

By Nick Alexandrov

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The U.S. government has a double standard for terrorist organizations. Groups that hinder Washington's aims are denounced, while those furthering the goals of U.S. power are trained, funded, and rebranded as "freedom fighters" or "bulwarks against insurgency." Consider the recent removal of Iran's Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) from the U.S. terrorist list. The MEK originally formed in opposition to the Shah, whom the CIA reinstated in 1953. In recent years, its terrorism hasn't abated—US intelligence officials believe it has helped murder Iranian nuclear scientists—but it has aligned itself with Washington and Israel, the only relevant factor in determining whether an organization qualifies as "terrorist."

This hypocrisy isn't a new development, of course, and other recent news items provide more evidence of Washington's true principles. In August 2011, it emerged that Inocente Orlando Montano, El Salvador's Vice-Minister of Public Security from 1989-92, had been living comfortably in a Boston suburb for years. Several months earlier, Spain's National Court had indicted Montano and nineteen other Salvadoran military officials for their roles in the "Jesuit Massacre," the 1989 slaughter of 6 Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her 14-year-old daughter. But the U.S. government couldn't care less about these legal proceedings. There has been no indication that Montano will be extradited to Spain—understandable given the urgent issues Washington faces, such as working to ensure U.S. citizens can be detained indefinitely, or pursuing Julian Assange, dubbed a "high-tech terrorist" by Vice President Biden.

Assange earned this nickname by helping release information that embarrassed Washington. Montano's years of service to the U.S., right through the most brutal years of El Salvador's civil war, helped guarantee his easy retirement in New England. Looking back on the conflict, an independent, UN-backed truth commission determined the Salvadoran military and affiliated groups were responsible for the vast majority of the 75,000 civilian deaths over the war's dozen years. President Carter's supposed humanitarianism never made it past El Salvador's borders, prompting Archbishop Óscar Romero to beg him to cut off U.S. aid for the Salvadoran military. Carter ignored him, and Romero was gunned down the following month. The assassination orders came from a graduate of what was then called the School of the Americas. Today, the institution, located at Georgia's Fort Benning, is known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), but "there are no substantive changes besides the name," one of its former instructors testified shortly after the rebranding.

Reagan embraced Carter's foreign policy upon taking office, arranging for Salvadoran troops to be trained by US Green Berets in Honduras in 1983. Lieutenant Colonel John Mirus, a Vietnam veteran, commanded the 125-member Green Beret group sent down from Fort Bragg; his first task was to instruct the new Arce Battalion, led by Montano. In May 1989, Montano was appointed to a top security position, which he held as soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion killed

the Jesuit priests later that year. In 1981, the same group—“created from scratch by U.S. funding and training,” according to scholar Michael McClintock—slaughtered hundreds of peasants in El Mozote. One imagines their trainers at the U.S. Army School of Special Forces weren't completely surprised. “We've always had a hard time getting [them] to take prisoners instead of ears,” an official remarked. Meanwhile, elite Salvadoran families linked to this and other death squads made a different sort of killing, using their fortunes to help Mitt Romney launch Bain Capital in the mid-1980s.

This discussion, and others like it, of “mass killings,” “slaughter,” and “violence” in the abstract, can often have a numbing effect, leading us to forget the specific horrors of what actually happened. So it's worth recalling the story of a Salvadoran peasant woman, related years ago by Rev. Daniel Santiago, a Catholic priest who lived in El Salvador during some of its bloodiest years. The woman, Santiago wrote, arrived home to find her mother, sister, and three children sitting at the kitchen table. They had all been decapitated. Each victim's hand rested atop its own head, as if stroking it—except for the infant's hand, which had to be nailed to its skull to keep it in place. Before departing, the soldiers had placed a bowl filled with blood in the table's center. If we imagine this scene's brutality, repeated countless times, we may begin to comprehend the implications of U.S. military training in Latin America.

Montano, who so thoroughly embodied Salvadoran military principles that he rose to its highest ranks, has only recently received attention from U.S. law enforcement—for making false statements when applying for Temporary Protected Status in 2002. A few weeks ago, he pleaded guilty to three counts each of immigration fraud and perjury, and faces a sentencing hearing this December. Montano's case brings to mind that of Luis Posada Carriles, the CIA-trained terrorist considered responsible for several atrocities, including the 1976 Cubana Airlines bombing, and a series of Cuban hotel bombings in 1997. Posada was accused of immigration violations in 2005, but then subsequently acquitted on all charges in 2011 after an extended legal battle, perhaps an indication of Montano's ultimate fate.

Washington's open door for Latin American criminals, and continued support for illegitimate coup governments in Honduras and Paraguay, makes the current situation seem bleak. But a closer look at recent developments tells another story. Last summer, delegations from School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) visited President Correa in Ecuador, and President Ortega in Nicaragua, both of whom promised to stop sending soldiers to be trained in the U.S. A few weeks ago, SOAW linked up with the Mexican Caravan for Peace and Justice with Dignity, which stopped at Fort Benning to protest on its journey across the US. And in less than two months, from November 16-18, SOAW is holding its annual demonstration at Fort Benning. It's essential that we continue pressuring the government, regardless of who wins this fall's election. If we wait for the candidates' campaign statements to be revealed as the empty promises they are, we risk squandering the recent victories won by SOAW and other activists.

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