

Second Edition

Revolution in El Salvador

FROM CIVIL STRIFE TO CIVIL PEACE

Tommie Sue Montgomery



*Introduction by
Ignacio Martín Baró and Rodolfo Cardenal*

WESTVIEW PRESS

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to Civil Peace

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and Rodolfo Cardenal

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Boulder • San Francisco • Oxford

All photos by the author unless otherwise attributed. The cover photo shows the installation of the Peace Commission, February 1, 1992.

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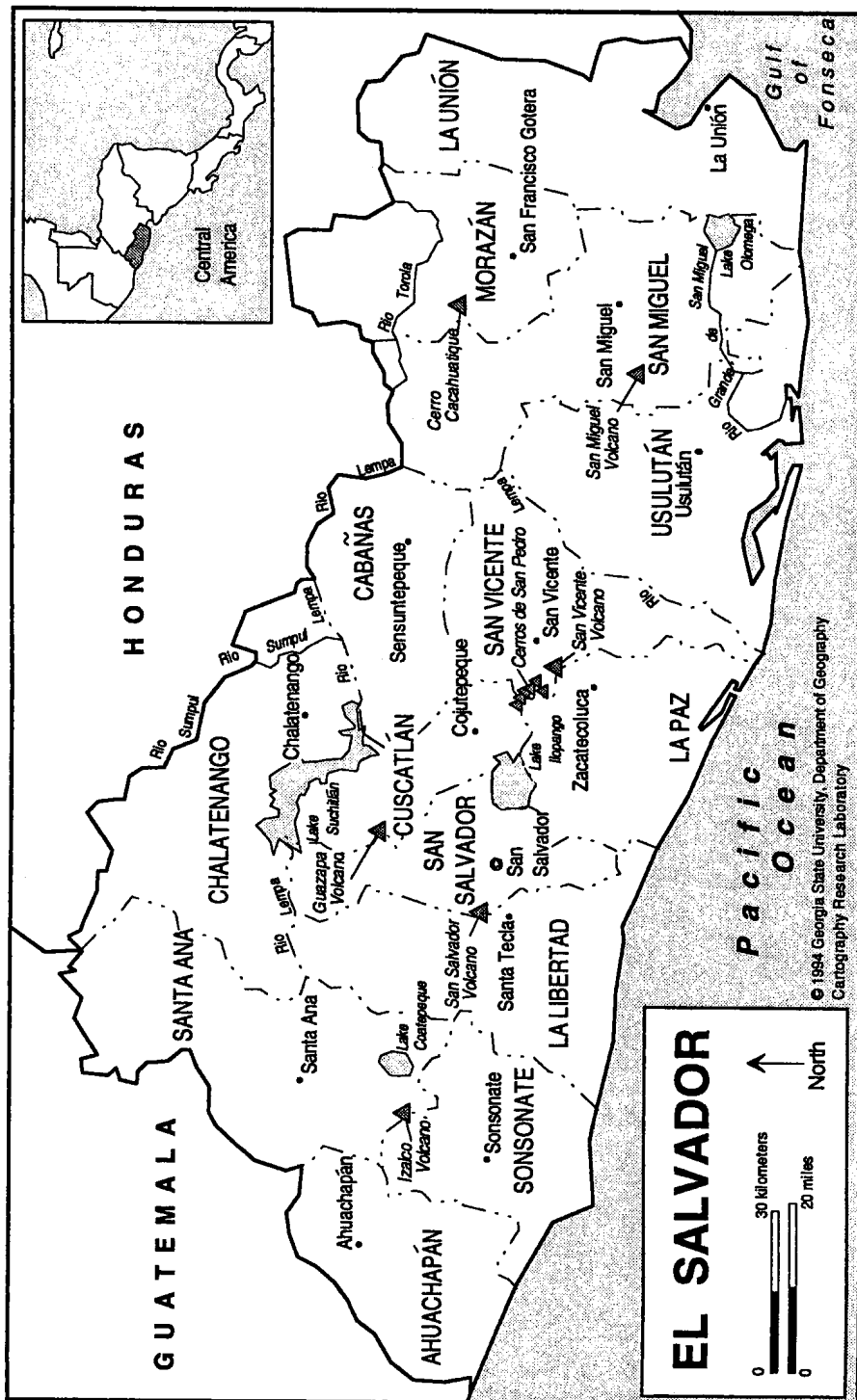
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Tommie Sue Montgomery



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Ignacio Martín-Baró and
Rodolfo Cardenal

Introduction—Fifteen Years Later: Peace at Last

On October 15, 1979, a coup d'état executed by a group of young officers in the Salvadorean army put an end to a regime serving a social minority that had become increasingly dependent on the bloody repression of the masses and of any opposition group. As this work of Tommie Sue Montgomery well documents, those people, both civilian and military, who most committed themselves to this first renewal movement, saw themselves displaced from the government by those in power more accustomed to the subtleties of spy games. Therefore, the political project that the Christian Democratic Party of El Salvador embraced in 1980 was already compromised by the corrupt orders of the Armed Forces of El Salvador. Recognizing this fact, a group of Christian Democrats decided to break away from the project and from the party for political and even strictly ethical reasons.

When on June 1, 1989, almost ten years later, Alfredo Cristiani assumed the presidency of El Salvador, having triumphed in the elections as the candidate of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), a cycle of Salvadorean history appeared to end. ARENA, a party of the extreme right, came into being as a political instrument to defend the interests of the Salvadorean economic elite during the unstable period after the 1979 coup. The party therefore had the clear objective of impeding any efforts to bring about serious social change. In 1982 ARENA scared the U.S. government with a partial victory in the Constituent Assembly elections and with the decision to place for election as president ARENA's founder and leader, former National Guard major Roberto D'Aubuisson—a man publicly recognized as the principal promoter

Ignacio Martín-Baró wrote a draft to introduce this book, titled "Ten Years Later: The War Continues," but he was unable to finish. The enemies of truth and light took his life violently, together with the lives of five other Jesuits, in the dawn of November 16, 1989. At the request of Tommie Sue Montgomery, I have taken the draft of Martín-Baró and have finished it, adding the last two years of negotiation and the signing of the peace treaty on January 16, 1992. For this reason I left his name and his ideas about the ten years of civil war. However, the war did not continue: "Fifteen Years Later: Peace at Last" seems to be arriving. —Rodolfo Cardenal

of the death squads. It was the less than democratic diplomacy of General Vernon Walters that impeded that premature blow against U.S. interventionism in El Salvador and that placed Alvaro Magaña in the presidency. Similarly it was, at least partially, CIA money that won the election for José Napoleón Duarte in 1984 when the United States was again faced with the threat of D'Aubuisson. In 1988, however, conditions had changed, and with the resigned acquiescence of the U.S. Embassy, ARENA was able to recover for the bourgeoisie control of the Legislative Assembly that since 1985 had been in the hands of the Christian Democrats. ARENA's victory in the 1989 presidential elections completed the recovery of the state apparatus by the same social forces that had possessed it before 1979—but it was only for a short time because within two and a half years, they had to accept important changes in their political agenda.

It would be misleading, however, to think that everything returned to the status quo ante and that in El Salvador nothing substantial changed during the ten painful years between 1979 and 1989. ARENA's electoral victory did not completely return to the Salvadorean capitalist sector its previous control over the full apparatus of the state, much less its control over where and how people lived. It did return a divided state and a country in civil war. It suffices to look at the principal actors on the political battlefield of the country to understand that ARENA's triumph was not simply a restoration of the traditional Salvadorean regime—the reestablishment of the order of “the Fourteen Families.”

ARENA did not have control over the Armed Forces, the U.S. government, or the forces of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Above all, ARENA did not return to the Salvadorean oligarchy its control over the Armed Forces. The war permitted the Armed Forces significant institutional autonomy in economic power, which had been traditionally subordinated. Between 1980 and 1989, the army increased its size four times over, achieving financial development with interests of its own, including interests in competition with those of the bourgeoisie. As much as ARENA rose in power, it still had to negotiate with an army that was not disposed to lose some of its privileges or engage in politics that would generate problems with its new patron: the U.S. government.

The second actor that escaped the force of ARENA was the U.S. government. If, as Montgomery argues, the United States began to interfere significantly in the politics of the country only after 1960 with the coup d'état against José María Lemus, after 1979 and the coup d'état against General Carlos Humberto Romero, the interference turned into quasi-colonial domination. An examination of the period 1980–1992 clearly shows that “the embassy” constituted the principal force in the Salvadorean conflict: U.S. advice and financing defined the direction of the war from the government's side. U.S. aid (plus the remittance of thousands of Salvadoreans in the United States, which increased to several hundred thousand dollars annually) impeded the collapse of the Salvadorean economy. U.S. diplomacy promoted and managed internationally the cause of the Salvadorean government. Finally, negotiations

to end the war were delayed or advanced according to the interests of U.S. foreign policy.

The third force over which, obviously, ARENA could not exercise control with its electoral triumphs was the FMLN. In a decade the FMLN accumulated military power made even more impressive in that it resisted the multimillion-dollar military aid of the United States, the giant development of the Armed Forces, the violent war between 1981 and 1983 (including a massive campaign of state and parastate terrorism), and a prolonged counterinsurgent war that unfolded between 1984 and 1991. It should be kept in mind that all of these developments took place in a country where the army could dispatch an air transport in twenty minutes to any corner of the national territory.

In addition to having limited control over the state apparatus when it attained power, ARENA encountered a country that was materially destroyed and socially polarized. The socioeconomic conditions of the majority of the Salvadorean populace are worse in 1993 than in 1979. If this situation of mass misery, caused by unjust and oppressive sociopolitical structures, was the fundamental cause of the conflict, the end of the war has given way to a new phase in the history of the country, one in which a new opportunity is presented to reconstruct the country in the intermediate and long term. The forces whose interests ARENA defends politically not only were principally responsible for the historical situation of injustice that caused the conflict, but over the years they also were the crucial actors in the development of the war. Through their systematic decapitalization and compulsive impoverishment of the country, in the opinion of some economists, they harmed the national economy more than the war itself. They also were responsible for these unjust conditions by their permanent politics of encouraging the war with their militaristic solution to the conflict and, worse, by their participation in the "dirty war" through the creation and financing of those paramilitary forces known as "death squads." They were responsible because, as Montgomery demonstrates, they actively participated in the socioeconomic and military policies developed during these years—first by aligning with the government and the assembly elected in 1982 but above all, by resisting and even opposing, against all reason, the socioeconomic and political changes without which the country could not be viable in the future.

In this sense, a book such as this constitutes a valuable historical record, particularly now that the armed conflict has ceased and some sectors are interested in having the origin and development of the war forgotten. With the return of ARENA to power there appeared a mystifying political discourse that was nothing but a variant of the discourse given by the Reagan administration. If for Ronald Reagan the Salvadorean war was the consequence of "communist aggression" executed from Cuba and Nicaragua, for ARENA the responsibility was attributed to the governmental reformism of the Christian Democrats, whose "communitarianism" had a simple cryptic variant: communist. In both cases, the fundamental causes of the armed conflict in El Salvador were ignored because they were assigned to forces considered "the ene-

mies,” and this focus allowed both the United States and the social groups that were backing ARENA to elude their historical responsibility.

It is evident that the Christian Democratic administration not only was inefficient, given that it did not achieve the purpose of peace and economic recovery that it initially proposed, but also that with the passage of the years, the administration was drowning in its own corruption. In good logic, however, the same and with greater reason could be said by ARENA about the Salvadorean Armed Forces: In spite of its disproportionate growth, in spite of the most specialized advisers and the best armaments to the point of saturation, in spite of consuming half of the national budget and an even greater part of international aid, and in spite of having free rein to develop a total war, including a massive “dirty war” campaign (state terrorism), and then a systematic counterinsurgency war afterward, the Armed Forces did not defeat the FMLN or weaken it significantly. This failure, recognized even by U.S. military analysts, was ignored in ARENA’s official discourse, which directed all of its arsenal against the reformism of the Christian Democratic Party, demonizing it and blaming it for everything bad, to the point of talking about a lost decade: the 1980s.

This work of Tommie Sue Montgomery reviews the history that provides the reasons for the Salvadorean conflict—a history that Reagan ignored, that ARENA tries to forget, and that the mass media tend to omit as if events began the moment they began to report the problems. Given the “official story,” fabricated in San Salvador or Washington, and given the events “without a story” of many journalistic reports, it is important to recall the roots of a civil war that, for its duration, turned into something familiar and unquestioned.

The need to keep the historical memory alive requires that this deplorable chapter written by the Reagan administration in its policy toward Central America—and more concretely toward El Salvador—not be closed without further consideration, especially when officials from this era freely declare that they were always in favor of peace. Reagan should not be made a scapegoat for prolonging the Salvadorean civil war (as some members of ARENA did at times), but it is undeniable that his administration must accept a large part of the responsibility. It was not in vain during these twelve years that the United States appropriated \$6 billion for the Salvadorean conflict, nor was it in vain that the U.S. government became the new patron of the Salvadorean Armed Forces. The theoretical pretense was to “professionalize” the Salvadorean army and turn it into a pillar of democracy. The practical reality was to create an institution totally disproportionate to the size of the country, structurally opposed to any reform of its privileges and prerogatives, and convinced of its supremacy over other national institutions and, therefore, of its primacy over civilian power and even over the law itself. It could be said that the only Latin American institution that successive U.S. administrations truly trust is the army, although they later show great indignation for the Pinochets and the Noriegas—in great part U.S. creations—and the systematic political torture and death squads.

The brutal massacre of the six university Jesuits in the early hours of November 16, 1989, by an elite battalion trained by U.S. officials was one of the

determining elements that changed the political orientation in Washington. This brutal murder appears to have opened the eyes of the architects of U.S. policy to the impossibility of professionalizing the Salvadorean army and of converting it into a pillar of democracy. It was then that they understood, in part due to the FMLN's general offensive that also occurred in November, the impossibility of winning the war with that army, the futility of establishing a democracy with the institution that most violated human rights, the complete failure of their foreign policy, and the fact that they had squandered billions of dollars. After November 1989, Washington began to look for a dignified way to disentangle itself from the chaotic situation that it helped create in one of its backyards.

As Montgomery well demonstrates, the Reagan administration had three objectives with its policy toward Central America: to depose the revolutionary government of Nicaragua, to establish a permanent military base in Honduras, and to defeat the Salvadorean FMLN militarily—all of which was done, of course, with the justification of promoting democracy in these countries. Five years after the Reagan decade, it is obvious from the blood and destruction, from the death and suffering that this militaristic policy scattered over Central America, that the policy was a failure.

This is not about mystifying the Salvadorean conflict as if it were merely a result of Latin culture, incompatible with a democratic order, or as if the United States did not have anything to do with its cause and development. Even though, according to the declarations of the late President Duarte, the interference of the embassy in the business of his government reached the point of wanting to choose ministers, Salvadorean history would be poorly understood with the elimination of the preponderant and powerful role of the U.S. government. Nothing is more disorienting, in this sense, than documents like those of the Kissinger commission that, by omission, seem completely to exempt the United States from any causal responsibility for the problems in the area. Historical memory is important not only so that present and future U.S. administrations do not continue committing the same or equivalent mistakes, but also so that they do not try to limit their analysis and responsibility to the moment in which a presidency begins. A bad diagnosis could only with difficulty lead to a good policy; the almost obsessive anticommunism of the Reagan administration resulted in a poor diagnosis of Central America's problems, and the consequent policy could only lead to the misfortune seen today.

In this manner the United States understood the situation after the FMLN's military offensive and the murder of the Jesuits. After that the United States looked for a means to disengage from the embarrassing situation in which it found itself in El Salvador. It is in this context that support for negotiations to the point of directly pressuring President Cristiani to overcome his and the army's resistance is understood. From this new U.S. determination, the negotiating process advanced rapidly and culminated in the signing of the peace accords in Chapultepec (Mexico) on January 16, 1992.

Not only the United States obtained benefits from the peace accords. ARENA was able to end the war in exchange for losing political space. Al-