narrative, this US history of interventionism had not been the product of ignorance and errors with noble intent: it had been a deliberate strategy intended to ensure continued US control in El Salvador, (and other countries in the region), at all costs. And according to Chomsky, it was often the ordinary people who bore these costs. The liberals were simply caught in the illusion that official rhetoric reflected real intentions and goals. Therefore, they believed that the nature of the United States was benevolent,

and that its goals were to spread its ideals of self-determination, justice, and progress, but that, sadly, due to ignorance and misunderstandings, these goals had become undermined and obscured. But the real goal of the US was to ensure and expand its power, Chomsky maintained, and any genuine democratic movement threatening this goal was by definition antithetical to US interests – despite official rhetoric. For Chomsky, as the historical guarantor of the status quo and the provider of arms and training to the Salvadoran army, it was the US that had caused the crisis, and it was the US that was responsible for the atrocities carried out against the Salvadoran population, and for their general misery.

More specifically, similar to the PACCA report, Chomsky's narrative argued that US policy had remained relatively unchanging in its support for the status quo from the time of La Mantanza until the Carter-Reagan years. Under the goals of modernization and development, the US had encouraged the economic changes occurring in El Salvador after the Second World War that shifted agriculture from primarily domestic food production to the agro-business model of cash-crops for export. As Chomsky explained, in the 1960s, "the trends of earlier years continued: production, including food production, increased largely for export, along with starvation and general misery. These trends were enhanced by the Alliance for Progress of Kennedy and Johnson. By late 1969, 300,000 Salvadorians (one in eight citizens) had fled to Honduras to find food and work."[128]

Furthermore, while the US support for the economic changes in El Salvador profoundly impacted the small country, enriching landowners and US investors while increasing the "general misery" for the majority of the population, the US was also responsible for establishing the networks of right-wing groups that would become the death squads that terrorized the population

[128] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 88

during the Civil War. Describing the part of the Alliance for Progress that was supposed to modernize the armed forces to counter alleged communist intrusion and subversion, Chomsky argued that:

> The Alliance for Progress programs of strengthening internal security forces took a still more ominous turn in El Salvador, with the establishment of the military and paramilitary apparatus that was to be responsible for widespread slaughter in coming years. According to Allan Nairn's detailed study, the US organized and trained the rural paramilitary force ORDEN, which has terrorized the countryside since, as well as the elite presidential intelligence service ANSESAL, which served as the intelligence arm of the "death squads." The founder of ORDEN and ANSESAL, General Medrano, was enlisted as a CIA agent.[129]

Not only was the founder of the well-known death squad a CIA agent, but that death squad, ORDEN, would, as Chomsky wrote, "terrorize the countryside" in El Salvador. The US had directly trained this group in counterterrorism and was therefore directly responsible for its actions. Importantly, in this way, it was not accidental that the US had become involved in the atrocities that was occurring in El Salvador; because the atrocities were committed by groups directly trained by the US, Chomsky implied, these atrocities were the desired policies of the US, policies that were designed to prevent any threat of "genuine democratic development" – thereby ensuring the continued dominance of the US in the region.

Furthermore, in Chomsky's narrative, such policies were the logical product of both the global economic system created by the US in the aftermath of the Second World War, and of the economic structures in the US. In contrast to the liberal and conservative understanding of this history in which the United States had struggled first against fascism and then against Soviet communism to provide freedom and prosperity to the rest of the world, in Chomsky's narrative, the system set up by the US was primarily intended to ensure the ability of the US and its industrial allies in the West to carry out the "fifth freedom." Seen in this light, it was imperative that US

[129] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 89

corporations were able to exploit resources and labor in poor countries, and that these countries therefore remained open to US influence, which real economic and political independence might undermine. Furthermore, the very militarization of conflicts was actually seen as beneficial to the US economic system. Indeed, what Chomsky called the "pentagon system" and "military Keynesianism," the producing and selling of military equipment to other countries, as well as the incredibly high expenditures required to maintain the US military machine, were the backbone of the US economic system, and a way for the elites in the US "to enhance existing privilege and power."[130]

Thus, for Chomsky, the very institutional structures of the US economic system, both domestically and internationally, could be seen as the general causes for the crisis in El Salvador. More specifically, the United States was responsible for creating the conditions that led to this crisis in two ways. First, the US encouraged the economic changes that favoured and expanded cash-crops (mainly coffee) over subsistence farming to the detriment of the local population, whose "general misery" thus increased. This, in turn, led indirectly to growing resentment; and while the memory of La Mazanta had kept peasants docile for a generation, political organizations challenging the status quo ranging from reformist unions and church groups to violent guerillas began to emerge and expand. Second, to combat any "communist" activities in El Salvador and the rest of the region, including the non-violent grassroots movements, the US established the "military and paramilitary apparatus that was to be responsible for the widespread slaughter in the coming years," and was therefore, in Chomsky's narrative, directly responsible for the atrocities committed against the Salvadoran population.

[130] Ibid., 181-182.

What should the US do?

Given that, for Chomsky, the United States was largely responsible for the development of the crisis in El Salvador, it was well within the power of the US to put an end to hostilities and attempt to address some of the underlying conditions that had given rise to the crisis. However, given the institutional system in which US power existed, this was perceived as a very unlikely development for US officials to undertake. This is evident in Chomsky's description of the debates over military interventions:

> We might recall the debates of the past few years over whether it would have been appropriate to use military force to intervene to stop the terrible massacre under the Pol Pot regime. It is not easy to take any of them very seriously. In the case of El Salvador, East Timor (where the atrocities were comparable to Pol Pot, thanks to crucial US assistance) and other places, no military intervention would have been (or would now be) required to terminate terrible massacres; it would have only have been necessary to call off the hounds. The implications seem obvious.[131]

As we can see, in Chomsky's narrative, because the oligarchy and army owed its power principally to the US, and as the US was and had been funding, arming, and training the army for decades, the most prudent US policy would simply be to stop this funding and arming and training, to stop this intervening in El Salvador; in other words, "to call off the hounds." Indeed, Chomsky argued that if the US were seriously concerned with human rights abuses and seriously wished to support democratic development, it could easily do so; therefore, any real debate about US policy should start with a recognition that the US was, and had been, intervening in El Salvador in various ways for a century.

The US could, in fact, right many of its wrongs by simply following what Chomsky later has called the Principle of Universality: "if an action is right (or wrong) for others, it is right (or wrong) for us. Those who do not rise to the minimal moral level of applying to themselves the

[131] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 21

standards they apply to others — more stringent ones, in fact — plainly cannot be taken seriously when they speak of appropriateness of response; or of right and wrong, good and evil."[132] When US officials and politicians vehemently lambasted the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union, and condemned the atrocities of guerilla communists, etc., it carried little weight, according to Chomsky, because the US was and had been engaged in exactly the things the USSR was criticized for: militarism, aggression, supporting corrupt and undemocratic governments, and sponsoring terrorism. Thus, the first step to changing course was for Chomsky to apply this principle.

However, because the whole network of institutional structures of the United States was geared towards these goals (make clear here what goals you are referring to – upholding and futhering US economic and military power and influence?), it was no easy task, and Chomsky did not have much faith in the ability of existing institutions to change course unless the power structure in the United States changed fundamentally. This is another of the main differences between the liberal critique of US policies and Chomsky's radical critique. Even the most critical liberal voices did not challenge the basic premises of the rights of the? US state, and did not, as Chomsky did, point to the power of the business class and their reign over foreign policy, or to the "pentagon system" of "military Keynesianism." At the same time, Chomsky was not defeatist; he argued that the most direct way to change the situation in El Salvador was for US citizens to engage in civic action and civil disobedience against US policies. This could, he maintained, change things, as it had eventually done in Vietnam. There, the political costs of continuing aggression in the context of the growing anti-war movement had made it unattractive for US officials to remain in Vietnam. If US officials also were to become worried about such costs regarding policies in El

[132] Noam Chomsky, "Terror and Response," *ZNet*, July 2, 2002 https://chomsky.info/20020702/

Salvador (and the rest of Central America), the US government might very well change course. At the same time, Chomsky was also clear about the limitations of such an approach:

> As our society is constituted, public policy will be guided by the imperatives of intervention and military Keynesianism; protests against particular excrescences, however successful, will lead to pursuit of the same objectives by similar means along other paths, since the state—in the broad sense of earlier discussion—relies on them for its survival *in its present form*…Determined opposition to the latest lunacies and atrocities must continue, for the sake of the victims as well as our own ultimate survival. But it should be understood as a poor substitute for a challenge to the deeper causes, a challenge that we are, unfortunately, in no position to mount at present though the groundwork can and must be laid. Protest over Star Wars, massacre in El Salvador, and so on, is a sign of our weakness. A strong peace movement would be challenging military-based state capitalism and the world system it dominates while seeking to support similar forces to the extent that they can survive in the so called "socialist world."[133]

In other words, in Chomsky's narrative, public opposition was understood as an important way to change the policies of the US government in a specific case ("the latest lunacies"), but it was only a small part of the efforts required if the underlying structural and institutional problems were to be addressed. This would require fundamentally challenging the system of "military Keynesianism" and "military-based state capitalism" that constituted the source of crises such as the one in El Salvador. Certainly, in Chomsky's narrative, if the public wished to stop and prevent the atrocities committed in the name of their country, it could not rely on the liberal institutions that were supposed to reflect the democratic exceptionalism and righteousness of the US, as these institutions were part of the very system whose survival was "guided by the imperatives of intervention." Structural change was required, and for this to happen, it would be necessary to address the economic and political structures in the United States itself. No small mission, but not, on that account, any less worthwhile.

[133] Chomsky, *Turning the Tide*, 215

Conclusion

This thesis has examined three different narratives about the crisis in El Salvador and the US role and response to this crisis. On one level, the conservative and liberal narratives, despite the significant differences and nuances among the voices of each, understood the causes of the Civil War in El Salvador, as well as the role the US' should play in response to it in very different ways. On the one hand, the conservative narrative told the story of an aggressive and expansionist superpower (the USSR) infiltrating and intervening in the small Central American country with dire consequences for the security and freedom of both the local population and of the United States. It was, therefore, in the name of freedom, for El Salvador, the US, and, indeed, the whole world, that the US must stand strong against this communist threat and support the forces of anti-communism. Moreover, the conservative narrative argued, if the US could not defeat the communists and defend an ally against external aggression in its own backyard, how could it be expected to be taken seriously, by allies and foes alike, as the defender of freedom and the primary bulwark against the global communist threat? And, even more frightening, if the communist aggressors were not stopped in El Salvador, which domino would fall next? Guatemala? Mexico? The US itself? In a world in which Soviet communism threatened the very foundation for freedom, peace and prosperity, any act undertaken to combat Soviet expansion was an act of peace and freedom, and was, by definition, in the interests of not only the US, but of the entire world.

On the other hand, the liberal narrative told the story of a poor and miserable country, haunted by a history of inequality, elite intransigence, and violent political repression culminating in this inevitable cataclysm. The crisis in El Salvador and, more broadly, in Central America had emerged as the result of these conditions, as well as of the mistaken policies of successive US administration in the 20th century. In the liberal narrative, El Salvador mattered to the United States because as the champion of the oppressed, and of progress, it could not condone, let alone support

any forces perpetuating poverty and injustice anywhere in the world. It would also be counterproductive to support the forces of repression and authoritarianism, both as a matter of principle, and because such support would most likely bolster the appeal of communism for both the reformers and revolutionaries. This, in turn, would increase the likelihood they would look to the USSR and Cuba for counter-support. Despite the dangers of Soviet subversion, the US should not fall back on old behavior patterns of domination and conquest; it should instead live up the ideals that had sustained the nation since its creation, ideals of freedom, of self-determination, and of tolerance.

On another level, however, these two narratives shared three interrelated and underlying assumptions/myths about the United States. First, they shared a belief in the inherent benevolence of the US government. In the conservative narrative, this was self-evident, and the only/main criticism its voices levelled against the US government was for its lack of assertiveness and willingness to stand up to the evil forces of communism that had arisen in the 1970s. This failure had led to the loss of will in Vietnam and had culminated in the Carter presidency with its disastrous policies in Central America. Similarly, although the voices in the liberal narrative critiqued the policies and competency of the Reagan administration, and even to a certain extent questioned the morality of past US involvement in the region, they shared the conservative narrative's belief that the United States was essentially a force for good. Sure, mistakes had been made, and some even with tragic consequences, the liberal narrative acknowledged – look at Vietnam as well as the US support of military dictatorships in Central America – just as it acknowledged that the US had not always done what was right. But, for these liberals, its *intentions* were almost always inherently benign, and whatever mistakes had been made and were being made

in El Salvador were therefore due to ignorance about the reality of the situation, and *not* any lack of morals.

In Vietnam, US officials had thought that they had to fight to prevent the spread of communism; and while the consequences were tragic not only for the US but for the Vietnamese people themselves, US policies and actions had come from a desire to make the world a better place – safe from the evils of communism. The problem in Vietnam, the liberals argued, was merely one of tactics as well as mistaking a largely indigenous revolution for Soviet intrusion and intervention. Similarly, the liberals argued, the Reagan administration was fundamentally mistaken in their understanding of El Salvador. They thought the crisis was the result of an externally caused revolution, whereas in reality, the liberals maintained, it was the result of El Salvador's history of poverty and repression. As Senator Dodd lamented, "we believe the Administration fundamentally misunderstands the causes of conflict in Central America. We cannot afford to found so important a policy on ignorance – and the painful truth is that many of our highest officials seem to know as little about Central America in 1983 as we knew about Indochina in 1963."[134]

Indeed, the problem was not that there was something inherently wrong with the US and its institutions; the problem was that some US officials had been mistaken and, at times, ignorant about certain developments and events around the world. In fact, it was the very institutions and political system in the US with its checks and balances and self-correcting democratic mechanisms and structures that had enabled it to chart a new course, a course that began in the 1970s and was continued by Carter. As such, both the conservative and the liberal narratives viewed the US as having a unique role to play in the world; both narratives celebrated the US' political and economic

[134]Dodd, "Transcript of Response to Reagan Speech on Central America," *NYT*, April 28, 1983.

system and institutions, and they both maintained that it was the responsibility of the US to bring about peace, progress, prosperity and freedom to all nations.

Second, although these two narratives saw the threat of the Soviet Union and Cuba differently in El Salvador, they agreed with the basic premises of the Cold War. In short, due to its embrace of the ideology of communism, the Soviet Union was intrinsically totalitarian and ruthless, and, as such, it was the antithesis of the United States. The Soviet Union was also seen by both narratives as inherently expansionist and aggressive as it sought to expand its influence wherever it could; and both narratives agreed that since the late 1940s, as the leader of the "Free World," the US had been attempting to contain this power for the benefit of all, and in the name of Freedom and Prosperity.

And third, for both the liberal and the conservative narratives, the right of the United States to intervene in El Salvador and "guide" the country in a favourable direction as understood by US officials was never questioned. Certainly, each narrative understood what a favourable direction could be or mean very differently – conservatives being more adamant in their anti-communism and liberals being more concerned with human rights abuses – yet that the US should act to ensure the best outcome for all parties concerned was simply a given. In a way, both narratives saw this as the "natural" state of affairs and the responsibility of the US.

In contrast to both the liberal and conservative narratives, political dissident and radical, Noam Chomsky, articulated a narrative about the Civil War in El Salvador and the US' role in the conflict in which the very foundations of and assumptions about the US government and its institutions were radically critiqued. Chomsky viewed US influence in El Salvador not only as morally wrong, but as the primary source of the crisis. In his narrative, the best course of action the US government could take was "to call off the hounds:" to stop their immoral intervention,

their war against the population. Indeed, in Chomsky's radical narrative, the real antagonist in this story was the United States government that had been responsible for supporting a system that had sustained the century-long misery endured by most people in El Salvador. Whereas the conservative narrative lambasted the Carter administration for its soft human rights approach to foreign policy, and for neglecting to deny the communists a foothold in both Nicaragua and El Salvador, Chomsky argued that the only difference between Carter and Reagan was in degree, not in kind. Indeed, Chomsky viewed the Reagan administration policies as simply the logical extension of those initiated by the Carter administration that, despite its elevated rhetoric, had sided with the forces of repression against the people of El Salvador. Although the more left-leaning and critical voices in the liberal narrative also critiqued how anti-communism had trumped humanitarianism in the Carter administration, Chomsky argued that despite the seeming change in policy and its elevated human rights' rhetoric, the Carter administration in reality was no different than previous US administrations.

Indeed, US policies were set by institutional boundaries, and, therefore, without fundamentally changing these institutions and the power structure underlying them, any change in elected officials was bound to be superficial. In other words, Carter's rhetoric was just that: rhetoric. Any commitment to human rights and democratization, which both the liberal and conservative narratives in different degrees maintained was part of US policy and should be, was merely a veneer for power politics and economic self-interests in which, Chomsky argued, the well-being of the majority of the population was incidental. Any rhetorical invocation of these humanist principles was merely a way to sell the US public on policies that would otherwise not be accepted, policies that ultimately were intended to ensure future US dominance in El Salvador and in the wider region.

Notably, whereas it is clear that Chomsky's narrative propounded a fundamentally different understanding of the US compared to the two other narratives, all three narratives did share the assumption that the US *could* direct developments in El Salvador, and that it could impose control on the outcome of the crisis. And while it is certainly true that the US was the most powerful actor in the region at this time by far, and while it was also true that the impact of US policy in El Salvador was profound, the US' intervention in El Salvador/Central America also revealed the limits of US power. This is evidenced by the fact that the Reagan administration was not able to orchestrate the defeat of the insurgents despite the massive amounts of military assistance provided to the army of El Salvador. Of course, this could partly be attributed to congressional resistance, and it is true that to a certain extent Congress did manage to set limits on US military aid, (although the Reagan administration found ways to circumvent these constructions).[135]

Furthermore, in conjunction with the liberal and radical counter-narratives, there was also public resistance to the Reagan administration's policies in Central America, (although they were mostly focused on Nicaragua), which most likely also impacted the ability of the Reagan administration to impose its will.[136] In this way it can be argued that the very existence of counter-narratives challenging the conservative narrative and the Reagan administration's approach in El Salvador might very well have prevented the US from becoming even more involved in El Salvador than it had. At the same time, the local realities in El Salvador, including the complexities of the political dynamics, the corruption and inefficiency of the Salvadoran government and army, and the popular support of the guerillas were important factors that prevented a clear-cut victory

[135] LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 140-150.
[136] See for instance Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central American Peace Movement,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

for the Reagan administration. In any case, despite their economic and military superiority, the US' intervention in El Salvador revealed the limits of US power, and the difficulty in unequivocally imposing its will on other countries. Tragically, as the Vietnam war had shown, and as the later wars in the Middle East would show, US official have seemed impervious to learning this lesson from history, and they seem doomed to repeating it. Of course, for Chomsky, this was not the tragedy. Not because he did not bemoan US policies and actions across the world, as well as the consequences for its victims, but because he saw the policies as the logical outcome of the political and economic institutional structures that underlay USFP – military-based state capitalism. Without a change in these structures, the USFP will inevitably be based on militarization and interventionism. It was not that US officials did not learn from history, Chomsky argued, it was because the system that they operated within largely determined the policies available to pursue.

Whether or not Chomsky's assessment is accepted, it is clear that the underlying political and economic structures certainly are important factors in understanding USFP anywhere in the world. At the same time, this thesis has argued that the role that narrative plays among the various actors in shaping USFP must not be underestimated. Indeed, the competing narratives, along with their underlying assumptions, determine to a great extent the range of actions that are available, or even thinkable to pursue by US officials. Indeed, it was largely the conservative narrative that guided the Reagan administration's policy to provide money and weapons to the most repressive and violent forces in El Salvador, thereby perpetuating and intensifying the already widespread violence and misery inflicted on its people.

In essence, this thesis asserts that it truly matters what stories various ideological and competing voices articulate when it comes to shaping USFP. It further argues that it was partly

because of the stories told by the Reagan administration about El Salvador, about the US, and about how the world worked that were responsible for the torture, murders, starvation, and general misery that the people in El Salvador faced during its Civil War. With a new crisis in Central America exploding in full view, it would be instructive to examine the current narratives being told about its causes, and the way to address it.

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