

California Polytechnic State University

President Jimmy Carter as an Activist?: Understanding President Carter's Human Rights Policy  
in El Salvador during 1980 through a Social Justice Lens

A Senior Project Submitted to  
the Faculty of the College of Liberal Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Department of History

by

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San Luis Obispo, CA

June 2018

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my senior project advisor, Dr. Gregory F. Domber, for supporting me throughout this whole process. He encouraged me to pursue a topic that I was interested in, yet unfamiliar with and provided me the guidance and push I needed to challenge my research and writing skills.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their endless support and encouragement. Thank you for pushing me to work hard and pursue my aspirations.

## Introduction

During 1980, Salvadoran citizens endured increased violence, torture, and overall suppression of their basic human rights. Many prominent figures were assassinated by either right-wing death squads or leftist insurgents. Then on December 2, 1980 came the murder of four American churchwomen from the Maryknoll Order. Their purpose was to aid the poor within Latin America; El Salvador gave them the opportunity to help the Salvadoran poor in the midst of this violence. However, they were met with suspicion by security forces and, as a result were raped and killed on a dirt road. Within a week, President Jimmy Carter cut economic and military aid as well as launched an investigation in El Salvador to find and hold the perpetrators accountable for the four murders and further, investigate the Salvadoran government's involvement in the ongoing murders of 1980.

In Washington, D.C., these December events served as a tipping point for Carter and provide a window into understanding how Carter balanced his desire to support human rights against more traditional American Cold War fears about national security and the expansion of Communist power in Latin America. While many previous scholars analyze the success of Carter's foreign policy through a political and economic lens, with the intention of seeing U.S. national interest as the key to a successful presidency<sup>1</sup>, many neglect to see President Carter through a lens that accentuates who he was: an activist.<sup>2</sup> While many saw his reaction to the murder of the churchwomen as an impulsive and irrational presidential decision, his actions can

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<sup>1</sup> For examples, see Robert Osgood, "Carter Policy in Perspective," *SAIS Review* 1 (1981); Coral Bell, "Virtue Unrewarded: Carter's Foreign Policy at Mid-Term," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 54 no. 4 (U1978); Linda B. Miller, "Morality in Foreign Policy: A Failed Consensus?" *Daedalus* 109 no. 3 (1980).

<sup>2</sup> An activist is defined as a person who is fighting for social, political, or economic justice to improve current conditions within society.

also portray Carter as a strategic and resilient activist.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the divided junta in El Salvador, the buildup of internal disputes within Carter's administration, the continuous neglect of human rights as American policy in El Salvador from January to December 1980, the overarching issue of the Cold War, and the timing of this event allowed Carter to step into the role of an activist to put emphasis on the human rights policy he had initially proposed when coming into office in 1977. To understand how Carter got to this tipping point, this article will delve into the factors mentioned above to understand, in detail, how Carter and his administration increasingly felt frustrated with balancing Carter's human rights agenda and the importance of winning the Cold War. By simultaneously looking at different perspectives of the events that occurred that year, the view that Carter had a naive approach to U.S. Foreign Policy transitions into seeing Carter's radical hope of changing the overall structure of U.S. Foreign Policy, which puts Carter's human rights approach wiser beyond its years.

Jimmy Carter's victory in the presidential election of 1976 marked a significant shift in the creation and execution of U.S. foreign policy, which reflected the morals and values Carter held as President and as an individual. Carter's religious upbringing as an evangelical Christian as well as the influence from his parents shaped his concern and care for human rights globally. As a native of Georgia, he actively participated in the Southern Baptist Convention where he learned that all people, as children of God, should be protected and cared for equally. As for his parents, his mother's actions of crossing segregated lines to counsel African American women

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of the reactions people had of Carter's decision after the rape and murder of the four American churchwomen see Karen DeYoung, "El Salvador: Where Reagan Draws the Line," *Washington Post*, March 9, 1981, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/03/09/el-salvador-where-reagan-draws-the-line/b63052cd-91a9-42df-b924-3f87b99d5d24/?utm\\_term=.70132fdd8b84](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/03/09/el-salvador-where-reagan-draws-the-line/b63052cd-91a9-42df-b924-3f87b99d5d24/?utm_term=.70132fdd8b84); Juan de Onis, "U.S. Officials Fly to El Salvador to Investigate Murders: U.S. Mission Arrives," *New York Times*, December 7, 1980; William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America 1977-1992*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

on healthcare taught him to care for people's lives other than his own. During the 1950s, he demonstrated his resistance against social injustice and human rights violations when he was the only white male to refuse membership of the White Citizens Council, a segregationist organization. A few years later, Carter slowly became more active in local boards for public institutions such as hospitals and libraries and sat on the Sumter County Board of Education. He eventually became Governor of Georgia in 1971. While he minimized appearances toward African American communities and tried to get endorsed by well-renowned segregationists during his election campaign to gain votes, his primary agenda when elected governor was to call for an end to segregation in the South. As governor of Georgia, "he increased the number of African American staff members in Georgia's government by 25 percent" and addressed the need for protecting the environment and providing greater funding in public education.<sup>4</sup>

Carter's support for human rights was reflected well in the positions he held and the actions he took before his presidency. His desire for the U.S. to give equal opportunity to all citizens, regardless of race during a time of racial and political turbulence, was not only addressed, but executed by him. Furthermore, his care for the environment and the funding of civic entities aided in creating a community that was well-resourced for all U.S. citizens. When he became the 39th President of the United States, his foreign policy agenda echoed the actions and policies of his past.

His human rights agenda encompassed the importance of transparency, true democracy, and world peace. After Nixon's Watergate Scandal, the secretive foreign policy practices of the government, and the continuous human right violations in developing nations, the U.S.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Strong, "Jimmy Carter: Life Before The Presidency," University of Virginia: Miller Center, accessed May 28, 2018, <https://millercenter.org/president/carter/life-before-the-presidency>.

population wanted a president who could reintroduce the American values of justice, democracy, and liberty. In an address iterated during his presidential campaign in 1975, Carter spoke of what his human rights agenda meant for the future of America's foreign relations. He condemned past tactics U.S. government officials used during the Cold War: the vicious cycle of installing democracy and/or suppressing communism within other developing nations, resulting in repressive methods of torture, assassinations, and disappearances of civilians by governments the U.S. had established or supported to win proxy wars around the globe. As Carter put it himself:

We have learned that never again should our country become militarily involved in the internal affairs of another nation unless there is a direct and obvious threat to the security of the United States or its people. We must not use the CIA or other covert means to effect violent change in any government or government policy. Such involvements are not in the best interests of world peace, and they are almost inherently doomed to failure.

When we embrace one of the contending leadership factions in a country, too often it is the power of the United States, not the support of the people, which keeps that leader in power. Our chosen leader may then resort to repressive force against his own people to keep himself in power.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, he expressed how the U.S. used undemocratic values of incentive, coercion and repression to institute U.S. democracy in the first place, and how his human rights agenda would change that:

[A] lesson to be learned is that we cannot impose democracy on another country by force. Also, we cannot buy friends; and it is obvious that other nations resent it if we try. Our interests lie in protecting our national security, in preventing war, in peacefully promoting the principles of human freedom and democracy, and in exemplifying in our foreign policy the true character and attitudes of the American people.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Address by Jimmy Carter," May 28, 1975, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

With this in mind, he communicated his future aspirations of changing previous objectives of U.S. foreign policy to fit his values and morals regarding human rights:

[It] must be the responsibility of the President to restore the moral authority of this country in its conduct of foreign policy. We should work for peace and the control of arms in everything we do. We should support the humanitarian aspirations of the world's people. Policies that strengthen dictators or create refugees, policies that prolong suffering or postpone racial justice, weaken that authority. Policies that encourage economic progress and social justice promote it. In an age when almost all of the world's people are tied together by instant communication, the image of a country, as seen through its policies, has a great deal to do with what it can accomplish through the traditional channels of diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

While Carter's genuine intentions for putting human rights at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy shifted towards a more socially just world, his key policies contradicted the tactics and objectives that reflected the Cold War mentality.

The end of World War II marked the United States and the Soviet Union as the two superpowers of the world, and consequently their contradictory ideologies created tensions that would involve developing nations around the globe to fight the Soviet-American war on ideology. Communism threatened the capitalist nature of U.S. democracy due to their collectivist nature and steps to abolish private property. If communism thrived around the globe, U.S. corporations located in developing countries would have to give back their property to the local government, and in turn U.S. foreign capital would decrease, which would immediately affect U.S. economic success. In addition, the United States wanted to be the only superpower.

In order to defend democracy, and halt the spread of communism, the United States used the tactics of "containment," a conceptual framework theorized by George F. Kennan, a foreign

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<sup>7</sup> "Remarks by Jimmy Carter," March 15, 1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

service officer, in 1947 to literally contain or enclose the spread of communism.<sup>8</sup> Containment was used in developing countries that had uprisings and bursts of communist ideologies, especially in Latin America, which the U.S. saw as their own backyard. Western containment policy within Latin American began in 1947 and the techniques used included the use of economic assistance and collective defense agreements.<sup>9</sup> Containment policy echoed in policies made by numerous presidents during the Cold War. President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress promised \$20 billion in assistance via loans and provided \$80 billion to Latin American governments to decrease Soviet and Cuban influence and ensure democracy was the only ideology in place.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Kennedy's inaugural speech amplified the lengths the U.S. would go to contain communism and spread democracy: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."<sup>11</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson continued this legacy by choosing Thomas C. Mann to become the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Mann was known to assess governments' commitment to U.S. values through their commitment to anti-communism, not their commitment to democracy.<sup>12</sup>

President Richard Nixon took it one step further with his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger where they implemented the political philosophy of *realpolitik*, which uses

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<sup>8</sup> "George Kennan and Containment," Office of the Historian, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/kennan>.

<sup>9</sup> "Containment and Collective Defense," Office of the Historian, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/containment>.

<sup>10</sup> "Alliance for Progress and Peace Corps, 1961-1969, Office of the Historian, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/alliance-for-progress>.

<sup>11</sup> "Kennedy's Foreign Policy," Office of the Historian, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/jfk-foreignpolicy>.

<sup>12</sup> "Johnson's Foreign Policy," Office of the Historian, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/lbj>.



pragmatic, and “no-nonsense” objectives when forming policies that explicitly disregard ethical considerations.<sup>13</sup> Nixon and Kissinger applied realpolitik when they secretly funded independent organizations in Chile to prevent Salvador Allende, a member of the Popular Unity Party (Socialist Party) to win the presidential election to first, prevent the nationalization of two major Chilean copper companies, Anaconda and Kennicott, which were owned by corporations in the United States and second, prevent the spread of socialist reform and thought.<sup>14</sup> However, their strategy did not work and Allende became President in 1970; his presidential agenda included reforming healthcare, agriculture, and education as well as nationalizing more businesses and farms in Chile.<sup>15</sup> Three years later, Nixon and the CIA idly sat by when the coup that ended Allende’s reign and began Augusto Pinochet’s, a Chilean general and dictator, dictatorship ensued. They may have not instigated the coup yet, they were “aware of the coup-plotting, had ongoing intelligence collection relationships with some plotters, and —because CIA did not discourage the takeover and had sought to instigate a coup in 1970—probably appeared to condone it.”<sup>16</sup> It did not matter if Allende’s reforms would benefit the Chilean people, U.S. interest came first even at the hands of a brutal dictator. The U.S. had a job to contain communism at whatever cost, even at the expense of human rights. As long as communism was contained and furthermore eradicated from a specific area, the U.S. had reached its foreign policy goals. Jimmy Carter wanted to change that. However his policies, contradictory to previous foreign policy, proved unsuccessful due to the omnipresence of the Cold War.

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<sup>13</sup> “Realpolitik,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/realpolitik>.

<sup>14</sup> “The Allende Years and the Pinochet Coup, 1969-1973,” Office of the Historian, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/allende>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “CIA Activities in Chile: Awareness of Coup Plotting in 1973,” Central Intelligence Agency, last modified September 18, 2000, <https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/chile/>.

Carter's policies are still disputed among historians and political scientists on their effectiveness and necessity during his time in office. Political scientists Alexander Moens and Erwin C. Hardgrove provide arguments that Carter's policies were not efficient nor successful. In *Foreign Policy under Carter*, Moen delves into defining and applying the multiple advocacy model to analyze President Jimmy Carter and his administration's policy-making process. Moens argues that it was not Carter's ideology regarding human rights that contributed to his failings; rather it was his open, decentralized decision-making process that hindered his ability to create successful policy outcomes, proving his policies to be ineffective. This process allowed his cabinet to be of equal status; Carter did not even have a Chief of Staff. Due to this, Carter personally involved himself in the decision-making process and was able to assess and weight different options and perspectives from his cabinet on all matters. However, Moen's argues that his indecisiveness got in the way of making clear decisions when it was necessary, creating an inconsistent and incoherent set of policies. Moen uses the examples of China, Iran, Africa, and the USSR to show this.<sup>17</sup> In *Jimmy Carter as President*, Hardgrove uses evidence of Carter's management process and style to explain the reasons behind its failure in U.S. foreign policy. Hardgrove goes as far to question if Carter's foreign policy goals were pertinent during the Cold War in the late 70s. He argues that his management of policy within his administration and abroad were unsuccessful due to his style of wanting a cooperative atmosphere and a sense of collegiality within his administration. This type of atmosphere failed internally and Hardgrove states that this is the reason of Carter's failure in foreign policy. Furthermore, he concludes his

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Moens, *Foreign Policy Under Carter: Testing Multiple Advocacy Decision Making* (San Francisco: Westview Press, Inc., 1990).

work by stating that Carter's heart may have been in the right place yet for the situations at hand, combating communism in developing nations outweighed the demand for human rights.<sup>18</sup>

While both of these historians focus on the ineffectiveness and unsuccessful timing of Carter's foreign policy agenda, other historians found his policy necessary and inspiring even with its failed outcomes. Historians David Schmitz and Vanessa Walker as well as specialist in U.S. foreign policy, William LeoGrande understood that Carter's policies did not work, and his reputation of looking "weak" and "incapable" were apparent during his presidency. However they all acknowledge that Carter's initiatives were as practical as they could have been given that the situations in developing countries were complex after years of oppression prior to U.S. intervention as well as the split narratives that took shape back home. David Schmitz and Vanessa Walker's "Jimmy Carter and the foreign policy of Human Rights," argues against the common notion that Carter's policy was "naive" and "simplistic." On the contrary, they present information that the Carter Administration was well aware of its contradictions and inconsistencies, and understood the complex situation of balancing anti-communist tactics and caring for human rights. Schmitz and Walker praise Carter for sticking to his initial agenda throughout his whole presidency even though it weakened his reputation as a leader in the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> William LeoGrande analyzes Carter's policy, specifically in Central America to show Carter's practical yet unsuccessful approach in Nicaragua and El Salvador. He criticizes Carter for his naive approach in El Salvador yet gives credit to his approach in Nicaragua. While LeoGrande does not outwardly praise Carter for his actions, he argues that the complexity of the

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<sup>18</sup> Erwin C. Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28, no.1 (2003): 117.

situation in both Nicaragua and El Salvador meant that these countries' problems simply could not be understood from an American perspective.<sup>20</sup>

While these historians understood the pros and cons of Carter's policy, other historians focus on the moral principles Carter espoused and how his drive toward human rights for a more peaceful world is what the nation needed in a time period where secrecy and deceit had infiltrated the government. Randall Balmer uses a religious lens to debate this in his work. In *Redeemer*, Balmer argues that President Jimmy Carter's persona and moral principles were needed during a time where the public could not trust the government, following the Watergate Scandal. Carter's religious stance and push for human rights made him a favorable candidate and helped him win the election. Balmer positively supports Carter's foreign policy goals, which replicate religious moral principles. In addition, Balmer states that Carter did the best that he could to be a successful president even though he lacked support both on the left and right and was forced to balance U.S. national interest and human rights concerns simultaneously.<sup>21</sup>

Specifically looking at Carter's limitations of putting forth human rights policy during the Cold War, William Michael Schmidli's *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy Toward Argentina* analyzes Carter's attempt to decrease human rights violations within Argentina during the midst of the Cold War. Heavily using primary documents and declassified information, Schmidli illustrates the difficult narrative of pairing Carter's human rights with U.S. foreign policy. Furthermore, Schmidli looks at the way society kept political leaders and groups accountable for their actions regarding human rights, thus revealing the intricacies and complexities of the relationship state policies and political activism share, using

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<sup>20</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Randall Balmer, *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 83.

Argentina as an example. With using a U.S. perspective to understand Carter's strategy and execution of human rights within Argentina, Schmidli argues that there are limitations to foreign policy when it comes to creating change. For Carter, there were limitations to implementing his human rights agenda in Argentina through the sole use of U.S. Foreign Policy.<sup>22</sup>

Other scholars have approached analyzing Carter's foreign policy, particularly toward Latin America, by studying officials within the Carter administration. While many look to President Jimmy Carter specifically when trying to investigate his policies, the Carter administration was filled with strong, contradictory personalities in Carter's decision-making apparatus. Two of the key figures for understanding Carter's policies within El Salvador are Zbigniew Brzezinski, his National Security Advisor, who had close connections with the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the National Security Council. Another focal point is Robert White, the Ambassador of El Salvador, who had disparate views that shaped their ideology of what foreign policy should look like.

In his biography of Brzezinski, Charles Gati describes the national security advisor as person who made great strides towards putting forth foreign policy that aided U.S. national interest during the midst of the Cold War. Brzezinski's tactics regarding anti-communism were influenced by his upbringing in Poland, his academic career, and persona. Gati attributes his unique tactics and policies when dealing with communism similar to Henry Kissinger's actions. Both Kissinger and Brzezinski grew up with similar backgrounds as well as had almost identical careers in academia. While both of them were competitive with each other in academic and career positions, their mutual respect for their work could be seen through personal exchanges as well as the policies Brzezinski pushed for during Carter's era. Brzezinski primarily applied

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<sup>22</sup> William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy Toward Argentina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

unique ideological tactics to contain communism, as did Kissinger, with the attempt to push Jimmy Carter's agenda of human rights by providing nations with military and economic aid if they followed the human rights agenda Carter put forth. Brzezinski often worked closely and influenced others within the Cabinet.<sup>23</sup> However, his bitter relationship with the U.S. Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance was unique in that he was known to steal the spotlight and overstep his authority on Vance's decisions and matters, which led to Vance's resignation.<sup>24</sup> Brzezinski's strong personality and Cold War strategy, in many cases, set the tone to what foreign policy looked like around the globe.

Robert White, on the other hand, within vicinity of the atrocities occurring in El Salvador, put his career and reputation on the line to fight for the rights of Salvadoran citizens oppressed by the regime funded by the United States government.<sup>25</sup> Raymond Bonner's article, "The Diplomat who Wouldn't Lie," addresses White's fight to for human rights within El Salvador, even if American interests were at cost. Bonner argues that while White was an ambassador, he took an activist role in his position, and this later did cost him his career. While White understood the dangers of communism within the Western Hemisphere, Bonner highlights that White was aware that the extreme right were responsible for the murder of innocent civilians, and on a broader scale, the issue in El Salvador was "a homegrown issue" due to the decades of oppression from the elites. White did what he could in his power to speak of the injustice in El Salvador, which later caused his removal. His actions ranged from criticizing

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Gati, *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Lewis, "Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Adviser to Jimmy Carter, Dies at 89," *New York Times*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/us/zbigniew-brzezinski-dead-national-security-adviser-to-carter.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Bonner, "The diplomat who wouldn't lie," *Politico*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/robert-white-the-diplomat-who-wouldnt-lie/>.

Latin American dictators to attending Archbishop Romero's funeral.<sup>26</sup> Pamela Constable also acknowledges that the ambassador's principles regarding human rights conflicted with the United States' plan to install a moderate government within El Salvador to halt the spread of communism. Constable argues that while White's actions wrecked his reputation during the 1980s, retrospectively, his actions should be recognized and applauded.<sup>27</sup> Both of these contradictory ideologies put Washington at a standstill of what direction their policies should take, and Salvadoran insurgents and citizens did not receive it well.

Another essential strain within the historiography is the Salvadoran perspective on 1980, the Civil War, and the Carter administration's policies vis-à-vis both. Primarily Salvadoran's viewed Carter's foreign policy negatively. Joaquín M. Chávez positively speaks of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) who spent decades fighting the oppressive regime in place. Chávez argues that FMLN stood and fought for democracy, yet did not look to the United States for their help because the U.S. supported a government that enacted oppressive, anti-democratic tactics towards civilians. Chávez positively acknowledges the support European and other Latin American countries, who had social democratic regimes, gave to FMLN. Chávez states that this support helped the insurgents fight through years of bloodshed which, ended in the Christian Democrats and the FMLN making a compromise.<sup>28</sup> Even though the FMLN wanted to instill a democratic government, they looked away from U.S. support.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Pamela Constable, "Robert E. White, who criticized policy on El Salvador as U.S. ambassador, dies at 88," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/robert-e-white-who-criticized-policy-on-el-salvador-as-us-ambassador-dies-at-88/2015/01/15/0c504738-9c29-11e4-96cc-e858eba91ced\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.6f02bfe2dfd3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/robert-e-white-who-criticized-policy-on-el-salvador-as-us-ambassador-dies-at-88/2015/01/15/0c504738-9c29-11e4-96cc-e858eba91ced_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6f02bfe2dfd3).

<sup>28</sup> Joaquín Chávez, "How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?," *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 5 (2015): 1787.

Mixed reviews of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy showcase the president's hope to put human rights first; however, the Cold War, internal differences within his administration, ineffective management, and his naive approach to installing democracy within several allied nations ruined the success of his human rights initiatives. Looking further into his foreign policies, Latin America, specifically El Salvador is one of many examples where the U.S. funded a politically divided government to insure the spread of democracy as well as halt the proliferation of communism. The year 1980 was significant for Carter's human rights agenda because it not only provided examples of ways Carter presidential duty of applying his human rights agenda within U.S. foreign policy, but also sheds light on Carter as an activist.

To understand Carter's immediate reaction to the American churchwomen through an activist lens, this essay will analyze the year 1980 looking at the various obstacles Carter and his administration had to face within El Salvador, the United States, and behind White House doors that both explains the difficulty he endured when putting both human rights and the Cold War as a priority as well as the continuous restrictions and restraints he had as an activist within a bureaucratic role leading up to the infamous December murders. The first section of the essay highlights the internal strife in El Salvador, explaining the military junta's rise to power in January and the Carter administration's initial response to the violence in El Salvador. The second section, "Internal Disputes within the Carter Administration (March 1980 – July 1980)" focuses on the cabinet member's differing Cold War tactics regarding foreign policy and how it translated to the disagreements they had about the ways to decrease human rights violations within El Salvador in response to the murder of Archbishop Óscar Romero. The third section backs away from U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador and looks at Carter's unsuccessful presidential campaign and specifically, how his human rights policy was seen as ineffective to



the U.S. public, and more so to president-elect Ronald Reagan and his supporters. The fourth section, “Increasing Divide within the Carter Administration (August 1980 – December 1980),” refocuses on the growing divide within the Carter Administration regarding the importance of reducing human rights violations yet, securing a pro-democratic regime in El Salvador. The last section covers the event of the rape and murder of the American churchwomen and Carter’s actions and correspondences both publically and privately, and the events that occur after.

### Disjointed Junta

Before the Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno (JRG) seized power on October of 1979, the Salvadoran peoples endured centuries of oppression by elites. These elites were a part of the *las catorce familias*, or the fourteen families, who obtained most of the wealth in El Salvador. Physically these families had euro-centric features and light skin, which indicated their strong Spanish ancestry. After El Salvador gained its independence in 1821, the European Enlightenment influenced El Salvador’s agenda of pushing for “progress.” This translated into putting economic prosperity first where elites invested heavily in raw materials, specifically coffee. In order to see a sufficient amount of monetary gain, a “subservient, impoverished, landless rural labor force” was necessary.<sup>29</sup> The economic structure in place during the 19th century reflected their colonial past in that it not only exploited the labor of both Indigenous and African communities, but also solely benefited elites where their oligarchical structure created through their economic success, allowed them to control the majority of the wealth and land in El Salvador, guaranteeing them both economic and political power. With coffee as their main source of income, their economy thrived; however, rural communities revolted during the latter

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<sup>29</sup>E. Bradford Burns, “The Modernization of Underdevelopment: El Salvador, 1858-1931,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 18, no. 3 (1984): 295-296.

half of the 19th century. While landowners compromised with the labor classes to keep their labor supply abundant, their original practices of oppression still echoed into the 20th century.<sup>30</sup>

At the turn of century, elites passed the Agrarian Law of 1907 which gave landowners physical protection to defend them from laborers as well as strictly regulated when, where, and how long laborers would work. Furthermore, the placement of rural police pushed the landowner's agenda to bully workers and influence judges' decisions to benefit planters. Economic prosperity and political power within the first half of the century fell to coffee planters. In addition, their cordial relations with the military created political and economic stability for them. On the other hand, most Salvadorans dealt with the inflation of food prices, high costs of living, and low wages. By 1930, only 0.2% of citizens were considered upper class and out of a population of 1,443,000, only 118,326 were landowners. With the majority of the population scrambling to put food on the table, the Salvadoran economy went into decline. Although some Salvadoran presidents tried to change the structure of El Salvador's economy and political stance to benefit more citizens, they failed to permanently change the structure, and kept the same system in place that oppressed the majority of the rural population for the prosperity of the elite.<sup>31</sup>

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many political parties upheld policies that centered power among particular elites. President Maximiliano Hernández Martínez from the Partido Nacional Pro-Patria (1931-1944), maintained power within the elite class and silenced the voices of the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS) by refusing to let elected Communist candidates serve. In 1932, he ordered the military to kill 30,000 Indigenous Salvadorans in response to protests regarding their harsh working conditions and low wages, an event known as La Matanza. Due to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 302, 305, 307, 309.

this event, Martínez gained the reputation as “one of the greatest mass murderers in Latin American history” and after, used oppressive tactics to keep opposition at bay.<sup>32</sup>

In response to another upsurge of mass protests during 1960, the United States supported a new government, the Directorio Civico-Military, to ensure the continuation of the oligarchic rule to combat Communist influence. Similar to the Partido Nacional Pro-Patria, the Directorio Civico-Military used its military government to instilled discipline and suppress opposition with the help of political and financial support from the United States.<sup>33</sup> While the Directorio Civico-Military disbanded in 1962, the United States made sure that the junta replacing the previous government would combat communism just as effectively as the previous regime. The Partido de Concertación Nacional (PCN) regime furthered suppression from 1962-1979, and its leaders (the last one being General Carlos Humberto Romero Mena) continued to combat leftist violence. During Mena’s reign, he created repressive policies, including his infamous reform, Law of the Defense and Guarantee of the Public Order.<sup>34</sup> This law, decreed in 1977, served to “combat kidnappings and murders of foreign businessmen and government officials by leftist guerrillas.”

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Two years after this law was passed, kidnappings still occurred. The leftist National Forces Armed Resistance held British, Japanese, and Salvadoran businessmen ransom for up to \$10 million. This law accounted for 715 arrests with 590 being freed after being beaten, two

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<sup>32</sup> John Beverley, “El Salvador,” *Social Text*, no. 5 (1982): 59.

<sup>33</sup> John Beverley, “El Salvador,” *Social Text*, no. 5 (1982): 60.

<sup>34</sup> James John Guy, “El Salvador: Another Domino?,” *The World Today* 36 no. 8 (1980): 327.

<sup>35</sup> Karen DeYoung, “El Salvador to Repeal ‘Public Order’ Law Cited As Tool of Repression,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 1979,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/02/28/el-salvador-to-repeal-public-order-law-cited-as-tool-of-repression/b9eee1c8-cebb-432f-821a-d23777fa4334/?utm\\_term=.899bc3c0eb3e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/02/28/el-salvador-to-repeal-public-order-law-cited-as-tool-of-repression/b9eee1c8-cebb-432f-821a-d23777fa4334/?utm_term=.899bc3c0eb3e).

assassinations, and 21 disappearances after being arrested.<sup>36</sup> The two juntas' motto, "reform with repression," received applause from John F. Kennedy for its success in combating leftist violence, and further inhibiting the spread Communism.<sup>37</sup> The United States, specifically the CIA played a huge part in training and equipping the Salvadoran military with weapons to ensure the success of these policies. In addition, the U.S. established the Alliance for Progress initiative, which encouraged El Salvador's dependency on foreign aid.<sup>38</sup> Due to the government's excessive push against "labor militancy and solidarity," the rise and severity of protests from other political organizations, especially the Revolutionary Democratic Front conjoined with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FDR – FMLN) escalated during the late 1960s.<sup>39</sup>

The FDR-FMLN was forged from two different organizations. The FDR, or the Revolutionary Democratic Front was established on March 15, 1980, by the left wing of the Christian Democratic Party, the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), the Popular Social Christian Movement (MPSC), and the Revolutionary Coordinating Council of the Masses (CRM), which was made up of several other organizations. Their agenda aligned with increasing nationalization and collectivization within huge sectors of the economy as well as replacing the military and police forces with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) who would not allow foreign entities to intervene during their revolutionary process and, would ensure liberation for all people.<sup>40</sup> The FMLN, named after the leader of the 1932 peasant uprising, was a leftist guerrilla organization comprised of five different organizations. Its main

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> John Beverley, "El Salvador," 60.

<sup>38</sup> "Alliance for Progress (Alianza para el Progreso)," John F. Kennedy: Presidential Library and Museum, accessed May 16, 2018, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Alliance-for-Progress.aspx>.

<sup>39</sup> John Beverley, "El Salvador," 60-61.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 65.

goal was to “reverse decades of suffering and more than 50 years of military dictatorship.”<sup>41</sup> The FMLN’s tactics included the strategies of Vietnamese-style People’s war and Che Guevara’s theories of guerilla warfare. They also as carried out a “campaign of terrorism.” Their primary goals included transitioning their authoritarian government to a democratic one, ending government oppression, and establishing land reform.<sup>42</sup> While the FMLN was more Marxist-Leninist leaning, the FDR took on a more popular-democratic ideology. Together they represented “different instrumentalities of the revolution” but they both shared the same agenda to foster liberation in El Salvador.<sup>43</sup> The leftist guerrilla organizations cared for and were made up of the poor, the peasants, and protesters who were tired of a regime that did not benefit them.

Leftists’ actions against the regime ranged from protests to kidnapping and torturing Salvadoran elites and foreign businessmen. Some activities that leftist guerillas used to oppose the regime included violent protests in upper class neighborhoods, committing arson, kidnapping specific individuals, and bombing different regions of El Salvador. Leftist guerillas primarily pushed for terror and guerilla warfare against the Salvadoran government and its supporters. With these tactics they intended to expedite political, social, and economic change that would serve the people, not solely the elites. By using these tactics and conducting combat operations, they were able to successfully take control of certain areas within El Salvador.<sup>44</sup> However, their victories were met with more repression and violence from PCN.

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<sup>41</sup> Angel Rabasa, John Gordon IV, Peter Chalk, Audra K. Grant et al, “Counterinsurgency Transition Case Study: El Salvador,” in *From Insurgency to Stability: Volume II Insights from Selected Case Studies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), 77.

<sup>42</sup> Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, “Politics and the FMLN in El Salvador,” in *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 68.

<sup>43</sup> John Beverley, “El Salvador,” *Social Text*, no. 5 (1982): 66.

<sup>44</sup> Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, “Politics and the FMLN in El Salvador” from *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda*, 66-68.

In response, the regime unleashed Organización Democrática Nacionalista (ORDEN), a paramilitary organization whose main goal included working with police to terrorize rural populations to hinder leftist guerilla violence against the regime and their supporters.<sup>45</sup> ORDEN members were directly ordered to murder suspects accused of preaching communist ideology as well as participate in death squad activities towards people they saw as “subversives.” The tension between the regime’s repression and the growth in opposition continued to build into the 1970s.<sup>46</sup> Opposition of PCN did not just come from leftist guerillas, it also came from moderate political organizations.

The Partido Demócrata Cristiano, or the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), opposed the tactics used by PCN. Their “centrist” views gained them popularity during the 1960s and early 70s where José Napoleón Duarte and Guillermo Ungo won the 1972 presidential election. Yet, the military committed fraud to win the election, in order to beat the PDC, with close relations to the military in power till 1979.<sup>47</sup> On October 15, 1979, Colonel Adolfo Majano and his supporters, who were against the harsh military tactics practiced by rightist, conservative military officers, overthrew the PCN. However, Majano’s coup d’état did not last long. Majano wanted to “[focus] on sharing power with key power centers in the attempt to establish a unity of effort around the military’s proclamation to institute reform objectives.”<sup>48</sup> His goals of modifying the government’s practices did not interest powerful politicians. Involved groups wanted to either maintain present reforms or implement more radical reforms. Then in January 1980, the Junta

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<sup>45</sup> John Beverley, “El Salvador,” 61.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 35, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, *El Salvador At War: An Oral History* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1988), 41.

Revolucionaria de Gobierno (JRG) was created, which put PDC in power with the existing military, including Majano.<sup>49</sup>

The JRG united groups that were traditionally political enemies. The Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party) wanted to create a “centrist solution” for El Salvador’s situation. On the political spectrum, the Christian Democratic Party members occupied either a centrist or left of center space. While they took a centrist view, members ranged from conservative- to liberal-leaning with their core values and ideology stemming from U.S.- and European-based education and values.<sup>50</sup> This translated into a policy focus which called for nationalization of banks and redistribution of large estates, as well as agrarian reform and democratization.<sup>51</sup> Within the JRG, the PDC’s role consisted of sharing seats alongside the current military officers in place then due to a longstanding connection with the old elites. The military’s ideology differed from the Christian Democrats in that they thrived on oligarchical power. Many military members held conservative and right wing ideology which consisted of suppressing any notion of revolution because it threatened their hegemony. Their use of death squads and practice of tormenting any opposition within their regime was a tactic they heavily relied on for decades. A change in government was not necessarily going to shift their views.<sup>52</sup>

The creation of the JRG elicited mixed responses from the Salvadoran people. The initiatives the JRG proposed—to end the repression of civilians, create a democratic political system, and implement policies to directly help the poor—were for the benefit of all people, but many felt that the military was unlikely to stray from their past tactics.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> John Beverley, “El Salvador,” 63.

<sup>52</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 40.

While the public slowly welcomed the new regime, the military faced internal fractures. Junta members held different ideologies reflecting the beliefs of two of the colonels in charge. Some members followed Colonel Adolfo Arnaldo Majano whose interest laid in achieving radical political, social, and economic reforms. Others looked up to Colonel Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez who believed in creating and executing moderate reforms. Other members followed the ideology of Robert D'Aubuisson who wanted to continue relations with the oligarchy.<sup>54</sup> Powerful contributors to the junta included Minister of Defense José Guillermo García and José Napoleon Duarte who was the civil-military junta leader during the JRG's reign. While the Christian Democratic Party seemed to have a prominent role at the beginning of the revolution, their left-leaning agenda was hindered due to their minority status within the JRG itself. In addition to the Christian Democratic Party's lack of voice within the government, the junta struggled to maintain a united agenda due to differing political ideologies and tactics. Ongoing violence from leftist as well as rightists continued.

While tensions heightened within the JRG and leftist violence erupted, the U.S. publicly responded positively to the new regime in place. During the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, the U.S. had pursued containment in Latin America. Containment was proposed by George Keenan who felt that in order to combat the spread of Communism, it had to literally be contained, which meant halting organizations and people who were trying to spread this ideology. Multiple American administrations pursued containment within Latin America, where the U.S. supported and installed governments that would primarily fight Communist influence. This translated into these regimes brutally suppressing leftist thought and ideology through

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<sup>54</sup> General Fred F. Woerner, Commander, U.S. 193d Infantry Brigade (Panama) and Deputy USCINCSO for Central America, 1982 to 1985, interviewed at the Presidio of San Francisco, California, 7 November 1986 from Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, *El Salvador At War*, 55.



physical violence and torture, which was even recognized and condemned by President Jimmy Carter.<sup>55</sup>

When Jimmy Carter entered the White House in January 1977, his agenda broke away from this model by focusing primarily on putting forth post-Cold War policies in developing countries—implementing humane policies--while preserving American interests.<sup>56</sup> Carter further condemned U.S. support of dictatorships as well as the containment policy imposed by previous U.S. presidents due to its un-American values.<sup>57</sup> Within the context of pushing for human rights, the JRG's values and intentions seemed “pro-democratic” in the Carter administration's eyes because the junta sought to actively halt continuous torture and assassinations putting forth policies to end suppression of Salvadoran citizens and creating left leaning agrarian reforms. These agrarian reforms would also hue to the effect of keeping leftist insurgents from causing instability within the Salvadoran government that could sacrifice U.S. interests there.

Outside of human rights concerns, the main priority for the Carter administration after the 1979 coup was to protect U.S. national interests, specifically U.S. dependents within El Salvador. While these dependents, mostly American missionaries and Peace Corps members, were not directly threatened by leftist insurgents, pulling them out of El Salvador could weaken the reputation the U.S. had locally. For the United States, the coup decreased the power the U.S. had within El Salvador, and the only way to protect national interest was through supporting the

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<sup>55</sup> “Address by Jimmy Carter,” May 28, 1975, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.). This can also be seen on page 4 of this essay.

<sup>56</sup> David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 28, no.1 (2003):113.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

regime. National Security Council Staff, Robert Pastor iterated these concerns to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs, in a memorandum written in December of 1979:

Withdrawal of our dependents is the worst thing we could do now; it would completely demoralize the already beleaguered government; it would be interpreted as a U.S. loss of confidence in the Junta and would be a significant morale boost for the terrorists. There are indications that the Junta has finally decided to bite the bullet and fight the terrorists. I have asked DOD to begin working on a range of alternative ways we can assist them to do this job. [...] By withdrawing our people, we will detract from the Junta's efforts to control the left, and ultimately increase the danger for all Americans in El Salvador. We should not panic.<sup>58</sup>

During this moment, the Carter Administration believed that the JRG would hinder the military from using violent suppression tactics against Salvadoran citizens. Unfortunately, the brewing problems proved otherwise.

Within the first two months of 1980, the Christian Democratic Party started to lose the little influence they had within the JRG. Left-leaning government officials began to resign from the JRG in March due to the government's inability to stop the repression of civilians. This decision was influenced by the February 1980 assassination of Attorney General Mario Zamora by a right-winged death squad leader. His assassination created an even bigger rift because Zamora was the main official to bridge a relationship between the Christian Democrats and the left. In response to the assassination the remainder of the left-leaning Christian Democrats resigned and formed the Popular Social Christian Party, a group that publicly opposed the JRG and its actions.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 46.

In the White House, the administration decided that continuing to support the JRG and providing the junta military aid was the best option to keep the violence at bay. As highlighted in a letter from the national security advisor to President Carter in January of 1980, Brzezinski wanted to bribe the Salvadoran military with aid from the United States. He also wanted to speak with Italy to give the JRG helicopters for their military. Both of these moves were an effort to pressure the JRG to pursue moderate policies.<sup>60</sup> However, other voices in the administration understood they could not give the JRG the idea that the U.S. would always sympathize with them out of a knee-jerk reaction to communism:

[The JRG] have found nothing but US support in the past, particularly when they scream “Communist.” Now, we don’t seem to be responding to their “red cape,” and they are growing frantic. Still, according to most people, they feel that there are sympathetic ears in the Administration (principally the Pentagon and [Brzezinski]) and outside (business, in Congress, Republicans) and that eventually that side will come to their rescue. They also believe that Afghanistan and cold war-like tensions mean that the probability of an early rescue operation has increased dramatically. *We must disabuse them of this illusion quickly.*<sup>61</sup>

Regardless of the concerns of some of the need to disabuse the junta of a knee-jerk American reaction to support non-Communists under all circumstances, fears of a leftist victory in El Salvador still held sway for others in Washington. In a memorandum written to President Carter, Brzezinski clearly acknowledged the issue regarding right-winged violence and the strategy to bring in progressive leaders to slowly influence the military as a whole. However he and Robert White, the ambassador of El Salvador, felt that the only course of action that could be taken at this time was to agree with the current government in place, even though violence was on the

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<sup>60</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 45.

<sup>61</sup> “Memorandum From Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski),” February 26, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

rise. If they stopped support, they believed there could be a Marxist victory within El Salvador. This was “unacceptable” for White.<sup>62</sup>

While the United States did not agree with the JRG’s actions, they understood that in order to keep their influence within El Salvador, they had to bribe the military. The Carter Administration settled on a budget proposal for \$5.7 million in emergency military aid in which they said would help “strengthen the Army’s key reforms.”<sup>63</sup> While this military assistance was labeled as “nonlethal,” this military aid included 7,500 CS tear gas grenades, 250 combat grenades, and an unspecified number of grenade launchers. This was pushed to congress on March 25, 1980.<sup>64</sup> By providing military assistance, they were funneling more power to the JRG, specifically military strength, which is what the JRG wanted.

While the Carter administration’s decision to consistently provide economic and military aid to a regime that continued implementing repressive tactics against leftists and civilians may be seen as incongruous with his calls for incentivizing human rights, Carter and his advisors felt that bribing the military was their only choice to instill stability and keep U.S. political influence within the region. They understood that the regime was inhumane and violent and went against their human rights agenda, but due to the fact that they were in the midst of the Cold War, letting insurgents bring a Marxist revolution to El Salvador was not an option. This is the first example of the Carter administration struggling with balancing Carter’s human rights agenda and Cold

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<sup>62</sup> “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter ,” March 21, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Conrad and Cynthia Arnson, “The Aid for El Salvador Is Called Nonlethal,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1980.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

War ideology. They had a duty to bring human rights to El Salvador, but also had a responsibility to look out for national interest, which meant combating Communism within the region. The White House believed that their bribe would decrease the violence and make the JRG move towards a democratic regime.

But instead, the violence escalated:

In the bright morning sunlight of March 24 1980, a car stopped outside the Church of the Divine Providence. A lone gunman stepped out, unhurried. Resting his rifle on the car door, he aimed carefully down the long aisle to where El Salvador's archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was saying mass. A single shot rang out. Romero staggered and fell. The blood pumped from his heart, soaking the little white disks of scattered host.<sup>65</sup>

#### Internal Disputes within the Carter Administration (March 1980 - July 1980)

When Óscar Romero became the fourth Archbishop of El Salvador in 1977, many progressive priests were worried that his conservative ideology would affect his care for the poor. However, on March 22, 1977, a progressive Jesuit, Father Rutilio Grande, whom he saw as a colleague and friend was assassinated by security forces and this caused Romero to become increasingly more outspoken against the regime.<sup>66</sup> The Archbishop stopped all appearances at government events, which would normally help legitimize the regime, to show his opposition.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Tom Gibb, "The killing of Archbishop Oscar Romero was one of the most notorious crimes of the cold war. Was the CIA to blame?," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2000/mar/23/features11.g21>.

<sup>66</sup> Philip Sherwell, "How the archbishop 'killed on the altar' by an El Salvador death squad began his road to martyrdom," *The Telegraph*, February 17, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/elsalvador/11414872/How-the-archbishop-killed-on-the-altar-by-an-El-Salvador-death-squad-began-his-road-to-martyrdom.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Betty Glad, *Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 250.

He also delivered sermons where he called out the brutality and violence inflicted against the majority of the Salvadoran population. A day before he was assassinated, the Archbishop specifically called on military members to cease their crude actions:

No government can be efficient without the support of the people, least of all when it tries to enforce them through blood and pain. . . . I would like to make a special call to the men in the Army. . . . Brothers, you are from our people, killing your own peasant brothers, and before being given an order to kill by a man, the law of God must prevail, which says: Do not kill. . . . No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. . . . An immoral law, nobody has to accomplish it. . . . It is time to recover your consciousness and to obey your consciousness before a sinful order. . . . In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise up to heaven, every day more tumultuous, I entreat and beg you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!<sup>68</sup>

His opposition against the government, and his support for the “peasant brothers” was clear.

These “peasant brothers” would soon make up the majority of the FDR-FMLN, a primary leftist guerrilla organization that opposed the JRG. Archbishop Romero saw the JRG’s continuing neglect and violence towards the poor, and believed that the FMLN were the only ones in El Salvador who could fix this ongoing atrocity. As Romero’s support for the FDR-FMLN’s goal of achieving liberation, democracy, and justice threatened his life within El Salvador, he attempted to seek support from the United States, who he thought had authoritative power to stop the JRG. In a letter to the White House, he expressed the worsening atrocities that would occur if President Carter continued to provide military aid to the junta:

I am very worried by the news that the government of the United States is studying a form of abetting the arming of El Salvador by sending military teams and advisors to “train three Salvadoran Batallions in Logistics, Communications, and Intelligence.” If this information from the newspapers is correct, the contribution of your government instead of promoting greater justice and peace in

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<sup>68</sup> As quoted in Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, “Politics and the FMLN in El Salvador,” in *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), 66.

El Salvador will without doubt sharpen the injustice and repression against the organizations of the people which repeatedly have been struggling to gain respect for their most fundamental human rights.<sup>69</sup>

In response, the Carter Administration wrote an apathetic letter stating that supporting the junta was the only path that would create peaceful change.<sup>70</sup>

While it seems that the United States just ignored Archbishop Romero's request, it turns out that the United States actively sought to halt Romero's role of opposing the junta by using the Vatican to pressure Romero. The Carter Administration, specifically National Security Adviser Brzezinski, wrote a letter directly to Pope John Paul II addressing the danger of Romero's leftist views and his impatience with the junta's progress. Furthermore, Brzezinski urged the Pope to intervene in Romero's outbursts because the church should play a "constructive and responsible role" during this process. While it is not clear if this letter was actually sent to the Pope, the intention was clearly to pressure Romero to not disrupt the U.S.'s plan to support the junta in the name of creating stability within the regime. The U.S. took the initiative to actively stop Romero's plea for human rights because it conflicted with U.S. national interest. While this can simply be seen as the U.S. being solely concerned with creating a facade of stability for their own national interest during the Cold War, it might have also served as a tactic to create trust between the JRG and the U.S. By creating trust, the U.S. could increase its influence over El Salvador and later, be able to push their human rights agenda on their terms, not the leftists. While Romero did end up meeting with the Pope, his responses to the violation of

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<sup>69</sup> "Text of Archbishop's Letter to President Carter," February 19, 1980, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 339 (The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.).

<sup>70</sup> Betty Glad, *Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 250.

human rights within El Salvador did not change.<sup>71</sup> The Archbishop's continued efforts to publicize and criticize military tactics and right-wing death squads ultimately cost him his life.<sup>72</sup>

Archbishop Óscar Romero's assassination created shock waves both in El Salvador and abroad. His martyrdom was venerated by his community in his home country as well as globally. Thousands of Romero's followers visited his tomb. Many expressed their love and respect for him after his death and he gained a wide following from progressives and met with hostility from several groups during his lifetime. Romero's death was similar to previous cases in El Salvador where priests, nuns, teachers, and lay workers were beaten, tortured, killed, and arrested by the government; all these cases, including Romero's, were not investigated nor was anyone held accountable.<sup>73</sup>

The U.S.'s public and private response to Archbishop Romero's assassination differed greatly. On one hand, the United States was surprised and immediately condemned the killing. However their real concern laid on how to maintain the stability of this so called "pro-democratic" regime now that the Archbishop, who fought consistently for human rights, had died at the altar. Publicly, President Jimmy Carter denounced the assassination of the archbishop while positively speaking of a regime that made Archbishop Romero outspoken in the first place:

I strongly condemn the tragic assassination of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero of San Salvador yesterday. It is a shocking and unconscionable act. Archbishop Romero spoke for the poor of El Salvador, where their voices had been ignored for too long. He spoke for change and for social justice, which his nation so desperately needs. Terrorism cannot silence the archbishop's message of compassion. It cannot and should not intimidate those who seek social justice and

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 250, 252.

<sup>72</sup> Jones and Libicki, "Politics and the FMLN in El Salvador," 67.

<sup>73</sup> James R. Brockman, "Oscar Romero: Shepherd of the Poor," *Third World Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1984): 446.



democracy. The United States trusts that the Government of El Salvador will move swiftly and effectively to bring the archbishop's assassins to justice.<sup>74</sup>

Robert White, the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador attended Romero's funeral. His presence was praised by peasants and the poor, yet not the elites nor the JRG.<sup>75</sup> This was the beginning of a split within the administration where Robert White and the rest of the Carter Administration developed different approaches on how to stop the violent tactics of the JRG over the course of 1980.

As for the U.S.'s private response, the first priority within the administration was to stabilize the JRG after the tragedy. According to Robert White, initially, Salvadorans did not trust the JRG, and the only reason they were still in power was due to the "lack of an effective opposition."<sup>76</sup> Yet, Romero's death could be used as a symbol for the poor, the moderate left, and the religious community to effectively mobilize together and take over the JRG. White indicated this may not be the case and would have to wait and see what happens. Due to this potential threat, the administration started meeting with JRG leaders to come up with ways to reduce this threat: stopping the repression in the first place.<sup>77</sup>

Two weeks after the Archbishop's death, the Carter Administration started to create and execute action plans to ensure the JRG decreased their use of violent tactics to suppress leftist guerillas. An April 4th memorandum from Robert Pastor, a part of the National Security Council Staff to Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs David Aaron mentioned that Robert

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<sup>74</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero Statement on the Death of the Archbishop of San Salvador," March 25, 1980, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33182>.

<sup>75</sup> Raymond Bonner, "The diplomat who wouldn't lie," *Politico*, April 23, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in El Salvador to the Department of State," March 25, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

White's and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Jim Cheek's meetings with leaders from the JRG to discuss the reduction of repression through a "land of the tiller" program seemed successful.<sup>78</sup> However in a letter from Robert White on April 12th, it was clear that these ongoing meetings with the all of JRG's members except from Colonel Majano were not effective because left-leaning leaders of the JRG were being manipulated by right-wing politicians.<sup>79</sup> The manipulation or intellectual domination from right-wing politicians came to fruition through left-wing leaders' inability to influence the regime. In addition, the leftist guerrilla violence increased in rural areas where the guerrillas forcefully prevented peasant farmers from planting.<sup>80</sup> In this letter, it becomes apparent that the JRG was undergoing a shift away from the left-centrist view the U.S. wanted implemented.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to the internal disputes within the JRG and escalating issues between the JRG and the United States, conflicts within the administration ensued as both leftist and JRG violence escalated over the next few months. On May 26, 1980, Robert White wrote a long telegram to the Department of State explaining the turmoil that occurred in El Salvador after Archbishop Romero's death. The government had survived a right-wing coup d'état attempt by Roberto D'Aubuisson as well as violent uprisings by the ultra-left on several occasions. In addition, the

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<sup>78</sup> "Memorandum From Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Aaron)," April 4, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>79</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in El Salvador to the Department of State," April 12, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> The worry expressed in this letter can also indicate the U.S.'s worry of repeating their mistake of letting the Sandinistas, leftist guerrillas, come into power in Nicaragua a year before when the Carter Administration was trying to implement their human rights agenda while maintaining U.S. interest as a focus.

Christian Democratic Party had forged a pull-out ultimatum.<sup>82</sup> As far as the plan of reducing violence however, the situation had only worsened:

We seem as far as ever from reducing the violence from the ultra-right. On the contrary, brutal murders of anyone suspected of liberal views, even Christian Democrats, produce a harvest of mutilated bodies by the roadside every morning. Security forces excesses against peasant villages have not declined either and in fact seem to be on the increase. Far left violence has declined in the cities but is on the rise in the countryside where all-out efforts are being made to sabotage the land reform and intimidate the peasantry into refusing to plant this [year's] crops. The national economy is already in serious straits and the failure to plant on a large scale could produce economic collapse.<sup>83</sup>

He further recommended that in order to de-escalate the situation, the perpetrators of the violence needed to be held accountable. As White noted, while the left does use violent tactics, the real ongoing violence stemmed from the ultra-right in the government. By siding with the JRG, White bluntly stated that the U.S. was backing a government that did not stand for what the U.S. preached and that was opposed to what the Christian Democrats stood for: democracy.

In addition, Amb. White pointed to the U.S.'s neglect of human rights policy, the signature policy that President Carter had put forth in the first place. As he wrote:

Those who look on this mayhem with tolerance, believing that the terror will be worth its cost if it prevents people from taking part in rebel activities, leave out a crucial factor. The target of the rightwing slaughter is not only or principally the extreme left but anyone who is against the oligarchy/military combine, including PDC members and their supporters of the present government. At least twenty Christian Democrat leaders have died at the hands of the paramilitary groups.<sup>84</sup>

With so much focus on defeating a Marxist rebellion in El Salvador, the United States had been too tolerant of the human rights violations. White brought to light the atrocities against the left,

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<sup>82</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in El Salvador to the Department of State," May 26, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

but also the Christian Democrat Party leaders who wanted to create change and democracy. White's plan of action included the U.S. realigning the High Command of the JRG where both Colonel Majano and Colonel Abdul Gutierrez were allies instead of enemies. Furthermore, both the colonels needed to end any political alliance with the right. In addition, the U.S. itself needed to cut ties with the ultra-right as well, which primarily included D'Aubuisson. As for any type of military assistance program, White suggested this decision should be halted until the administration is "clear on who [they're] supporting and why and where such a decision will take [them]."<sup>85</sup> In a sign of just how divided the executive branch was becoming on El Salvador policy, Zbigniew Brzezinski's and others within the Department of State and the Department of Defense took on actions in El Salvador that differed from White's recommendations.

Brzezinski's tactics shifted early August when considering the Department of State's view, which asserted that it was unrealistic for the JRG to meet all criteria for support set out by Robert White.<sup>86</sup> The criteria, which White established in June of 1980 to incentivize the JRG to improve their human rights, included:

- the United States is prepared to lease six U.S. Army UH-1H helicopters to El Salvador;
- this offer is made on the understanding that the military will take specific measures to reduce and effectively bring under control the violence participated in by elements of the military;
- as evidence of our good faith, the necessary training of Salvadoran pilots will begin (at schools in Panama or the U.S.) as promptly as students can be identified. The training will take approximately two months;
- provided the military take specific measures that effectively reduce indiscriminate violence for which they are responsible or with which they are

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter," August 1, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

associated during the next two months, the helicopters would be delivered as soon as the training is completed.

The Ambassador also recommends that a small survey team from SOUTHCOM be brought into El Salvador for a few days to assess the type, amount, and optimum location of helicopter training required, and that a three-man logistics and maintenance support team be assigned to the Military Group for approximately one year.<sup>87</sup>

Brzezinski may have been neutral with the Department of State's comment but either way believed that bribing the JRG with helicopters and training was a necessity, even before progress was made. While there were no stark disagreements between White's and other ideas on how to handle the JRG, it is notable to see that both the Department of State and Brzezinski were more concerned with using incentives to play a prominent role in controlling the situation, while White was more focused on human rights. He wants the JRG to prove their care for human rights before giving the JRG what they desire. This small disagreement sowed the seeds that later grew into a bitter feud.

The actions taken by Carter and his administration in El Salvador during the first six months of 1980 reflect American fears of a Marxist Revolution as well as the urgency of halting human rights violations implemented by the JRG. Unlike previous Cold War presidents, President Jimmy Carter's primary foreign policy agenda was on creating post-cold war policies that bettered the conditions developing countries endured due to proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, his foreign policy agenda in El Salvador was not as successful as planned. While his administration attempted to alter their policies to crack down on the right-wing sector of the JRG in El Salvador, his actions had already proved damaging to his

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<sup>87</sup> "Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Christopher to President Carter," June 28, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

reputation. Back in the United States, his reputation went from an honest, moral man this country needed to a weak, communist-sympathizing president not fit for office.

### Carter's Presidential Campaign (July 1980 - September 1980)

During July of 1980, one of President Carter's primary concerns outside of El Salvador included his Presidential re-election. The promises of creating a foreign policy agenda that would primarily care for human rights had faltered within El Salvador, and this affected the way the public and politicians in El Salvador and the United States viewed him. This was significantly different from four years earlier when many saw Carter's foreign policy as a fresh new start for the United States to practice values that had been lost in the midst of the Cold War.<sup>88</sup>

When President Jimmy Carter campaigned for president in 1976, his foreign policies exemplified values that aligned with President Woodrow Wilson's internationalism, including putting peace, human rights, self-determination, and cooperation at the forefront.<sup>89</sup> His push for democratic idealism as well making human rights a central theme for his foreign policy perfectly counteracted President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's foreign policy of realism. During his campaign, Carter spoke against the "excessive assertion of American governmental power, whether in Vietnam or later in the Watergate and CIA scandals."<sup>90</sup> Rather than maintaining secrecy when it came to foreign policy, Carter wanted to drift away from this practice and pursue open and honest diplomacy that implemented values such as human rights

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<sup>88</sup> "Jimmy Carter: Foreign Affairs," UVA Miller Center, accessed June 6, 2018, <https://millercenter.org/president/carter/foreign-affairs>.

<sup>89</sup> Erwin C. Hardgrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good*, 111.

<sup>90</sup> Erwin C. Hardgrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good*, 112-113.

and democracy when meeting and working with foreign nations.<sup>91</sup> While the idea of implementing human rights as the primary focus for a foreign policy agenda was uncharted territory, Carter's morals played a huge role in his policies and helped him win the 1976 election by 1.7 million votes and an electoral college lead of 57.<sup>92</sup> Yet by 1980, Carter's popularity dwindled not only within the United States, but around the world.

Within some Central American countries, many traditionally right leaning groups, including businessmen, landowners, and military officers disdained Carter for his policies which they believed took away the privilege, wealth, and rights they had accumulated over the last century.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, they saw his policies as "weak" and "wrongheaded" and went so far to say that Carter had pro-Communist intentions.<sup>94</sup> Beyond the elites, civilians and leftist guerrillas were upset that the U.S. did not seem to care about their human rights. Leftist guerrillas, specifically the FMLN understood that U.S. military aid would only give the JRG more authoritative and military power over the rest of the region, so the FMLN took time to strike U.S. military personnel and military training centers funded and overseen by the U.S. government.<sup>95</sup> To the FMLN, it was clear that the U.S. did not intend to support them due to the continuation of military aid during the first six months of 1980.

Within the United States, Carter also earned a negative reputation from American public and U.S. public officials. While Carter was clearly not as secretive as Nixon and Kissinger, the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> "1976 Presidential Election," Roper Center: For Public Opinion Research, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polls/us-elections/presidential-elections/1976-presidential-election/>.

<sup>93</sup> William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 56.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Angel Rabasa, Lesley Anne Warner, Peter Chalk, Ivan Khilko et al, "El Salvador (1980-1982)," in *Money in the Bank -- Lessons Learned from Past Counterinsurgency (COIN) Operations: RAND Counterinsurgency Study --Paper 4* (Santa Monica:RAND Corporation, 2007), 42.

U.S. public felt that he was hiding a part of the truth when pushing for military aid that his administration labeled as “nonlethal” just a week after Archbishop Romero’s assassination. In a *Washington Post* article, journalists called out the administration’s shady tactics that helped twist the truth around the continuation of military aid to the JRG:

What [Mr. Franklin D. Kramer, Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs] neglected to disclose in his public testimony was that the aid package in fact included combat-related equipment that stretches the definition of “nonlethal” beyond credibility. The Defense Security Assistance Agency has provided Congress with a list of items in the military aid proposal that was more detailed than the one made public by Mr. Kramer. The members of Congress who saw the list--it was given to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee--accepted the “nonlethal” designation despite the nature of the equipment. When this gear reaches the field, however, any distinction between lethal and nonlethal will have been lost. As repression by Salvadoran security forces escalates daily in the countryside, this gear becomes vital to the junta’s waging of counterinsurgency war.<sup>96</sup>

The U.S. public was not only aware of the JRG’s repression, but also understood that military aid was going to make matters worse. The military equipment that had been purposely taken out of Kramer’s testimony included tear gas grenades, tear gas grenade launchers, combat radios, and night-vision devices, which could be easily defined as lethal, or used for nighttime weapons targeting. In addition, the administration had asked Congress for more overtly combat-related equipment for the JRG including helicopters, jeeps, patrol boats, aircraft engines, and parachutes. Further, this amount of military aid funneled from the United States to El Salvador did not include private arms transactions from U.S. companies, transactions that had not been restricted. The deceit and secrecy that Carter practiced negatively impacted his own morals. It also

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas Conrad and Cynthia Arnson, “The Aid for El Salvador Is Called Nonlethal,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1980.



negatively affected his foreign policy agenda that promised to care for human rights and to practice democracy within other regions.

On the other side of the issue domestically, conservatives felt that Carter's policy in El Salvador has been too soft. Roberto D'Aubuisson and Alfredo Mena Lagos, Salvadoran businessmen, successfully lobbied Congress to get conservatives' support in Congress and to constantly ridicule and undermine Carter's policy in El Salvador.<sup>97</sup> Roger Fontaine, Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan's foreign policy advisor on Latin America, criticized Carter's "tolerance of ideological pluralism" where the president had not been successful in combating the issues ensuing in El Salvador except for accepting of some Marxist ideology. Jeane Kirkpatrick, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations during Reagan's first term as president, expanded on this notion by stating that Carter and his officials only seemed to accommodate people who were similar to the Russians and the Cubans.<sup>98</sup>

In contrast to Carter, Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan's foreign policy agenda focused on putting U.S. national security at the top of its list.<sup>99</sup> As a staunch anti-Communist, Reagan felt that Carter's policies deviated from effectively seeking to win the Cold War. In order to put U.S. national security first and defeat Communism, Reagan and his campaign agreed to build up military and economic strength.<sup>100</sup> His goal of reasserting American power—which Carter had weakened in many peoples' eyes—made him a strong candidate for the 1980 election. His primary foreign policy goals regarding Central America included preventing the expansion

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<sup>97</sup> Jack Anderson, "Carter Cautious on Salvadoran Situation," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 1980. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00965R000100170069-1.pdf>.

<sup>98</sup> William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, 53-54.

<sup>99</sup> William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, 52.

<sup>100</sup> Tore T. Peterson, "RONALD REAGAN: LEADERSHIP STYLE AND FOREIGN POLICY," *Transactions of the Historical Society in Ghana* no.8 (2004): 150.

of Soviet influence and promoting democracy through a mixture of diplomacy and both economic and military assistance.<sup>101</sup>

Regarding his presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan was popular for some conservative officials and voters based on his policies, but among some constituencies Reagan's popularity had more to do with Carter's failures. Reagan's position in the polls during 1980 mostly reflected the successes of his attack on Carter's failures during his first term.<sup>102</sup> In debates and on the campaign trail, Reagan consistently highlighted Carter's domestic and foreign policy failings. In a presidential debate on October 28, 1980, Reagan explicitly displayed Carter's failure to better the U.S. economy by stating the huge rise in inflation rates, from 4.8% to 12.7% as well as the eight million American citizens out of work. He then resorted to highlight that the government is to blame for these obstacles:

[Carter] has blamed the people for inflation, OPEC, he has blamed the Federal Reserve system, he has blamed the lack of productivity of the American people, he has then accused the people of living too well and that we must share in scarcity, we must sacrifice and get used to doing with less. We don't have inflation because the people are living too well. We have inflation because the Government is living too well.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Kimbra Krueger, "Internal Struggle over U.S. Foreign Policy toward Central America: An Analysis of the Reagan Era," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1996): 1036. It is noteworthy to add that Ronald Reagan's idea of human rights differed from Carter's in that pushing for democracy and containing Soviet influence was human rights in itself; Reagan did not negate the need for human rights, rather he felt that Carter's human rights agenda was not beneficial to advance their chances of winning the Cold War.

<sup>102</sup> Ed Magnuson, "The Mood of the Voter: As the race begins in earnest, the public is wary, worried -- and waiting," All Politics - Back in Time *CNN*, September 15, 1980, <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/analysis/back.time/9609/15/index.shtml>.

<sup>103</sup> "October 28, 1980 Debate Transcript: The Carter-Reagan Presidential Debate," Commission on Presidential Debates, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-28-1980-debate-transcript>.

As for foreign policy, Reagan added that while world peace was important, Carter's way of pursuing it was ineffective. Due to this inefficiency on Carter's part, using force might be necessary:

And I'm only here to tell you that I believe with all my heart that our first priority must be world peace, and that use of force is always and only a last resort, when everything else has failed, and then only with regard to our national security. Now, I believe, also, that this meeting this mission, this responsibility for preserving the peace, which I believe is a responsibility peculiar to our country, and that we cannot shirk our responsibility as a leader of the free world because we're the only ones that can do it. Therefore, the burden of maintaining the peace falls on us. And to maintain that peace requires strength. America has never gotten in a war because we were too strong. We can get into a war by letting events get out of hand, as they have in the last three and a half years under the foreign policies of this Administration of Mr. Carter's, until we're faced each time with a crisis.<sup>104</sup>

Rather than critiquing his individual policies, a lot of Reagan's critiques focused on Carter as an individual. When Carter rebutted Reagan in a presidential debate regarding Reagan's disagreement of the SALT II treaty, saying that Reagan's views on the SALT II treaty would resume a dangerous nuclear arms race, Reagan criticized, or better yet used condescending language, to respond to Carter's rebuttal:

I know the President's supposed to be replying to me, but sometimes, I have a hard time in connecting what he's saying, with what I have said or what my positions are. I sometimes think he's like the witch doctor that gets mad when a good doctor comes along with a cure that'll work.<sup>105</sup>

While Reagan had a charismatic persona on screen, he was guarded during individual interviews with reporters and maintained one sentence responses. In an interview with *the Atlantic* reporter James Conaway, Reagan responded with one word answer. However, when Conaway asked Reagan to compare himself to Carter as "amateurs in the White House," his expression

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

brightened.<sup>106</sup> Reagan's campaign strategy during the 1980 election was to consistently recognize the failings of Carter's policies and create the perception that he was what the United States needed.

Overall, President Carter was bombarded from both the left and right in El Salvador and in the United States during the campaign year in 1980. His actions regarding his human rights policy were not successful enough to many, nor was his concern for U.S. national security strong enough. He was stuck being unsuccessful in both aspects because he could not fully commit to one agenda; the Cold War made it hard for his human rights agenda to go forth in lieu of national security concerns, and vice versa. His human rights agenda and the U.S. Cold War mentality were essentially contradictory. On one hand we have an agenda that pushed for civilians to be allowed basics rights such as thinking for themselves, yet on the other hand, these civilians could only have one type of ideology, one that benefitted the U.S.'s initiative for liberal capitalist democracy. As Schmitz and Walker highlight, Carter was aware that his foreign policy had internal contradictions and complexities due to the nature of the two policies he was trying to balance and merge.<sup>107</sup> With his contradictory agenda's, not one of his policies could possibly become successful. This contradiction proved to be fodder for a mass critique of Carter. The re-election campaign exposed his failures in a place where politics were displayed in a black and white fashion, rather than the complexity of the situations Carter had dealt with since his first term. Carter's weak re-election campaign and the critique he receives during the later months of

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<sup>106</sup> James Conaway, "Looking at Reagan," *The Atlantic* (Washington D.C.), October 1980 issue. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1980/10/looking-at-reagan/307256/>.

<sup>107</sup> David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28, no.1 (2003): 117.

1980 not only diminished his reputation as an effective leader, but also created a further divide within the administration on how to be successful in El Salvador.

#### Increasing Divide within the Carter Administration (August 1980 - December 1980)

The election added tension to the Carter Administration: Carter's ineffectiveness at stopping leftist insurgencies and right-winged violence in El Salvador created an even deeper divide within the administration. In June, the administration as a whole agreed to lease the JRG six U.S. Army UH-1H helicopters and supply a two month U.S. military training for Salvadoran pilots if the military would take certain steps to reduce their violent actions.<sup>108</sup> However, the administration had split views on the quality and tangibility of evidence needed for the JRG to receive military aid. Ambassador Robert White wanted the JRG to receive aid solely after the JRG made substantial progress in decreasing human rights violations. On the other hand, the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of State (DOS), and the National Security Council (NSC) were flexible with the evidence the JRG provided regarding human rights, and focused more on providing the JRG aid to protect them from leftist violence, who White, contradictorily, did not see as the culprit of the violence.

In July of 1980, Ambassador Robert White met with JRG leaders, Colonel Adolfo Majano, Colonel Jaime Gutiérrez, civil military leader José Duarte, and Minister of Defense José Guillermo García to create a permanent plan that would ultimately be the deciding factor of whether they would receive U.S. military assistance or not.<sup>109</sup> While the JRG leaders and

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<sup>108</sup> "Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Christopher to President Carter," June 28, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>109</sup> "Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Tarnoff) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," July 17, 1980, Volume XV,

Ambassador White did come to agreement on the specific actions the JRG would take in order to receive military assistance, the Department of State felt that the proposed criteria was ultimately unrealistic and the JRG should receive military assistance if they were committed to *trying* to halt the violence.<sup>110</sup>

In a memorandum sent from Brzezinski to President Carter, the national security advisor agreed that the Department of State believed that the JRG's ability to successfully complete all criteria (and furthermore have tangible proof of this completion) was impractical. While Brzezinski did not have a specific opinion on the Department of State's position on this matter, he believed that the military assistance promised was enough of an incentive for the JRG to agree with the criteria proposed by Ambassador White to reduce right-wing violence. During the process of producing and executing a plan to decrease violence, President Carter insisted on a detailed description of the "specific measures to judge human rights progress."<sup>111</sup> So even at this stage, Carter was at the least partially committed to pushing a human rights agenda. While the administration, with Carter's permission, was using military assistance as an incentive to encourage the JRG to halt its repression tactics against leftist insurgents and innocent civilians, he was also making sure that the JRG was taking tangible and realistic measures to permanently reduce violence. Carter did not want to half-heartedly suppress bloodshed for a short period of time for the U.S.'s benefit.

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Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>110</sup> "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter," August 1, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

Overall, the differing opinions within the administration on the strategy taken to reduce right winged violence was specifically focused on the judgement of whether the leftist insurgents posed a legitimate threat or not. As stated within a memorandum between Frank Kramer, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in early September 1980, different sectors within the administration have “fundamentally different perceptions as to the nature of the problem”.<sup>112</sup> White’s perspective was that the leftist insurgents did not constitute a real threat in El Salvador because they did not have outside help, specifically from Cubans. Therefore, the main task at hand was to push the JRG to hold down right-winged members from acting violently. In contrast, the DOD, DOS, NSC, and Brzezinski relied on the fact that while the right was an immediate threat, the left also was considered a “serious threat.”<sup>113</sup> Moreover it was a threat to the JRG’s pro-democratic regime. This view emphasized that the military needed more time to fulfill the criteria proposed by White. Even though both views did compromise on the offer of giving helicopters to the JRG, White was more concerned with human rights conditions whereas others focused on the political, economic and military value of giving helicopters to the JRG’s military.

On a larger scale, this reflects the struggle between what the U.S. deemed most important: human rights or the threat of a leftist takeover. Kramer ended his letter by stating that policy makers should still debate if increased military aid to the junta is needed because guerillas still pose a threat to the pro-democratic regime the U.S. was attempting to stabilize. In addition, Kramer foregrounded White’s persistence on persuading armed forces to practice the values of

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<sup>112</sup> “Memorandum From the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Kramer) to Secretary of Defense Brown,” September 5, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

democratization, human rights, and honesty rather than repression, excessive violence, and corruption in order for this regime to survive. The differing views on human rights however did not end with compromise. Rather, officials who opposed White's stance sought other ways to get their perspective heard and considered, specifically Defense Secretary Harold Brown and NSC staffer Robert Pastor.

Harold Brown's concern for leftist violence peaked on October 24th when he informed Brzezinski that he believed the U.S. was "not providing the right kind of security assistance."<sup>114</sup> Brown spoke about the importance of the JRG's success in order for the U.S. to achieve political and economic success. Within this memorandum, Brown emphasized the many materials the U.S. could provide to the JRG to minimize the leftist threat including specialized training in border control, intelligence collection, and special operations to help develop capabilities for disrupting the flow of arms as well as improve basic counterinsurgency techniques. He even suggested putting civic-action teams (military personnel) in civilian clothes to help assist with roads, agriculture, and public health concerns while simultaneously countering the increasing dominance of guerilla groups in rural areas. Brown was aware that having military personnel within El Salvador was a political matter and already had a plan of how to reduce U.S. visibility.<sup>115</sup>

For his part, Robert Pastor undercut Robert White and the Salvadoran Embassy by meeting with Colonel Garcia, who was known to "symbolize repression and military continuismo in El Salvador." The two met in private to discuss future U.S.-JRG relations

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<sup>114</sup> "Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Brown to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," October 8, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.



regarding military assistance.<sup>116</sup> Robert White's letter to the Department of State illustrated the frustration and hurt he felt for purposefully not being informed of this meeting. White felt this meeting also publicly undermined his knowledge and expertise on the matters that happened in El Salvador. In addition, this move on Robert Pastor's part reflected badly on the public image of the United States. It showed weakness and divide among Carter's officials and displayed U.S. support for the right, which implies neglect of the human rights policy Carter preached during his presidency.<sup>117</sup>

The push for issuing military assistance to the JRG continued into late October. At that point, the CIA endorsed Brown's military suggestions to combat a leftist takeover: "This Agency welcomes increased DOD participation in operations designed to strengthen the JRG in El Salvador and to help turn the tide of rising Cuban-supported insurgency in Central America."<sup>118</sup> Consensus to send more military aid was growing out of fear of leftist guerillas. Plans however were delayed when President Carter lost the election against President-elect Ronald Reagan. The election of 1980 reflected the American peoples' attitude toward Carter. Carter lost the popular vote by 8.42 million votes and lost the electoral vote by 440 votes.<sup>119</sup> Carter's domestic and foreign policies had proven unsuccessful, and the fact that Iranian hostage crisis dominated the news during the last few weeks of the election did not help his campaign.

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<sup>116</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in El Salvador to the Department of State," October 19, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>117</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in El Salvador to the Department of State," October 19, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>118</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in El Salvador to the Department of State," October 19, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>119</sup> Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Election of 1980," The American Presidency Project, accessed May 10, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1980>.

In terms of El Salvador, his loss in the election changed the way the Carter Administration wanted to attend to foreign policy in El Salvador. After the election, Robert Pastor realized that within the next few months, it was very likely that the U.S. would lose their ability to influence the JRG. He believed that the right would eventually kick the moderates out of the JRG if the Reagan Administration did not clearly denounce the right's violence. Yet, Pastor was apprehensive of implementing lethal military assistance because Carter lost the election. He acknowledged that the JRG's human rights progress still needed to be reviewed and logistically, the JRG would not be able to absorb all the material promised to them by the end of Carter's term. In addition, he understood that giving additional assistance might give the JRG the wrong idea about their use of repressive tactics. Furthermore, he returned back to the administration's original use for military assistance in El Salvador : "Our feelings has long been that if the Salvadoran military pursues the correct *political* strategy, then U.S. military assistance would not be that important or necessary. Conversely, if they did not pursue the correct political strategy, no amount of U.S. military assistance will help. " He concluded by stating, "I don't think the issue of lethal military assistance need to be addressed in the last three months of the Carter Administration." <sup>120</sup> Pastor's letter not only signifies a drawback in military assistance due to time constraints but also highlighted that providing military assistance was not as important as human rights for the Carter Administration.

U.S.-El Salvador relations in November of 1980 seemed to be improving when Duarte and Fidel Chavez Mena, the Foreign Minister of El Salvador, met President Carter to discuss providing economic aid and military assistance. Carter did not agree to any of these but rather

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<sup>120</sup> "Memorandum From Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," November 6, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

stated that he would expedite the process of reviewing their improvement on human rights in order for the JRG to receive the helicopters they were promised. The fact that they were on speaking terms and friendly with one another suggested that El Salvador could be heading in the direction of securing a pro-democratic regime.<sup>121</sup> Yet, on the last day of November, the improvements the U.S. government thought the JRG had made were diminished when Duarte admitted that security forces within the JRG participated in murdering FDR leaders. While Duarte had agreed to expel members who were involved, Robert White indicated in a letter to the Department of State that Duarte may have had a plan to continue covering up these murders in order to gain more authority within the JRG because none of these members would be tried or punished.

Due to this incident, White urged the Department of State to suspend any ongoing or future military assistance. Military training teams would also need to depart. In addition, White strongly urged Washington to write a joint statement declaring that foreign policy in the United States, regardless of who is president, prioritizes democracy and human rights.<sup>122</sup> As for specific actions in El Salvador, White advocated for the U.S. to “use all of [their] to influence the choices that will be made within the next few days. At a minimum [the U.S.] must achieve the expulsion from the armed forces of the middle-level officers who are responsible for the killings and a rededication of the officer corps to professionalism and a code of conduct.”<sup>123</sup> While White had a

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<sup>121</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation,” November 26, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>122</sup> “Telegram From the Embassy in El Salvador to the Department of State,” November 30, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

strategy to push the JRG back to a path of democracy, time was running out in his eyes. Two days later, four American churchwomen were raped and brutally murdered by military forces.

#### The Four American Churchwomen (December 1980)

On December 2, 1980, four American Churchwomen, nuns from the Maryknoll Order, flew to El Salvador to do charity work. The Maryknoll Order's mission was to fight for social justice on the behalf of the poor. However, many right-wing officials labeled members of organizations like these either "subversives" or "communists." Dorothy Kazel an Ursuline sister, and American lay missionary Jean Donovan were in charge of picking up four of the Maryknoll sisters from the international airport on this day. First, they picked up Madeline Dorsey and Teresa Alexander in a white van, and came later that day to pick up two more sisters, Ita Ford and Maura Clarke. National Guardsmen found the white van suspicious, since they had already seen it earlier that day and informed their supervisor, Sub-sergeant Luis Antonio Colindres Alemán. Alemán ordered them to change into civilian clothes and station a squad down the road from the airport's traffic checkpoint. After their white van passed the checkpoint and headed to the end of the road, the squad stopped them, searched their car, and made the women follow them. After 15 miles the guardsmen stopped. They forced the nuns out of the car, raped them, and shot them, leaving them on the side of the road to rot.<sup>124</sup> The brutal violence these women endured was unfortunately quite common in El Salvador. However, because they were foreigners, Salvadoran civilians reported these dead bodies to a local parish priest. The priest later contacted Father Paul Schindler, an American pastor relocated to El Salvador from 1972-1982, and Ambassador Robert White. The bodies were found in a community grave that the

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<sup>124</sup> William G. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, 60-62.

National Guardsmen hastily created a day later because they realized they were foreigners, not just Salvadoran civilians. The bodies laid on top of one another: bullet wounds from the guardsmen made their faces unrecognizable. Other nuns who came to the scene silently prayed. Local reporters surrounded the bodies taking photos. Eventually this tragic event gained global attention.<sup>125</sup> Chaos ensued within the Carter Administration. They not only needed to figure out a way to approach the JRG on the recent FDR murders, but also had to immediately respond to the murder of four American nuns.

The Carter Administration understood that Salvadoran government officials were most likely responsible for the December 2nd murders. Robert Pastor's main concern in a December 4th memorandum was to respond to the FDR murders. He agreed with White's existing plan of suspending all military aid, however he also believed that providing incentives would give the U.S. what they wanted. He suggested that the U.S. should assure "an immediate delivery of helicopters, a start-up of economic and military aid, and the signing of FY 81 Foreign Military Sales agreement", if the JRG: arrested and punished all officers involved in the FDR killings, including D'Aubuisson,<sup>126</sup> sent a High Command official who used repressive tactics abroad as an ambassador, and enforced agrarian reform by "giving title to the farmers."<sup>127</sup> In addition, Robert Pastor felt it was necessary for Ronald Reagan to publicly oppose right-wing and left-wing terrorism and speak in favor of long-overdue reforms in El Salvador.<sup>128</sup> Pastor understood

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> "Memorandum From Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," December 4, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

the fragility of the situation. Any public statement needed to be carefully composed to provide stability within the JRG's government, which had been consistently crumbling.

As for the murders of the Churchwomen, instead of speaking to the JRG privately about this matter, President Carter decided to launch a public investigation in El Salvador immediately. This marked "the first time since the Carter administration began backing the government junta that it [has addressed] publicly the charges of government forces involvement in terrorism here."

<sup>129</sup> In addition to a public investigation, Carter also suspended \$25 million in both military and economic aid. <sup>130</sup> The investigation was launched, dubbed the Bowdler/Rogers mission, and was led by Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs William Bowdler and William D. Rogers. Its purpose was to conduct a genuine and thorough investigation on the four murders as well as clearly display the Carter Administration's full support to the Christian Democrats and military who condemned and attempted to reduce right-winged violence that had consistently occurred over the past year. As for military and economic aid, it was clear within the administration that in order for the JRG to even last a week, economic aid had to be restored. If the JRG's economy crumbled, the U.S.'s ability to control that government would completely collapse and an ultra-right takeover would likely occur, diminishing the U.S. goal of spreading democracy within El Salvador. Nonetheless military aid would be suspended until political negotiations between the Christian Democrats and the military were resolved. <sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Christopher Dickey, "U.S. Mission Arrives in El Salvador to Probe Killing of 4 Catholics," *Washington Post*, December 7, 1980, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/12/07/us-mission-arrives-in-el-salvador-to-probe-killing-of-4-catholics/1342b22d-a735-432f-b8f9-162c73689b24/?utm\\_term=.99e15f54756a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/12/07/us-mission-arrives-in-el-salvador-to-probe-killing-of-4-catholics/1342b22d-a735-432f-b8f9-162c73689b24/?utm_term=.99e15f54756a).

<sup>130</sup> John Goshko, "U.S. Halts Salvadoran Aid," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 1980. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/12/06/us-halts-salvadoran-aid/3984eb08-c259-4624-b91b-cea7729a7d11/?utm\\_term=.724586e83a8d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/12/06/us-halts-salvadoran-aid/3984eb08-c259-4624-b91b-cea7729a7d11/?utm_term=.724586e83a8d).

<sup>131</sup> "Memorandum From Robert Pastor of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) and the President's Deputy Assistant for

In a memorandum written by Robert Pastor to Brzezinski and the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs David Aaron, Pastor addressed the four conditions that needed to be met before restoring aid. They included:

- (1) To reduce the right-wing violence; to gain greater control of the security forces; and to avoid the perception that the JRG has shifted sharply to the right.
- (2) To assist the JRG in its struggle against the leftist guerrillas.
- (3) To assist the JRG to implement the reforms (in particular, to give Titles to the peasants) and to restore the economy.
- (4) To reiterate the JRG's willingness to dialogue with the moderate political left.<sup>132</sup>

In addition, Pastor clearly name dropped several leaders in High Command who need to be dismissed from office due to their association with the right.<sup>133</sup> Pastor's clear intentions of publicly holding specific members of the JRG accountable scared the regime.

While this was a successful threat to create fear within the JRG, it only lasted for a short period of time. Due to the JRG's economic instability, Carter decided to restore economic aid on December 17<sup>th</sup>, only two weeks after suspending it.<sup>134</sup> In a memorandum from Brzezinski addressed to Carter, Brzezinski reiterated Secretary of State Edmund Muskie's proposal to inform the JRG to restore economic aid. In addition, Brzezinski spoke of the Special Committee Council's recommendation of also restoring military aid, if the military fulfilled the promises they made with the Christian Democratic Party to decrease the violence they perpetuated onto

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National Security Affairs (Aaron)," December 11, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> William G. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America*, 63.

civilians and other political leaders. Brzezinski agreed with these recommendations and further listed other necessary steps he thought was needed:

- we are prepared to proceed with military assistance;
  - non-lethal materiel in the pipeline would continue to be delivered;
  - the helicopter program, with attendant in-country training by MTT's, will go forward promptly as soon as the military has made significant progress in implementing the agreement with the Christian Democrats;
  - with further implementation, we would go forward with the \$5 million FY 81 FMS Credit Agreement and purchase of \$2.3 million in non-lethal equipment; and
  - this could be followed by further MTT training of El Salvadorian armed forces.
- (I would rank the MTT's for the El Salvador army last because they are the most visible and will require significant political justification both in Salvador and elsewhere.)<sup>135</sup>

Brzezinski ended the letter by stating his recommendations for Carter:

1. That [Carter] authorize informing the El Salvador Government of our economic assistance plans along the lines of Secretary Muskie's memorandum.
2. That [Carter] authorize the Department to instruct Ambassador White to inform the El Salvador Government of our willingness to resume military assistance contingent upon their meeting their own commitments along the above lines.<sup>136</sup>

While Carter was able to take on an activist role after the December murders, the restraints and limitations of being a Commander and Chief restricted his capacity of being an activist. He unfortunately resorted back to the original plan of continuing to funnel in economic aid and consider resuming military aid to the JRG in order to avoid further economic instability within El Salvador that may have resulted into a successful right-wing coup.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter," December 16, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> William G. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America*, 64.



The immediate suspension in aid as well as the public launch of an investigation by Carter and his administration did not come out of nowhere. It was the outcome of built-up tension, a fractured administration, Carter's loss in the 1980 presidential election, and his genuine care for human rights. President Carter began his presidency attempting to bring human rights into foreign policy. However, implementing human rights policies and shifting old policies was not simple. He understood that within his own policies, there would be complexities and contradictions because he could not solely fight for human rights. He also had to do what was best for U.S. national interest during the Cold War, which meant containing communism where the U.S. had relations including Latin America.<sup>138</sup> Re-structuring the way presidents have implemented foreign policy was going to be an uphill battle. In addition, it did not help that the new government in place in El Salvador, the JRG, did not have the same desires to bring democracy to the country. Leftist insurgents were an obvious threat to American power due to their communist and socialist views, yet the JRG's repressive tactics did not scream democracy either. At the beginning of 1980, the Carter administration believed that with more time and acclimation, the JRG would soon practice democracy and soon become a stable pro-democratic regime; yet, the administration failed to recognize that centuries of repression and oppression from governing bodies, whether it be colonizers or military dictators, were going to affect the way new governing bodies were going to treat their citizens, especially since the military of the old regime was well in tact when the Christian Democrats came into power. For the Salvadoran people, the JRG would be just the same regime with some progressive members in the mix.

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<sup>138</sup> David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28, no.1 (2003): 114.

Carter not only had to shift the way the U.S. treated policy in El Salvador, but also had to find ways to transform or extract the repressors in the government for his mission to be successful.

On top of this issue, the tensions within the Carter administration added pressure to Carter's push for human rights and the JRG's contradictory position. While everyone within the administration was on board with the concept of addressing human rights in El Salvador, different sectors of the administration had contradicting tactics on how to tackle human rights violations. Going in either direction was a double edged sword for Carter. Robert White's attempt to address the human rights violations specifically held the right-wing members of the JRG accountable. He did not see the left as threat. He saw their actions as a violent response to the ongoing brutality perpetrated by military officials. White believed that taking away what the JRG expected from the United States and holding officials accountable for their actions would help shift the regime toward respecting Salvadoran's human rights. Yet, many Carter administration officials did not agree with White's "dismissal" of leftist violence. If Carter agreed with White, he would look like a communist sympathizer.

As for the administration officials who disagreed with White and thought it was best to propose military assistance to the JRG, they felt that they could use military aid to bribe the JRG to halt human rights violations and at the same time, counteract leftist violence. The problem with this idea is that it could look like Carter was throwing money at a problem without holding guilty parties responsible. Either way, Carter's attempt to bribe the JRG with military funding while creating protocols and agendas to ensure the JRG would make tangible improvement proved unsuccessful. With disagreements between the JRG and the administration, the strategies implemented showed little to no progress; the climate in El Salvador stagnated. His defeat in the

1980 elections against a staunch anti-Communist ruined his reputation even more. The U.S. public had no faith in his leadership.

The December 2nd murders of the four churchwomen served as an event for Carter to throw his previous bureaucratic strategies out the window and revert back to his emphasis on human rights. His immediate actions after the December 2nd event symbolize the built up frustration Carter had to deal with from multiple parties as well as his attempt to fulfill the rhetoric he put forth during his first presidential campaign. While this action taken by Carter is seen as rash and reckless, considering that economic aid and military aid were in the process of being resumed almost immediately, it was a form of activism.<sup>139</sup> Carter used his resources to condemn the injustices of those responsible for the death of the four American churchwomen as well as pushed to investigate how to extract and hold accountable those who were either partaking or ordering these brutalities to be completed.

### Conclusion

The terms activist and activism stems from the actions of a person, group, or an organization whose purpose is to fight for social, political, and/or economic change to improve the conditions that society has created to suppress someone's basic human rights; President Jimmy Carter is an example of someone who did this in El Salvador during the year 1980. Examples of activism and activists who have participated in pushing for change in policies and dismantling structures to promote justice and true democracy within the United States can be

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<sup>139</sup> For examples of the reactions people had of Carter's decision after the rape and murder of the four American churchwomen see Karen DeYoung, "El Salvador: Where Reagan Draws the Line," *Washington Post*, March 9, 1981; Juan de Onis, "U.S. Officials Fly to El Salvador to Investigate Murders: U.S. Mission Arrives," *New York Times*, December 7, 1980; William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America 1977-1992*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

traced back a mere 50 years ago during the Civil Rights Era. Activists such as Martin Luther King and Dolores Huerta, or organizations such as the Black Panther Party and anti-war protestors fought for numerous campaigns to ensure there was justice and equity within the U.S. for various marginalized communities. In addition, activist groups wanted to hold certain individuals and organizations accountable for their wrongful actions. Their tactics included peaceful or silent protests, violent protests, lobbying Congress, boycotts, banner drops, sit-ins, etc. While strategic actions and measures may have differed across their organizations, all of them had one attribute in common: they all were on the margins of society. Their goal was to push for change from the outside and persuade bureaucratic officials to take them seriously. While activists have traditionally been seen as pushing for change from the outside, activists can also be a part of the bureaucratic system where they can implement change from the inside. Jimmy Carter is an example of this kind of activist.

Carter's actions in December of 1980 to cut economic and military aid as well as launch an investigation to find and hold those accountable of murdering the four American churchwomen as well as those responsible for the torture and murders of Salvadoran citizens and officials since the JRG came into power, all reflected his commitment to activism. While his activism seemed unexpected and irrational, Carter's actions were caused by built up frustration stemming from the continuous push and pull of taking on the presidential duty of looking out for U.S. interest during the Cold War while simultaneously being an activist and pushing the envelope to bring social justice to the forefront of U.S. foreign policy.

The beginning of his human rights journey in El Salvador began when most of the JRG was on the same page of his human rights agenda (emphasis on most). While the FDR's values aligned with bringing a US. approved, pro-democratic regime into power, the military in place

could not leave their lust for oligarchical power behind, including their repressive tactics of beating, torturing, and killing officials, civilians, and leftist insurgents who wanted reform and change that went against previous policies and regulation. The U.S. was backing a government who did not fully commit to the democracy and values the United States under Carter's leadership preached. Unlike previous presidents who would not consider nor care for human rights violations in these developing countries as long as the U.S. retained authoritative power, Carter did care about human rights, not only for the benefit of the United States during the Cold War, but also for the benefit of the citizens in countries who were involved.

Within the first two months of 1980, human rights violations occurred left and right and Carter and his administration had to do something about it. This was the start of Carter's plan of figuring out how to stop these human rights violations while also making sure he and his administration kept good relations with the JRG. This was needed to secure a pro-democratic regime in Latin America to further American superiority in the Cold War. (The United States had already lost Cuba, and Nicaragua to a certain extent, as regional allies.) This is why Carter had to still support the JRG publicly. Yet, privately his administration was trying to find alternative ways to decrease the torture and assassinations happening daily on Salvadoran grounds. However, when it came to finding a plan that his cabinet approved of, government officials had different approaches in the handling of human rights violations.

The Carter administration put human rights at the forefront because that was Carter's official foreign policy. The administration created the plan of incentivizing the JRG to embrace better human rights policies, by making helicopters and military training available if the JRG decreased human rights violations. Yet, the follow through on continuing human rights violations as well as the threat level of the leftist insurgents greatly differed between cabinet members.

Brzezinski, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the National Security Council Staff all agreed that while the JRG's fulfillment of the this plan was a necessity, they felt that it was unrealistic. Ambassador Robert White's specific human rights requests, which Carter personally asked for to ensure structural change within the regime's policies, could not be successfully completed according to the rest of the cabinet members. They felt that there was not enough tangible evidence for the JRG to prove they were fulfilling the human rights goals. As long as the JRG tried to halt the injustice, that would be enough for the more skeptical voices in Carter's administration. This idea of White's requests as being too "unrealistic" was an echo of previous U.S. foreign policy thinking as well as the Cold War mentality. Foreign policy advisors rarely had to conquer issues such as this because previous presidents never looked at human rights the way Carter did. Due to this, sacrificing more instability of securing a pro-democratic El Salvador for the sake of human rights seemed to be too great of a risk for U.S. interest.

As for comparing leftist violence to JRG violence, most of the cabinet felt that leftist violence was the bigger threat, and this largely contributed to the preeminence of the Cold War mentality and maintaining an emphasis on containment and national security above other concerns. Radical, structural change screamed communism and undemocratic behavior, resulting in the U.S.'s opposition against them. This left White alone in his agenda of bringing justice to Salvadoran citizens even if it was a huge risk for the United States because in his mind, human rights trumped U.S. interest. With the majority of the administration agreeing to put U.S. interest first, Carter went with that plan. It is evident that Carter was in agreement with White in that he wanted to hold the JRG accountable, yet he relied on advisors, who were knowledgeable on how to operate within a Cold War world, to make his ultimate decision of agreeing to helicopters and military training with whatever the JRG would do to decrease human right violations, even if it

was solely lip service. For the first eleven months of 1980, President Carter compromised the depth of his human rights agenda for his presidential duty of putting U.S. needs first, which was to win or at least keep Soviet influence out of Latin America, the United States' backyard. Unfortunately, human rights violations increased.

The continuous meetings and small gains the U.S. made with the JRG only lasted for a short time. Civilian death was normalized and did not decrease. While some leaders of the JRG did want to change their way of leading, due to their fear of losing military training and helicopters, the fear was not enough to truly hold those who were guilty accountable for their actions. The JRG understood the importance their country had in this Cold War, and believed the United States would give in eventually. Plus, the administration was aware of this but did not understand to what degree their power was dwindling. To Carter, it seemed that it was getting better, which can be expressed in his meeting with Duarte and Mena in November 1980 when they discussed economic and military aid. While the leaders were friendly, Carter was adamant on making sure the JRG followed through with their end of the deal. When meeting with one another, they both spoke highly of each other:

President Carter welcomed Duarte and Chavez Mena to the White House and said that he admired Duarte's courage and his leadership and that we supported the Government of El Salvador in its struggle to promote important changes in that country, and to resist terrorism from both right and left [...] [Duarte said] he strongly supported and admired the President's human rights policy, and felt that the President had done important things with his policy, not only in El Salvador, but throughout Latin America.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation," November 26, 1980, Volume XV, Central America, 1977-1980, Carter Administration, Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Office of the Historian, Washington D.C.).

Yet, Carter adamantly argued for decreased human rights violations when Duarte asked for the U.S. to provide helicopters, which the U.S. agreed to in their FY 81 Foreign Military Sales

Agreement:

In speaking to Duarte, President Carter said that he is not promising that he would go ahead with the helicopters, since he would want to review the conditions and make an assessment first. But he would expedite the process.<sup>141</sup>

Even though Carter had compromised his human rights policies in El Salvador for the Cold War, he did not drop the importance of human rights. During this meeting, he saw promise in eventual securement of a democratic regime in El Salvador.

Yet, the truth of the violence reached White House ears when FDR officials were assassinated by right-wing security forces. The human rights agenda was not working. Rather than improvement, high ranking leaders were killed and no one was going to be held accountable, even though the culprits were known. Back in the United States, Carter had already lost the election to president-elect Ronald Reagan. Carter's reputation as President was awful. To the United States and abroad, his domestic and foreign policies were unsuccessful and in their eyes, he was not fit to be president of the United States. While this could be seen as an unfortunate event, it also could have conceivably been a stress reliever for Carter. He did not have to appease the U.S. population or other government officials because he had already hit rock bottom and only had a few weeks until he left office. There was not much time for him to fix complex situations and prove that he could still be a "fit" president. He had hit rock bottom. However, the rape and murder of the four American churchwomen lowered the bar.

This event pushed him to the edge. In El Salvador, his administration was not able to put forth the human rights policy Carter wanted nor could his administration stop the leftist

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.



insurgency. People had no faith in him to combat communist influence nor halt social injustice. The rape and death of the American churchwomen gave him the chance to be the activist he was trying to be the entire time he was president. With his term almost over, and no real solution to this issue, he was finally able to push for the human rights policy he wanted to have in the first place by holding the JRG accountable for their lack of transparency and dismissal of guilty parties without the constraints of worrying about the Cold War and what the rest of the world would think about him as the President of the United States. In addition, these were American citizens who were killed. This gave him more of an opportunity to dive in and create economic and political instability within El Salvador because American lives were involved. He understood that this action was not the solution to fixing the corruption in El Salvador, but served to question not only the JRG's practices, but also traditional U.S. foreign policy practices. The humiliation and vulnerability both he and his administration endured to hold the regime accountable for these murders as well as past murders was powerful, and should not be overlooked. As President of the United States, he was confined to a box where he had to compromise on human rights and morality for Cold War national security and did not have room to be an unfettered activist. Yet, due to the timing of this event, he was able to strategically be an activist within his bureaucratic role.

Jimmy Carter's limited success with his human rights policy was not because his agenda was naive or simple, it was because he was trying to change the traditional structure and reform the way U.S. foreign policy was created and executed. Latin American governments in power and U.S. government officials were only knowledgeable of the traditional way foreign policy worked; and did not plan on such a radical change, especially during the Cold War, where U.S. authority was at stake. Political scientists and historians neglect to see the resilience Carter had

when he consistently pushed for human rights not only in El Salvador, but also during his four years as president, due to his job description as Commander in Chief, putting U.S. national interest at the top of the list. Being a leader within a bureaucracy hindered his ability to be an activist because a bureaucracy hinders one's ability to successfully create political and social change. He struggled with the confinements of leading a bureaucracy and his resilience, strength, and passion for human rights. Rather than seeing Carter solely as an ineffective president; Carter should be seen as a struggling activist within the restrictive role as president. By looking at Carter in this light, scholars can look at Carter's actions during his presidency with a new understanding and lens.

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