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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Threats to Government Stability in El Salvador

Prospects for the Overthrow of the Romero Government

1. The Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that the government of President Carlos Humberto Romero Mena might be overthrown in 45 to 60 days. The Central Intelligence Agency believes this may occur sometime after January 1980, possibly not until mid-year. In any event, the combination of economic pressure with pressure from terrorist forces and hard-line members of the military establishment make overthrow of the Romero Government increasingly likely.

2. The Romero government and its allies in the military and the oligarchy have been badgered and harassed with increasing ferocity by three groups of terrorists with kidnappings of prominent members of the government and business community, bombings, and shootings. Mass organizations associated with the terrorist groups have organized strikes and street demonstrations which frequently have degenerated into violence. The security forces have been severely taxed to restore order.

3. President Romero, who attained power by electoral fraud, lacks the characteristics to inspire or control the populace. Some high-ranking military officers, impatient at Romero's inability to crack down on the terrorists, have threatened to overthrow him. That they have not done so can probably be attributed to their inability to agree on anyone to replace him.

4. Political unrest has adversely affected the economy. The so-called "14 families" which dominate El Salvador's economy have withdrawn substantial amounts of their liquid assets from the country. Many have fled to the United States, closing their enterprises in El Salvador. Foreign investors, wary of the bleak prospects, have refrained from investing there. This has aggravated unemployment in a country where overcrowding and joblessness have always been grave problems. The idle, young, and poor have gravitated toward the extremist organizations, swelling their ranks and adding to the political ferment.

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380-82-0205, box 9, El Salvador, 1979

5. Cuba recognizes the revolutionary potential in El Salvador and is assisting the strongest of the terrorist organizations, the Farabundo Marti Popular Liberation Forces (FPL). It has trained 50 FPL members as a military cadre to form a 2,000-man Popular Liberation Army to overthrow the Romero government. So far, 800 recruits have finished preliminary training to serve in the Popular Liberation Army. Cuba -- as in years past -- is endeavoring to encourage a coalition among the FPL, the ransom-rich Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN), and the Popular Revolutionary Army, so that it can channel its support through a single, viable revolutionary entity. Following the success of the faction-ridden Sandinistas in Nicaragua, a coalition of these Salvadoran groups seems more feasible than before. [REDACTED]

6. Revolution in the short-term might occur if the mass organizations succeed in imposing a general strike on the country, paralyzing all productive activity in El Salvador. This, combined with guerrilla and terrorist activity, could bring about a collapse of the government in 45 to 60 days. A general strike, however, implies united action by all unions which to date have been unwilling to work together. It could take as much as six months for this kind of labor coalition to be arranged. A six-month period would allow the terrorists time to form a common terrorist front composed of the three terrorist groups and provide the FPL with the opportunity to give military training to the full 2,000-man force of the Popular Liberation Army. Thus, Romero could be overwhelmed by an almost invincible force early in 1980. [REDACTED]

OSD 3.3(b)(1)
CIA 3.3(b)(1)

Would US Assistance be Important in Preventing This?

7. United States assistance would be important if it could: (a) improve the economic situation by stimulating industry, exports, and foreign investment; (b) rebuild the Christian Democratic Party as a moderate political alternative; (c) persuade President Romero to adopt the political reforms proposed by moderate elements of the military establishment, notably a new constitution calling for democratic elections. [REDACTED]

Are There Any Moderate Groups to Which We Could Turn in El Salvador?

8. There has been an increasing tendency in El Salvador for the population to polarize to the extreme right or the extreme left. Moderate elements, discouraged by years of officially-sponsored fraud and intimidation, are few and dispirited. There is, for example, the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) which garnered a respectable number of votes in the elections in the early 1970s. Its biggest vote-getter was Jose Napoleon Duarte, who is currently in exile. Another prominent

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OSD 3.3(b)(1)
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Christian Democrat, Morales Ehrlich, just returned to El Salvador. The United States could increase its efforts to rebuild the PDC to provide a moderate alternate to the leftist extremists. [REDACTED]

9. We know very little about moderates within the armed forces. There is a group of field grade officers led by Colonels Eugenio Vides Casanova, Jaime Abdul Gutierrez, and Jose Guillermo Garcia and backed by a number of majors from the graduating class of 1963. This group has drafted a new constitution, seeks the elimination of leftist terrorists, an end to corruption in government, an overhaul of the judicial structure, and a tax reform to finance increased social-welfare programs. It intended to expel Romero and hold free and fair elections within 18 months. None of these officers holds an important command position, so it is unlikely they will succeed in deposing Romero. Nevertheless, they have gone to more than usual lengths to plan for an orderly transition to civilian rule. It may be that Romero could be prevailed upon by the US either to associate himself with them or accede to their demands. [REDACTED]

What Can We Do to Improve Our Leverage?

10. If we were to undertake one or more of the suggestions contained in paragraph 7 above, our leverage in El Salvador might be improved somewhat. [REDACTED]

Office of the Secretary of Defense
Chief, RDD, ESD, WHS
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5 U.S.C. § 552

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