

THE CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR: A Retrospective Analysis

T. David Mason
University of Memphis

- THE EL MOZOTE MASSACRE.* By Leigh Binford. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. Pp. 263. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- EL SALVADOR'S CIVIL WAR: A STUDY OF REVOLUTION.* By Hugh Byrne. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1996. Pp. 241. \$49.95 cloth.)
- DEATH FORETOLD: THE JESUIT MURDERS IN EL SALVADOR.* By Martha Doggett. (Washington, D.C.: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Georgetown University Press, 1993. Pp. 358. \$40.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- RIGHTS AND RECONCILIATION: U.N. STRATEGIES IN EL SALVADOR.* By Ian Johnstone. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995. Pp. 101. \$8.95 paper.)
- REVOLUTION IN EL SALVADOR: FROM CIVIL STRIFE TO CIVIL PEACE.* Second edition. By Tommie Sue Montgomery. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995. Pp. 344. \$69.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- MARTYRDOM AND THE POLITICS OF RELIGION: PROGRESSIVE CATHOLICISM IN EL SALVADOR'S CIVIL WAR.* By Anna L. Peterson. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997. Pp. 211. \$17.95 paper.)
- THE PROTECTION RACKET STATE: ELITE POLITICS, MILITARY EXTORTION, AND CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR.* By William Stanley. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1996. Pp. 328. \$59.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)
- IS THERE A TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY IN EL SALVADOR?* Edited by Joseph S. Tulchin, with Gary Bland. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1992. Pp. 212. \$9.95 paper.)
- BETWEEN EARTHQUAKES AND VOLCANOES: MARKET, STATE, AND THE REVOLUTIONS IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* By Carlos M. Vilas, translated by Ted Kuster. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995. Pp. 224. \$36.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.)
- PROMISED LAND: DEATH AND LIFE IN EL SALVADOR.* By Scott Wright. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994. Pp. 229. \$14.95 paper.)

The civil war in El Salvador lasted over a decade and took the lives of more than seventy thousand citizens. This much is common knowledge. Yet as Carlos Vilas aptly notes in his introduction to *Between Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, until the eruption of civil conflict in Central America in the

1970s, El Salvador and the rest of the region “had gone unnoticed by international public opinion, receiving only so much attention as is customarily accorded the picturesque” (p. 8). It was the war that brought El Salvador to the attention of academics, activists, policy makers, and the public in general. It was the war that stimulated an outpouring of academic research that probably exceeded the total volume of English-language works on El Salvador from independence until the outbreak of the civil war in 1979. With the war having ended in 1992, we are now seeing the first wave of works benefiting from the sharper lens of hindsight. A sample of these books provides the subject matter of this essay.

Thirty years ago, Samuel Huntington argued, “where the conditions of land-ownership are equitable and provide a viable living for the peasant, revolution is unlikely. Where they are inequitable and where the peasant lives in poverty and suffering, revolution is likely, if not inevitable, unless government takes prompt measures to remedy these conditions.”¹ Since that time, the study of peasant-based rural insurgencies has grown into a cottage industry among social scientists and policy analysts alike. Do the theories developed in the three decades since Huntington’s provocative assertion help analysts understand the Salvadoran conflict? Did it conform to the causal dynamics of revolution depicted in those theories? The books reviewed here suggest that the answer to both questions is yes. Beyond this point, does the Salvadoran conflict teach scholars anything new about the causes, trajectory, and outcomes of revolutions in the countryside? Has the profusion of scholarship on the Salvadoran conflict helped elaborate and refine existing theories of revolution? Fortunately, the answer to these questions is also in the affirmative.

Tommie Sue Montgomery’s *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* stands out as a comprehensive overview of the Salvadoran conflict. This updated edition of her 1982 book adds a thorough chronology of the war, including the convergence of events and forces that led to the peace agreement in 1992. Without compromising analytical rigor, Montgomery embellishes her scholarship with vignettes from her field research that put a human face on the sort of social scientific analysis that too often objectifies the lives of human beings caught in the crossfire of civil war. In this manner, she conveys the humanity of those whose everyday lives were changed irrevocably and often tragically by the war raging around them.

Each of the remaining books analyzes critically some specific aspect of the Salvadoran conflict and revolutions in the countryside as a general phenomenon. Vilas’s book addresses the structural antecedents of peasant-

1. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), 375.

based revolutions. He describes how the expansion and commercialization of export agriculture in the last half of the nineteenth century displaced peasants from the land and thereby generated the reservoir of discontent that gave Salvadorans a reason to revolt. Yet aggrieved individuals rarely rise up spontaneously in armed revolt. When they do, they are usually crushed with great brutality, as the 1932 *matanza* in El Salvador tragically illustrates. Revolution requires the effective mobilization of the aggrieved by an opposition elite with the organizational resources and leadership skills to persuade individuals to support an armed challenge to the regime. Montgomery and Hugh Byrne provide excellent accounts of El Salvador's revolutionary organizations, their leaders, and the strategies they pursued to mobilize support for an armed revolt.

Opposition movements rarely choose revolutionary violence as their initial strategy. Instead, they start by mobilizing the aggrieved around the far less dangerous strategy of nonviolent collective action aimed at pressuring the state into undertaking reforms to alleviate the sources of popular grievances. The books by Anna Peterson and Scott Wright address the role played by the Catholic Church in mobilizing the poor of El Salvador for nonviolent action through grassroots mechanisms of "Christian base communities."

It is the response of the state—reform or repression—that determines whether opposition will remain nonviolent or shift to revolutionary violence. In 1980 the Salvadoran state simultaneously undertook an ambitious agrarian reform program and one of the bloodiest campaigns of repression ever witnessed in contemporary Latin America. William Stanley's book presents a model of the "protection-racket state" that allows him to explain how intra-elite politics within the Salvadoran state could produce simultaneously the contradictory strategies of fundamental reform and indiscriminate repression.

What effects did this two-pronged strategy have? Regardless of its economic outcomes, agrarian reform was intended primarily to restore popular support for the incumbent regime and to inoculate peasants against the appeals of the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Unfortunately, none of the books in this group focus on the question of whether agrarian reform succeeded or failed in its political purpose. This issue may be the most critical feature of the politics of revolution in El Salvador that has not yet been subjected to the microscope of social scientific analysis.

The other dimension of the state's counterinsurgency strategy—repression—is the focal point of Leigh Binford's account of the massacre at El Mozote and Martha Doggett's investigation of the Jesuit murders in 1989. In addition, Byrne chronicles the ebb and flow of the civil war by analyzing the competing strategies of the state and the FMLN as well as the effects of these strategies on the support and loyalty of the Salvadoran peo-

ple. By the end of 1989, both the state and the rebels had reached the conclusion that neither could defeat the other on the battlefield and that the time therefore had come for negotiations. The negotiations that brought the war to a conclusion are addressed in Ian Johnstone's book and the volume edited by Joseph Tulchin. By examining the contributions of these books to our understanding of the war in El Salvador, readers can perhaps discern the ways in which analyses of the Salvadoran conflict have contributed to our understanding of revolution in general.

Social and Economic Antecedents of Civil War

Most analysts trace the roots of the Salvadoran conflict to the displacement of peasant cultivators by an aggressively expansionist agro-export sector. This process began in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the coffee boom and culminated with the expansion of cotton, cattle, and sugar production after World War II. The gross inequality of landownership and impoverishment of the landless and land-poor populations are resulting conditions that have preceded the outbreak of rural unrest in various countries around the world. Yet inequality of landownership, income, and wealth occur far more commonly in time and space than does revolution. Carlos Vilas raises this point in *Between Earthquakes and Volcanoes: Market, State, and the Revolutions in Central America*. The question central to his analysis is, "[W]hy did El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua become . . . fertile ground for revolutionary movements . . . while Costa Rica and Honduras managed to remain above the fray?" (p. 19). Vilas's comparative analysis reminds readers that however disruptive of peasant subsistence security the liberal reforms of the nineteenth century might have been, there was nothing inevitable about revolution in El Salvador.

Vilas assesses the impact on peasants of the "modernization of Central American capitalism." In the name of unleashing the productive forces of capitalism, the Salvadoran state wielded a very visible hand in altering the distribution of land, wealth, and income flows, all to the detriment of the peasant majority. Both Vilas and Montgomery provide detailed accounts of this state-led economic transformation. Neoclassical critiques of the 1980 land reform as an unwarranted intrusion by the state into the workings of the market pale when one considers the active role taken by the Salvadoran state in dispossessing peasant cultivators of their land in the first place.

Vilas describes how the expansion of agro-export agriculture affected the markets in which landless peasants found themselves buffeted. The growth in the landless population increased the supply of labor and thereby depressed agricultural wages. It also increased market demand for subsistence goods, as peasants who previously had produced their own

food now had to turn to the market to purchase those goods. Yet with export crops displacing food crops, the supply of basic grains declined while demand was rising and wages were declining, all the result of displacing peasants from the land.

By comparing El Salvador with Costa Rica and Honduras, Vilas makes his case that revolution was not an inevitable consequence of these changes in the political economy of the countryside. For instance, Honduras and Nicaragua possessed substantial agricultural frontiers to which displaced peasants could migrate. El Salvador did not, its person-to-land ratio ranking highest in the region. In fact, migration to Honduras was a favored escape valve for land-poor Salvadorans until the Soccer War of 1969 closed off the border and drove three hundred thousand Salvadorans out of Honduras.

El Salvador's exclusive dependence on agricultural commodities for export earnings retarded the diversification of its economy and its ability to absorb the population displaced by the commercialization of agriculture. Vilas argues,

A price-taker economy is not in a position to influence the world prices for its exports, which restricts its margin for action. . . . Its capacity to cut production costs . . . can be reduced to one: labor. . . . Business must target the labor force as a cost to be reduced, rather than as a profit-generating component of capital. A production structure of this kind tends, by its own logic, to give rise to authoritarian political regimes and repressive governments; to deprive broad segments of the working classes of citizenship rights, especially in the countryside; to outlaw unions and other popular organizations; to resort to extra-economic compulsion of the labor force. (Pp. 75–76)

Vilas concludes, "the disorders of capitalist modernization are not sufficient explanation for the emergence of radical political challenges." Instead, "repressive states in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua" account for revolution in those nations and its absence in Costa Rica and Honduras, where "political systems more open to popular pressure and social reform" prevailed (p. 79).

Vilas explains in *Between Earthquakes and Volcanoes* the socioeconomic changes that produced a tinderbox of popular discontent, but revolution requires more than widespread grievances. It also requires dissident elites with the organizational resources and leadership skills to persuade the aggrieved population to support their challenge to the state. How, then, did mobilization of dissidents occur in El Salvador?

The Role of the Church and Grassroots Mobilization

When traditional patron-client networks and village institutions are disrupted by the displacement of peasants from the land, those affected be-

come susceptible to the mobilization appeals of grassroots organizations that offer some means of restoring subsistence security. Beginning in the 1960s, the Catholic Church in Latin America, under the banner of “liberation theology,” began taking a more active role in organizing the poor for collective action. Initially, the Christian base communities (CEBs, or *comunidades eclesiales de base*) organized small groups of poor Latin Americans for religious study aimed at helping them understand that they were not fated merely to endure their poverty and powerlessness. Eventually, CEBs became the organizational catalysts for a variety of projects initiated and managed by the poor themselves seeking to restore some measure of economic security.

Empowered by their success in such endeavors, CEB participants often became active in opposition political organizations that advocated reforms that could remedy the structural sources of their poverty. Thus CEBs and other grassroots organizations became the support base for opposition political organizations challenging the dominance of the prevailing alliance between the military and the landed elite. When nonviolent political opposition was met by violent repression, peasants then (and usually only then) turned to revolutionary violence. In *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution*, Hugh Byrne captures succinctly the sequence by which revolutionary mobilization occurred: “the first step into peasant organizing came through study, reflection, and action within the church’s base communities. The next step often involved radical peasant organization and beginning to work collectively for such demands as better wages, improved working conditions, and access to credit. It was the repression almost invariably resulting from this organizing that made the political-military groups—with their ability to provide self-defense, links to other groups, and a society-wide strategy—an appealing option” (pp. 30–31).

What made peasant mobilization in the 1970s more effective than the tragic uprising of 1932 was the role played by the Catholic Church. Anna Peterson’s *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* and Scott Wright’s *Promised Land: Death and Life in El Salvador* highlight the church’s role in mobilizing the poor. Wright spent a decade working as a Catholic lay missionary in El Salvador. *Promised Land* is a highly personal account of the events he witnessed and their role in the evolution of the Salvadoran conflict. His recounting of events is augmented by his reflections on their meaning, especially for those with whom he lived and worked.

Peterson’s *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion* takes a more removed scholarly look at the same phenomenon that Wright describes with such passion: how a newly progressive Catholic Church went about organizing the poor of El Salvador. Maintaining a remarkable balance between passion and analytical rigor, Peterson describes how priests and lay catechists imparted a sense of empowerment to the poor so that they were no

longer willing to accept poverty and powerlessness as their fate. Using open-ended interviews with CEB participants, she documents the ways in which the teachings of liberation theology altered not just the lives of participants but their worldviews as well: their beliefs about what is just and what is unjust and about what they were willing to accept and what they felt morally obliged to change through collective action.

Peterson highlights three major ways in which CEBs contributed to the political mobilization of the poor. First, CEBs strengthened collective identity among the poor and gave them a new sense of empowerment. For the first time, poor Salvadorans were able to participate in decisions that affected their lives, and they came to believe that they could change their lives for the better. They were not simply passive clients compelled to comply with the directives of superiors controlling their livelihood and therefore their lives. Peterson presents a theory about the roles played by ritual, storytelling, and martyrdom in altering the worldview of CEB participants. For societies marked by low levels of literacy, rituals "serve as the primary locus for both the development and expression of the world view, ethical norms, and political assumptions associated with religious belief" (p. 72). By introducing new rituals and imbuing them with new meanings and by drawing parallels between the trials and the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the poor in El Salvador, activists in the CEBs were able to give a new meaning to the suffering that pervaded the daily life of the rural poor in El Salvador. Peterson presents a compelling analysis of how participation in CEBs could progressively lead one to participate in the community's projects, then to extend one's commitment to larger organizations aimed at compelling those in power to undertake reforms, and finally to engage in political activism aimed at reforming the government.

The second way that CEBs helped mobilize poor Salvadorans was that experience with democratic decision making within the CEBs led members to question the legitimacy of the state's authoritarian political institutions. CEB members demanded greater democracy and accountability from their government. Moreover, church sponsorship gave CEBs a degree of moral legitimacy and immunity from repression that secular organizations could not. CEB members therefore felt more comfortable about speaking openly about the need for reform without fear of sanctions by landlords, employers, or security forces.

Third, CEB participants developed skills that enabled them to assume leadership positions in a variety of secular organizations, including peasant associations, labor unions, and neighborhood associations. The CEBs were small (usually less than twenty members), made up of persons from humble backgrounds, and run according to small-group principles of democracy. Consequently, participants who would have been crowded out of leadership positions in large, bureaucratic secular organizations could develop the self-confidence and communication skills they needed to move

into leadership roles in those secular organizations. In this manner, CEBs energized the grassroots support base for opposition political parties in the 1970s, and CEB participants helped shape the programs and platforms of those parties. The growth in grassroots political activism in the 1970s revitalized the electoral fortunes of opposition political parties so dramatically that the military was forced into blatant fraud in order to steal the elections of 1972 and 1977.

Once mobilized for nonviolent collective action (including opposition politics), how are peasants converted to supporting revolutionary violence? Peterson addresses the ways in which the changes in consciousness brought on by participating in CEBs allowed many to justify support for revolutionary violence. Differing conceptions of the meaning of martyrdom and the proper response to it allowed some to justify violent opposition, while others felt that violence was precluded by the same teachings of the Catholic Church. Many who came to believe that violence was justified had experienced the violence of the war first-hand in the deaths of family members, friends, and neighbors. This link between experiencing state violence and participating in revolutionary violence leads analysts to contemplate how the state's response to opposition challenges determines whether opposition remains nonviolent or shifts to revolutionary violence.

The Role of the State

When confronted with a growing but still peaceful opposition challenge, a regime has two strategies to choose from to defuse the challenge. It can initiate reforms aimed at relieving the immediate economic distress of its aggrieved constituents and ameliorating the structural sources of the poverty that gave rise to grievances in the first place. Alternatively, the regime may resort to using the coercive machinery of the state to repress opposition challenges and intimidate opposition sympathizers into withholding their support and withdrawing from the political arena. In most cases, states pursue some mix of reform and repression.

How the state responds to opposition challenges becomes a critical link in the causal chain leading to revolution. Revolutionary organizations do not spring out of nowhere. They arise instead from nonviolent opposition organizations that have become the targets of state-sanctioned repressive violence. As Vilas notes, "The choice of a revolutionary path generally arises within organizations that until then have acted within legal bounds: because they are subjected to repression or forced to go underground, or because internal factions . . . opt for direct action in the face of what they regard as the ineffectiveness of the institutional route. As a result, the first generation of revolutionaries usually enjoys some previous political experience" (p. 33).

What is striking about the Salvadoran case is the extremes to which

the state went in both directions simultaneously. The Salvadoran state initiated one of the most extensive agrarian reforms ever witnessed in Latin America while presiding over one of the bloodiest waves of repression in recent history. How can this apparently schizophrenic response to opposition challenges be reconciled?

William Stanley's *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* deconstructs the Salvadoran regime into its constituent factions and delineates their divergent institutional interests. Through the logic of his "protection-racket model" of intra-elite politics, Stanley also documents a rigorous account of how and why the Salvadoran state could simultaneously pursue both land reform and repression. Stanley's account of the civil war in El Salvador thus adds a crucial piece to the puzzle of why a state would embark on a brutal program of repression so indiscriminate as to ensure the transformation of peaceful opposition into armed rebellion.

The *matanza* in 1932 established the political dominance of the agro-export elite (the so-called fourteen families). Their dominance was enforced not by the invisible hand of the market but by the visible and bloody hands of the Salvadoran military. What the agro-export elite needed was an ample supply of low-cost labor. The swelling ranks of landless Salvadorans filled that need. But their growing immiseration made them susceptible to mobilization appeals by opposition movements intent on instituting redistributive reforms. Land reform, redistributive tax policies, minimum-wage laws, and even industrial development threatened the economic hegemony of the agro-export elite. Thus once the system of labor-repressive agriculture was in place, the "fourteen families" still needed the services of the military to repress labor and protect the elite against any reformist movements that might threaten their economic hegemony.

How did the agro-export elite induce the military to protect their class interests? In return for repressing labor activism and preserving the hegemony of the agrarian elite, the military was allowed to exercise control over the machinery of the state. In these circumstances, the military could convert the state into a protection racket whereby "the military earn[s] the concession to govern the country (and pillage the state) in exchange for its willingness to use violence against class enemies of the country's relatively small but powerful economic elite" (pp. 6–7). The military then used its control over the machinery of the state to preserve its institutional prerogatives and perquisites.

The Salvadoran military violently suppressed any opposition challenge—violent or nonviolent—to the status quo. The excessive levels of violence often perpetrated are explained by the military's need to demonstrate to the agrarian elite that the threat to its continued dominance was grave and that their continued economic hegemony could only be preserved by diligent military action. Stanley elaborates:

Conspicuous acts of violence against supposed enemies of the state can enable a repressive regime or coercive state agencies to develop and maintain a civilian constituency. By committing acts of repression, the coercive apparatus sends signals to social elites that threats from below still need a firm hand. This may help convince groups within the upper and middle classes who might otherwise become restive that they still need the services of a highly autonomous, authoritarian regime, thereby forestalling pressures for political liberalization. (P. 37)

Stanley argues that the military in protection-racket states often exaggerates existing threats and even fabricates threats (or the appearance of threats) when none exist, all to legitimize the military's claim to control over the machinery of the state and its demands for more resources. In return for "protecting" the economic hegemony of the agrarian elite, the military can extract not just the resources needed to sustain the institution. It also engages in rent-seeking behavior, claiming resources far in excess of those required to sustain a military capable of suppressing any opposition challenges. Thus the level of military repression perpetrated on society often exceeds the level required to suppress the opposition because higher levels of violence can be depicted as responses to more severe threats that then require additional resources for the military and continued acquiescence to military control of the state.

While protection-racket logic explains much about Salvadoran politics from 1932 until 1979, analysts are still confronted with the puzzle of why the 1979 coup by junior officers would install a junta committed to introducing radical reforms of the agrarian economy and the political system. In the volume edited by Joseph Tulchin, *Is There a Transition to Democracy in El Salvador?*, José García depicts the coup as conforming to the conventional politics of *tanda* rivalries: junior officers became impatient with the slow pace of their own advancement due to senior officers' reluctance to relinquish the more powerful (and lucrative) positions in the government. This interpretation might explain a coup but not the reformist path charted by the coup leaders in 1979. Moreover, it fails to explain why repression escalated to unprecedented levels just as the junta proclaimed sweeping land reforms and the election of a constituent assembly to write a new democratic constitution. Stanley's model suggests that the senior officers escalated repression to undermine support for the junta and its reforms. The ensuing crisis of the state combined with the junior officers' professional commitment to the military as an institution to make them unwilling to purge the senior officer corps. The reformers feared that a purge at this critical juncture would damage the military irreparably and heighten the state crisis to the point that it might implode and allow a rebel victory. They therefore did not restrain the death squads or identify and cashier officers with ties to them. The result was that the junior officers' ambitious reform agenda of 1980–1982 was implemented amid the most brutal wave of repression in Salvadoran history.

Reform versus Repression

Both reform and repression were intended to deter popular support for the FMLN. What effects did these two strategies have on the distribution of popular support between rebels and regime? Several books explore the impact of repression. Not one of them, however, takes as its central theme the political effects of land reform and democratization. This omission is surprising because the Salvadoran land reform program was undertaken primarily for political rather than economic reasons. It was intended not to stimulate economic growth but to retard and hopefully reverse the erosion of popular support for the regime.

One could conclude that land reform failed to inoculate peasants against the appeals of the FMLN. After all, the period beginning with the announcement of agrarian reform and ending with the 1982 elections of the Constituent Assembly comprised the bloodiest two years in the civil war. Peace was not restored until more than a decade after the initiation of land reform. One is therefore hard pressed to attribute the peaceful settlement of the conflict to the implementation of land reform, whatever its effect on inequality of landownership and income may have been.

Flaws in program design and implementation certainly limited the capacity of the land reform program to inoculate substantial portions of the rural poor against the appeals of the revolutionary opposition. The most glaring flaw in the program was that it failed to provide benefits for the most economically marginalized and politically volatile segment of the rural population: the landless. Although growth in the landless population had precipitated the crisis in the first place, those who were landless at the time of the reform—more than 40 percent of the rural population (eight hundred thousand to one million Salvadorans)—did not qualify for land as members of Phase I cooperatives or as Phase III smallholders. Only those already renting land qualified for Phase III benefits, and the membership in Phase I cooperatives was restricted to permanent residents of the pre-reform estates.

Despite the limitations of the land reform, can one readily dismiss it as a political failure? Or were its remedial effects simply overwhelmed by the wave of repressive violence that accompanied its implementation?² By any measure, the Salvadoran land-reform program was one of the most ambitious nonsocialist agrarian reforms in the history of Latin America. Mitchell Seligson has pointed out in the pages of this journal that the program redistributed approximately 289,000 hectares of land (14 percent of the nation's total land area and 20 percent of its farmland) to a quarter of a million beneficiaries (21 percent of the nation's economically active popu-

2. See T. David Mason, "Take Two Acres and Call Me in the Morning: Is Land Reform a Remedy for Rural Unrest?" *Journal of Politics* 60, no. 1 (1998):199–230.

lation). Largely as a consequence of land reform, the size of the landless and land-poor populations in El Salvador declined between 1971 and 1991 from 60.1 percent to 50.7 percent of the economically active agricultural population, and from 29.1 percent of the total economically active population to 18.0 percent.³ According to the logic of Huntington's assertion that "no social group is more conservative than a landowning peasantry, and none is more revolutionary than a peasantry that owns too little land or pays too high a rental," this program should have preempted the escalation of revolution. The fact that it did not leads scholars to question why.

Even those who received no land are not likely to take up arms in revolt simply because they were denied benefits. Joining a revolution carries the risk of death, and most peasants will not assume this risk simply because they did not qualify for land reform benefits. They are more likely to resort to what James Scott has termed "everyday forms of peasant resistance"⁴ or to the less risky alternative of nonviolent political opposition. Such opposition in fact mounted during the 1970s as a result of grassroots mobilization via the *comunidades de bases*. When CEBs, their leaders, their members, and the secular organizations they supported became the objects of violent repression by the state and paramilitary death squads, participants had to choose between withdrawing from politics altogether or shifting to violent forms of opposition, including revolution. When repression escalated further to the point of indiscriminate violence against suspected supporters of the opposition, even those who had avoided political involvement faced the risk of being victimized by the security forces and their paramilitary surrogates. In these circumstances, noninvolvement is not a choice, and one must either emigrate to escape the violence, support the government, or join the revolutionaries out of fear.⁵ When a person can become a victim simply by having a family member or neighbor fall under suspicion of having aided the insurgents, then he or she is compelled either to join the insurgents in search of protection or become a refugee. As Vilas observes, "state terror can elicit responses of abandonment and passivity, or even drive people into the arms of the opposition: some people finally decide to heed the revolutionary call if only because they know they will be killed either way" (p. 34). This calculus of fear applies regardless of whether one benefited from land reform or did not.

3. Mitchell Seligson, "Thirty Years of Transformation in the Agrarian Structure of El Salvador," *LARR* 30, no. 3 (1995):43–74.

4. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

5. See T. David Mason and Dale A. Krane, "The Political Economy of Death Squads," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1989):175–98; T. David Mason, "Non-Elite Response to State-Sanctioned Terror," *Western Political Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1989):467–92; and Mason, "Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and the Rational Peasant," *Public Choice* 86, nos. 1–2 (1996):63–83.

The calculus of fear induced by the wave of repression that swept El Salvador between 1979 and 1982 probably overwhelmed any remedial effects that land reform might have had on popular support for the Salvadoran regime. Socorro Jurídico documented more than twelve thousand “extralegal killings of civilians not engaged in combat” in 1981 alone. Although some of these victims were targeted because of their political activism or willingness to apply for land under the agrarian reform program, a bloodbath of this proportion in a nation of less than five million Salvadorans had to include many who simply crossed the path of the increasingly indiscriminate forces of repression. Massacres at the Sumpul River (14–15 May 1980), the Lempa River (20–29 October 1981), and El Mozote (December 1981) represent only the most egregious examples of a pattern of indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the Salvadoran military.

Martha Doggett’s *Death Foretold: The Jesuit Murders in El Salvador* and Leigh Binford’s *The El Mozote Massacre* use notorious instances of state-sanctioned violence to illustrate the politics surrounding the Salvadoran state’s relentless and indiscriminate use of violence. Doggett’s book presents a detailed chronology of the events surrounding the murder of six Jesuit priests and two assistants at their residence on the campus of the Universidad Centroamericana on 16 November 1989. Six members of the U.S.-trained and equipped Atlacatl Battalion and two officers from the Escuela Militar were later charged with the killings. Doggett uses meticulous documentary research and witness interviews to make a lawyer’s case for high-level complicity in ordering the killings and protecting the perpetrators. This finding is not in itself a surprise. The important point is that given U.S. policy at that time, an airtight case was required to embarrass the U.S. government into acknowledging that its military assistance and training programs had failed to “professionalize” the Salvadoran military or to exorcise the homicidal tendencies of its leaders. As a consequence, the George Bush administration found it difficult to justify continued bankrolling of the Salvadoran military after events such as this one revealed its leaders to be incorrigibly venal.

Binford’s *El Mozote Massacre* goes beyond being another case study of a heinous massacre in the war. Binford argues that public opinion in the United States may register righteous indignation over high-profile killings such as the rape and murder of Maryknoll nuns in 1980 and the Jesuit murders in 1989. Yet the same public all too easily relegates thousands of anonymous Salvadoran victims to being mere numbers in a mounting death toll. Both reactions result from the dominant mode of reporting on human rights issues. Binford develops a new mode by putting a human face on the community that was El Mozote. By reconstructing the life of the community before the massacre—its history, its leaders, and the patterns of social interactions that governed the everyday lives of its citizens—Binford imparts a deeper meaning to the outrage generated by news of the mas-

sacre. She reveals the struggles of daily life in El Mozote to have been so thoroughly consuming that few residents would have had the time, resources, or energy for any level of political activity that could justify repressive violence by the state, much less the indiscriminate brutality perpetrated there.

These two books reveal the fundamental flaws in the Salvadoran state's use of repression as a counterinsurgency strategy and the U.S. government's support of that approach. First, the military institution that was given U.S. equipment, funding, and training was so devoid of professional values that U.S. assistance, far from "bringing the Salvadoran military under control," amounted to subsidizing terror. The Atlacatl Battalion that carried out these murders was supposed to epitomize the effective combat unit that U.S. training and equipment would produce. The cover-up of the massacre also showed that U.S. officials responsible for managing U.S. policy in El Salvador were more concerned with containing damage to Ronald Reagan's prospects for reelection in 1984 than with preventing further massacres. Finally, Binford's *El Mozote Massacre* demonstrates the strategic futility of Salvadoran repression: instead of helping defeat the rebels, it enhanced their base of support by forcing campesinos who preferred to remain uninvolved to turn to the side that did not pose the threat of random violence. As Binford comments, the massacre in El Mozote "underscores the degree to which a government had lost its capacity to distinguish potential supporters from probable adversaries" (p. 96).

From Battlefield Stalemate to Peace Settlement

Why did the Salvadoran government and the FMLN undertake a negotiated settlement to end the war when they did? Hugh Byrne's *El Salvador's Civil War: A Study of Revolution* addresses this question by analyzing the shifting strategies of the government, the FMLN, and the United States over the course of the conflict and the effects of those competing strategies on popular support for the government or the rebels. His account of the origins of the groups that coalesced under the banner of the FMLN introduces a persistent theme in his assessment of the rebels' conduct of the war: their inability to reach consensus on strategy and tactics and their unwillingness to integrate their forces into a single combat organization limited their prospects of ever achieving victory on the battlefield. In addition, "the complete rejection of electoral approaches left the largest of the revolutionary groups without a meaningful discourse with sectors that had not fully broken with the system" (p. 40). Each rebel organization had a slightly different civilian constituency and a slightly different ideological vision of how to achieve victory. These differences constrained each group's willingness and ability to compromise with its coalition partners on tactics and strategy. Even so, it is doubtful that the FMLN would have prevailed militarily,

given the extraordinary willingness of the U.S. government to subsidize the Salvadoran military.

In contrast, Byrne's assessment of the government's strategy implicitly overestimates the unity of purpose and strategy among the elements of the incumbent regime, at least when compared with Stanley's more finely calibrated analysis of factionalism within the Salvadoran state. For instance, Byrne suggests that the extreme Right's campaign of death-squad violence in 1979–1982 prevented the Left from seizing power, devastated the rebels' urban network, and left them no choice but a protracted campaign of rural insurgency. While this assertion may be true as far as it goes, the argument ignores the more critical success of the death-squad campaign: it prevented the reformist junta from consolidating its control over power and building a base of popular support for a politically moderate, reformist center that could have ended the war sooner and with much less death and destruction. An atmosphere of violence and terror surrounded the initiation of land reform and democratization. This campaign of terror reinforced popular suspicions about the reformers' sincerity. Any public support that might have coalesced around the reforms evaporated in the crossfire between the death squads and the rebels, both of whom had an interest in the failure of the reforms.

For Byrne and others, the critical event in getting the combatants to the negotiating table was the FMLN offensive of 1989. Although the offensive failed to achieve its goal of toppling the government, it demonstrated that the rebels' capacity to sustain combat operations was sufficient to preclude military defeat by the government. The rebels' failure to achieve victory in the offensive convinced them that some alternative to military victory would be worth pursuing. For the U.S. government, the "final offensive" made it politically difficult to continue subsidizing a Salvadoran military that was no closer to victory than it had been in 1982 and continued to engage in acts of terror like the Jesuit murders. Thus all three actors came to realize that neither side could achieve victory and that continued fighting would be futile.

George Vickers reiterates this point in his contribution to Tulchin's *Is There a Transition to Democracy in El Salvador?* Vickers argues that the settlement became possible only because the illusions that had guided both the Left and the Right were shattered by eleven years of civil war: "for the leftist insurgents . . . , the principal illusion has been of an imminent popular insurrection in the face of which the Salvadoran armed forces will collapse, thus enabling the insurgency to seize power. For the Salvadoran extreme Right, the conviction that popular protest is an artifice of international communism without a genuine social base has been no less an illusion than the certainty that massive repression can crush the desire for social justice" (p. 25).

Stanley's *Protection Racket State* adds several critical points to general

understanding of why a settlement came to be preferred to continued conflict. First, the Salvadoran military, while willing and able to kill unarmed civilians, proved incapable of defeating the insurgency. Its repression became so indiscriminate that it stimulated rather than deterred popular support for the FMLN. The military's failure to defeat the rebels effectively nullified its claim to control over the state machinery and to the civilian elite's acquiescence to such control. The same lack of professionalism, cronyism, and pursuit of personal and institutional enrichment that characterized the military's protection racket also precluded its ever developing the capabilities necessary to be an effective fighting force.

Second, civil war, land reform, and democratic elections combined to alter the composition of the civilian elite and the structure of the Salvadoran economy in ways that made negotiating a peace agreement and dismantling the protection racket preferable to continuing the war. Land reform eroded the power of the agro-export elite, and a new generation of a commercial elite eclipsed the older elite. Based in finance, export processing, and commerce, this new elite had little need to preserve the protection racket that had sustained the agro-export elite. Its members had even less interest in continuing a war that threatened the infrastructure and investments essential to their own prosperity.

By 1990 the ARENA Party of President Alfredo Cristiani was no longer the party of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, a founder closely linked to the death squads. Tom Gibb's contribution to the Tulchin volume characterizes the Cristiani government as "a Salvadoran version of Margaret Thatcher's philosophy" led by "highly capable business people and technocrats" whose "main interest is not in controlling [state] power or government for itself but in creating the best conditions for their own businesses to flourish" (pp. 20–21). Gibb adds, "many business people agree with the left that the military should be brought under civilian control. . . . They are highly critical of the military's performance in the war and believe that it has become a big business for many senior officers" (p. 21). The new elite managed to capture the state from the agro-export elite by transforming ARENA into a viable electoral alternative for a war-weary electorate disillusioned with the ineffectiveness and corruption of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano. A peace settlement then became feasible because the new elite shared with the FMLN an incentive to dismantle the protection racket.

How the settlement came about and the implications of its terms for the postwar order are addressed in Ian Johnstone's *Rights and Reconciliation: UN Strategies in El Salvador*. Joseph Tulchin's edited volume, *Is There a Transition to Democracy in El Salvador?*, includes a set of papers presented at a conference held before the 1992 peace accords. As such, the authors' assessments of the prospects for peace and stability provide an interesting counterpoint to Johnstone's analysis of the settlement negotiations and the

implications of the agreement's provisions. The agreement signed in January 1992 converted the FMLN from a guerrilla army into a political party. In return for FMLN demilitarization, the internal security forces were abolished and replaced by a new national police force. The peace agreement also called for major reforms of the military and a purge of its officer corps as well as reforms of the judicial and electoral systems and a land-transfer program to benefit former combatants on both sides. Johnstone's book describes the sequence of events that resulted in the six separate agreements that ended the war. He offers incisive analyses of the motivations of both the FMLN and the government at each stage in the negotiations.

Rights and Reconciliation also illustrates the role that the UN can play not just as a mediator in negotiations but as a neutral third party overseeing implementation of the peace accords. An early surprise in the negotiations was that once talks on reforming the military stalled, UN mediators shifted to discussions of human rights monitoring and secured surprisingly quick agreement from both sides on creating a UN human rights monitoring operation. In a move unprecedented in the annals of peace-keeping, ONUSAL (the Misión de Observadores de las Naciones Unidas en El Salvador) was deployed before the cease-fire was in place. Despite initial fears for the safety of ONUSAL representatives, their early deployment seems to have bolstered both sides' confidence in the peace process and thereby accelerated the consummation of agreements on the other issues that divided the parties.

Johnstone highlights the difficulty faced in implementing peace accords. All too often, public attention and press scrutiny subside after a peace agreement is signed. Correspondents move on to the next war, and the public's attention follows the reporters. Thus the UN quickly lost the leverage of international public opinion as a persuasive asset with which to compel the parties to comply with the agreements they had signed. Johnstone notes especially the difficulty that the UN faced in compelling the Salvadoran government to comply with the agreements on identifying and removing from the army officers whose abuses of human rights were egregious. Because the FMLN was demilitarized by the time the army was investigated, their leverage in compelling compliance was limited. Moreover, the ARENA party still controlled the presidency and a clear majority in the legislature, giving it the capacity to enact legislation that would water down the investigation. In these circumstances, the UN faced the difficult task of compelling compliance without appearing to have abandoned its role as a neutral mediator to become the partisan advocate of the FMLN. In the final analysis, ONUSAL managed to secure a purge of the military, although its extent was far from satisfying to either the FMLN or UN officials. The achievements were sufficient, however, to keep the FMLN from abandoning the peace process and returning to the hills.

The "elections of the century" in 1994—the coincidence of election

cycles for the president, legislative representatives, and all mayors—culminated the peace process in one sense. ARENA again won the presidency and a plurality in the legislature. But former leader Rubén Zamora of the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR) forced a runoff for the presidency, and the parties created out of the FMLN won a sizable bloc of seats in the legislature. The major flaw in the election was that seventy-four thousand eligible voters had their registration applications rejected, and another eighty-seven thousand showed up at the polls but were not allowed to vote. Most of those turned away were residents of former zones of conflict who probably would have voted heavily for FMLN candidates. UN election commissioners prevented the government from succeeding in last-minute efforts to move polling stations in ways that would have further depressed the FMLN vote. The Vickers essay in the Tulchin volume makes the point that despite the success of the 1994 elections in the broad sense (they went off as scheduled), the consistent decline in turnout over the last decade of El Salvador's democratic experiment is disturbing. In the five elections occurring between 1984 and 1989, 35 percent of the electorate who showed up at the polls in the first elections of 1982 dropped out of the process. Most of the increased turnout in the 1991 and 1994 elections is attributable to the return of leftist parties that either had been supporters of the FMLN or were constituted out of the FMLN.

Conclusion

Research on the Salvadoran conflict has done more than just enlighten us on the origins and trajectory of that particular conflict. Vilas's work is especially valuable for placing the Salvadoran conflict in a comparative context and shedding light on what conditions provide the spark necessary to ignite a reservoir of discontent into a conflagration of civil war. Stanley's *Protection Racket State* makes important contributions to general understanding of the role of the state in determining whether opposition will remain nonviolent or will explode into revolutionary opposition. The books by Peterson and Binford provide useful insights into how peasants are mobilized for collective action and how that collective action can shift to violent forms in response to state repression. The issue of how land reform affected the politics remains to be explored, however. Johnstone's book on the peace settlement is a valuable beginning to much-needed research on what factors determine the success or failure of peace settlements in civil war. In sum, this first wave of postwar works on El Salvador represents a valuable addition to our understanding of the Salvadoran conflict but also of revolutions in the countryside in general.