

WHAT IS AT RISK IN EL SALVADOR

The victory of the Marxist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in the Salvadoran civil war would endanger United States and Central American security and set back for years the cause of democracy in the region. Yet some in Congress do not see what is at risk in El Salvador. Only two weeks ago, 194 members of the House of Representatives tried unsuccessfully to cut back the \$85 million military aid package the U.S. provides to El Salvador. This sentiment against aid to El Salvador could grow unless members of Congress clearly understand U.S. policy goals in that country and what could happen if that policy fails.

The failure of U.S. policy in El Salvador would endanger U.S. and Central American security. Like other terrorists, the FMLN is a direct threat to the lives of Americans, murdering, for example, four off-duty Marines and two U.S. businessmen in an outdoor restaurant in San Salvador in 1985, and forcing the evacuation of Americans from El Salvador last week after FMLN terrorists seized an American diplomat in San Benito. Like their patrons in Havana and Managua, the FMLN preaches a "revolution without borders," promising to spread revolutionary violence to all countries in the region. A victory for the FMLN would produce yet another state in Central America dedicated to exporting terrorism, joining Cuba, Nicaragua, and Panama in that deadly enterprise.

"Warsaw Pact of the West." But most harmful to U.S. and Central American security would be the expansion of Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan military power to El Salvador. As George Bush apparently told Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the FMLN is armed and financed by Cuba and Nicaragua. This became indisputable last month when a Cessna twin-engine aircraft originating from Managua crashed in El Salvador. It was carrying to the rebels a cache of Soviet-made SA-7 surface-to-air missiles. This arms shipment is part of a larger effort by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua to destabilize Central America. Despite assurances by the Soviet Foreign Ministry on September 25 that Moscow had "since 1988 ceased arms supplies" to Central America, at least three Soviet torpedo boats and four MI-24 *Hind* helicopter gunships entered Nicaragua via Cuba in September. The Pentagon reports that East bloc countries delivered over \$400 million worth of arms to Nicaragua during the first nine months of this year.

Just when the Warsaw Pact seems to be crumbling in Europe, a victory for the FMLN would create a "Warsaw Pact of the West" in Central America, consisting of Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, and a FMLN-dominated El Salvador. These countries could use the arms supplied by Moscow not only to attack Americans and such U.S. interests in the region as the Panama

Canal, but to threaten the democratically elected governments of Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and possibly even Mexico.

Enormous Costs. The further destabilization of Central America could be very expensive for the U.S. Should El Salvador fall, hundreds of millions of dollars more in U.S. military aid would be needed to prop up Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras. Were a civil war were to erupt in Mexico as the result of outside interference, as many as 10 million Mexicans could pour across the U.S. border seeking refuge. Just as bad, an FMLN victory in El Salvador could push more illegal drugs into the U.S. Havana and Managua provide drug traffickers with weapons and military protection; so would an FMLN regime in El Salvador.

At stake too in El Salvador is democracy. The government of President Alfredo Cristiani was elected this March 20 in a free and fair election. Even harsh U.S. critics of his government's policies, like Representative Stephen Solarz, the New York Democrat, recognize that the elections were fair. Sometime critic of U.S. support for the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters, Congressman Dave McCurdy, the Oklahoma Democrat, has praised Cristiani for his handling of the recent guerrilla offensive. The FMLN's war against this legitimately elected government is a war against the people of El Salvador who chose it.

Wrong Side of History. Human rights in El Salvador, meanwhile, are protected by the influence Washington wields through its military aid; this restrains enormously radical death squad activity. For this reason, the extreme Right and Left in El Salvador both want U.S. military aid to cease: the Left because it would diminish the military capability of the government, and the Right because it would end outside interference by the U.S. and permit the death squads to prosecute a "Dirty War" against the guerrillas and their sympathizers. Cristiani wants to control death squad activity, but he needs U.S. help to do it.

The civil war in El Salvador is also about whether poverty or economic development will emerge in that country. The FMLN wants to establish a centralized economic planning system of the type that has produced nothing but poverty and backwardness in Eastern Europe, Nicaragua, the Soviet Union, and other socialist countries where it has been tried. The Cristiani government favors a free market economy, which has been shown to work not only in the West, but in Third World countries like Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Chile. History shows that this economic system has the best chance of providing the basic material needs of most Salvadorans.

The future of Central America may be at risk in El Salvador. The FMLN terrorists are on the wrong side of history. In Europe, communism is on the retreat. In El Salvador, it is on the armed offensive. The Czechoslovak and East German parliaments voted last week to deprive the communist party of its monopoly on power. In El Salvador, communists are trying to grab such a monopoly by force of arms.

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For further information:

Jorge Salvaverry, "A Winning U.S. Policy Is Needed in El Salvador," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 663, July 20, 1988.

Charles Krauthammer, "Why Are We in El Salvador?" *The Washington Post*, December 1, 1989.