

# Debate on El Salvador

What is Possible?

Chris Nielsen  
Ana Coluthon

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## Ultra-Leftist Cliche

Dear Cave-dwellers:

Nice try, but you really make yourselves look a bit ignorant, not to mention self-righteous, in “El Salvador and Its Politicians” (FE #316, Spring 1984). Guillermo Ungo and his “reformist and Stalinist” FDR/FMLN might well become counterrevolutionary if they came to power, but they’re a long way from doing so.

You imply that the anarchist masses are just rarin’ to go, and the corrupt pols are holding them back with their “broad participation” platform. It’d be nice, in a way, if this were true, but it simply isn’t.

The FDR/FMLN doesn’t have the military strength or the popular support to overthrow the government outright, once and for all, and happily install itself in power. There are significant numbers of Salvadorans who are either on the right or haven’t chosen sides yet—and maybe never will.

You’re just perpetuating the tired ultra-leftist cliche that the masses are being betrayed by their leaders, when the truth is that the masses are nowhere as united, committed, class conscious, and revolutionary as we wish, or as you seem to think they are. The 50,000 who have died have not all been combatants or organizers; many, if not most, have just been people who just got in the way.

It’s not just politicians who are fundamentally conservative. It’s people. The vast majority of people just want to be left alone—they don’t want to be bothered with revolutions. There are too many meetings to go to, and you might get shot. That’s not inspiring to most—it’s a drag, to say the least.

Most people—in all revolutions and civil wars—just want to stay out of the way until it blows over, and get ready to survive under the next bunch of creeps that comes to power. The insurrectionary left in El Salvador is a small minority, part of a larger reformist plurality or majority. It doesn’t have unambiguous victory at its fingertips, and I really don’t understand how you could think it does.

It’s doing the best it can under the burdens of US/oligarchic repression and normal, self-interest popular caution. Sure, there are reasons sometimes to emphasize the “critical” half of critical support. But it doesn’t help to deceive ourselves about the reality of the situation or to promote a stereotyped, idealist vision of revolutions and social change.

The cry of the oppressed masses is not “Anarchy Now!” It’s “Peace, Land, and Bread”—or “Where’s the beef?”

Chris Nielsen  
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## Ana Coluthon replies

I know that Chris Nielsen has neither sympathy nor tolerance for U.S. Central American policies and certainly none for the ruling Salvadoran gangsters, but through the use of an ill-chosen phrase he unwittingly lines up with those responsible for the butchery in El Salvador.

It is the Big Liars of the Reagan Administration who try to peddle the line that the massive death toll in that country results from “people who just got in the way.” This “crossfire” rationalization attempts to shift blame from the U.S. and its bloody client by posing a scenario in which a small number of leftists are seen battling uncontrollable elements of the army with innocent people as victims of both.

This fantasy version of events is straight off of the State Department’s Central American desk and acts as a smoke screen for an official, deliberate and sustained policy of terror utilized as a strategy of counter-insurgency. It is precisely due to the degree of support enjoyed by the guerrilla movements that the Salvadoran government and its U.S. sponsors have employed the tactics of massacre, beastly torture, dismemberment and other crimes against its people.

In October 1983, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador tabulated 37,000 political murders since 1980 with all but an insignificant handful being attributed to government security forces and the paramilitary right. This “Central American strategy” is practiced as well in Guatemala with the undoubtedly accurate perception that a population faced with such massive and arbitrary brutality will be less likely to support an insurgent movement.

This point aside, there is a pervasive cynicism to Chris’ letter which is disheartening to say the least. His reflection that people in cattle-like fashion are interested solely in getting fed contradicts historical moments of revolution that I am sure he is aware of, but if passivity is the universal human condition, why are any of us even bothering?

It is undeniable that a conservatism exists in all of us, founded in a mass character structure of submission; and certainly the “masses” (that hideous modern term expressing the submerged human personality) share in the responsibility whereby leaders are allowed to continue to represent others even in times and in situations when it appears as though the material basis for such relationships has disappeared. However, all of this is often overcome in the crucible of revolution.

The point of my article was not that the Salvadoran people are champing at the bit to establish anarcho-communism and were being restrained solely by the politicians. I simply meant to indicate my estimation of what an authentic revolution would entail, i.e., the destruction of the state, the armed forces and the economy, and to say that this was not on the agenda under the proposal put forth by the FDR for a negotiated settlement.

Chris asserts that the insurrectionary left is a small part of the process in El Salvador. It’s been difficult for me to make a determination like that and I’m curious to know how he did. Trying to sort out information, from the apologists for the U.S. at the *New York Times* to the cheerleaders for the FDR/FMLN in CISPES and other anti-intervention groups, and discover what is the real potential for revolution seems almost impossible.

I have read reports which show life in the guerrilla sectors to be verging on a democratic revolutionary existence and others which report the insurgents are leaving the former governmental structures intact in the areas they control and have tax revenues channeled to them rather than the central government. It’s very possible that both accounts are true, but I think that the actual rebel support and military strength is beyond our estimation—it just depends on what set of statistics you want to believe.

But whatever that strength may be, it certainly is constrained by a number of factors: 1) the FDR/FMLN political strategy for a negotiated settlement with the recently elected government of Napoleon Duarte, 2) a fear of direct U.S. military intervention if the rebel forces were to score significant military victories, and 3) by a deep-grained conservatism common to all leftist politicians which fear the “masses” acting without the vanguard (them).

In many ways, the election of Duarte and the thundering applause for his new image as a “moderate” from the compliant U.S. media and Congress may perhaps bring events to a resolution faster than if “Blowtorch Bob” d’Aubuisson instead had gotten the tons of CIA money which went to buy the presidency. Duarte and FDR head Guillermo Ungo are old buddies who go way back to when the two were presidential running mates in 1972 and had their election thwarted by the military.

They both may see the present situation as an historic opportunity to achieve what the army previously prevented. Certainly, the FDR/FMLN proposal for a “government of broad participation” is nothing that would offend Duarte or who he represents—the Salvadoran middle class and U.S. financial interests—in that it guarantees the state, the repressive mechanism and capital. In fact, all it would remove would be Blowtorch Bob; no loss for Duarte.

Calling Duarte, who was head of the junta during the worst days of the political killings, a “moderate” is much like labeling Mussolini similarly in comparison to Hitler. Still, after the election Duarte brought a new spit and polish image along with gushings for democracy to Washington which worked well enough to crumble liberal Congressional opposition to U.S. aid for El Salvador.

This vote of confidence for the politics of the death squads has set the stage for another escalation in the thus far futile effort to suppress the insurgents. It comes at a period when the guerrillas have been fairly restrained in their military offensives, perhaps waiting to see how their negotiations offer will be responded to.

It seems to be generally accepted in American left circles that whereas a negotiated settlement may not be the most desirable result of so many years of travesty, it may be the best that can be salvaged, since a rebel victory would certainly signal direct U.S. intervention. But is this sound wisdom?

Could Reagan, who is trying desperately to cultivate a peaceful image with which to enter the Fall electoral farce, afford an invasion? None of the questions is easily answered, but one has to be suspicious of those conservative and self-serving ones which the leftist politicians virtually leap to propose.

Ultimately, most of the answers will come from El Salvador itself. Maybe the campesinos and workers who have done all of the dying and bleeding will follow only the strategies of the FDR or maybe they will go beyond those impediments.

What we can do to aid their struggle is to insure another U.S. defeat such as the one in Vietnam by eroding public support for U.S. policy in Central America, by encouraging the U.S. army to refuse to fight there, and by joining the myriad protests against intervention or initiating our own.

Maybe seeing workers and peasants greeting Reagan from revolutionary San Salvador is a dream, but at least we can impede the slaughter.

# fifth Estate

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