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EL SALVADOR

Operations and Planning Assistance Training Teams and a minimalist approach to counterinsurgency

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Ever since El Salvador's long counterinsurgency ended in a negotiated peace in 1992, military and political practitioners continue to review the war for insights relevant to current and future conflicts. Although the role of the United States in El Salvador has its detractors, many consider it a successful counterinsurgency campaign and occasionally refer to a "Salvador Model." Popular descriptions include the "minimalist" approach to military aid or negotiations as an objective.

The case of El Salvador, like any counterinsurgency, was like twisting Rubik's cube: there were many influences, and action with any one of them affected all the others. Nevertheless, one can single out a rarely examined piece of the "model" to find lessons worth learning: the U.S. military advisory program to the El Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF).

Key political and economic components of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy played prominently to get the protagonists to negotiate an end to the conflict. At the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, the dominant policy themes were democracy and development. U.S. counterinsurgency strategy had tools for both. El Salvador, however, was a special case in the desperate throes of a violent leftist insurgency on the verge of overthrowing the government and seizing power imminently, an outcome inimical to U.S. security interests in Central America.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers resisted any meaningful role with the only key player capable of preventing that outcome: the Salvadoran military. Prime among U.S. objections was the ESAF's record of political intervention and abusive repression, either of which was reason enough to withhold aid as a matter of policy. Decision-makers were thus stuck with the quandary of how to support a quasi-political, unprofessional, and repressive military ally when U.S. policies and values advocated against it.

Ultimately, the United States relied on small teams of advisors, known as Operations and Planning Assistance Training Teams (OPATTs), to assist El Salvador with its counterinsurgency. But political resistance to sending them and restrictions on their numbers and how they operated provide valuable lessons for a military advisory role in a counterinsurgency.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the policy and doctrine that existed at the time. It discusses the Arms Export Control Act and the War Powers Resolution of 1973 and the impact both had on the security assistance mission. It describes why El Salvador mattered to the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The chapter then explains how the field advisory mission evolved with the creation of the OPATTs, a wholly unique organization at the time.¹ It concludes with lessons offered by the U.S. experience in El Salvador.

Policy and doctrine

None of the counterinsurgency doctrine extant at the time appeared to fit the circumstances in El Salvador.² Internal defense and development, for example, was in considerable disrepute due to its perceived failure in Vietnam.³ Post-Vietnam low-intensity conflict was part of a larger doctrinal construct to deal most with Europe's Fulda Gap and less with third-world insurgency.⁴ U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in Panama, in whose area of responsibility El Salvador was situated, established a directorate in 1986 to develop solutions for Central America's "small wars"; principal among them at the time was the insurgency in El Salvador.⁵ It published its first study in 1988 when the war was all but over.⁶

The most relevant doctrine at the time was the new foreign internal defense doctrine. Foreign internal defense had its trial run in El Salvador and has remained part of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine since. At the time, however, U.S. doctrine offered little guidance for the counterinsurgency campaign in El Salvador.

With little doctrinal basis, the campaign in El Salvador came to be driven primarily by the U.S. Security Assistance Program. This program, designed to aid allied host nations to provide for their own security, had historically been a tool to promote U.S. security objectives abroad. In Latin America, those objectives typically included a military component to modernize host nation militaries while promoting democratic ideals.⁷ The program, however, had never been used as the core of a counterinsurgency campaign against a full-scale revolution.⁸

In El Salvador, the program was used as early as 1981 to deploy U.S. Army Special Forces detachments to train ESAF units. For the next two years, this and other deployments focused on small unit tactics and force expansion to counter early insurgent advantage. Training and weapons modernization gradually had their effect as new U.S. trained battalions were fielded and battlefield advantage tilted away from the insurgents.

Yet fundamental reform among El Salvador's officer corps, one of the program's objectives, lagged combat advances. The ESAF became a more effective fighting force, but the military's unprofessional and abusive behavior on and off the battlefield stunted other counterinsurgency objectives of political legitimacy and popular support for the government.

Unfortunately, the United States had no effective way to influence how the ESAF conducted combat operations against insurgents. In 1979, the United States sent a small group of senior officers to advise the ESAF at the national level in San Salvador. Among others, this team had officers at the air force, logistics services, and at the ESAF command and staff headquarters (*Estado Mayor*). But none were assigned to field units where fighting was among the population and abuses routinely alleged. No sustained field advisory program with a strategic view was established until 1985, when advisory teams were finally assigned to ESAF brigade headquarters. Once established, that mission developed into one of the longest running of the war but was rarely coordinated into the overall U.S. campaign.

This experience was not a plan according to doctrine or model but rather a case of "make it up as you go" with the only tool acceptable to a U.S. Congress that wanted no part of a military adventure in El Salvador.⁹

Security assistance, the Arms Export Control Act, and the War Powers Resolution

Congressional resistance stemmed from the experience in Vietnam and how an early advisory mission there escalated into the United States taking over the war. In 1980, the tools to prevent a recurrence in El Salvador were powerful. Principal among them were the Arms Export Control Act of 1976 and the War Powers Resolution of 1973. The Arms Export Control Act was significant because it provided that Congress approve funding for all security assistance programs annually. For El Salvador, that meant Congress was empowered to control whether the program was funded each year.¹⁰

The War Powers Resolution limited presidential authority to commit U.S. forces abroad. A product of the Vietnam experience, the resolution gave Congress the authority to require the president to withdraw forces from “hostile situations” after 60 days unless Congress approved.¹¹ In 1981, the resolution’s language was unavoidable given nightly news of guerrilla attacks across the country and riot and repression in San Salvador’s streets. There would have been little purpose in deploying U.S. military forces to El Salvador knowing Congress would likely order them withdrawn.

The solution was to avoid the War Powers Resolution altogether and send small teams to train and advise Salvadoran forces under provisions of the Arms Export Control Act. Within that legislation, training and advice was available from a list of choices, one of which was the mobile training team (MTT).

MTTs were limited to six-month deployments; if the mission required a longer commitment, the Extended Training Services Support (ETSS)¹² allowed for deployments of a year or longer. As a result, most of the early missions to El Salvador were MTTs designed to quickly patch the most immediate combat skill needs within the six-month term of their deployment. As combat capabilities improved, objectives shifted to more complex planning and coordination assistance, which predictably required longer-term ETSS deployments. The ETSS was the tool used to deploy the OPATTs to the ESAF brigades.

The insurgency and why it mattered to the United States

El Salvador’s war was typical of Latin American insurgencies. From the colonial period, a culture of radically skewed economic and political systems developed throughout Central America. Military intervention in government was the norm and commonly had the purpose of preserving the social and economic status quo as wealth and power accrued to an elite economic class while systemically disenfranchising an impoverished majority.

Described “as one of the sickest and most repressive societies in Latin America,”¹³ El Salvador’s condition was in part due to its distinction as the most densely populated nation in the Western hemisphere.¹⁴ The consequences of that alone for an agro-export economy in which land was scarce and labor abundant were inescapable: El Salvador’s economy *required* exploitation of the powerless. Any uprising that threatened this status quo was put down by force, as brutally as necessary, by military and security forces.

In that way, the Salvadoran military, the very institution the U.S. military proposed to aid, was a significant part of the “problem.” These features, combined with revolutionary fervor of the 1960s—fueled by Marxist movements, liberation ideology, and other forces—made revolution in El Salvador all but inevitable.

This inevitability became reality in the late 1970s. From Fidel Castro’s march into Havana in 1959, leftist movements throughout Latin America were increasingly inspired to violence as the only path to social, political, and economic reform. In Central America, armed rebellion that had simmered in Nicaragua since the 1930s erupted into open revolt in 1979. Extreme violent suppression by Nicaragua’s National Guard sufficiently disgusted President Jimmy Carter that he withdrew all support for the long-time ally at the height of the insurgent assault. The regime collapsed within days. Sandinista rebels seized government control in July 1979, and shortly afterward Nicaragua’s new revolutionary *junta* allied with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

Within a year, El Salvador looked as though it would fall next. Only months after events in Nicaragua, El Salvador’s capital city of San Salvador was a wild déjà vu cycle of violence as military crackdowns on protesters ignited more protests, which, in turn, escalated to ever more extreme brutality to quell them. By the end of 1980, conditions had worsened to a crisis, and the United States had limited leverage to influence the situation. Military aid available to El Salvador, for example, was less than \$6 million and restricted to spending on non-lethal purposes.

Timing for Washington was bad. The crisis in El Salvador straddled the administrations of outgoing President Carter and President-elect Ronald Reagan, and they differed considerably in how to respond.

President Carter withheld military aid because of human rights abuses. By withholding aid, however, Carter risked El Salvador going the way of Nicaragua.¹⁵

At the same time, Reagan campaigned on an aggressive policy to curb communist expansion in Central America. Reagan's landslide election forecast significant military aid for El Salvador.¹⁶ But as Reagan prepared to implement his plans, Congress found ways to condition U.S. aid on ESAC human rights observance, a high hurdle at the time.

These policy differences during the transition muddled the political environment in ways that shaped assistance operations for the entire war. With Carter, for instance, aid came halting and lurching based on the latest report of a government atrocity or rebel surge, a persistent pattern throughout the war. Just before Carter turned over the presidency to Reagan, two events offered a preview of how this pattern precipitated chaotic swings in military aid.

The first was the murder of four U.S. churchwomen by Salvadoran security forces in December 1980. Carter immediately suspended all military aid.¹⁷ The second came barely a month later, when the January 1981 guerrilla "final offensive" staggered the ESAC.¹⁸ Carter reinstated the suspended aid and added another \$5 million.¹⁹

The failed offensive is less the story than how it made clear to the Salvadorans that they needed substantial help quickly and that only the United States stood to provide it. Aid expected to flow on Reagan's inaugural was tenuous at best and would remain so as the new administration's containment agenda clashed with an opposition Congress anxious to avoid military involvement in El Salvador's troubles.²⁰

In response, the Reagan administration crafted extraordinary rules for how military personnel sent to El Salvador would operate to placate fears of a Vietnam *redux*. To deflect language in the War Powers Resolution and the Arms Export Control Act, they would only be "trainers" and specifically not "advisors," even though the Arms Export Control Act made no distinction between the two terms.

To address worries about escalation to a combat role, a State Department letter to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs described how trainers would be confined to "safe" garrisons to diminish risk of their exposure to "hostilities" and would be limited to sidearms for personal protection with strict rules on circumstances under which they could use them.²¹ The letter concluded that "a small training team whose members have sidearms would have no meaningful combat capability, and [therefore] is not a force equipped for combat" and ipso facto could not be in a hostile situation.²²

In addition to these innovative maneuverings, the "55-man limit" initiated at the end of the Carter administration severely constrained incoming President Reagan.²³ The genesis of the limit can be traced to a December 1980 meeting headed by Carter's secretary of state, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in which one of the issues to be decided was how many U.S. military personnel would be in El Salvador when Carter transitioned to Reagan. The number projected for transition day was 55, a number Brzezinski approved.²⁴

This decision might have faded away as an uninteresting historical tidbit except that in March 1981, just months after Reagan's inauguration, Undersecretary of State Walter Stoessel Jr., in testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, affirmed that the administration would not exceed that limit without first consulting Congress.²⁵ That set the limit in stone and became a dominant factor in both personnel and mission planning for the duration of the war.

The U.S. military thus joined El Salvador's war with its first ground deployment in March 1981—just months after the January guerrilla "final offensive"—as a training mission armed only with sidearms, confined to safe garrisons, and admonished from any advisory or combat function.

This first deployment, loosely organized in three Special Forces MTTs, consisted of 26 "trainers," as those were the only positions available after factoring in other U.S. military personnel already in El Salvador—a preview of the meticulous character this war would have.²⁶ With such a small force, the immediate priority was combat training almost exclusively for one unit—a thousand-man immediate reaction battalion named the *Atlacatl*—an occurrence that would shadow U.S. military assistance throughout the war and beyond.

Strategy and elections

After the initial MTT, the United States did not plan any further training missions until the “Woerner Report” at the end of 1981. The Pentagon directed senior staff officer General Frederick Woerner Jr. to assess what could be done to turn the course of the war. In his report, he laid out a five-year, \$300-million program to triple ESAF ground forces. Nearly the entire plan focused on immediate combat capability.²⁷

Strategically, force expansion intended to buy time for El Salvador’s two critical elections: the election of the 1982 Constituent Assembly and the 1984 presidential election. Then, along with a constitutionally elected president, a new popularly elected government would form.²⁸ Support and legitimacy for the new government would flourish, and the insurgency would wither.

The interim, however, was bleak. In January 1983, SOUTHCOM Commander General Wallace Nutting observed, “government forces are losing enough weapons to equip a new guerrilla company every two to four weeks.”²⁹ The U.S. Military Group (MILGP) commander at the U.S. Embassy, Colonel Joseph Stringham, described entire battalions mauled in head-to-head combat with Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) insurgents.³⁰ Euphoria over the 1982 election had worn off in a milieu of government corruption and ineptitude, unabated rightist terror, and economic drift. FMLN insurgents were wrecking infrastructure nationwide.

Against this background, with the critical March 1984 presidential election only months away, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Thomas Pickering arranged the pivotal December 1983 demarche by Vice President George H.W. Bush to add clout to Pickering’s position that the Salvadorans either get control of rightist violence or lose U.S. support. Furthermore, Bush demanded that the military guarantee the presidential election, and, in a *quo* to the *quid*, he pledged increased and sustained military aid.³¹

Elections and advisors

How to know the military would guarantee the election worried Pickering. Even though international observers were planned, Pickering wanted his own guarantors and proposed to SOUTHCOM Commander General Paul Gorman to detail U.S. military officers to monitor the ESAF during the elections and then to stay on in the brigades as advisors.³² A three-man OPATT would be assigned to each brigade composed of a lieutenant colonel team chief, a captain as training officer, and a military intelligence officer.³³ To bring the ESAF on board with Pickering’s proposal, Gorman promised intelligence and other support.

The impact opportunity of this mission was lost from the start as team members trickled in and were piecemealed to the brigades, some arriving after the election. The mission suffered further when the team chiefs were ordered out of the brigades as Salvadoran commanders made it clear they were not interested in advice.³⁴ Without the colonels, the two remaining officers were poorly used. Although the training officers were tasked to help the Salvadorans develop training programs, they spent most of their time conducting the actual training, a wasteful under-utilization of a combat arms captain. When the six-month MTT tours for the intelligence officers ended, no replacements were requested, and Pickering’s OPATT dwindled in most brigades to a lone training officer.

The presidential election was nevertheless a success and dramatically impacted the assistance program. When newly elected President Jose Napoleon Duarte promised to carry out reforms and investigate right-wing violence, support in Congress soared on the view that democracy had taken root in El Salvador.³⁵ Congress approved the highest annual military assistance appropriation of the war in 1984 at \$197 million—more than double the year before. In 1985, appropriations for economic aid ballooned to \$434 million.

Woerner’s force expansion was nearly complete. El Salvador had the most formidable military in Central America, with a ground force of over 40,000 backed by a more modern air force refurbished after a crippling FMLN raid destroyed half its fleet in January 1982.³⁶ The Bush effect had inspired something of

a shakeup as moderate officers were assigned to key positions, and senior leadership publicly declared they would end abuses.³⁷

As for the FMLN, international support flagged after the elections, and guerrilla ranks declined from combat losses, recruiting difficulties, and desertion. From hotly contested Usulután Department came an assessment describing demoralized guerrillas “drifting away in onesies and twosies” at a desertion rate higher than the brigade was capturing or killing them.³⁸ The MILGP searched for ways to seize the initiative.

OPATT revival: fielding the right teams

These were the circumstances when the moribund OPATT concept was salvaged by the opportunity of two only tenuously related events. First, when the intelligence officers to the brigades were not replaced, the MILGP requested two Special Forces operations and intelligence sergeants from Panama to keep intelligence support alive in the two high-threat departments of San Vicente and San Miguel. They arrived within weeks, both veterans of earlier missions.

The second event came in June 1985 when a letter from U.S. Army Captain Michael A. Sheehan requested assignment to an OPATT. The fourth brigade training officer was near the end of his tour with no replacement planned, and here was an officer asking for the job.³⁹

With Sheehan’s letter in hand, the MILGP requested his assignment by name, and he arrived in September. The ease and speed of this action outside routine personnel processes were surprising. Combined with the quick deployment of the two operations and intelligence sergeants, this set in motion an initiative to give the OPATT concept one more try.

The sputter of the 1984 OPATT made getting the mission off to a solid start a priority. To do that, the MILGP exploited the discovery that it could summarily select specific officers and expedite their assignment. Officers in El Salvador proposed candidates they believed would be “right” for OPATT leadership, and the MILGP requested their assignment by name—a collegial and unorthodox pull approach in which incumbents, at least for several years, could select their successors.

To further control the process, the SOUTHCOM personnel officer suggested that the embassy declare OPATT assignments “nominative,” meaning that candidates required embassy approval. In practice, that gave the MILGP the unusual prerogative to determine team chief assignments outside routine personnel management channels. Most came from a narrow field of officers from the forward-based Special Forces battalion in Panama. The selection for Marine Corps team chiefs was similar.

By the end of 1985, every brigade had a complete team on the ground. The new teams, one for each of the six brigade headquarters, were composed of three men: a major and two operations and intelligence sergeants. The one exception was the 6th Brigade, where the Marines provided the OPATT. Lacking operations and intelligence sergeants, Usulután was staffed with a major, a military intelligence lieutenant, and a gunnery sergeant.

Assignments were established as year-long ETSS tours. Team chiefs were screened to have experience and education equivalent to their advisory duties, company-level command, battalion or higher staff experience, and Spanish language fluency.⁴⁰ The Special Forces sergeants brought additional capabilities—such as communications, engineering, and medical—that contributed to their counterinsurgency assistance.

The real launch of the new mission came with the noncommissioned officers who replaced the now-departed military intelligence lieutenants. For a good start, the MILGP requested immediate MTT deployment of 10 Special Forces operations and intelligence sergeants from Panama to fill those positions. This MTT, composed of veterans of earlier missions, arrived in June 1985, and an ESAF-wide coherent training and advisory effort surged for the first time. As the startup MTT ended, their ETSS replacements arrived. From there grew the repetitive noncommissioned officer assignments that became the backbone of the OPATTs as the same men returned year after year—a boon for a long-lasting war.

This process for OPATT selection and assignment continued under MILGP control until Special Forces was established as a career management field in 1987. Afterwards, the process in El Salvador normalized into routine personnel administration. For the critical early period to establish the mission, however, assignments were selective in a way that the formal personnel system could not hope to replicate.

The MILGP—in consort with the SOUTHCOM personnel office, security assistance administrative offices at Fort Bragg and Fort Monroe, a committed forward-based Special Forces battalion in Panama, and an eager Marine Corps headquarters—found that it could get the right man in the right assignment and on time. Everyone involved in this process understood that manpower restrictions dictated that no position could afford less rigor.

The revived 1985 OPATT construct was essentially an improved version of the Pickering-Gorman scheme for the 1984 elections: three-man teams deployed to each of the six brigade headquarters. The ESAF traditionally consisted of 14 military departments as autonomous commands, each reporting directly to the *Estado Mayor* in a flat organization. Designating six of them as brigades changed little. Nevertheless, in 1985, the new OPATTs were assigned to the brigade headquarters, even though functionally, each was still just another military department.⁴¹

Part of the reason for this was that military department boundaries were the same as political department boundaries, which historically endowed department commanders with a quasi-political role.⁴² This feature complicated coordination between the departments because commanders found it difficult to overcome the autonomy of departmental authority and resisted coordinating operations with neighboring departments. Notably, the FMLN had no such boundaries and routinely exploited this weakness.

Force expansion presented other frustrations. For instance, immediate-reaction battalions assigned to brigade zones were under command of the *Estado Mayor* in San Salvador and had no obligation to coordinate with brigade commanders in whose zones they operated. The National Guard and National Police fielded battalion-size units that also operated in brigade zones and also under their own national level authorities. The MILGP never considered that these commands might fall within the OPATT mission or whether the brigades were even the right place or best use for field advisors. Their title had become Brigade OPATTs as early as 1981, and there was no consideration to use them otherwise.

The foundation of the new OPATT was thus built on decisions from years earlier with little thought to contemporary circumstances. The OPATTs, with limited direction from the embassy or any other authority, spent the rest of the war defining and expanding their role and influence on their own initiative.

OPATT support to counterinsurgency

When the 1985 OPATTs deployed, they were tasked to help develop ESAF counterinsurgency capabilities across the board. This included human rights, a concern that gave Congress pause from the beginning. Human rights observance, as the Congressional linchpin to continued U.S. aid, became an overriding edict for the OPATTs to monitor—no small task, which carried considerable risk. Their mission also included developing civil-military operations capabilities with the objective to integrate all Salvadoran and U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities into a coordinated campaign.

With the OPATTs in place, the opportunity to form a national to local coordinated U.S. counterinsurgency campaign was at its apex. Manpower was finally available and in most of the right places. Several of the jobless colonels banished from the brigades were assigned national-level civil-military operations responsibilities: one as coordinator for civic action, another for civil defense. A psychological operations advisor had been assigned to the *Estado Mayor* since mid-1984. These and others worked almost exclusively with agencies in the capital, with scant attention beyond the city limits. The OPATTs had arrived, but commands outside San Salvador continued to operate largely on their own initiative and with local resources. National-level resources remained distant.

Intelligence

U.S. intelligence support was relatively advanced when the OPATTs arrived. It included C-130 signals intelligence overflights, which could detect locations of guerrilla units on the move. The 470th Military Intelligence Brigade in Panama provided analytic support and occasional short-term assignments of intelligence specialists to support the advisory teams. The Central American Joint Intelligence Task Force operated from the Pentagon to coordinate intelligence activities supporting El Salvador. At the *Estado Mayor* intelligence section, a U.S. intelligence advisory team worked to coordinate all of these activities.⁴³

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) teams of as many as four intelligence specialists set up regional intelligence centers in the brigades to expedite information gathered by brigade units to the *Estado Mayor* intelligence staff for analysis and regeneration as “actionable intelligence.” Since the regional intelligence centers were CIA teams, they did not count against manpower limits, even though they roughly doubled U.S. intelligence support in the brigades.

Intelligence was the counterinsurgency linchpin for the OPATTs, yet it was a top-down-driven program supported by far-flung analysts, sometimes so operationally focused that it provided little immediate tactical value. The high-level, high-tech resources were important, but for all the U.S. investment in Salvadoran intelligence, the most actionable tactical intelligence typically came from capabilities developed by the OPATT operations and intelligence sergeants.

Psychological operations and civic action

Psychological operations were an important part of the strategy to influence public support to the government, but U.S. doctrine and capabilities were inadequate for the task. Early U.S. psychological operations assistance at the national level, mostly MTTs from SOUTHCOM and Fort Bragg, generally lacked continuity and direction.⁴⁴ In 1984, General Gorman had assigned Major Dennis Keller, a qualified and experienced psychological operations advisor, to the ESAF *Estado Mayor* staff as a two-year ETSS to turn things around.⁴⁵

When Keller left two years later, the Salvadorans had “the rudiments of a true organic capability to design, produce, and disseminate psychological operations campaign products.”⁴⁶ It was a success story soon adrift as subsequent psychological operations advisors arrived having little more qualification than brief orientations and, in the better cases, completion of Fort Bragg’s six-week Psychological Operations Officer Course.

By this time, the education and experience of the Salvadoran officers heading the psychological operations staff eclipsed that of the U.S. “advisor,” relegating the inexperienced advisor to providing little utility beyond funding and equipment.⁴⁷

A resurgent interest in civil-military operations in 1988 prompted the MILGP to pull all related advisors under a single office to unify and coordinate civil-military assistance activities from the national to local level. As part of this initiative, the MILGP attached a liaison officer to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) office in San Salvador to coordinate military activities with USAID programs.⁴⁸ This evolution of organization achieved an effective level sometime in 1989, when the war was essentially over.⁴⁹

Operationally, the OPATTs encouraged coordination of locally generated civic action events and psychological operations with intelligence activities.⁵⁰ The symbiosis of these relationships gave advisors the bonus opportunity to fit human rights behavior into dialogue with their counterparts. In rural areas, this symbiosis was most evident when civic action followed combat operations.

Seemingly small things mattered immensely. Resources such as food distribution, soccer balls, water containers, and other enticements—including medical and dental care and haircuts—attracted people to attend the events and provided the audience for psychological operations. Intelligence operators used the events to establish relationships with local citizenry and to develop human intelligence resources.⁵¹ The

FMLN obviously opposed these events and where the ESAF did not secure populations afterwards, local guerrillas countered with their own psychological operations. The advantage, said one advisor, was that “we could do Civic Action and they could not.”⁵²

Civil defense

Civil defense was a program of U.S. advocacy for a nationwide rural security plan with local citizenry organized as self-defense units for their communities. The program fell into the OPATTs’ portfolio because of general ESAF disinterest in it.⁵³ U.S. involvement in El Salvador’s civil defense program began with the National Campaign Plan in 1983 during which performances of civil defense units in the San Vicente Department had been encouraging.⁵⁴ But responsibility for civil defense still effectively belonged to military department commanders, most of whom had little enthusiasm for it. As a result, the OPATTs tended to assume responsibilities—including training, inspecting, and certifying civil defense units—to keep the program operational and viable.⁵⁵

Once the OPATTs were behind the program, active civil defense units accelerated to more than 300 nationwide. The program nevertheless suffered where commanders failed to provide weapons and equipment or refused to reinforce them when threatened or attacked. The test of U.S. commitment to civil defense came in 1987 when National Civil Defense Coordinator Lieutenant Colonel Gilberto Tijerina completed his ETSS tour and departed. For the next year and a half, the MILGP requested civil defense coordinators as six-month MTTs in the grade of captain—an enormous step backwards, as it signaled low U.S. interest for a vital program in which the ESAF had almost none.

In 1989, the MILGP reversed course and requested Major Andrew Angelacci and Sergeant Major Michael Hitcho as an ETSS team to salvage the program, but it was too late to impact the war.

Interagency civil-military operations

Where psychological operations, civic action, and civil defense were military led, USAID directed assistance for war damage restoration and economic development. USAID programs were active nationwide but rarely coordinated with either U.S. advisors or ESAF commands. Accounts of interagency cooperation reported at the national level were not evident in the brigade zones.⁵⁶

National civil-military operations coordinator Hitcho observed that, by 1989, civil-military operations were “left to the departmental level and even then, there seems to be a lack of coordination and cooperation between agencies. Each agency was doing its own thing, sometimes working against each other.”⁵⁷ The ETSS liaison officer attached to USAID to remedy this situation had come too late to meaningfully contribute except for post-war reconstruction.

U.S. agencies were certainly committed to reconstruction and development throughout the countryside but with little focus on overarching counterinsurgency objectives. That was partly because no system for routine interagency coordination existed for programs below the national level. This disconnect left the field advisors largely outside any strategic counterinsurgency direction of other U.S. agencies. In 1986, Ambassador Edwin Corr prodded embassy agencies to coordinate their programs with brigade OPATTs, as they were the only continuous U.S. presence in most of the country outside San Salvador.⁵⁸ Later that year, the OPATT team chiefs raised the same issue in a meeting with SOUTHCOM Commander General John Galvin.⁵⁹ Yet the disconnect remained.

A prime example was how projects lavished on insurgent-infested communities often ignored those with dedicated pro-government civil defense units. That presented the OPATTs an inconsistency impossible to explain away. USAID declared its position in a 1987 memorandum that read, “[USAID] neither gives assistance to [communities with] Civil Defense nor refuses assistance to communities that resist forming Civil Defense units.”⁶⁰

Had the one counterinsurgency principle of interagency coordination been embraced, leverage for U.S. programs with the OPATT as the focal point in the brigade zones would have been incalculable. A flourish in psychological operations and civic action with human intelligence byproducts is easily imagined. The effect on civil defense could only have been positive. Pressure on the insurgency would have intensified, and their freedom of movement would have shriveled. The war might well have ended years earlier.

As the war wound down with the negotiated peace in 1992, the OPATTs were redirected as monitors for demobilization and peace plan compliance because they were already there, known, and generally trusted by both ESAF and FMLN leaders and had the capabilities to fill the role. The security assistance program supported that mission, too, mostly with Special Forces officers and noncommissioned officers.

Lessons learned: security assistance in a counterinsurgency

The U.S. security assistance system is a large body of programs designed to accomplish a broad range of U.S. policy objectives, discussion of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say, as long as the Arms Export Control Act and the War Powers Resolution exist, military planners may need to be prepared to work within the constraints of this legislation. Regardless of the doctrinal void when El Salvador's crisis called, much was known about how to counter insurgencies, yet principles like interagency coordination were ignored and military theorem cast aside. Programs known to be critical to counterinsurgency operations were relegated to low priority. Principles known as essential to counterinsurgency were consciously disregarded.

A field advisory mission should have started earlier

Deploying advisors to ESAF field units was repeatedly considered dating back to 1979, yet nearly four years lapsed after the United States joined the war before a coherent field advisory force deployed. That was a significant opportunity lost. The intervening years saw some of the most intense fighting, when the Salvadoran government teetered and U.S. assistance policy wavered.

The ETSS as an instrument for advisory missions was well known, having been used as early as 1980 for advisors to the *Estado Mayor*. That same sense of priority was not accorded to field assignments where the fighting took place, right-wing terrorism ruled, and daily human rights abuses occurred along with the occasional atrocity—all crucial matters with consequences for U.S. policy objectives.⁶¹

When the United States commits to a genuinely desperate counterinsurgency campaign, knowing neither the cost nor duration, field advisors close to the action are essential to influence not only the pursuit of the war but whether U.S. objectives are even achievable. The later they are deployed and the farther they are from the action, the less effective they will be and the less known about the efficacy of policies and objectives.

Stringent selection criteria for advisors was critical

After earlier efforts failed to establish a viable field advisor mission, prospects for any future mission seemed poor. Had it not been for the MILGP initiative to resort to selecting personnel on its own and directly managing their assignments, the advisor mission would have likely plodded along until it died for lack of priority and interest. A sustained advisory program might have never existed.

The 1985 mission demonstrated how one can succeed when others fail: in a minimalist counterinsurgency strategy, the quality and dedication of people become the key assets. Middle-grade to senior ranks for both officer and noncommissioned officer were required for the OPATTs because they had the necessary education, training, and experience for field advisory duty.⁶² Skills that did not come with the off-the-shelf

soldier—such as language fluency and cultural awareness—were essential, hence the reliance on the special operations community. Compromising advisor qualifications or relying on generic selection will put such a mission at grave risk.

Tour length for advisors should have been longer

How much can an advisor accomplish in a year, and would longer make a difference? For the advisors to El Salvador, planning and conduct of counterinsurgency operations presented little challenge—that was their forte. Their real challenge was influencing how their counterparts thought about small unit operations against nimble insurgents, the value of a noncommissioned officer corps, why a captured intelligence source is better than a dead guerrilla, what the military's human rights behavior and its relationship with the citizenry mean to winning the war, and more. Such subjects were the ingredients to promoting individual and institutional reform in El Salvador's case and required long-term influence.⁶³

Continuity of effort is vital. There were about four iterations of OPATT advisors to the various brigades on one-year assignments, and none reported their jobs “done” after a year. As they finished their tours, most agonized over tour brevity relative to task magnitude. How long is long enough? Most who opined suggested that an advisor was only beginning to become effective after a year; two years would have been more realistic, and even that commitment would be meaningful only if their replacement had the background to pick up where they left off.⁶⁴

Tour length, however, provokes a separate discussion about how the services regard assignment of their personnel to missions outside normal career progression patterns—or put bluntly, when career becomes more important than mission.⁶⁵

Commands that should have sought a stake in the advisory program often did not

Special operations and intelligence communities were prime supporters of the advisor mission.⁶⁶ The Marine Corps aggressively sought advisor assignments and deserves applause. Some commands that should have been vital players, however, were only reluctant participants. Psychological operations assistance, given the oft-cited doctrinal tenet about the importance of popular support and government legitimacy, is worth comment. El Salvador offered the psychological operations and civil affairs communities a rare opportunity for high-profile, real-world experience. Where those commands were expected to lean forward to get into the war, they leaned the other way. The low priority they assigned to El Salvador was reflected in reluctant MTT support and the difficulty in providing qualified and experienced psychological operations and civil affairs advisors.⁶⁷

Manpower limits narrowed U.S. influence

The 55-man limit continues to garner praise for saving the United States from a ground combat role in El Salvador. The limit is occasionally awarded status as a counterinsurgency model.⁶⁸ The brigade advisor mission, however, the largest of the security assistance programs in manpower terms, owned only 18 positions deployed throughout the ESAF. Other advisors to combat units added about another six. Such limited manpower spread advisors very thin, and much of the ESAF remained outside their influence. The immediate-reaction battalions illustrate the point: after they were trained, equipped, and deployed to the field, U.S. influence all but ended. This had consequences.

The preeminent example is the case of the *Atlatcatl*, the first immediate-reaction battalion trained by U.S. Special Forces. In December 1981, less than a year after its activation, the *Atlatcatl* was charged with one of the war's worst atrocities at El Mozote, a village in the country's northeast, where the battalion allegedly

killed more than 700 civilians.⁶⁹ That event laid a stigma on all the immediate-reaction battalions and, by extension, the U.S. Special Forces who trained them.⁷⁰

Eight years later, during the November 1989 FMLN urban offensive, a unit assigned to the *Atlacatl* was credited with the Jesuit murders during the heat of the offensive.⁷¹ That singular event abruptly changed the course of the war and marked the ESAF as incorrigible after nearly a decade of U.S. effort to reform it. The question is whether U.S. military assistance can afford to train units like the immediate-reaction battalions and then not assign them advisors.

The difference with other high-risk units to which advisors were assigned makes the point. The Special Operations Group, for example, grew out of a 1982 initiative to provide the ESAF a strategic reconnaissance capability to go deep into guerrilla held areas for intelligence purposes and, importantly, to control the use of artillery and air attacks near civilian populations.⁷² This unit also developed specialized commando capabilities that carried considerable opportunity for abuse.⁷³ By the end of the war, the unit's reputation for professionalism ranked among the highest in the ESAF. A hand-selected noncommissioned officer had advised the unit continuously for four years.

Another was the Special Antiterrorist Command, formed in 1984 in response to rising urban insurgent terror. This was a unit of Congress' nightmares—an organization operating in secrecy within the Treasury Police, long known for its collusion with right-wing terror groups. Sufficient reforms within the military and police, however, convinced the MILGP that such a unit could be effectively influenced by an appropriate advisor—another hand-selected noncommissioned officer who advised the unit for more than four years. These units were identified from the beginning for their important capability but also their potential for misuse, the solution for which was to assign long-term advisors to manage the risk.

Advisors effectively promoted human rights objectives

The effect that brigade advisors had on Salvadoran human rights conduct is too easily overlooked.⁷⁴ Notably, data gathered by the post-war United Nations Truth Commission determined that units that had U.S. advisors assigned had a greater decline in human rights abuses than units without advisors. The study concluded that advisor impact on human rights, one of the most important U.S. objectives, was effective and positive but only where advisors were present.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Observations from this case study are both encouraging and disappointing. The advisory mission to El Salvador contributed to the fundamental objective of military reform and to U.S. regional security objectives. This can be attributed to careful selection of advisors with specific qualifications at a turning point in the war. Such rigorous personnel management can help a minimalist approach to counterinsurgency succeed, but policymakers must consider what a small mission can realistically accomplish.

Political considerations that established manpower and other constraints offered little on how to organize and deploy a small advisory mission. They offered even less for how to fight an insurgency. Even so, while the litany of rules and restrictions may have been necessary to get the assistance program started, making those constraints rigidly inflexible obstructed pursuit of policy objectives and very likely prolonged the war.

The most important conclusion to be taken from this experience is the exigency to plan for an advisory mission as early as military assistance becomes an option. In El Salvador's case, the delay in getting a ground advisory mission in place was indeed a lost opportunity. The reaction to the experience of Vietnam was too severe. The Salvadorans received a small U.S. training and advisory mission that was too tightly reined.

Security assistance will probably be a U.S. counterinsurgency option in the future for the same reasons it was in El Salvador—a politically acceptable, flexible, economical, and low-profile choice that can be tasked with a broad range of objectives from imparting basic soldier skills to promoting sensitive political objectives.

The U.S. experience in El Salvador offers considerable insight into opportunity and risk for small advisory missions, especially those for counterinsurgencies. As a practical counterinsurgency model, however, making it up as you go relies too heavily on fortuity. Quality professional talent eager for advisory duty may not be readily available or easily deployed. Commands may not be willing to commit their best and brightest on a moment's notice.

A counterinsurgency doctrine that incorporates and encourages the kind of flexibility, imagination, and independent action exhibited in the case of El Salvador—and that resolutely mandates campaign coordination down to the lowest and most remote advisor—would be more effective.

Notes

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- 10 Arms Export Control Act, 22 U.S.C. § 2751 (1979).
- 11 War Powers Resolution, 50 U.S.C. § 1541–1548 (1973).
- 12 At the time, ETSS referred to Engineering and Technical Services Support, but since engineering and technical specialists were not required for the El Salvador mission, the same acronym was used, but it was used to refer to Extended Training Services Support. The term now refers to Extended Training Services Specialists.
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- 14 Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects Dataset* (New York: United Nations, 2019), <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>.
- 15 Paul F. Gorman, “Operational Art in a Low Intensity Theater,” in *On Operational Art*, ed. Clayton R. Newell and Michael D. Krause (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1994), 153–170.
- 16 Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads, Congress, The President, and Central America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 41–42.
- 17 William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 60–62.

- 18 Brian J. Bosch, *The Salvadoran Officer Corps and the Final Offensive of 1981* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999).
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- 33 Colonel John D. Waghelstein, interview with Colonel Charles A. Carlton, Senior Officers Oral History Program, El Salvador, Project 85–7, U.S. Army Military History Institute, 1985, 56.
- 34 Roach, e-mail to author.
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- 39 Captain Michael A. Sheehan, interview with Kalev Sepp, June 24, 1996.
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- 48 Lieutenant Colonel Calvin C. Seybold, interview with author, May 17, 2003; Sergeant Major Michael Hitcho, interview with author, June 20, 2003.
- 49 Lunt, interview with author; Hitcho, interview with author.
- 50 Colonel Christopher St. John, e-mail to author, May 20, 2003. Haircuts, for instance, “were a surprise . . . even more popular than medical and dental care.”
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- 52 St. John, e-mail to author.
- 53 Bosch, *Salvadoran Officer Corps*, 124–125.
- 54 Colonel Peter Stankovich, interview with author, May 18, 2003.
- 55 Tijerina, Memorandum, Civil Defense, 1987.
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