

A black and white photograph capturing a tense moment in a conflict zone. On the left, a soldier in military gear, including a helmet and a vest, is positioned in a trench. He is leaning forward, aiming a rifle towards the right. In the center-right, a man in a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt is crouching or kneeling on the ground. He has a look of concern or fear, looking towards the soldier. The background consists of a rough, stone or brick wall, suggesting a fortified position or a trench. The overall atmosphere is one of danger and the human cost of war.

THE

The slaying of six Jesuits was only the

WAR

most recent reminder that El Salvador

NEXT

is one of few remaining countries where

DOOR

the price of thought can be death

BY FRANK SMYTH

SAN SALVADOR—Several months ago a friend invited me to his sociology class. “Come on,” he said, “we’re going to see a movie.” *Beaches*, starring Bette Midler, was the day’s discussion subject.

Students milled about the auditorium, many in Levis and Reeboks. With a Coke and popcorn in hand, I felt as close to home as a foreigner can feel in El Salvador.

Entre Amigos—“Among Friends”—is how the movie title was translated into Spanish. Readers may be familiar with the plot: two young girls meet by chance in California and build a friendship that stretches to New York and lasts for life.

When the lights came on, a tall man with a long greying beard took his place at the front of the class. He spoke in a deep raspy voice.

“What does it mean to be friends?” he asked paternally. “What does it mean to have a friendship?”

But the discussion soon took its own track. “What is the meaning of friendship,” asked one woman, “in the midst of war?”

A Salvadoran soldier interrogates a suspected guerilla during the November fighting in San Salvador.



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This more sober theme dominated the rest of the session. In El Salvador, even the most delightful film can offer only transitory escape from violence.

The bearded man was sociology professor Segundo Montes, SJ. Like other Jesuit professors at the University of Central America Jose Simeon Canas or UCA (pronounced "ooka"), much of his coursework was devoted to exploring El Salvador's "national reality." Integration of the war and friendship themes was likely part of his plan for that session.

Both Montes and his fellow Jesuit and colleague Ignacio (Nacho) Martin-Baro were immensely popular among students. The last time I saw them was in October, at an UCA-organized conference on the Salvadoran military. That day I spoke with both. We needed to exchange ideas. Segundo, Nacho and I were to speak on a joint panel at an upcoming Latin America conference in Miami.

But I made the trip alone. In Miami I sat next to two empty chairs adorned with flowers.

Before daylight on November 16, in the midst of a major military offensive by leftist guerrillas, U.S.-trained and equipped army soldiers surrounded and entered UCA's grounds. They marched six Jesuit priests, including Segundo and Nacho, into a grassy courtyard in their nightclothes. The Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were shot repeatedly with automatic weapons at point-blank range.

With recent changes in Eastern Europe, El Salvador now remains one of the few places in the world where ideas are genuinely dangerous. Segundo, Nacho and the other Jesuits were targeted to be killed precisely because their ideas were powerful and persuasive.

Segundo, for example, was a noted critic of human rights abuses. He also had done extensive research on refugees created by El Salvador's 10-year civil war between the U.S.-backed government and leftist guerrillas.

Nacho was chairman of UCA's psychology department as well as an astute political and military analyst. He also administered a public opinion poll run out of UCA. It explored Salvadorans' views on subjects such as the economy and the war.

Ignacio Ellacuria, SJ, UCA's rector, who also died that night, was another compelling figure. "The truth is the truth is the truth," I remember him telling an auditorium packed with students some years ago. Editor of UCA's main journal, *Estudios Centroamericanos* or "Central American Studies," he was a prolific writer and a powerful critic of both the Salvadoran government and U.S. policy toward it.

In interviews with the foreign press, he and Nacho often told both Salvadoran and U.S. officials what they didn't want to hear:

"Ideology . . . had a lot to do with the American involvement in this civil war," said Nacho. "And unfortunately, you Americans have invested here during the last eight years [\$3.2 billion] of your tax-payers' dollars; just to have in this country more destruction, more death—and no more democracy, no more peace, no improvement for the majority of the Salvadoran people; just with the obsession of militarily defeating the rebels."

militarily putting an end to the so-called advancement of, or the expansion of, communism.”

Nacho, Ellacuria and all the Jesuits at UCA advocated a negotiated settlement to the war, as opposed to a military victory by either side. The Jesuits strongly criticized the United States for pursuing a military solution. They also took issue with claims by U.S. officials that El Salvador’s civil war was foreign inspired.

“The problem of this country is not a problem of communism or capitalism,” Nacho went on. “The problems of this country are problems of very basic wealth distribution, of very basic needs. Now more than 60 percent of our adult population doesn’t have a job. Can you imagine—how are our people able to . . . survive without a job?”

The Salvadoran government and military had long equated popular demands to change such conditions with subversion. This is why, argued the Jesuits, El Salvador’s guerrilla movement was born.

“When in this country you ask for satisfaction for those needs,” said Nacho, “you become a subversive—and you are a subversive. Why? Because if you want to satisfy those basic needs, you have to change the social system. You have to change the regime. But then you become a ‘Communist.’ Then you become a rebel. Then you become a revolutionary. And then you have to be repressed. And you are repressed. And there you have. . . the civil war.”

The Jesuit killings have received more attention than any Salvadoran crime since the 1980 slaying of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. But over the past decade, over 70,000 Salvadorans—more than one percent of the country’s population—have been killed. According to the human rights office of the country’s Catholic archbishop, the vast majority of victims were assassinated by either the Salvadoran military or allied rightist death squads. They were killed on suspicion of being “subversives.”

Let me offer one family’s story.



FMLN guerrillas check the identities of Salvadoran citizens in a search for government informers.

BOSSA/ARND BRONKHORST/CONTRAST

In October I interviewed an inspirational young woman, Tatiana Mendoza. Her father was a leading member of El Salvador's early democratic opposition movement, before it was driven underground. He and several colleagues were killed when army soldiers raided their offices in 1980.

A decade later, Tatiana, his 21-year-old daughter, was a union organizer who worked

more recent interviews carried a sense of foreboding. "There is an environment," I remember him saying, "of the possibility of being killed any moment of the day."

Nacho also did not equivocate about the likely source of the threat. "As long as the armed forces in this country are over and above the law, as long as the armed forces [are] a corruptible and corrupt institution, as long as the armed forces have within its ranks . . . terrible human rights violators, you cannot expect to have in this country peace, to have democracy, and to have [least of all] justice."

Nacho said these words in his last known interview, one week before he was killed.



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with women's groups. She had recently been detained on charges of being a "subversive." During her ordeal, Tatiana told me, she was raped by a military guard. Although a court-appointed doctor confirmed her claim, in El Salvador an attempt to charge a soldier with rape is laughable.

Two weeks after I interviewed her, Tatiana was killed by a bomb. An attacker had placed it in the cafeteria of her trade union office. Two generations of activists; two deaths. The story of Tatiana's family is the story of her blood-drenched country.

For Nacho and the other Jesuits, such violence was part of daily life. Some of his

The UCA Jesuits were full participants in the Salvadoran community. In addition to teaching and writing, they were active at the grassroots and shared a commitment to the poor.

Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, SJ, was another of the murdered men. He ran a program—"Faith and Happiness"—which worked in poor areas with base Christian communities: small groups of local individuals who meet to worship and read scripture.

Despite his death, other UCA Jesuits continue similar work. One, Jon Sobrino, is not only a leading interpreter of liberation theology, but is also active with El Salvador's base Christian community movement, whose members receive constant threats and other forms of intimidation from the armed forces. Another, Jon Cortina, does his pastoral work in Chalatenango, one of the most war-torn provinces in the country. He recently moved there from UCA to live and work among newly rebuilt peasant communities.

Most of these priests, including Segundo. Nacho and Ellacuria, were born in Basque country in Spain, and later became naturalized Salvadoran citizens. But most of the younger Jesuit seminarians who have been studying under them are native Salvadorans. The seminarians are spread throughout the country. Almost all live and work among poor communities.

Segundo, who had several seminarians under his tutelage, not only studied refugees but frequently traveled to their places of repatriation. He encouraged them to organize

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themselves to defend their rights and to find ways to improve their conditions. Nacho also worked closely with peasant and labor-based "popular organizations," as well as community self-help groups.

Nacho and I knew one such refugee community well. Called "Community of the Cross," it is not far from UCA, on vacant land between lanes of the country's largest highway. Its 500-odd squatters live in mud and split-bamboo shacks with roofs of tin.

Children with faces mottled by chickenpox and bellies bloated by amoebic infection rush to greet a stranger. They are likely to call any foreign male they come to know *Padre*.

People there say that Nacho came every once in a while to say Mass. "*Padre* Nacho is with us," one woman, Martha, told me.

Martha later said she was angered by Nacho's death, but not surprised. Like many others, Martha knew at firsthand the effects of repressive violence. She and her two sons had been taken, interrogated and physically

abused by government soldiers two months earlier—again on suspicion of "subversion."

Martha said she knew who was responsible for killing the Jesuits—this, before government officials admitted military involvement in the case. "The ones who need to be punished," she said, "are the [ones running the country]."

Martha must have had better insight than U.S. officials here. Nearly up until the time that army involvement in the case was made public, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador William Walker tried to convince Congressional leaders in Washington that leftist guerrillas and not army soldiers were responsible. U.S. officials also questioned the credibility of a key witness in the case, seriously straining relations with the Catholic communities in both countries.

Maria Julia Hernandez, a tough little

DONNA DECSARE/IMPACT VISUALS



Green Cross relief workers flee government strafing in a San Salvador neighborhood. "On the second day of fighting," writes the author, "I saw a [government] helicopter fire a rocket at a mud and split-bamboo shack. I can still see the victims—a mother and her decapitated daughter."

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woman who directs the Catholic human rights office, said she's not surprised by this behavior. "I don't know if they are aware of it or not," she said, "but U.S. Embassy officials have the ability to deceive themselves, and to never hit the mark [on human rights] in El Salvador."

Some U.S. officials—speaking privately—seem to agree. "If we can have 55 military advisors," said one, "why can't we have 55 human rights officers?" The Jesuit case has disillusioned many. U.S. officials need to put a good face on the case in order to ensure continued Congressional approval for military and economic aid. But when confronted, some admit they no longer believe in what they're doing.

Many Congressional leaders have also lost faith. The idea that an army trained, financed and advised by the United States would commit such a crime proved too much for them. A bipartisan task force looking into the slayings recently visited El Salvador. By the time members finished their investigation, they were openly questioning whether senior Salvadoran military officers were trying to cover up the murders; whether the killings were "the actions of a few renegade military figures or whether, in fact, they stem from attitudes and actions that go to the very heart of the armed forces and other major institutions in this country."

The evidence doesn't look good for the armed forces. For years army officers had accused the UCA Jesuits of being allied with the guerrillas. Last April, then Army Intelligence Chief Colonel Juan Orlando Zepeda accused the Jesuits of running guerrilla operations out of the university.

For several days prior to the murders, the armed forces radio program broadcast threats against the UCA Jesuits. "Anonymous" phone-in callers were encouraged to express their views. The army aired repeated demands for the Jesuits' deaths in revenge for the offensive by leftist guerrillas.

Approximately five hours before the killings, the military high command held an emergency meeting. Military sources quoted in *The Washington Post* and elsewhere said the officers present decided to use greater air power to put down the guerrilla offensive and also decided to attempt the assassination of suspected guerrilla leaders in the capital city.

Shortly after the murders, a second meet-

ing took place in the military's intelligence complex, which shares facilities with the CIA. An army officer interrupted the meeting to announce the Jesuits had been killed. According to military sources present, the attending officers clapped in approval.

Nevertheless, only one army officer present at the first meeting has been charged with the crime. Many non-American Western diplomats here believe other senior officers were involved in planning the murders.

Preliminary treatment for accused Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides doesn't offer much cause for hope that justice will be served. He is being held in a luxury apartment at the headquarters of the National Police. The "prisoner" has also been seen at a military-owned resort hotel on the Pacific Coast.

I was in a small parish in San Salvador the morning of November 16. It was the fifth day of combat since the guerrilla offensive had begun. An orphanage, called Mary, Mother of the Poor, had been hit by a grenade. Young Jesuit seminarians were evacuating civilians under heavy fire. One of them stopped to tell me

that Ellacuria and the others had been killed.

I felt relatively little on learning this shocking news. My senses were numbed by the wanton violence I had seen over the previous days. The most extraordinary experience of many was watching a government's helicopters and planes strafe, rocket and bomb its own people. On the second day of fighting, I saw a helicopter fire a rocket at a mud and split-bamboo shack. I can still see the victims—a mother and her decapitated daughter.

Many similar incidents occurred. The Jesuit murders are only the most celebrated in a series of atrocious acts. Leftist guerrillas share in the blame. Their worst violation was to discourage or even temporarily prevent people from leaving combat areas, in order to use them as a deterrent against government air strikes. But both human rights groups and international monitoring organizations cite army soldiers as the most consistent and flagrant offenders. One of the most inexcusable crimes was not allowing the International Red Cross and other relief groups to evacuate wounded from battle areas—out of fear they might unknowingly treat "subversives."

The violence of November has left the country scarred. Most UCA students, for instance, who come from El Salvador's wealthier classes, seem generally repulsed by the killing of some of their most prestigious and popular professors. But indicative of the country's mood, few are willing to express their views. According to several students I've talked to, most will keep their feelings private rather than admit them even to each other.

UCA's academic programs have been scaled back. Several professors have fled the country in fear. At least one senior editor and writer for UCA's journals barely missed encountering a death squad of heavily armed men in civilian clothes at his home. He has now taken refuge in another Latin American country.

Many lesser known Salvadorans have fled as well. Jesuit seminarians have arranged visas for people who feel particularly targeted to flee to Canada—it is not possible to obtain such visas from the United States. But others have been smuggled into the United States illegally by the religious-based sanctuary movement.

But most Salvadorans don't have the lux-

ury of flight. For them, violence is a recurring agony to be endured.

Nevertheless, there is some reason for hope. In the wake of the November offensive, an increasing number of players on all sides of the conflict have come to see that a negotiated settlement, rather than a military victory, would indeed be the best solution. The slain Jesuits certainly believed this. It is worth noting that as a community the Jesuits believe that the most efficacious way to bring about genuine negotiations is to cut U.S. aid to the Salvadoran government and army.

I was recently invited to a base Christian community meeting. It took place in one of the areas I had reported from during the fighting, the same community in which I had learned of the UCA massacre.

A family had invited me to commemorate a previous tragedy—the ninth anniversary of their son's death. In 1981, along with 25 other young men from his community, he had been dragged from his home and shot by army soldiers.

A Christian catechist, brother of the murdered man, led the ceremony. After a short reading he asked, "What is the fruit of his death?"

"Well," said a peasant woman, addressing the mother, "the fruit of his death is in the children you still have."

"But," responded another, "we are all children of God. The fruit is in all the children, all of us."

But the mother had a different answer: "For me, I cope with his death by giving to other children who have no one else." A seemingly frail woman, the mother, since her son's death, has tenaciously managed a home for children abandoned or orphaned because of the war. "I had a choice," she said. "I could have gone into despair. But I decided to make something good come out of it."

It's possible there may be no negotiations in El Salvador—and no cuts in U.S. aid. I wonder, what then would be the fruit of the Jesuits' deaths?

Frank Smyth '82, has lived in El Salvador since February 1988. A radio reporter for CBS News, he also writes for the "Village Voice" and other publications. ■