

# poetry versus imperialism

any remaining peasant land of its burden of corn and beans and converting it to the coming thing, cotton for the Allies' WW II uniforms. But again, as throughout their post-Columbus history, Salvadorans resisted, and in 1944 a general strike unseated El Brujo 'Warlock' Martinez. The oligarchy adroitly shuffled dictators, installing a military clique to replace the single man. It modernized, entering on a program of import substitution, the coming thing after WWII and the Korean War boom and bust cycles of cotton and coffee. But there was no land reform; the oligarchy was not about to touch their own pride, joy and secure profits. So, naturally enough, and certainly clear to economists, the domestic market did not expand. Import substitution didn't really work out, anyway. It seemed to serve as a tariff-jumping device for multinationals setting up subsidiaries rather than to foster a real national capital sector.

But there was one thing the modernizing oligarchy and its strategy for development did produce. With increased urbanization and services in the cities, there grew up a working class, and a middle class with its consequent politization. Political parties outside the hackneyed versions of oligarchic cliques developed which articulated the needs and aspirations of this new class. Under the influence of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress Dollars and Pressures, room was allowed El Salvador for unionization, especially of civil servants and skilled workers essential to the functioning of urban society. And they sought charges through electoralism, especially through the Christian Democratic Party of Napoleon Duarte, the popular mayor of San Salvador, the capital. In that space also began to function peasant associations and Christian based communities, in all a whole panoply of mass and civic organizations who organized around basic needs, such as clean water, lighting and schools. There were left-wing groups, too, which should come as no surprise to students of 20th century life.

This array of unions, parties and groups sought reforms through the ballot; though there were those who warned that the oligarchy would ultimately not accept such reforms, those who sought answers in guerrilla actions. But the electoral tendency carried the majority, and they elected Duarte president in 1972, one of the few relatively infraudulent elections permitted by the oligarchy since 1932. He didn't even take office: there was a military coup; and there was selective assassination of popular leaders, heads of unions, teachers, student council representatives at the university, peasant leaders, and people from the Catholic Church Human Rights Commission. There was harassment and sabotage of organiza-

tions' offices and activists. Right-wing death squads appeared, their members curiously never being caught or arrested, while the police and guard arrested hundreds of members of the popular organizations. One squad popularized the slogan, aimed at ostensibly subversive priests, "Be a patriot; kill a priest."

But the popular organizations continued their organizing and agitating for reforms; strikes and mass demonstrations became common in the middle and later 70's. Things seemed to be getting beyond the control of the oligarchy. A "young, liberal officer's" coup ousted Romero, the author of a 1977 shuffle coup, in October of 1979. They talked of land reform, popular elections, the curbing of the repressive forces and the death squads. The U.S. embassy staff talked up the young colonels even as peasant and urban activists' deaths at the hands of security forces increased. Individuals and parties associated with the young colonels dropped away. The colonels thought they had a hand on legitimacy when they included Duarte, back from exile, hobnobbing with his erstwhile torturers, but over 80 per cent of Duarte's Christian Democratic Party left him. Enrique Alvarez Cordoba, scion of one of the *Fourteen Families* and named Minister of Agriculture, left the junta and joined the umbrella opposition organization, the FDR (Democratic Revolutionary Front).

Now the question arises, who are these FDR? They are nothing less than a coalition of the majority: 85 per cent of unionized workers, the two universities and virtually all university and secondary student unions, Catholic base communities, the peasant organizations, tenants' and block committees of the urban areas, slum dwellers, political parties from the far left to center, including the disaffected Christian Democrats, organizations of professionals and small businessmen. Mass repression began to be visited upon the FDR and its components. It was no longer selective repression. Troops fired on demonstrations of thousands and attacked whole peasant villages. The junta kept shuffling the personnel, looking for the right reformist facade that would gain legitimacy. The violence increased, in town and countryside. A refugee situation developed in the countryside as peasants fled mass repression by troops armed with tools of the trade developed in Vietnam and supplied by the United States. Archbishop Oscar Romero, a conservative when he took up the post, but increasingly appalled at the wanton slaughter spoke out: he said two things that cost him his life. He said that when all peaceful means to achieve reforms have been exhausted, the Church considers insurrection moral and justified. And certainly, Salvadorans were resisting the attacks on their

mass organizations, which had laboured long and legitimately for their rights, dignity and material improvement. Those who had proclaimed armed struggle in the early 70's, citing repeated electoral fraud and the attacks by death squads and repressive forces, were joined by a variety of forces, which combined under single military command in 1980.

But what really got to the oligarchy, and especially their henchman Roberto d'Aubuisson, was Romero's last call. Speaking in a Church homily, with his voice broadcast from outside the country, he addressed himself to the repressive forces and especially the rank and file: "In the name of God, I beseech you, I beg you, I order you to stop the repression." The oligarchy and the extremists in the military saw red. This was a call to insubordination, if not mutiny. He was gunned down the next day while saying mass. He had said: "They may kill me, they may silence me, but they will never silence the voice of the people." During the mass homage to the martyred archbishop, security forces opened fire near the Cathedral, killing over forty and wounding hundreds in a Dantesque scene appearing on world TV screens.

And there has followed one horror after another. Six FDR leaders were kidnapped at a large meeting in a hall donated by the Jesuits in San Salvador, their mutilated and tortured bodies were found the next day. One of them was Enrique Alvarez, the oligarch who dared be with Salvadorans instead of their oppressors. And then the four American nun/lay workers were raped and massacred by security forces. And of course, the Dutch newsmen. And the massacres of peasants, hundreds at a time, along the Rio Sumpul border with Honduras, in a cave seeking shelter from U.S.-supplied jet attacks and helicopter gunships. More than 50,000 Salvadorans have been killed in five years. Over a million refugees resulted, both inside and outside the country, 250,000 in the United States alone, where they face deportation to uncertain conditions at best and violent death all too frequently.

Yes, a war is on, a war in which the oligarch who heads the Coffee Planters' Association has said that if it takes another 1932 Matanza (Slaughter), he is ready for it. Well, it has been surpassed, for those who bother to count cadavers. And why is the United States government in it? Because they have chosen sides, a clear choice. And why have they chosen the side they have? Well, there is precedent. They chose Somoza and all the line of dictators stretching through this bloody century in Latin America who maintained elite privilege and a stable investment climate for U.S. companies from United Fruit to Hanna Mines to ITT. This is such a slippery

thing for many North Americans, with all their education, to grasp.

It is very clear to most Latin Americans. CBC's "Man Alive" once presented a documentary on the Church in Nicaragua. Clearly the working people, the poor and unemployed, the peasants of that country, devout Catholics all, saw something called imperialism behind Somoza. Salvadorans, in their majority, see imperialism behind their 50 year pain, behind the killing of their beloved Archbishop Romero, behind the brutal deaths of their family members among the 30,000. An increasing number of Canadians see it, too: Unions and Church groups, students and farmers. Never has there been a greater volume of mail crossing the desks of External Affairs than that received urging Canada to disassociate itself from U.S. policies in the area.

And where is it all going from here? In Washington they are saying that it all came from Moscow, Havana, Managua and Hanoi, though former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador Robert White repeats untingly, as did Romero and as does the FDR, that the struggle comes from 50 years of inequity and injury to the Salvadoran people. The U.S. policy-makers threaten to regionalize the war, drawing Honduran troops into the struggle (as they have already done), trying to "destabilize" the popular revolutionary government of Nicaragua (whose forbearance must rank as an unprecedented effort of will). But who really is the greatest enemy of the U.S. government? Not Central American peasants. I'll tell you who the Reagan administration fears most: the American people, euphemistically known as "public opinion." Reagan's crowd fear that they could not count on the American people to support and die in another imperialist war. Would they not already have gone in, in force, given how strategically important it is to "deny Central American dominoes to communism," if the American people had permitted it?

U.S. citizens have been the barrier to much-increased intervention, and will continue to be so. Vietnam caused a lot of pain and discord which will take generations to live out, but it taught the "American body politic" some things. It dropped the mask of imperialism. So Vietnam was and is a poem. Because poets, like Roque Dalton of El Salvador, drop the mask of imperialism. And now the unknown poets fighting in El Salvador know, as he did, that El Salvador Vencera—El Salvador Will Win.

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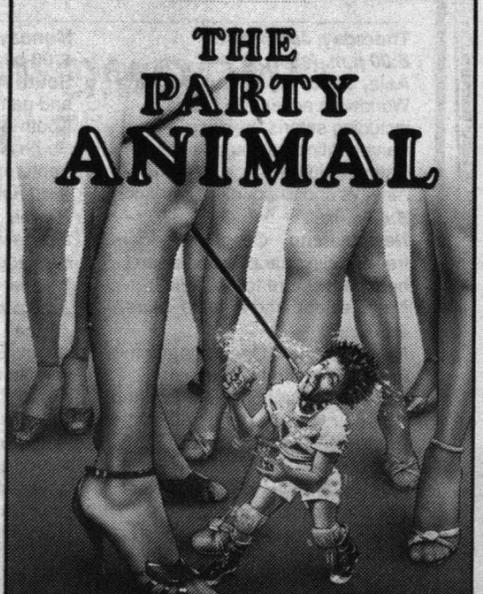
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