

# Release the Jesuit Tapes

*The FBI Has Videotaped Testimony That Accuses the Salvadoran Army of Killing Six Jesuits—and Proves the U.S. Knew in Advance*

By Thomas Long  
& Frank Smyth

**SAN SALVADOR**—American officials in both San Salvador and Washington claim that they have cooperated “intensely” with the investigation into the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter last November. Yet even though State Department officials finally yielded to pressure from Congress to turn over the sworn testimony of a U.S. military adviser—who said he knew of the murder plan in advance—they have continued to withhold key evidence. For 10 months the FBI has kept a videotape of the adviser’s testimony, which suggests there was a conspiracy to murder the Jesuits that included several top Salvadoran army officers, in their Washington headquarters.

Two weeks ago U.S. Embassy officials delivered to a Salvadoran judge three cursory sworn affidavits given by U.S. Army Major Eric Warren Buckland to the FBI in January. But they did not turn over the videotape or a transcript of a detailed discussion between Buckland and FBI examiner Paul Cully.

The recorded discussion is vital. Cully based his own conclusion that Buckland had prior knowl-



Bodies of Jesuit priests slain in San Salvador

edge of a plan to kill the Jesuit priests on the videotaped interview. It also contains information that Buckland recanted—with only a sketchy explanation—one week later.

“There is no way to analyze his statements and his supposed retraction without having the videotape—or at least a transcript—to know exactly what he said and what he was trying to recant,” said Antonio Cañas, a senior po-

litical analyst at the Jesuit-run University of Central America.

American officials have yet to explain why this evidence has not already been volunteered to investigating Salvadoran authorities. In fact, U.S. officials in San Salvador have received strict instructions from Washington not to comment on Buckland’s testimony at all.

Nevertheless, the videotape was entered into evidence at FBI headquarters in Washington.

Logged, according to official FBI documents, under case title “Shooting of Six Jesuit Priests,” subject “Murder,” it has been “maintained” at the Polygraph Unit, section GRB, Suite 2, under the file number #00116093 PQ1 X0.

“Why is the Embassy being so fucking tight-lipped?” asked a non-American Western official, who has been independently monitoring the investigation. “Somewhere somebody is lying through their back teeth within the U.S. hierarchy.”

According to Jesuit academic Michael Czerny, “The United States government from very early on has been acting in a very irregular if not criminal manner.”

**Major Buckland has offered** two clearly conflicting stories. First he said he had prior knowledge that senior officers were planning to murder the priests. Then he said that he only learned of the Jesuit murders after the fact.

But his recantation is less than weak. “It’s absolutely nonsensical,” said one Western diplomat.

In both versions, Buckland says that some time before the Jesuits were killed he accompanied a senior Salvadoran army officer, Colonel Carlos Avilés, to the country’s military academy to “solve a problem” with the school’s direc-

tor, Colonel Guillermo Benavides. Benavides was later charged with ordering the Jesuit murders.

Buckland says he shared a close working and personal relationship with Colonel Avilés, his Salvadoran counterpart in developing psychological operations for the war. He also says that Avilés was his chief source of information on the murders. According to both Buckland’s original and revised testimonies, on the day of their visit to the academy, Avilés was acting as a special envoy of then army chief of staff Colonel René Emilio Ponce.

In a sworn handwritten statement given to the FBI on January 11, Buckland says Avilés told him that Benavides, the military school’s director, and other unnamed officers were planning to kill Ignacio Ellacuría, the rector of the University of Central America and the most prominent of the murdered priests. The adviser says he waited while Avilés went to talk with Benavides:

“Aviles appeared very uncomfortable about talking to Benavides. Upon returning to the vehicle Aviles called me back to the vehicle and told me that he had to work something out; ‘Colonel Benavides is from the old school, he liked to handle things in his own way, in the old style.’”

Continued on page 22

## Smyth/Long

Continued from page 18

"Benavides told Aviles that Ella Coria [sic] was a problem. Aviles told me they wanted to handle it the old way by killing some of the priests. I asked what happened when you (Aviles) talked to him. Aviles told me that Benavides was old school and was still the 'rammer.'"

In his January 18 retraction one week later, Buckland describes the same visit in even greater detail. He recalls, for instance, Avilés telling him "about the fine quality of the bread baked at the military school." At the same time, however, Buckland curiously claims not to remember anything about his conversation with Avilés concerning Benavides—which was, according to the adviser's own testimonies, the purpose of the trip:

"After we both got into the vehicle, I asked him words to the effect of what was going on and I do not remember his reply or specifically what we talked about." According to this revised version, the major still claims Avilés told him about Benavides's involvement in the murders—but on another occasion, six weeks *after* the crime took place.

In explaining the switch, Buckland implies that his initial version was given under duress, and that he became confused during the FBI examination. But it does seem odd that Buckland could have invented the information that Benavides wanted to murder Father Ellacuría—and even write it down himself—and then recall nothing a week later. What's more, Buckland's first account is rich in its particulars, with little hint of confusion under stern FBI examination. It seems unlikely,

for example, that Buckland could have remembered details like the little-known nickname, "the rammer," when Benavides is more commonly referred to by fellow officers as "Virgin Boots."

U.S. officials back up Buckland's claim that he lost control of his faculties in his initial testimony—even though the veteran Green Beret and army Special Forces Psychological Operations major was under routine questioning as a friendly witness.

Even more convincing, a lie detector test directly contradicts Buckland's retraction. In answer to the question, "Did you have prior knowledge that the Jesuits would be killed?" Buckland said no, and the polygraph indicated "deception," according to official FBI documents.

Based on this and the subsequent videotaped interview, FBI examiner Cully concludes: "Buckland admitted that he obtained prior knowledge that [priests at the university] were going to be killed, specifically Ella Coria [sic], through conversations with Colonel Aviles. According to Major Buckland, Colonel Aviles told him of the intent of certain officers of the El Salvadoran Army to conduct a military operation against the University of Central America. Major Buckland became aware of this information several weeks before the Jesuits were murdered."

But Colonel Avilés, Buckland's main source, denies telling the adviser anything. Avilés denies even his former friendship with Buckland—a relationship of which both Salvadoran and Americans were well aware. Indeed, Avilés claims that he was not even in El Salvador when the alleged trip

took place.

Buckland, in his initial statement, says the pair made the visit "approximately 10 days before the killings (circa November 6, 1989)." But in his later version, the adviser says the trip was made in late *October*, recalling that Avilés left for vacation at the beginning of November.

Colonel Ponce, on whose orders Avilés was allegedly sent to the military school, also denies knowing of the murders in advance. He bases his denial on a selectively narrow reading of Buckland's testimony (Ponce has since been promoted to the military's top post as minister of defense).

Last month Ponce sent a letter to Massachusetts congressman Joe Moakley, who chairs a special task force on the investigation. Ponce points out that Avilés' passport indicates he was not in El Salvador in early November. "That should be sufficient to demonstrate with facts the falsehood of Major Buckland's declaration," he says in the letter.

Only Buckland's *revised* testimony, which U.S. officials *now* claim is the truth, establishes the date of the visit in late October.

**The newest revelations do not** mark the first time Avilés and Buckland have given widely disparate versions of their activities together. Buckland first came forward in early January, telling his superiors that Avilés informed him in December that the military school director had ordered the killings. Avilés categorically denies revealing any information.

Both men were given lie detector tests at that time. Congressman Moakley and other officials concluded that it was the Salva-

doran colonel who was lying.

Avilés would have had good reason. To be branded a snitch within the most exclusive and powerful men's club in El Salvador—the senior officers' corps—is akin to blowing the whistle on the Mafia. At the very least, "his career is over," said one Western official. Not surprisingly, Avilés has since said he's planning to retire.

"It is a very grave sin among them [to snitch]," said a chief prosecutor from the office of the Salvadoran attorney general. "But they can't get rid of him now, because it would be too obvious." Portions of the affidavits which Buckland does not retract reveal that both men feared for their lives because of what they knew of the murders.

**The many inconsistencies** between Buckland's original and revised testimonies clearly indicate that key pieces of the puzzle are still missing. For one thing, much of the information he recants in his revised affidavit never actually appeared in his previous sworn statements.

What's more, the FBI examiner's report draws heavily on evidence that has never been made available to Salvadoran judicial authorities. The most complete record of what Buckland may have known and when he knew it is likely to be found in the videotaped FBI interview.

The Bush administration has never been notably openhanded about information concerning the Jesuits' murder. The January affidavits were released only after Congressman Moakley publicly complained in mid-October. The Salvadoran judge on the case has

now asked for the videotaped interview; U.S. officials refuse to comment on the matter, saying they have not yet received a formal diplomatic request.

Such behavior leads Jesuit leaders and other observers to question the administration's true intentions. "The U.S. Embassy did not provide the evidence, and they have not yet explained why," said Father José María Tojeira, the Jesuit Provincial for Central America. "They are either inept, or acting in bad faith."

Sources say that Buckland's January testimony was "discovered" by U.S. officials in San Salvador in late September. Yet they refuse to say who in the federal government might be responsible for their mysterious discovery or even which agency channeled the evidence from the FBI headquarters in Washington to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador. They also fail to explain why it took nearly a month to pass the evidence to Salvadoran authorities—at the same time that they deny that Moakley's prodding played any role.

Non-American officials and other observers say that the U.S. government's blatant discrepancies warrant an inquiry. "There are too many agencies involved," said one Western diplomat. "They [should] be called to testify under oath."

Officials of the Jesuit university agree.

"There has always been passive complicity [by U.S. officials] in human rights abuses in the past; now the complicity has become active," said the university's Cañas. "It is not only a question of how far does this complicity reach, but where did it begin?" ■