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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

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Date: AUG 27 2019

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July 13, 1981

Delayed by FL

EL SALVADOR

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

THROUGH THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR POLICY *72* 15 JUL 1981

SUBJECT: El Salvador: The Military Balance

As we had discussed on 10 July, I flew with Bill Casey to Panama. He stayed there to listen to the assessments of his chiefs of station, while I flew into El Salvador. Thanks to Ambassador Hinton, I met both with [redacted] President Duarte, the Vice President, the Army Chief of Staff and other key officials.

After comparing notes yesterday, Bill Casey and I believe Al, Bill, Dave, you and the others on the NSC should meet with the President to discuss the probable set of conditions in El Salvador a year hence, and what to do if the trends are judged unacceptable.

American officials and advisers in country are pessimistic because, since all have seen and some have run enemy roadblocks, they feel the pervasiveness of the guerrillas, they see the slowness of the El Salvador Army and they witness the distrust and class hatreds which wrack the society. American officials in Washington are more optimistic because they don't want to think of failure, the junta is moderating rightist violence and will hold elections, and the guerrillas seem to be stumbling and strategically inept. In reaching judgments, each of us is flying by the seat of his pants.

We just do not know enough. We don't know what the guerrillas have for a game plan; we don't know the rate of arms traffic or guerrilla recruitment; we don't know which side controls what territory outside San Salvador. We don't know how well either side fights. Nor are we likely a year from now to know much more about the countryside or the battlefield, because no American adviser is permitted to venture out there. Second-hand reporting is like asking a proud father how his son performed in a scoreless athletic practice. Tactically, we are practically blind in El Salvador, and will be a year from now.

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☞ Strategically, Nicaragua controls the fate of El Salvador. If the current Nicaraguan pattern continues, a year from now, El Salvador's shattered economy will be worse, the countryside will remain chaotic but not cohesively antigovernment, and there will be an elected government, probably led by Duarte--a shrewd, impressive politician. Real per capita income is dropping steadily in an economy dependent upon dropping coffee prices, non-existent security to drive to markets and a plummeting foreign exchange balance. Duarte, who speaks excellent English (Notre Dame graduate), and has a social view to the left of Tip O'Neill, has succeeded in a sweeping land reform, thanks to the Army's protection. He is a man of verve and character and I strongly second Ambassador Hinton's request that the President meet with him in August. Duarte will present a forceful case to the American people--and that is the reason for the pessimism in country. At current rates, our advisers see a long war (five or more years) with a steady series of frontpage stories about its tragic aspects (refugees, etc.). The Army believes a coup means the end of U.S. aid and that right-wing killings result in an ebb in U.S. support. Even so, violence and tragedy are a definition of the word war and so our advisers see the situation as bleak.

☞ Nicaragua keeps on the pressure; the U.S. tires; El Salvador collapses.

☞ What needs to be discussed at a Presidential level? Against the present situation--some call it a "stalemate" with low casualty rates, a chaotic economy and a governing body which is slowly instituting genuine reforms--there are four options.

☞ 1. Continue the current military aid level (\$25M FMS and 55 military) and style (no Defense advice or pressure the Army). Endorse the El Salvadoran Army's strategy: shadowbox with the guerrillas until they give it up and do nothing to upset Nicaragua. Be prepared for at least a five-year war. Fend off El Salvadoran and U.S. Army requests to double the size of the El Salvadoran Army, at a cost of \$75M FMS. Be prepared for a gradually deteriorating situation if Nicaragua increases its aid and the El Salvadoran Army's morale drops because it perceives the U.S. as not truly committed.

☞ 2. Squeeze Nicaragua out. Without the Nicaraguan connection, the political forces and armed strength of El Salvador are sufficient as they stand today. Nicaragua is a regional threat. It soon will be the regional superpower--Gulliver in Lilliputia. If we

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permit the introduction of MIG23s and other equipment, it will psychologically as well as militarily dominate Central America. The U.S. government should have no doubts on this score. Yet we have done nothing to explain to the American people the military/subversive threat. Mexico tries to cooperate and buy the threat, and some other Latin American nations prefer not to speak out. This option argues strongly not to allow Nicaragua to become the Cuba of Central America. Curb Nicaragua and the threat to El Salvador and other regional states is manageable at roughly current levels of U.S. effort.

3. No external or obvious pressure upon Nicaragua. Instead, support El Salvador's request to double its army (\$75M FMS per year, vice the current \$25M). Permit El Salvador to continue its basic four-objective strategy: (1) harass but do not assault the guerrilla base camps in the mountains; (2) leave the guerrillas, unless in main force size, in the countryside to the National Guard; (3) assume Nicaragua shows some moderation; and (4) let the guerrillas wear themselves out over a five-year war.

4. No obvious pressure upon Nicaragua. Instead, tell the El Salvadoran Army we will drastically increase (\$75M FMS vs. \$25M) annual military aid. But El Salvador must change its strategy and place unrelenting pressure upon the guerrilla base camps. This will heavily cost El Salvador in casualties for a year. After that, the war will be essentially over, unless Nicaragua matches the increase by using non-El Salvadoran troops. If that happens, the U.S. faces a further decision.

Conclusion. We are playing penny-a-card poker. At this rate, the game won't end before 5 AM. Only we like to go to bed early. If so, we have to change the dealer's rules. Nicaragua is the dealer. We can either change the rules (El Salvador attacks aggressively), change the dealer, or go to bed later (essentially accept the 1981 situation in 1982 and probably in 1984).

For two days with two separate groups, Bill Casey and I listened--hour after hour after hour. Our experts in the field are not optimistic. They feel we in Washington are not fully committed in El Salvador, not playing to win in Central America, not as leaders explaining the real security threat to the domestic and international publics. Yet we confront a foe who is collectively deadly serious, international (Nicaraguan, Cuban, Ethiopian, East German, PLO, Libyan, etc.), patient, optimistic from past victories, and optimistic about the long term.

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() In my personal judgment, given the years I devoted to the Vietnam battle, can we just adhere in El Salvador to our current levels of FMS, economic assistance, advisory effort and policy involvement, and see a democratic, viable state? Yes--if we do so without wavering for five years, if Nicaragua does not increase its level of air or psychological intimidation (e.g., through MIG overflights or other military bullying), if the guerrillas in the El Salvadoran countryside do not attract an increasing rate of devotees, and if the deteriorating Salvadoran economy does not erode the size and spirit of the central government.

() These conditional phrases are probably heroic assumptions. Hence, our country team is pessimistic. Over the long haul, they are concerned that the guerrillas will grow gradually stronger than the government forces. This is a judgment call which on its face has no evidence: the government troops have no significant desertions, are not afraid of the guerrillas, do not suffer undue casualties and report the guerrillas have no compelling or coherent political appeal. Lurking behind this judgment, I suspect, is another judgment most country team members were too polite to mention: a question about Washington's staying power, or whether we would authorize to \$25M, then \$22M, then \$18M, then \$15M--and then be in deep trouble in El Salvador, with a military which was dependent on our firepower, our ammunition, our maintenance, our dollars (having few of their own)--a military dejected by the trend.

() So? This drives toward Option 4--an insistence that the El Salvadoran Army fight before it is ready to do so--assuming the guerrillas will learn of the offensive. Even if El Salvador verbally accepts, going into the field does not mean seeking contact. On the one hand, we risk the protracted war whether we in Washington and San Salvador want it or not; on the other hand, we risk Lam Son 719--the crushing South Vietnamese defeat in 1971 when we pushed them into Laos without U.S. ground forces.

() So--there are no easy options. Our current course assumes a relatively benevolent Nicaragua, or a U.S. willingness to support a long war. We haven't prepared the public or the Congress for the latter.

FJ West Jr

Francis J. West, Jr

SecDef Decision

1. Pursue interagency an IG leading to an NSC _____
2. Send me FY83-85 options for FMS/U.S. military advisory teams/U.S. military/DoD policies _____
3. I'll get back to you _____
4. Other _____

Fred & I will be back next week with fleshed-out options.

Let's see

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