

Analysis lacking in Didion's 'Salvador'

Salvador
 Joan Didion
 Lester & Orpens Denys, 108 pages
 Review by Geoff Martin

In this, her sixth book, Joan Didion makes her contribution to the rapidly expanding literature dealing with the present crisis in Central America, and El Salvador in particular.

For Didion, who has a reputation as a conservative in the United States, I suppose this is a clearly thought out response to what she experienced in her trip to El Salvador in June of 1982. Didion is certainly not a radical, yet she does criticize the American policy presently being pursued by the Reagan Administration.

Something is wrong with Didion's account of the current situation in El Salvador, not because she is factually incorrect but because she often leaves the reader in the dark on certain issues and generally fails to draw obvious conclusions from the evidence she presents.

The elections held in March 1982 are a good example of this. She quotes a June 8, 1982 speech by President Reagan: "(With elections) Suddenly the freedom fighters in the hills were exposed for what they really are: Cuban-backed guerrillas . . . On election day the people of El Salvador, an unprece-

dent 1.5 million of them, braved ambush and gunfire, trudging miles to vote for freedom."

Didion then goes on to quote former Ambassador Robert E. White as saying the elections were a "political disaster," and "Nothing is more symbolic of our current predicament in El Salvador than the Administration's bizarre attempt to recast (now Assembly President Roberto) D'Aubuisson in a more favourable light."

Both sides of the argument are presented but Didion leaves the reader hanging, waiting for an interpretation of the elections which she never intended to provide. And, without her interpretation of the facts, the book cannot possibly succeed.

Throughout her short 108 pages Didion presents all sorts of ideas without any conclusions. A good example of this is her quotation from de-classified State Department document of January 15, 1982, which outlines Major Roberto D'Aubuisson's murky connection with the notorious Salvadorean death squads.

The State Department memo states "Membership (in the death squads) is also uncertain, but in addition to civilians we believe that both on- and off-duty members of

the security forces are participants."

D'Aubuisson unofficially confirmed this when as a right-wing spokesman he stated in an interview early in 1981 that "security force members utilize the guise of the death squad when a potentially embarrassing or odious task needs to be performed."

In addition, Didion quotes Ambassador White, who remarked that D'Aubuisson is a "psychopathic killer," and she states that D'Aubuisson would have become President of the Republic if the US, through their present Ambassador Deane Hinton, had not demanded there be a civilian (Alvaro Magana) to occupy the head post.

Didion says nothing else about the elections, and she does not delve into the significance of a man like D'Aubuisson as the President of the Constitutional Assembly, including how and why he got there and what part the United States plays in the internal politics of El Salvador.

Another example of Didion's habit of relating reams of information without explaining the significance are her remarks about the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN). She mentions the five major irregular revolutionary commands in the FMLN, one of which has the word "Communist" in the title. However, she neglects to analyze any of the more than 14 groups which are under these five umbrella organizations. Didion does not tell us anything about ideology or internal politics. The power of the radical left, the centre, or the right and the roles they play in the FMLN also remain a mystery.

Indeed, her failure to distinguish between the FMLN (the Provisional wing) and the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), is perhaps the most serious transgression.

One of the things which the author did describe, something which I hadn't heard of, is the strident anti-semitism of D'Aubuisson's right-wing party AERA. Didion says that in the days preceding the appointment of Alvaro Magana to the Presidency of the Republic, D'Aubuisson, his chief competitor, was spreading rumors that he was a "Communist," and was calling him the "little Jew." Apparently there is a lot of tension in the oligarchy itself between the Spanish families who came to El Salvador in the 18th and 19th centuries and the rich Europeans of Jewish descent who arrived in El Salvador since 1900.

Finally, Joan Didion in *Salvador* refuses to advocate a policy for the Reagan Administration even though she is not satisfied with the present state of affairs. Though sometimes writers of non-fiction decide to remain aloof to preserve their objectivity, this is not a work of scholarship (there is no index, for example). For someone who has read about El Salvador, this will be worth reading, but for those who are looking for a good general work on the subject, there are other books such as *Bitter Ground* by Lisa North.

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