Dirty hands
Benjamin Schwarz
The Atlantic Monthly; Dec 1998; 282, 6; Research Library Core
pg. 106

Dirty Hands

The success of U. S. policy in El Salvador—preventing a guerrilla victory—was based on 40,000 political murders

by Benjamin Schwarz

OUR OWN BACKYARD: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992

by William M. LeoGrande. University of North Carolina, 790 pages, $39.95.

READING William LeoGrande's *Our Own Backyard* is a distasteful experience. The book is difficult to stomach precisely because it is such a masterly and comprehensive chronicle of U.S. policy toward Central America in the 1980s. That policy, as LeoGrande writes, "occasioned the most bitter domestic political debate since Vietnam," and to read this book is to be reminded of a host of unpleasant and rancorous subjects that one would prefer to forget. Nearly all sides in that debate emerge from LeoGrande's account as hypocritical, and at least some participants emerge as apologists for murder. *Our Own Backyard* makes the reader squirm as it dredges up memories of dishonest arguments concerning the unsavory friends with whom the United States allied itself and the equally nasty enemies against whom it fought by proxy in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

LeoGrande, a professor of government at American University and a former congressional-committee staff member, divides his extraordinarily clear account of American policy into two lengthy main sections, one on El Salvador and the other on Nicaragua. His section on El Salvador is the more interesting and valuable, and the focus of this review, because LeoGrande's is the only comprehensive record of the subject. His chronicle of Nicaraguan policy can't compete in thoroughness with Robert Kagan's 900-page *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977–1990*, published two years ago, and furthermore, the most complicated and controversial aspects of that policy have been and will continue to be assessed in works on the Reagan presidency generally and the Iran-contra scandal specifically. In contrast, America's involvement in El Salvador's civil war has not until now been

treated as history. To be sure, in the 1980s a number of books took a journalistic or overtly political approach to the subject, but as the very title of the best of these—*Weakness and Deceit*, by Raymond Bonner—illustrates, these polemics were designed to generate more heat than light and don't serve dispassionate reassessment.

Not that LeoGrande doesn't have a point of view (he was and remains a strenuous critic of the Reagan Administration's policies), but in *Our Own Backyard*, which is based on interviews with many of the key policymakers and on the relatively small number of government papers that have been declassified, his scrupulousness as a historian overtakes his biases, allowing the reader to assess with clarity the policies and debates concerning the U.S. role in El Salvador's civil war. Until scholars are granted access to the hundreds of thousands of pages of still-classified documents, LeoGrande's will probably remain the definitive account of America's part in that murderous conflict.

Few subjects in America's recent foreign policy are richer, as morally unsettling, and better deserving of a chronicler. El Salvador was the site of America's most prolonged and expensive military endeavor in the period between the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf conflict. More important, whereas America's strategy in Nicaragua was rather straightforward—arm and train a guerrilla force and in other ways subvert the economy and regime—U.S. policy in El Salvador demanded nothing less than that America effect fundamental changes in that country's authoritarian culture, its political practices, and its economic, social, and military structure.

Such a project used to be called, presumptuously, "nation-building." With the exception of its involvement in South Vietnam, America had never been so deeply and intimately involved in attempting to transform a foreign society that it had not defeated in war and hence did not control. In postwar West Germany the United States inculcated democracy, but it had first destroyed

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Germany's demons. In El Salvador the United States sought to transform the country while allied with the devil it had to subdue. Whether the geopolitical stakes demanded that involvement and whether letting events take their own course would have resulted in even more atrocities can be debated. What is indisputable is that for a decade American policymakers in Washington and American civilian and military personnel in El Salvador consorted with murderers and sadists.

As LeoGrande's account—if not always his assessment—makes clear, this pact with the devil was made not by the Administration of the aggressively anti-Communist Republican Ronald Reagan but by that of the moderate Democrat Jimmy Carter—ironically, a President deeply committed to emphasizing human rights in his foreign policy. Simply put, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and with Cuban and Soviet influence apparently growing throughout the Third World generally and in Nicaragua specifically, the Carter Administration believed that global containment required the United States to forestall a revolution in El Salvador led by the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), a loose alliance of Marxist guerrilla groups tied to Cuba and the Sandinistas of Nicaragua.

El Salvador was ripe for revolution. Its society, in which a small landed elite dominated an exploited peasant labor force, was grossly inequitable even by Latin American standards. That elite ruled the country in partnership with its guardian, the military, which had a long tradition of bloody repression of dissenters and revolutionaries, whom it tended to view as one and the same. Although the Carter Administration was troubled by the abysmal human-rights record of El Salvador's rightist regime, it feared "another Nicaragua." So when in late 1980 a rebel victory appeared imminent unless the United States provided military and other forms of aid to the Salvadoran regime, Carter chose to assist the Salvadoran government, and thus hesitantly embarked on the policy that the Reagan Administration would later pursue with alacrity.

Not content to keep the radical left—made up of the FMLN and its allied political organizations—out of power, the Carter Administration, as LeoGrande correctly emphasizes, firmly and consistently opposed any measures that would have afforded the radicals a significant political voice. This position in essence required a rebel defeat rather than a negotiated solution, since to have been meaningful, a political settlement would have had to entail some sort of power sharing between the FMLN and the regime.

So important did defeating the FMLN appear to be that the Carter Administration justified its military aid by announcing that the regime had made "progress" in the area of human rights, even though the Administration knew that in fact progress was nonexistent. In the year leading up to Carter's decision the Salvadoran armed forces and the right-wing death squads linked to them had killed more than 8,000 noncombatant civilians—among them four U.S. churchwomen.

THUS by the time Ronald Reagan was sworn in to office, the contours of U.S. policy had already been rigidly established. First, because of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, preventing a rebel victory in El Salvador was regarded as a national-security priority (and the possible "loss" of El Salvador was seen as a catastrophe with enormous political consequences in the United States), which ultimately trumped concern over human rights. Second, "reform" in El Salvador was to be encouraged, but revolution was to be thwarted. And third, to make American aid to a homicidal regime more palatable, its human-rights progress would be greatly exaggerated. Despite the obfuscation engendered by the ensuing decade of bickering between Congress and the Administrations of Reagan and George Bush, and between Democrats and Republicans, this was the outline of what amounted to a bipartisan policy.

Although the Reagan Administration's fundamental policy toward El Salvador didn't differ substantively from its predecessor's, the new Administration did immediately escalate the rhetoric. The new Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, famously declared in the first weeks of the Reagan presidency that El Salvador was the "test case" of the Administration's foreign policy and that America would "draw the line" there against "Communist interference." Although

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this tough talk aroused considerable concern and criticism among liberals and the Democratic opposition, almost no one realized that the single most important and most terrible development in El Salvador's decade-long civil war had occurred before Reagan assumed the presidency and intensified American efforts to counter the FMLN.

By the time Reagan entered the Oval Office, on January 20, 1981, the guerrillas' "final offensive," launched at the beginning of the month, had failed, even though the Salvadoran regime and military were at their weakest and most divided. The rebels would never again come so close to seizing power. Although the FMLN had made important military gains in the countryside during the offensive, the success of its strategy rested on the ability of its affiliated "popular organizations"—coalitions of workers', peasants', and students' unions—to mobilize a simultaneous general strike in San Salvador, thereby crippling the country and forcing the military to spread itself too thin. But whereas the popular organizations had assembled hundreds of thousands of marchers in the capital just a year earlier, the general strike called to coincide with the final offensive failed to materialize, and thus the offensive petered out.

At the time, American officials publicly ascribed the failure of the offensive to the U.S.-sponsored land-reform program, initiated the previous March, which, they argued, had undercut the FMLN's popular support. As a Rand Corporation analyst, I spent two years assessing U.S. policy in El Salvador for the Defense Department. The U.S. military advisers and intelligence officers I came to know all understood that this explanation of the guerrillas' failure was nonsense. They knew that had land reform undermined popular support, it would have had its greatest impact in the countryside, but in fact the FMLN's major setback came in the city. It was not the result of reform but the consequence of the murder of thousands of people in the preceding months by the Salvadoran armed forces and the death squads. With lavish brutality the military failed to distinguish between dissenters and revolutionaries; many of its victims were unconnected to the FMLN, but enough were connected that the guerrillas' polit-

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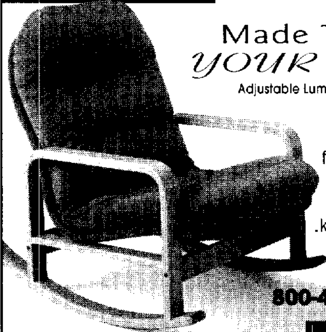

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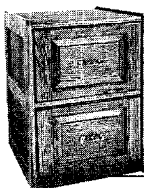

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ical infrastructure was destroyed. The guerrillas simply did not have enough allies left alive in San Salvador to organize a general strike.

In 1982 and 1983 the Salvadoran regime remained on the defensive, but the guerrillas continued to prove incapable of following up their increasing success on the battlefield with the necessary final blow—an insurrection in the capital. As I was told repeatedly by U.S. military and intelligence personnel who were as clear-eyed as they were aghast, the dirty little secret shared by those determined to prevent an FMLN takeover—a group that included both the Salvadoran armed forces and the United States government—was this: the death squads worked. To his great credit, LeoGrande recognizes and repeatedly emphasizes this crucial point.

As the American commitment to El Salvador deepened, the United States grew increasingly determined, for a mixture of altruistic and practical reasons, to put a stop to the carnage. Nevertheless, since the purpose of that commitment was to prevent an FMLN victory, there is no escaping the fact that the success of the U.S. policy was built on a foundation of corpses. A former U.S. military attaché to El Salvador recalled to me that in the middle of one of his many demarches to the Salvadoran high command on the need to stop death-squad killings, a high-ranking officer retorted in a dismissive tone that talk about respect for human rights was a luxury the United States could afford only because of the cold efficiency of the death squads in the early 1980s: "We cleaned up San Salvador for you." The attaché found the argument appalling—and correct.

But having noted the essential role of the death squads, LeoGrande fails to assess clearly and precisely the related issue of the differences—and, more important, the similarities—in the early 1980s between, on the one hand, congressional moderates and "pragmatists" within the Reagan Administration, who insisted that, somehow, defense of the Salvadoran regime be combined with efforts to reform it, and, on the other, the Administration's hard-liners. The latter thought that concerns about reform would only hinder the Salvadoran regime's efforts to defeat the guerrillas. LeoGrande evidently finds the position

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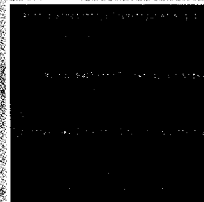

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of the hard-liners—a group that included Haig, Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, National Security Advisor Richard V. Allen, and Undersecretary of Defense Fred Ikle—so distasteful that he fails to pay proper attention to their gruesome logic. In their public praise of the Salvadoran regime the hard-liners were unquestionably dishonest. Privately, however, most of them faced the implications of American policy quite honestly.

They had no illusions that the Salvadoran military was anything but "a bunch of murderous thugs"—as one of the hard-liners, a rigidly anti-Communist assistant secretary of defense, later told me. But they understood, as did America's Salvadoran clients, that the United States had involved itself in El Salvador's conflict not to ensure that the Salvadorans conducted their war cleanly but to serve what were seen by Democrats as well as Republicans as America's national-security interests. Entertaining no hope of fundamentally altering a highly undemocratic and violent society, these policymakers believed that the most effective way of pursuing America's security objectives in El Salvador was to let the Salvadoran armed forces run their war as they saw fit.

By painstakingly laying out the lines of debate over El Salvador, LeoGrande's chronicle shows that the Reagan Administration's hard-liners were more clear-eyed than most of their Democratic critics. Democratic representatives and senators were deeply and publicly troubled by the flagrant lapses of America's ally, as was the Carter Administration; nevertheless they would not countenance the triumph of Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador. This meant that although Democrats indignantly imposed conditions on American aid and threatened to withdraw support if those conditions weren't met, their threats were ultimately meaningless, since they no less than Republicans recoiled from the likely consequence of cutting off aid. In addition to the apparent geopolitical risks of making good on their threats, the Democrats were unwilling to risk being charged with "losing" El Salvador.

The liberal representative Stephen Solarz, of New York, whom LeoGrande quotes, perfectly encapsulated the position of most congressional opponents of the Reagan Administration's policy: "We do not want to see a guerrilla victory," he said, "but we do not want to see the United States provide assistance to a government whose security forces remain responsible for the abduction and torture of thousands of people." Most of these opponents clung to the idea that a solution negotiated between the FMLN and the regime was the way out of the dilemma that Solarz defined, and they castigated the Administration (as does LeoGrande) for not aggressively pursuing one. But a negotiated settlement was practically unthinkable before the Cold War ended and before the two sides had bled each other white.

Throughout the 1980s (again, as LeoGrande's chronicle, if not his assertions, makes clear) neither the guerrillas nor the Salvadoran regime showed any serious inclination to bargain. The FMLN was fighting to create a revolutionary state; the armed forces and the right wing, which wielded enormous influence in the regime, were fighting to prevent that. Both sides saw the war—and politics—as an all-or-nothing proposition, and both sides thought they could win. Just as important, Democratic advocates of negotiations held steadfastly to the same position as that of the Carter Administration (and the Reagan Administration): a "power-sharing" solution—which amounted to allowing the guerrillas to "shoot their way to power," as the rhetoric had it—was unacceptable, since it would have entailed the real risk that the FMLN would eventually control El Salvador. But the FMLN repeatedly insisted that power sharing was one of its "fundamental goals" in a negotiated solution.

Essentially, the only principled positions in the debate over what to do in El Salvador were those held by a very few liberal Democrats—most notably Representative Gerry Studds, of Massachusetts—who wished to cut off aid to the Salvadoran regime despite their conviction that such a measure would probably lead to an FMLN victory, and by the hard-line Republicans who unflinchingly acknowledged the monstrous character of America's client but took the position that the geopolitical stakes demanded that America work with the devil.

For nearly the first three years of Reagan's presidency U.S. policy, as LeoGrande minutely traces it, cumbersomely combined the emphases of pragmatists and hard-liners, as the two groups jostled for influence within the Administration and as the Administration responded to pressure from its congressional critics. Thus the CIA spent $2 million to ensure that Roberto D'Aubuisson—a death-squad leader, the head of the far-right ARENA party, and a man who had been described by Carter's ambassador to El Salvador as a "pathological killer"—would not win the 1982 election for provisional President, even as it turned a blind eye to the sources and extent of death-squad violence, believing that, as an intelligence officer said, "the less you know, the better." (Later, when the moderate position prevailed and the CIA did focus on the death squads, it conclusively declared that "extreme rightwing terrorism" was "an integral part of the government of El Salvador.")

Significantly, just as in 1980 the Salvadoran armed forces and the death squads linked to them did the dirty work for the United States, forestalling a rebel victory, so, too, by the end of 1985 the death squads had eliminated another 30,000 "subversives," thus removing any threat of an urban insurrection for the next four years and giving the United States the luxury of implementing the complex strategy for which the moderates had been pressing.

This strategy eventually won the consensus of the American political class, Democrats and Republicans, because it promised to allow the United States to pursue its security interests while working to make El Salvador a better place. It was patterned after an earlier American effort to defeat another Marxist insurgency by supporting and reforming another seamy regime—the government of South Vietnam. Remarkably, this fact gave pause to very few, but the limitations and frustrations that America encountered in pursuing its strategy in El Salvador would prove decidedly similar to those it encountered in Vietnam.

The new strategy just as steadfastly pursued the hard-liners' goal of preventing an FMLN victory. But, as championed by its advocates—Reagan's new Secretary of State, George Shultz; Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders; Enders's chief deputy for Central America,

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L. Craig Johnstone, a veteran of the pacification program in South Vietnam; Deane Hinton, the ambassador to El Salvador; Hinton's successor, Thomas Pickering; and the U.S. military-advisory group in El Salvador—this plan would seek to tutor, nudge, and pressure the Salvadoran regime to conduct what one of the strategy's earliest advocates, James Cheek, Johnstone's predecessor under Carter, termed "a clean counterinsurgency war," a goal that some of the strategy's critics on the left and the right charged was oxymoronic.

This new strategy viewed the insurgency as rooted in legitimate grievances and assumed that it could ultimately be defeated only if those grievances were redressed through fundamental reforms. With the triumph of this viewpoint in policymaking circles, the American project in El Salvador really began. This project left practically no aspect of Salvadoran public life untouched by the United States. Even the U.S. military defined its ends in the broadest possible terms: according to a joint Army and Air Force report, America's goal in "low-intensity conflicts" like El Salvador's was to do no less than build "viable political, economic, military and social institutions that respond to the needs of society." American military advisers and intelligence officers in El Salvador would now be joined by a stream of American lawyers and judges and former police officers, by agricultural and manufacturing consultants, by union officials and social psychologists, by experts on legislative and electoral procedure—all determined to remake the country.

THE most extensive and enduring expression of this approach was the report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, commonly known as the Kissinger Commission report, which was issued in January of 1984. Although the report argued unequivocally that Cuba and the Soviet Union were behind the crisis, which posed a serious threat to U.S. security interests, it nevertheless emphasized the political and economic roots of El Salvador's civil war and advocated a strategy that relied on political, social, and economic development to defeat the FMLN. The report stressed, for instance,

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the need to continue the land-reform effort that the Carter Administration had prodded the Salvadoran regime to undertake in 1980. (The heart of this program was entirely a U.S. creation; the law enacting it was the only piece of legislation in the history of El Salvador that had to be translated into Spanish.)

Issued less than a month after Vice President George Bush's mission to El Salvador seeking to compel the government and the armed forces to restrain the death squads (the most dramatic expression of the triumph of the pragmatists' strategy, and the first of what would be more than half a dozen similar visits by high-level U.S. officials and politicians over the next six years), the Kissinger report explicitly linked countering the insurgency to attaining political legitimacy, which in turn dictated an end to human-rights abuses. Thus the commission argued that no contradiction existed between the security interests of a great power and the generous motives of a democracy; indeed, the two were connected. The mechanism by which the two interests were apparently to be linked was "conditionality." In a key passage of the report explaining specifically the goals of the American counterinsurgency strategy in El Salvador, the commission recommended that increased military aid

> be made contingent upon the Salvadoran government's demonstrated progress toward free elections; freedom of association; the establishment of the rule of law and an effective judicial system; and the termination of the so-called death squads, as well as vigorous action against those guilty of crimes and the prosecution to the extent possible of past offenders.

Significantly, however, in an endnote that reflected the ultimate motivation behind the reformist strategy that the report advocated, Kissinger himself, along with two other members of the commission, declared, in effect, that since the survival of the Salvadoran regime was crucial to American security, the United States could not allow human-rights abuse to stand in the way of its support of El Salvador. Nevertheless, the counterinsurgency strategy the report defined, which the United States would pursue in El Salvador until the end of its involvement in the conflict, assumed that American pressure, advice, and assistance could achieve profound political change. The United States thus took on a most daunting task. It assumed responsibility for ameliorating the pathology produced by centuries of abuse perpetrated by the very armed forces and governing elite that its policy supported. In El Salvador the United States found that to foster a just and liberal society it had to rely on a recalcitrant military with a murderous past and a government with no democratic traditions. America's only means of persuading that government and those armed forces to help themselves by helping the Salvadoran people was conditionality.

FOR the next six years policymakers and the congressional supporters and critics of the U.S. role in El Salvador measured the success of that role in terms of the degree to which the objectives enunciated in the report were attained. Until the end of the Cold War, an event that fundamentally altered both the premises and the limitations of America's strategy in El Salvador, the debate in the United States amounted to whether the glass was half full or half empty. The optimists pointed out that from 1982 to 1990 El Salvador held six reasonably free elections, thanks to U.S. guidance and millions in U.S. support (the United States spent $17 million on the 1982 and 1984 elections alone). They noted, furthermore, that beginning in 1984 political murders committed by the armed forces and the death squads declined precipitously; this was thanks mainly to U.S. pressure but also to the fact that so many targets had already been eliminated. (To the end the American engagement in El Salvador indisputably forced the United States to associate with thugs, but at the same time that association undeniably mitigated their thuggery. Neither the severest critics nor the most strenuous proponents of U.S. policy fully acknowledged both sides of this coin.)

Pessimists noted that by 1989 El Salvador had absorbed perhaps $6 billion in open and covert American assistance, but U.S. Agency for International Development workers were still frustrated by

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the fact that the U.S.-sponsored land-reform program had ground to a halt; U.S. military advisers were dismayed that the Salvadoran military remained corrupt, tactically incompetent, and brutal; U.S. Justice Department officials found it unbelievable that despite their advice and $15 million in technical assistance, the Salvadoran regime had failed to convict a single military officer in a situation in which up to 40,000 political murders had been attributed to the military and the death squads affiliated with it; and State Department officials declared in exasperation that El Salvador could not "qualify . . . as an institutional democracy capable of insuring respect for the human and civil rights of all its citizens."

By and large, the pessimists had a stronger case. On the eve of the collapse of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, most American military experts—including every U.S. military adviser I knew—believed that the war would continue indefinitely, and U.S. diplomats spoke off the record of an American reform project that would perforce last generations. The Salvadoran regime remained remarkably immune to American blandishments.

These limitations on the American project were obvious in the selection of two Salvadoran Defense Ministers—Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova in 1983, and René Emilio Ponce in 1990. The United States exerted considerable pressure on the Salvadoran military to select these two, whom U.S. officials touted as moderates—as indeed both were, compared with their alternatives. But as commander of the National Guard in the early 1980s, Vides had acquiesced in the cover-up of the Guard's murder of four American churchwomen, and he was assumed to have been complicit in other political murders carried out by the Guard and death squads linked to it. For his part, Ponce had been the de facto commander of the Treasury Police—the unit of the Salvadoran armed forces most notorious for its sadistic and extravagant crushing of dissent—from 1979 to 1982, the height of the period of political violence in El Salvador. Thus Ponce did not have a reputation as a particularly enlightened officer, and was in fact denied a U.S. visa for years because he was suspected of human-rights violations. (Later, as army chief of staff, Ponce was one of the officers who

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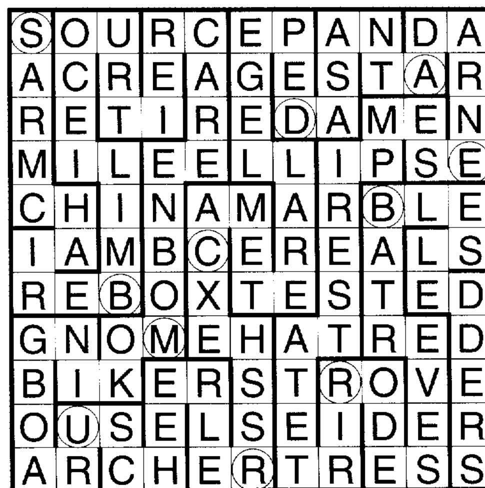

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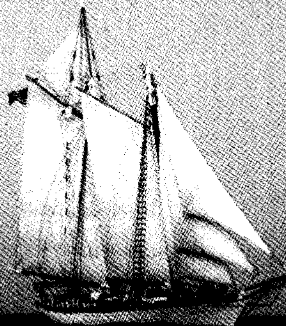

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almost certainly ordered the murders of six Jesuit priests in 1989.) U.S. officials found that both Vides and Ponce were a good deal more pliant than the "extremists" in the Salvadoran officer corps, but obviously neither really shared their American benefactors' vision for El Salvador.

The causes of the frustration that the United States encountered aren't difficult to fathom. American policymakers failed to realize that the leverage that the United States can exert over the conduct of a regime, even if that regime's very survival would appear to depend on American material assistance, is easily overestimated. As policymakers should have learned from the case of South Vietnam, such leverage decreases dramatically when those whom the United States is attempting to influence perceive America to be constrained by its own national interests. After all, how could the Salvadoran military take seriously Washington's threats to cease aid when the United States repeatedly made clear its determination to prevent a rebel victory? Unless America was able to convince the Salvadoran regime and armed forces that it was willing to take drastic steps apparently antithetical to America's interests, the U.S. nation-building strategy could not have succeeded.

IN November of 1989 the FMLN launched its most dramatic offensive in years—the so-called Battle of San Salvador. It was during this attack that the Salvadoran military murdered the six Jesuit priests, who had been strenuous advocates of reform. The frustration that American policymakers in Washington and officials in El Salvador had been experiencing over the previous six years boiled over. That the FMLN had been able to infiltrate the capital with more than a thousand fighters and launch such a powerful assault belied all optimism regarding progress in the seemingly interminable conflict and in the tactical improvement of the Salvadoran military. More important, the Jesuits' murder and the Salvadoran military's subsequent cover-up and obstruction of justice seemed to show that the armed forces' apparent progress under American tutelage in respecting human rights and adhering to the rule of civilian political institutions was illusory.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 USC 3685). 1. Publication Title: The Atlantic Monthly. 2. Publication No.: ISSN 02769077. 3. Filing Date: October 1, 1998. 4. Issue Frequency: Monthly. 5. No. of issues published annually: Twelve. 6. Annual subscription price: $17.94. 7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 77 N. Washington Street, Boston (Suffolk County) MA 02114-1908. 8. Complete mailing address of the headquarters or general business offices of the publisher: 77 N. Washington Street, Boston (Suffolk County) MA 02114-1908. 9. Full names and complete mailing addresses of publisher, editor, and managing editor: Publisher: Donna Palmer, 150 W. 33rd St., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001. Editor: William Whitworth, 77 N. Washington Street, Boston (Suffolk County) MA 02114. Managing Editor: Cullen Murphy, 77 N. Washington Street, Boston (Suffolk County) MA 02114. 10. Owner: The Atlantic Monthly Co., 77 N. Washington Street, Boston (Suffolk County) MA 02114. Mortimer B. Zuckerman, 77 N. Washington Street, Boston (Suffolk County) MA 02114. 11. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: None. 13. Publication Title: The Atlantic Monthly. 14. Issue date for circulation data below: October 1998. 15. Extent and nature of circulation: a. Total No. copies (Net press run): Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 542,462. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 542,041. b. Paid and/or requested circulation. 1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales (not mailed): Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 35,293. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 37,000. 2. Paid or requested mail subscriptions (include advertisers' proof copies/exchange copies): Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 127,923. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 129,952. c. Total paid and/or requested circulation: Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 163,216. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 166,952. d. Free distribution by mail (samples, complimentary, and other free): Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 11,631. Actual No. of single issue published nearest to filing date: 11,587. e. Free distribution outside the mail (carriers or other means): Average No. copies each issued during preceding 12 months: 0. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. f. Total free distribution: Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 14,631. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 11,587. g. Total distribution: Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 177,846. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 178,539. h. Copies not distributed. 1. Office use, left-overs, spoiled: Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 4,836. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 4,681. 2. Returns from news agents: Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 59,779. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 58,821. i. Total: Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 542,462. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 542,041. Percent paid and/or requested circulation: Average No. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 97%. Actual No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 98%. 17. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete.

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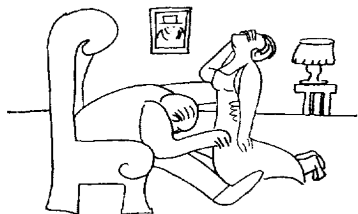

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But many shocked officials at the State Department, following the fighting in San Salvador, failed to pay proper attention to the far more significant events occurring simultaneously in East Germany. The Cold War, quite suddenly, was ending, and just as suddenly everything changed for the United States in El Salvador.

In its unwavering support of the Salvadoran regime, the United States succeeded for a decade in denying the guerrillas a victory. By 1990, though the ambitious goals of America's nation-building effort were never realized, the security concerns that had impelled that strategy evaporated along with the East-West contest. To Washington, "winning" in El Salvador no longer mattered. A negotiated solution, or even "losing," no longer carried the ominous significance that it had for the Carter and Reagan Administrations.

Washington's leverage over its client vastly increased as soon as the Salvadoran armed forces and regime recognized that the United States no longer had pressing reasons to continue supporting them. Thus the threat to cut off aid at last brought a measure of justice in the case of the Jesuits' murder. And more important, with the American embassy in San Salvador, policymakers in Washington, and Democratic and Republican legislators on Capitol Hill all eager to liquidate a burdensome and noxious commitment, America was finally able to force the Salvadoran military and rightist elements of the regime to make concessions that weakened their position in the Salvadoran polity.

This provided the necessary precondition for the contestants in El Salvador to settle their differences, because it permitted the guerrillas to stop fighting without fear that rightist forces would destroy them as soon as they laid down their arms. Neither side, however, would have sought an agreement had not each been compelled to recognize that it was never going to gain the victory for which it had long fought, especially now that the Sandinistas' electoral defeat meant that the FMLN had lost the material and ideological support of its main ally, and the United States was no longer interested in bolstering the Salvadoran military. And so the contestants scurried to make the best deal they could.

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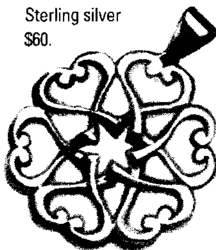

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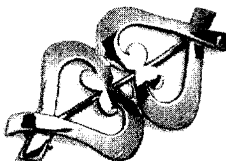

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This was a fairly sordid ending to what was—despite some men of good will on both sides of the Salvadoran conflict, such as Alfredo Cristiani, El Salvador's President, and Guillermo Ungo, the president of the Revolutionary Democratic Front—a squalid and brutal contest. Having involved itself in this struggle, there was no way the United States could emerge from it without exceedingly dirty hands.

For all the honesty of his chronicle, LeoGrande at times wishes, understandably, to assign a too easy blame for America's conduct in El Salvador—a posture that his own painstaking account will not support. To blame, as he occasionally does, "Reaganites" for an "ideological certainty" and "Manichean" outlook that exaggerated the perceived national interest in the outcome of El Salvador's civil war is facile. Democrats and Republicans were united to the end on the essential question concerning that country: both were adamant, for domestic political as well as apparent strategic reasons, that El Salvador should not fall to the FMLN. Most American liberals were, after all, *Cold War* liberals, and thus very few were able or willing to say forthrightly that a guerrilla victory would not jeopardize American interests.

An American reading *Our Own Backyard*, knowing that this chapter of our history is over, feels liberated, because despite the nostalgia of our foreign-policy mandarins for what they call an "overarching" foreign policy "vision" like global containment, it's a relief to live in a world in which a reflexive bipartisan foreign-policy doctrine—or, if you prefer, a realistic bipartisan recognition of the Soviet threat—no longer demands that America intervene in conflicts like El Salvador's. Now that America is free to pursue a more discriminating foreign policy, perhaps the most important lesson of our involvement in El Salvador's civil war is that internal conflicts are particularly brutish struggles, and that choosing sides in them almost invariably entails means unsettling to us for ends that future chroniclers, at least, will deem unworthy of the costs.

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The reader of Ms. Bainbridge's obliquely angled novel never directly meets Master Georgie—amateur photographer, physician, head of a well-heeled and respectable Liverpool family in the mid nineteenth century. He is described by three people. The adoring Myrtle is a waif taken in by Georgie's parents and gradually incorporated into the family. Dr. Potter is his brother-in-law, a man who seemingly has never been self-supporting in all his scholarly life. Then there is "the duck-boy," a tough street urchin who grows up to be a tough small-circus performer. They all wind up in the Crimea, because Georgie has taken the war seriously. The novel creates, with conviction, a small segment of Victorian society in which surface propriety conceals some distinctly improper arrangements. Whether she is describing the morbidly comic or the dubiously experimental or the savagely bloody, Ms. Bainbridge writes with cool detachment in a prose as clear as gin. Her use of historical detail is subtle and surprising and functions brilliantly. This is a memorable novel, in part because the reader is left worrying the unanswered question—Who was Georgie really?

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