

## CHAPTER TEN

### THE AMERICAN EMBASSY

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Later in the afternoon we visited the newly-constructed, multi-million dollar United States Embassy in the district of Nueva San Salvador. The juxtaposition of the simplicity of Romero’s living quarters against the ostentatious display of American bigness at the Embassy, a fortress of buildings surrounded by walls and checkpoints dominating the countryside, was jarring and embarrassing.

Around 3 P.M. our driver made a U-turn, and stopped in front of the main gate.

“You will have to turn in your passports when we go upstairs for our meeting,” Sinclair said. “It’s a formality. You’ll get them back when we leave.”

At the first security checkpoint in an out-building, a guard asked us to leave cameras, bags, and “anything that could be used as a potential weapon.” Then we were led into the main building and a spacious lobby housing two bullet-proof glass enclosures – one with a clerk who took our passports and asked what our business was, the other with a Marine guard standing at attention.

“I don’t like the looks of this place,” said Kempton.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“They are going to hear from me about this place. It’s too posh!”

“It really does have a fortress-like look. It’s in bad taste,” added Spence. “Anyone who took Art 101 would know that.”

“Do you mind if I ask you why you are here?” the Marine asked.

“We’re here to study the country after the peace accords,” I said. “From a university in Connecticut.”

I got the feeling he suspected we were a bunch of liberal Communist sympathizers.

“I’m deliberately not combing my hair and putting on lipstick,” said Kempton, miffed.

At that point a woman in a purple dress with a name tag identifying her as Pamela Cory Archer, Director of the USIA [U.S. Information Agency], greeted us, ushered us through a thick metal door with several locking mechanisms, then led us upstairs to the third floor into a cavernous conference room, and invited us to take a seat at a round table, large enough to accommodate half the Notre Dame football team.

“It’s very King Arthurian in here,” Archer said, looking around.

The walls were covered with fabric and the table was at least fifteen feet across and twice as long.

“Until ’78 we were strictly TV and radio,” she said. “Then in ’78 we took over the educational and cultural aspects of the Department of State.”

Archer explained she had been stationed in El Salvador for the last two years, was about to return home, and then before leaving us introduced a blonde woman in a gray suit.

“This is Barbara Stevenson,” she said. “Barbara will bring you up to date and answer any questions.”

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“I’ve been covering politics here for the last couple of years,” Stevenson began. “Now I’m covering the peace accords, and it’s been an almost perfect cease-fire. There have been no shots fired in anger since the signing of the accords. And no fighting since then.

So we see no reason to go back to war. The accords have been stunningly successful.”

Successful? After witnessing the breakdown of the accord stipulations with the presence and testimony of Apolo at Hacienda California? After Fr. Blanchard telling us the present moment in El Salvador was more dangerous than any time in recent memory?

“Maybe you have questions that I can help answer,” she said.

“What about the status of the National Civil Police Program?” Sacco asked.

“It requires a lot of administrative work,” she said, “but we’re making progress and we’re hoping the academy will open by July 25. In the first two classes, there were seventeen hundred hopeful participants.”

She explained that the testing was ongoing, and included one class per month. Participants had to pass a physical that included sit-ups and pull-ups and a medical exam, then they took written tests to determine their aptitude for the curriculum. Also they were subject to psychological testing, and finally an investigation of the background of the applicant.

“Would the new Civil Police be open to former members of the FMLN?”

“The tests did not specifically bar ex-combatants.”

“What about the recent activities of the death squads?”

“The number of incidents is down. But the follow-up is very poor. The judicial system in this country remains very weak. About the death squads, I don’t know. A special investigative agent was shot two days ago. Usually it’s a question of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. We did reach a very discouraging phase between March and May. Nothing was happening. The government was not doing its job in overseeing the disbanding of forces. The police were not being demobilized, and the land reform was not being initiated. But on May 11, the FMLN and President Cristiani got together and agreed on some guidelines. Last Friday a recalenderization plan was drawn up, and beginning June 25 the FMLN will hand in 25 percent of their weapons.”

Problems, she said, were compounded by the fact the FMLN wanted the old security forces dissolved, and the compliance on the

part of the government didn't really happen. The Treasury Police were scheduled to demobilize over a period of twenty-one months to approximately two thousand personnel. And, if the laws were passed, the FMLN agreed they would demobilize by at least 80 percent. The National Police, numbering about eight thousand, would remain in the urban areas, while the National Guard would stay in the country. "Basically checking driving licenses and registrations," she said.

It sounded like the security forces, rather than making substantive changes, were simply switching names, and I got lost trying to keep the different units (National Police, Treasury Police, National Guard, Military Police, Hacienda Police, Civil Police) straight. Maybe, I told myself, Sacco could make sense of it all later.

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Ventura wanted to know about the economic reforms.

"The treaties call for a gathering of business, labor, and government to talk about economic programs," she said. "Some of the FMLN leaders want sweeping socio-economic reforms."

She pointed to the current growth in the economy, but said the '94 elections would be important. The deregulations were good, she added, because they dropped tariffs. But there was some question about the trickle-down effect of the money.

"In '94 the peace issue will be behind us," she said, summing up, "and the issues will be more economic."

At that point Trebon asked about on-going educational programs.

"The country hosts thirty-eight universities, but thirty of them are principally trade and vocational schools," she said.

"What about the withholding of funds from the National University that had been set up by UNESCO [UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization]?" Sinclair asked.

"There are problems holding up the disbursement of funds," Stevenson agreed. "It's because of the perceived politicization within the National University. There are reports of the FMLN occupying

a floor of the library. There are tremendously dedicated people who are paid very little who work there, but the university can't survive on monies given from the government."

"What about the issue of land reform?"

"The biggest estates have been broken up – over eleven thousand acres," she said. "But in the mid 80s the implementation of the two hundred forty hectare limitation on land holdings took effect. The FMLN wanted lands that exceeded twenty-four hundred acres to be broken up. So there was some violent kicking of people off their lands. The FMLN took over roughly a third of the country, and now there are many property issues that must be settled by COPAZ [National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace]. With recalenderization in effect," she said, "the future looks promising. Both sides do not want to return to war."

Listening to her talk, it seemed two different narratives of the post-war realities were emerging. So we looked forward to our visit to Fr. Blanchard's community the next day, thinking the testimonies we would hear there might clarify the issues. For the moment, trying to piece together the situation on the ground depended in part on who you were talking to, and their political affiliations and agenda.

In closing, Stevenson admitted the judicial system was not working.

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The meeting ended around 4:30, and we walked downstairs to the office where we left our passports for security purposes. It was closed for the day. So much for coordination among Embassy offices. Willison, Spence, and Gradie agreed to stay to retrieve the documents as soon as embassy personnel could locate them. Then we discovered we could not exit the building before problems with our names and IDs were ironed out.

By the time we passed through the outer gates, we breathed a collective sigh of relief. The Embassy complex was stuffy and oppressive, and its footprint a slap in the face of impoverished Salvadorans. Later, we learned they looked upon the Embassy as one more instance of American stupidity and greed.

On the way back to the hotel, we stopped at the National University where Trebon, Bertsch, Torriera, McAllister, and Sinclair were to meet with Fabio Castillo around 5 P.M. This was to make up for the missed meeting the previous day. Later I was told the meeting was cordial, and included discussing a proposal for a cooperative agreement between the two universities that included collaboration in teaching and research as well as faculty and student exchanges.

That evening we arrived at a *papuseria*, and were joined by Chester Wickwire, invited by Sinclair to dine with us. A graduate of Yale Divinity School who had served as university chaplain at Johns Hopkins, he had worked in Baltimore with black urban youth, the Black Panthers, and migrant workers, and was highly respected in Central America because of his efforts since 1979 with the poor in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

“He championed the cause of teachers incarcerated during the early years of the war in El Salvador,” said Sinclair.

It turned out that the reason why he joined us, besides Sinclair wanting us to meet him, was to set up a plan for him to hitch a ride with us to Perquín, the rebel stronghold in the mountainous northeastern province of Morazán close to the Honduran border, the last community we would visit in El Salvador.

“It will take about five hours of driving time to reach Perquín,” Sinclair said. “But it’s an important place. The territory wasn’t generally accessible during the hostilities.”

Largely held in rebel hands, the area had witnessed some of the war’s most brutal fighting.

“The area is not considered safe,” he cautioned, saying heightened security measures would be necessary. “You’ll need to stay together, and be more aware of your surroundings.”

Later in our room, I asked Sacco if he could explain what he had learned so far about the different police organizations.

“Before the peace accords,” he said, “several forces were responsible for maintaining order: the Military, the National Police, the National Guard, and the Treasury or Hacienda Police. The National Police controlled the country, similar to our own FBI. The National Guard operated as more localized police and were directed to disband by the accords. The Treasury Police, charged with supervising farms, also were directed to cut back on manpower. Before the accords, the Treasury Police and National Guard numbered about ten thousand combined, but now they were to demobilize to about two thousand. The National Police were supposed to stay at the same level, but since the accords they swelled their ranks from fifty-nine hundred to eight thousand, adding men from the demobilized other forces.”

The police and military forces were “works in progress,” he said.