

Testimony of
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for the
United States Catholic Conference

before the
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

on
U.S. POLICY TOWARD EL SALVADOR

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I testify today on behalf of the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC), the public policy agency of the Catholic Bishops of the United States. I am accompanied by Mr. Thomas Quigley, Advisor for Latin American Affairs at the USCC. At the outset allow me to express the appreciation of the USCC for being invited to testify on U.S. policy toward El Salvador, a topic which we know deeply engages this Committee and a topic which is of intense interest to the Catholic bishops of the United States.

An indication of the degree of the bishops' concern can be gained from the record of their sustained participation in the public debate about El Salvador. As early as 1977 the USCC brought testimony about El Salvador before the Congress. Then in 1980, catalyzed by the letter of the late Archbishop Romero to President Carter and the subsequent assassination of the Archbishop, the involvement of the bishops and other sectors of the Catholic community intensified.

Last year Archbishop James A. Hickey of Washington testified before the House Inter-American Affairs Subcommittee on behalf of the USCC; at the same time I presented complementary testimony to the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. Both of these testimonies warned against a military course for the United States in Central America, opposed military assistance from any source to any party in El Salvador and stressed the necessity of economic aid and creative diplomacy. In November 1981 the General Meeting of all the bishops voted overwhelmingly to reaffirm USCC policy

on El Salvador. In the last month the President of the USCC, Archbishop John R. Roach of St. Paul-Minneapolis and Archbishop Hickey have both opposed the Administration's call for more military aid to El Salvador.

All of this is history, but relevant history, since the trend of events in the last year has hardly been reassuring to those who believe a peaceful political solution to the Salvadoran crisis is the only lasting solution. Not only has the military conflict continued but the rhetoric and direction of U.S. policy appears to be aimed at preparing the American people for a long struggle, possibly of a military nature, in a region where political vision and economic development are needed.

For two years now, the Catholic bishops - hardly a body which can be labeled complacent about communism anywhere - have warned against a military response by the United States to the forces at work in Central America. I recall these warnings because some aspects of current policy intensify the apprehensions expressed by the bishops in the last two years.

In this testimony the USCC expresses the views of the bishops conference in the United States, participating along with other Americans in the ongoing public debate about the wisdom and direction of U.S. policy in Central America. The outcome of this debate will have momentous consequences, literally of life and death, for thousands of people in Central America. The USCC represents bishops who are related by faith to the Church in Central America and who are also citizens of the United States. On both counts they feel obliged to participate in the public debate.

The argument of the testimony moves in three steps: (1) a discussion of the USCC perspective on the Salvador debate; (2) an analysis of church and state in Salvador and the United States; and (3) concluding policy reflections.

I. The USCC Policy Perspective

At the outset a simple reaffirmation of the right and responsibility of the bishops to address a question of public policy like El Salvador. The bishops are moved to speak on this issue because of Catholic social teaching and the duty they have to translate that teaching into relevant public terms for the Church in the United States. The Second Vatican Council asserted that the Church should stand as the sign and safeguard of the dignity of the person in the political order. This mandate is the basis of all of the Church's public involvement. Human dignity, human rights and human life itself are at stake in El Salvador in a tragic and bloody manner. The bishops do not believe they can remain silent or passive when the political debate touches on dignity, rights and life.

The USCC also believes it is significant to note that a congruence exists between the theological argument which moves the bishops to address these public issues and the constitutional right accorded them in the American political system. It is a right rooted in our constitutional consensus which affirms the validity and value of religious and moral perspectives in the determination of public policy.

Even when the theological and constitutional grounds are established, the Church like other organizations faces the policy

challenge of making a convincing case for its position. The policy question is particularly significant in the El Salvador case because what the Salvadoran Church says and how that is used in the American political debate has become an increasingly important issue. We want to make clear how the USCC relates its views to those of the Church in Salvador.

The USCC position can be summarized in three steps. First we listen and learn from the Salvadoran Church. There are many voices in that local church, a fact which neither surprises nor distresses us. We are convinced that the Church in Salvador is in direct living touch with its people; that it can convey, even in diverse tones, the suffering of its people and their aspirations for justice, peace and a chance to build a secure and stable future for their children. We listen to all the voices in the Salvadoran Church, not because they give the American bishops a ready-made position to take into the U.S. policy debate - they cannot do that, it is our task. We listen to the varied voices of El Salvador because they keep us close to the human reality of the devastating civil war engulfing El Salvador.

The voices of the Salvadoran Church may be diverse but they pierce the curtain of ideological rhetoric, geopolitical slogans and contending assessments of body counts to bring home, at an elemental but truly fundamental level, the realities of civil war. The reality of thousands of refugees in camps along the Honduran border or in the seminary in San Salvador. The reality of family after family which has lost someone to war or political repression.

The reality of the vast majority of a people long-denied justice, now denied safety and peace.

Second, while listening can sensitize us to the internal reality of Salvador, it cannot substitute for the essential task of interpretation needed to relate what we learn to the American political debate. This is the specific role which the U.S. bishops have; to relate their view of what they have heard to the issues which we must decide as Americans: how judge human rights criteria for U.S. policy; how assess the impact of U.S. military aid; how should we relate to a changing Central America.

To fulfill its interpretive task the Church in the United States must make choices; it must weigh data, listen to conflicting arguments coming from Salvador and identify which voices speak most powerfully and persuasively. The USCC has tried to do this openly, most conspicuously by our regular references to the positions of the late Archbishop Romero and now Bishop Rivera y Damas. These have not been the only voices for us, but they have been our principal guides in understanding the impact of U.S. policy on El Salvador.

Third, there are a range of issues relevant to U.S. policy on which we receive little or no guidance from dialogue with the Salvadoran Church. Here we must do more than listen and interpret; we must assess as American citizens, with our fellow citizens, questions about the direction, wisdom, costs and likely outcome of U.S. policy in Central America. These three steps of listening, interpreting and assessing U.S. policy lie behind the rest of this testimony.

II. Church and State: In El Salvador and the United States

There are four principles which USCC believes should shape the U.S. view of Salvador. They are: 1) the principle of nonintervention; 2) the primacy of the internal situation; 3) the need for a political solution; and 4) the impact of military assistance. I will comment on each principle, showing its relevance to Salvador and its relationship to the U.S. policy debate.

A. The Principle of Nonintervention: A continuing theme of Church voices in El Salvador, particularly Bishop Rivera y Damas, has been the lament that the domestic civil strife has become "a geopolitical war". The truth of this statement is beyond dispute; outside forces presently intensify the conflict in Salvador. It would be naive to believe that such outside influence, our own or others, can be quickly dispelled.

It is not naive but necessary, however, to ask how the international dimension of the conflict can be contained and reduced. In USCC testimony last year we argued against the Administration's declared policy of perceiving the Salvadoran conflict through the prism of East-West global competition. In our view the geopolitical definition of the problem works to the detriment of a balanced U.S. understanding of the internal roots of the war.

The USCC does not deny the international aspects of the conflict; we agree that Soviet or Cuban sponsored intervention is illegitimate. But we do not believe the driving force of the war is in Moscow, Havana or Managua. We fear the U.S. threats to go "to the source" may mistake the source of assistance for the roots of the war. The

continuing Administration emphasis on the geopolitical aspects of the Salvador case keeps raising the stakes of the U.S. commitment in Salvador. This escalation of interest in turn narrows the range of political options which we could accept. Any outcome that seems to run counter to our definition of what is acceptable threatens to be a major international defeat for us rather than a shift of power within a small Central American neighbor.

B. The Primacy of the Internal Situation: We find the Administration's style of interpreting the local situation in Salvador through a geopolitical and regional matrix unpersuasive because we remain convinced of the primacy of internal factors. The conflict in Salvador is rooted in long-standing patterns of injustice and denial of fundamental rights for the majority of the population. The U.S. bishops reaffirmed their conviction on this point in their November 1981 statement: "The Latin American Church has repeatedly stated in the last decade that external subversion is not the primary threat or the principal cause of conflict in these countries. The dominant challenge is the internal conditions of poverty and the denial of human rights which characterize many of these societies". In his February 15th letter to Congressman Barnes, Archbishop Hickey reiterated this view about the source of the war in Salvador.

At the heart of the internal definition of Salvador is the human rights issue. Recently President Reagan sent his certification report to the Congress with the conclusion that the efforts of the Salvadoran Government on human rights justified an increase of military assistance. Assistant Secretary Enders, in his recent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee admitted the

enormous difficulty of determining what the human rights picture is, but confirmed the President's conclusions. Within the past week Bishop Rivera y Damas has said that "a very slight improvement in the area of human rights" has occurred.

I submit four comments on human rights for the consideration of the Committee. First, we welcome enthusiastically any improvement, however slight, in the human rights picture. Second, I question whether an increase in military assistance has contributed in the past or will contribute in the future to an improvement in human rights for the vast majority of Salvadorans. Third, I note, and think the Committee should also, the discrepancies of the statistics regarding human rights violations between the U.S. Government estimates and other observers. Both Amnesty International and Bishop Rivera y Damas, for example, cite twice as many deaths in 1981 as the certification report. USCC does not intend to enter the statistical debate but we do think the discrepancies provide a prima facie case for questioning whether the acknowledged "slight improvement", based on disputed figures, can justify the step which Congress is being asked to take: doubling U.S. military assistance to the junta.

Fourth, a relevant corollary to the different estimates is the concerted effort by the Administration to eliminate from consideration the reports of various human rights groups within Salvador as being propagandistic or prejudicial. The direct attack on the Legal Aid Office of the Archdiocese seems to us to be out of proportion. To acknowledge that Bishop Rivera y Damas has criticized the office is simply the truth; to argue that he has

delegitimized its data is to distort the reality.

C. The Necessity of a Political Solution: In one sense no one disputes the need for a political solution in El Salvador. Bishop Rivera y Damas, the State Department, the Salvadoran Government, the opposition forces and the USCC have all stated the necessity of a political solution. There have been moments in the last two years when one could divide the Salvador debate between those who did and did not advocate a political settlement. Today, all parties call for a political solution, but each provides that phrase with different content.

One topic that distinguishes the parties is how each sees the relationship between elections and a political solution. The Administration tends to equate the two. The Salvadoran Bishops Conference, in a statement of January 22, 1982, endorsed the holding of elections.

The Salvadoran bishops described elections as a "possible beginning of a solution" to the crisis and they urged participation. Bishop Rivera y Damas has stressed the need for elections to occur in a context of political dialogue which would legitimate the electoral process. It was this link of dialogue and elections which the American bishops supported in their November 1981 statement: "If valid elections are to be the final product of a political solution, they will come about only after appropriate preconditions are fulfilled".

In a posture which we believe reflects the attitude of the Salvadoran Bishops Conference, the USCC welcomes elections as

a sign of hope. We also lament the absence of the political dialogue among the contending parties which Bishop Rivera y Damas has so often called for. And we agree with the statement of the U.S. Ambassador to Salvador that elections by themselves will not solve the political problem at the root of the civil war. The U.S. support for elections must, in our view, be pushed beyond elections to the wider diplomatic and political efforts needed to establish common ground not only among the parties in the electoral process, but between the forces presently locked in bloody conflict.

D. The Impact of Military Assistance: The USCC position is to oppose military assistance from all sources to any party in Salvador. Hence, we have consistently opposed U.S. military assistance to the Government of El Salvador. Correlatively, we have not only opposed in principle aid from other nations to the opposition forces, but we have also supported political measures, preferably of a multilateral nature, to stop the flow of arms into Salvador.

Our opposition to military assistance is based on four reasons. First, as participants in the U.S. political debate, we see our opposition to U.S. military assistance as a means of limiting the superpower involvement in the military conflict. Second, military assistance strengthens that element of the Salvadoran junta which is most suspect in the minds of the citizenry. The abuses of the security forces are well known and continue today. Military assistance associates the United States not with an effort for a political solution, but precisely with those elements of the government widely suspect of being opposed to establishment of

democracy in Salvador. Third, military assistance, especially when it is doubled in one year, sends the wrong signal to those in Salvador intent on blocking or reversing political reform. Contrary to the standard U.S. policy view, we believe military assistance, especially when liberally granted, reduces our leverage for human rights reforms.

Fourth, military aid has already proved to be a self-generating dynamic; the increase last year from \$5 million to \$26 million and now the proposal for \$60 million in FY 1983 is eloquent witness to our deepest fears. The military aid, in our view, substantially impedes the potential the United States has for playing a political role which could break the impasse in El Salvador. Even in the face of support for military assistance from voices we respect in Salvador; even in the face of differences of views among Salvadoran bishops, on this point - for the reasons cited above - the USCC believes that in the American political context we should continue to oppose all military assistance to any party in Salvador.

III. Policy Dynamic and Decisions

The Reagan Administration has recently described the situation in Salvador as a stalemate. We are inclined to agree with this assessment. The present pattern of the war is a violent, vicious cycle in which thousands die each year in a country of less than 5 million people. Two judgments coming from the Administration, the military stalemate and Ambassador Hinton's judgment on the elections, create, in our view, a moment of critical policy choice for the United States.

The choice is critical because the Administration will have to move in one of two directions. Either an intensified military option is before us in Salvador, which will have to be correlated with wider military proposals for the region. Or the United States will have to move vigorously toward a diplomatic-political course in Salvador.

Just a year ago the USCC came before the Congress to warn that the logic of a military option would draw us more deeply into Salvador than would be wise for America or good for Salvador. Today we face a proposal for military assistance which is double last year's request; we have advisors in Salvador with all the human and political risk this entails; we have large numbers of the Salvadoran military being trained in the United States; and we have a regional policy, rooted in our Salvadoran commitment, which is escalating the rhetoric and reality of confrontation throughout Central America. The logic of \$26 million in military aid moved us in the direction just described; our question this year, Mr. Chairman, is where will the logic of \$60 million take us in twelve months?

The critical choice we seek to portray here is not only before the Administration but also before the Congress and the American people. On that choice hangs fateful questions about our role in Salvador, our relations with Central America, our image in Latin America and even our future domestic political direction.

We live in a dangerous world in which the United States has vast responsibilities and an enormous potential for influencing

the course of international relations. It will not serve the United States, the Salvadorans or the international system to have us locked in a major military commitment to the Salvadoran civil war.

To choose well today we need a grasp of our recent experience in Salvador and the possible consequences ahead of us. There is no way in which the United States will be uninvolved in Salvador; the question is what kind of involvement we will choose. The four principles used in this testimony lead the USCC to call the Congress to emphasize the political dimension of U.S. influence, to support significant economic assistance for Salvador and to deny the Administration's request for military aid.

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