

# Caught With Their Pants Down

## Why U.S. Policy—and Intelligence—Failed in Salvador

BY FRANK SMYTH

### SAN SALVADOR

**I**DON'T THINK THEY HAVE the capability," said a U.S. Embassy official as he sipped coffee one Saturday morning in the tropical setting of his patio. I asked him if he thought rumors of an upcoming rebel offensive were true. "We've heard some things," he said. "But ESAF's [El Salvador Armed Forces] taken measures" to prevent it.

Seven and half hours later, heavy gunfire had made his pleasant, suburban street impassable. He was forced to barricade his family inside his home for hours as the battle raged.

Ever since Vietnam, U.S. policymakers have underestimated Third World guerrilla movements. Although the Salvadoran military twice detected concrete evidence of planned rebel attacks the week before they occurred, both the army and their U.S. advisors preferred to believe their own propaganda. For years, U.S. officials had said the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) was losing this war. They never expected the FMLN to launch the most spectacular military offensive in the history of the 10-year civil war.

**I**N HINDSIGHT, it's hard to see how anyone could have missed it. The grassroots guerrilla activity amounted to a national conspiracy; tens of thousands of

people participated in preparations for the offensive. Truckloads of rice, beans, bullets, and medicine were stockpiled in poor barrios.

The night before the offensive, U.S. Embassy personnel indulged in their annual Marine Corps ball. Most U.S. officials rarely get out of Escalon and the other affluent suburbs on the western side of the capital. Most of the staff press corps live there as well. On the night the offensive began, the resident correspondents for *Newsweek*, Associated Press, and *The New York Times* were out of the country.

"They were caught with their pants down," said one Western diplomat. Considering the level of U.S. commitment here—after 10 years and nearly \$4 billion in aid—the failure to even remotely estimate rebel strength amounts to the worst intelligence blunder since the fall of the Shah.

And then there's President Alfredo Cristiani's startled, unglued eyes after the reverberating *crump* of several bombs exploding outside his headquarters disrupted his press conference last week. The normally unflappable squash champion had just finished telling the cameras that the Salvadoran army had regained control of the capital.

The rebel offensive has forever

changed the face of Salvadoran politics. On one hand, the FMLN has demonstrated that it can stand up to the greatest U.S.-backed counterinsurgency effort since Vietnam. On the other, the rebel drive has generated a rightist backlash of killing and repression not seen since the slaughter of the Archbishop Oscar Romero, four American nuns, and thousands of others in the early 1980s.

Thousands more are now likely to be killed. A military-imposed, dusk-to-dawn curfew will provide cover for dragging targeted victims out of their homes. Trade union, student, and other popular organizations have already become inactive or gone underground. But it's the above-ground church activists, especially those who work with the poor, who have the most to fear.

Once more, the same old policy debate in Washington has also begun to round up the usual suspects. Critics are pointing to the slaying of six Jesuit priests by uniformed men (nearly every non-U.S. Western diplomat in town will tell you that the Salvadoran military was, at the very least, complicit in the crime) to argue against military and economic assistance. The State Department, on the other hand, is rattling its sabers after a plane loaded with sophisticated, Russian-made surface-to-air missiles was discovered ap-

parently en route to the rebels from Managua.

The cold choice between human rights and "national security" was what both Reagan and Bush administration officials had long tried to avoid. But rather than admit that U.S. policy has run aground, American officials continue to engage in spin-control diplomacy, blaming the press and not the policy. During a press conference, Ambassador Walker tried to argue that the fighting in El Salvador is not a war. When I pointed out that was just what U.S. officials had said in Vietnam, U.S. Information Officer Barry Jacobs stepped forward, pointed his index finger and thumb at me as if it were a pistol, and jerked it upward in imaginary recoil.

**W**E'RE ALL SCARED," said a young, heavyset Salvadoran woman, "because we've never seen anything like this before." She was standing with about a dozen local residents at a recently built rebel barricade. Most said they had never seen a real guerrilla before.

Like many other poor barrios around the country, popular organization in Santa Marta is strong but mostly clandestine. Both rebel operatives and government *orejas*—informants—live close

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together here, on one street, unbeknownst to the *oreja*, the guerillas even live next door.

The FMLN tried to judge potential support when choosing areas to occupy. Once the offensive began, thousands of rebels took fixed positions in the east, south, and north of the capital city. When the *muchachos* appeared, some civilians joined in the struggle. But depending on whom you talked to and when, the rebels' presence brought a mixture of hope, resentment, and fear.

"What we're afraid of is the planes will come and massacre everyone," said a mother standing at a barricade of bricks and overturned cars in the street.

"A fear we have," explained an older woman in an apron. "It's natural. But for me, more than anything I have a hope that there will be change."

The 28-year-old urban commando in charge of the barricade, Izabel, represents a second generation of committed guerrillas. She sat cross-legged on the floor, and asked a group of journalists for identification.

Izabel looked slightly surreal in the shell-pocked barrio wearing a bright turquoise bandanna and dark blue polo shirt, cradling her AK-47. Her red nail polish was fading, like the bruises between her cheekbones and eyes.

She explained she had been captured by the Treasury Police the week before. "But I didn't give information—not a thing," she said, smiling. "So they beat me."

Izabel directed the rebel occupation from a second-story window while other rebels prepared homemade contact bombs on the floor below. Barricades were being erected on nearly every street. The guerrillas had about 10 square blocks under their control. Other guerrilla units were positioned a few miles away.

In these northern sectors, the rebels moved among apartment buildings and shantytowns. Taking cover in a cement stairway during a firefight, I encountered someone I recognized from the national university. His day pack was filled with ammunition. Like hundreds of students, trade unionists, and other activists, he had abandoned his legal life for the FMLN.

In this new urban context, the rebels intentionally mixed experienced fighters with new recruits. Roberto, a commander and a veteran fighter from the countryside, climbed up the stairs. Moises, a 16-year-old recruit, held a position in a corner balcony on the upper floor. The sound of the gunfire was deafening; we both took cover as bullets ricocheted off the walls. Cringing slightly with each blast, Moises told me this was his first time in combat.

The FMLN's success in switching from rural to urban warfare surprised even themselves. They demonstrated more military capability in seven days than the

Nicaraguan contras had demonstrated in that many years. Their immediate objective was to take and hold parts of the city in a vivid demonstration of strength: they held most urban areas for about a week.

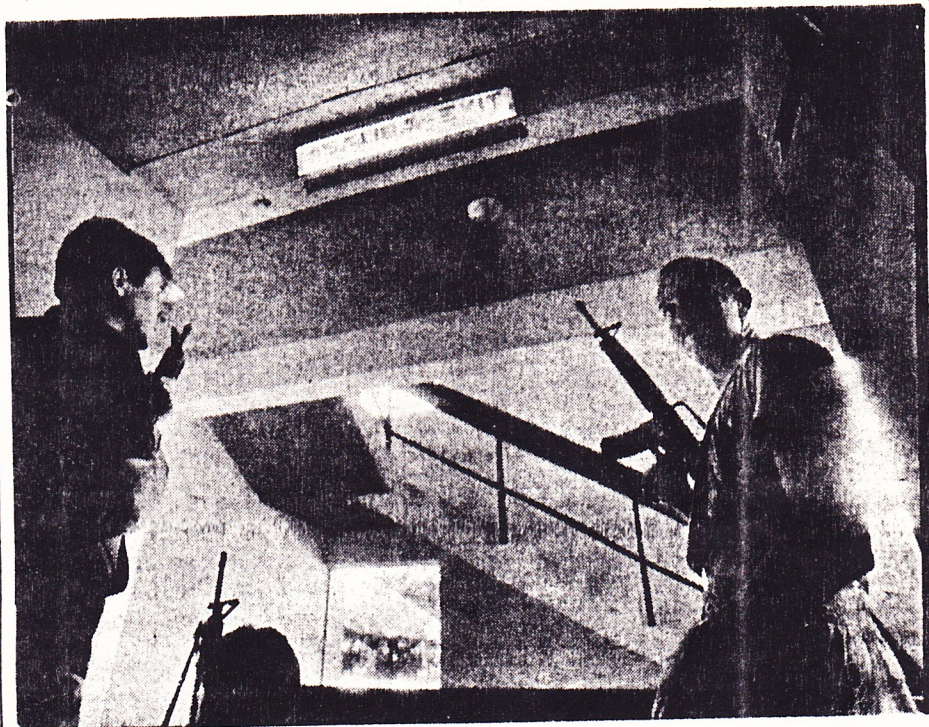
But some guerrilla commanders I talked to said their ultimate goal was to take power. "Here we are and we will defend [our position] until freedom has arrived," predicted Izabel. She and the 40 rebels under her command successfully repelled three government advances that week.

Later that day, a photographer saw Izabel's body among a pile of 13 dead guerrillas. She still wore her bright turquoise bandanna. Her pants were ripped, leaving the business card I had given her exposed on her leg. Several years ago, a

even its most ardent critics. The strafing, rocketing, and later bombing of heavily populated civilian areas was more than indiscriminate. Unlike in wealthy suburbs to the west, the Salvadoran military demonstrated a total disregard for the safety and well-being of its indigent residents.

"Señor periodista, señor periodista [Mr. journalist], please tell them to stop firing on our homes," said one man fleeing with about 50 others. "This isn't the countryside. We live here." Scores of families, carrying bundles of belongings and white flags, fled en masse from San Salvador's poorer neighborhoods. At least a thousand people are known to have been killed since the fighting began; countless others have been wounded.

"Look at the beds," said one elderly



The Empire strikes back: U.S. military advisers wait out the siege of the Sheraton Hotel

similar mistake resulted in the assassinations of four Dutch journalists. By the time I arrived to retrieve it, soldiers had doused the corpses with gasoline. Izabel and her companions were left burning in the street.

THE HELICOPTER CIRCLED slowly overhead. I was in the northern sector of Zacamil, interviewing a woman in a shantytown among several thousand mud-and-split bamboo shacks. On the third approach, the pilot fired a single rocket in my direction, exploding about a hundred yards away.

There was gunfire on two sides, but none coming from the ridge where the rocket had landed. I approached a man whose face and arm were covered in blood. "They've just killed my family," he said. The rocket had hit his home; his wife and two daughters were inside.

The severe reaction of the Salvadoran military to the rebel offensive surprised

woman pointing to a pile of ashes. Following government air strikes, row upon row of makeshift shacks were either demolished or burned. In Soyapango, entire blocks were destroyed. Reporters saw massive craters from what appear to have been 500-pound bombs.

"We don't have anything left," said a mother surveying the rubble that was once her home. "They just fired and fired."

Military attitudes notwithstanding, the political cost to the government for the air war on the city will be tremendous. "Why won't they negotiate" with the rebels, screamed one woman after her family in Zacamil was rocketed and killed.

"They're destroying the country," said another woman fleeing from bombing raids in Soyapango.

"Who?" I asked.

"The same people who did that," she said, referring to the brutal slaying of six Jesuit priests and academics.



FATHERS IGNACIO ELLACURIA, Ignacio Martin-Baró, and Segundo Montes were the country's leading intellectuals, as well as El Salvador's most articulate and compelling critics of both the Salvadoran government and U.S. policy. Their killings were only the beginning.

Religious activists across the country have been targeted. More than 41 church volunteers, including 20 foreigners, have been captured. U.S.-born Catholic priest Jim Barnet and Lutheran minister Bill Dexheimer received death threats and left the country.

U.S. volunteer Jennifer Casolo also received a death threat by telephone. At 10:30 Saturday night, soldiers entered her home. They claimed to have found one of the largest guerrilla arms caches since the offensive began buried in her backyard.

Casolo organized visiting religious and congressional delegations. Anyone who knows her would say the accusation is preposterous. But privately U.S. officials say they expect her to be tried, convicted, and sent to a Salvadoran jail.

Casolo, like the Jesuits, is being made an example. Independent criticism is no longer acceptable. And meddling by foreigners in Salvadoran affairs will no longer be tolerated.

AFTER THE AIRSTRIKES here first started, Ambassador Walker said he had "no knowledge" of government bombing. But other U.S. officials had already admitted the government was bombing urban areas of the city. One religious volunteer who lives in a targeted area was told the situation was out of the embassy's control.

But that hardly meant that Americans were not involved in the terror bombing of San Salvador's people. On November 15 at approximately 10:15 in the morning, the conversation between a U.S. military advisor in a "Blackhawk" observation helicopter and "retelo," the U.S. military command center in San Salvador, was intercepted by radio. The observer told retelo the Salvadoran air force needed to "hit" an area several blocks "north of the church."

U.S. advisors in El Salvador are prohibited from participating in or directing government air raids. Shortly after this transmission, a senior U.S. military official monitoring the conversation broke in ordering all such communications to be done "on push 5"—a scrambling system installed last February after U.S. military advisers became aware that journalists were monitoring their communications.

After years of self-deception, American policy has finally been unveiled. "That's why they're here," said a diplomat from a U.S.-allied country, "to keep the place in order—to keep the place from turning commie."

"Why would they kill the Jesuits?" asked the diplomat, referring to the army. "It's another Romero," he said. "It's starting again."