

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE ARMY'S CHIEF OF STAFF

“To be a citizen of a First World power has its costs, my friends. If you do not want to pay the costs, then leave.”

After we left Blanchard and the people of Dolores Medina, we headed back to the city, hoping to catch part of the ceremonies honoring the war-wounded flown in from medical and rehabilitation centers in Cuba. People and cars packed the avenues around San Salvador's central plaza, and at first it didn't look like we'd be able to drive anywhere near the festivities, but Romeo smiled, as if to say “*no problema*,” and pulled out a large card that read “CNN Press,” propped it on the front windshield of the van, and whisked us through several army checkpoints straight to the center of the activities.

By the time we arrived around 1:45 P.M., the celebration was in full swing. Music and speeches blared from loudspeakers. Red and white banners were draped over the lower face of the cathedral, and a platform with an awning, erected on the front steps, held the dignitaries. In the center of the plaza, the war-wounded sat in rows of seats facing the cathedral surrounded by throngs of well-wishers.

The war was over. The peace accords were taking hold. And in the Central Plaza, where years before people protesting the war had been shot and killed by the military snipers, a carnival-like atmosphere held sway, with the guerrilla war-wounded treated with all the pomp and ceremony of returning heroes. Vendors hawked hot dogs, sodas, FMLN T-shirts, banners and headbands, and long white banners were draped from light poles. In the crowds, people held aloft large red FMLN flags.

The atmosphere was infectious. I bought a red headband with “FMLN” painted in white lettering, and hesitated about wearing it, thinking it might be offensive to some FMLN sympathizers seeing it on a *gringo*, then decided it would be a sign of solidarity, and tied it around my head.

“I’m on the lookout for an FMLN cap,” said Sacco. “For my son’s collection. A cap from El Salvador would be a special trophy.”

With speeches blaring over the loudspeakers, Ventura pushed through the crowds to the war-wounded where he managed to interview a veteran on his cam-recorder.

“This celebration will last well into the night,” said Sacco.

— 2 —

The afternoon schedule called for a visit with the Salvadoran Army Chief of Staff at the military headquarters in San Salvador.

General Mauricio Vargas, a leading officer in the army, and the chief military negotiator in the peace talks, walked across the stage of the headquarter’s auditorium and stood behind the podium, dressed in combat fatigues with his shirt sleeves rolled up. He stood looking at our delegation, his arms folded on his chest.

Ventura described the general as

a man in his late forties (he asked for his reading glasses during his speech), in fatigues, polished boots, stocky, maybe 5 feet 6 inches, probably 180 pounds, a man who had certainly a high rank, though he did not wear any stars or medals, but who had an entourage of other people with stars and medals who looked up to him. They were always at his disposal, and would jump whenever he wanted something.¹⁰

“It is a pleasure and honor for us to receive you in the High Command,” he said, speaking in Spanish, with Sinclair translating. “I am a general in the army, and I had the opportunity to work with the negotiations during the twenty-three months of working out the

accords. First of all, we'd just like to hear your ideas on this report, or this conversation we are going to have. It's up to you, whatever you judge is most appropriate to discuss."

Trebon introduced himself, spoke about the purpose of our visit, and asked the first question.

Q) What do you see are the positive things that have occurred, and what are serious things which must be done since the peace accords have been signed?

A) First of all, I'd like to make a structure or a framework to talk about the peace accords. In El Salvador, there are two schools of political thinking. One school of thinking responds to the structural issues of the conflict which gave rise to the conflict. And the second school of political thinking is much more based on an interventionist ideology that the root causes of the conflict are owed either to the intervention of the United States, or Soviet Union and Marxist-Leninist ideology through the expansionism of Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

We believe both schools of thought have validity. What we don't see as correct is that one school of thought is the dominant, isolating the other school of thought or legitimizing it. We believe that the two are interrelated, that there's an organic link between the two, and to the extent that they are addressed wholly makes for a better solution.

If we were to analyze which of the two factors has the greatest influence or the greatest strength in causing the conflict, we would assess that it would have been the interventionist factor. And why are there two factors which gave rise to the conflict? First of all, this isn't theory, nor is it analysis. But it is objective reality which exists. It is based on practical life, and you can assess it from an historical perspective or from a practical perspective.

In terms of history, we can look at two incidents in 1959 and 1979 which explain the typology of factors involved in the conflict. In 1959, Fidel Castro assumes

power in Cuba. And his thesis under which he took power was against dictatorship, against militarism, against colonialism, against underdevelopment. And thirty years later we have more dictatorship, more militarism, more colonialism because of the military bases inside Cuba. And we have equal or even worse levels of development.

And in the case Nicaragua in 1979, the fight against dictatorship, against militarism, against colonialism, and against underdevelopment, and for ten years they pushed Marxism anyway they could. They wear military uniforms and the military grows to a hundred and fifty thousand elements including popular militias. They have brigades of Soviet and Cuban military inside Nicaragua, and the level of development remains the same. These are the historic antecedents.

And in our country, the first offensive of the guerrillas to take power, takes place January 10th in 1981. During that uprising, there is evidence of submachine guns made by the Israelis, rockets from China. These arms were given by Cuba and Venezuela to the Sandinistas to overthrow Somoza.

El Salvador did not have military aid. El Salvador sustained itself against the revolution in 1981, 1982, and 1983 without military assistance. So this is the essence, the big sombrero under which everything else resides. The two types of factors: the structural factors gave rise to the conflict, as well as the interventionist factors. And I'm trying to explain why the interventionist factors predominate when explaining the nature of this conflict.

This explains why we see the interventionist factors as much more dynamic factors which led to the rapid changes that predominate over the structural explanations of the conflict, which granted were present but not in the same active form. These structural factors are utilized to engender political violence in the hopes of taking power.

And then we get to what is just a concrete fact, and that is the structural issues could have been changed. Let's go to a specific example. Changes in this country have been

brought about by the peace agreements, and not brought about by the war. We have to be able to conceptualize the kind of country we want and to seek that country in the future, but we cannot accept the taking of power by way of arms.

And with that framework, now we can discuss more completely the peace agreements, which as of January 16, 1992 leave our country completely different, completely new. There are many Salvadorans who don't appreciate that we are living under a new stage of the republican life of this country. Why is that? I mentioned that there are structural problems. The peace agreements restructure the Armed Forces and put their mission in a new dimension. Public security is separated from the Armed Forces to a mission of more subsidiary action. The Armed Forces end up much smaller and very beholden to the civilian sovereignty of the country. The army's intervention in internal affairs is with only the exceptional. And only when the President determines it. That is to say, civil power determines the use of the Armed Forces.

Then we have the reforms in the judicial system. First of all, justice is no longer based on compliance with the law, but is now based on the philosophy of respect for human rights. And the composition of the Supreme Court of Justice will allow for the nomination of candidates that represent a pluralistic spectrum politically. That is named the National Council of Jurisprudence. They receive nominations for candidates and will make recommendations on those judgeships. Also there is a school of judicial training. This, in rough form, verifies what the judicial system involves.

We also have the electoral system. First of all, a Supreme Electoral Tribunal has been created, and within that are four different political lines or tendencies. There are those who believe in reforms to the electoral code and the revision of voter registration, and the whole political spectrum is represented. There is no other current faction

that is not represented. Before the politics would go from the center to the right, but now it goes all the way to both ends of the spectrum.

Then we have the political participation of the FMLN, which enlarges the political spectrum of the country, and the cease-fire which is elemental to peace and the absence of all conflict. Also we have the process of verification by the United Nations, as well as a calendarization of execution. So the entire structure of the country has been changed, and all these structural changes are in the constitution and its amendments as of 1992. This includes all of the structural reforms contemplated within the parameters of the peace accords, as well as the creation of a human rights ombudsman.

So where has the progress or the advances been made through the peace agreement? We believe that compliance with the calendarization, which begins on January 16th and ends on the 31st of October, will be determined by the political will of those parties in agreement. The verification of the United Nations is very important, as well as the verification within El Salvador through the Committee on the Consolidation of Peace, known as COPAZ. Is that a response to your question?

“That’s very helpful,” said Trebon.

— 3 —

Next, this far-ranging Q and A session took place:

Q) As university professors we’d like to know your opinion on university education as part of the peace process.

A) First of all, one of the fundamental pillars that these changes really solidified comes through mentality and attitude, and every Salvadoran has to be changed. To

change the mentality and attitudes of people, the basis of that is formation, education. One of the most important reforms has two different areas. One is structural, from the point of view of organic function, and the other would be a reform in the educational system.

We have, in terms of structure, the creation of a Military University. The second level is the center of studies for the Armed Forces in which all the studies of the military arts and sciences are discussed. The third level would be the Military Academy. And in this level there is a parallelism between military arts and sciences and academic military preparation.

We also have the basic training, or the center of training for our Armed Forces. Next we have training in small businesses and agriculture to help people participate in society. These changes should reach all twenty-one thousand kilometers and the five million people.

Why weren't structural changes important in El Salvador before? Because expansionism came to El Salvador first, so we had to ask the U.S. for assistance to fight against Communist arms. The U.S. responded very timidly in 1984. They began speaking with the FMLN in Washington because they did not think we would survive. I was in Congress and Senator Dodd said, "We'll help you, but I'll give you fifteen days before you fall." Now I'm a General and I will say to him, "What happened to those fifteen days?"

Q) Could the peace accords have happened eleven years ago, without all the fighting and bloodshed?

A) It is difficult to judge history. Especially when the facts have already been accumulated. It is not easy to do this kind of dynamic. But the polarization did not help or facilitate meeting the agreements.

Q) What happens to a people who have fought for a political mission half their lives? What sent new air into the discussions?

A) External factors played a major role. Who foresaw Dr. Gorbachev talking in the White House? It is not that the peace accords could not have happened, but the political polarization in our country did not allow for it. Yes, it could have been possible, but all the factors did not allow it to happen.

Man is a rational being. Facing limited resources with few means, people prioritize. The question of land is a very difficult problem. But it has to be answered in a rational fashion. Man has compensatory ways. We need to utilize the land better because there is not enough land for all the people. There is not enough for five million. But how do Saigon, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong do it? We need to diversify, and we need to be very clear. We need training.

I don't want to say that we are not in a very difficult situation. But this is not immobilizing us. It must create a new solution. This isn't a simple problem. But I don't want to see the land as the problem of the country. It is an element of the historical dialectic.

In Guatemala it's the same problem, and El Salvador fits four times in Guatemala. Since the '60s, in Guatemala, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Panama, the revolution has been exported. But they have more land than they know what do to with. Maybe the U.S. will give us a piece of their land, and we'll annex it.

Q) Could you talk about plans to demobilize the military?

A) First, the reduction of forces is 50.2 percent of the total number of elements since the 31st of December, 1991. We are speaking of an average of thirty thousand men being demobilized – including security forces. What I can guarantee is that a new generation will come to write this history. No one in our generation can do this. Others, crazier than us, will change the history. But we will do it either because of necessity or because of conviction.

In November of this year, we will vote for a new Congress. Let me give a reflection, a very personal one. The U.S. is not present in Central America, Asia, or anywhere else for philanthropic reasons. They are there because it is in their interests. What happens? Its citizens must change their attitudes. They should understand what their president is doing. To be a citizen of a First World power has its costs, my friends. If you do not want to pay the costs, then leave. If you do not want to pay for who you are, then that is an error. This is your moment. The Cold War is over. This is your opportunity. You have the world in your hands. If it is too heavy, then drop it. Let it go.

Everyone must locate in the most objective terms the position of your country and the will of its citizens. I want to reiterate this. You are outside your country because your interests are there. In Panama you are there because of the canal, and not because of little black people and bananas. You are there because of natural oil reserves, and because of copper and silver.

In the present time, these relations will have to change. They are already changing with the Free Trade agreements with Mexico and Canada and Central America. The relations are changing and are interdependent. If El Salvador was helped it was because another Castro would have been here, and that would have impacted U.S. policy.

You are facing war. If you don't address it here, then you'll face it there. If you help here, it is not because you want to help a developing country, but because it will help you up there. Why is there so much crime up there? Because of the instability down here. That's my vision. We need each other with clear rules of the game, and with interests that are totally different. But together we can bring about a better world.

Q) Can you give us a breakdown in the formation of the National Civil Police?

A) The problems are of a difficult nature. First, there are problems which are not the responsibility of the government. Why are there these delays? We undertook a bilateral position. COPAZ is in a process of negotiations which are multi-lateral. In order to begin, you need a direction for the Police Academy.

Where does it start? COPAZ was delayed thirty-five days in the calendarization. The director was named thirty-five days late because COPAZ was late. Eight agencies in COPAZ must come up with the answers.

Secondly, there are problems with international assistance. For the peace process, the council was based in New York. The problem is eight hundred million dollars. Only sixty-three million has come four months after. And the calendar is half over.

The third problem is that the donors set up detailed conditions without knowing the realities of El Salvador. They say, "We'll bring a million hamburgers and French fries for the hunger of the *campesinos*." But they want rice and beans. But the conditions say you must buy hamburgers and fries. And they must be bought out of the country. But how much does a Salvadoran meal cost versus a gringo meal? Also, bureaucracy holds things up because they feel the conditions are not being met. Right now a mixed group, including the FMLN, is in the U.S. talking about the problems.

Lastly, we have to recognize that we don't have complete trust. It is a process of ice which begins to melt. But sometimes it is our fears that don't allow us to move forward so fast. Last Friday, after speaking for thirty days with the leaders of the FMLN, we went over the problems of the delays. There are no more delays. We've solved those problems. But we've been saying all these bad things in the newspapers, and now we find they are not so bad.

Q) Will these problems still exist after the recalendarization?

A) People who don't read history are condemned to repeat it. We looked at the assistance in Panama and Nicaragua. They were promised large amounts of aid, but once their problems were over then forget about the aid. When someone goes drinking at night and wakes up the next morning he says, "I'll never go drinking again." And then when he's sober, he goes for the drink.

The international political community looks for problems elsewhere, and we have had that problem. For example in Panama, and then recently Chamorro was talking with Bush about moving ahead in Nicaragua. These are the reasons we are working on a continual basis. You are citizens privileged in the world. You can prolong or end these problems. And so what we are trying to do this afternoon is to discuss what is happening here and about the influence your country has on our country.

For example, how many of you were told that you were crazy to come here? But now you see that things are not that crazy. You can describe what the real problems are that face this country. And that is precisely what we did this afternoon. That you have a vision about our country. That the military are not savages, or a race of people from the Stone Age. They paint us as violators of human rights. But we want you to see the reality. Not what you read in the papers that have their own political agendas.

Perhaps when we get our military university, your professors could come here to teach. We thank you for your time. We are privileged to meet with someone of your stature. I have much respect for your government and your people. You should feel proud of what your country has done for our country. Time will tell. And this truth will be concretized in the development of our society.

As we trailed out of the auditorium, a couple of members of our group agreed that the general was "following the party line," while one other, reacting viscerally, called him "a stuffed shirt."

Had Vargas chosen his words carefully? No doubt. His job was to put a positive spin on the current situation for international visitors. But, at the same time, he did not hesitate to level charges at the self-serving policies of the U.S. Government, or hesitate to express his annoyance with what he called the misrepresentation of the Salvadoran military in the international press, or hesitate to register his chagrin with the perceived lack of the American electorate's resolve to help mend El Salvador's broken national reality.

He also agreed on the basics: the war had divided Salvadorans, and atrocities committed by both sides had caused deep-seated hatreds. But, he noted, there was hope for the future. Recent meetings when the two sides managed to talk were beginning to resolve some of the major obstacles to peace, so progress, slow in coming, was being made.

— 4 —

On July 13, less than a month after we returned home, the *New York Times* ran the following editorial:

El Salvador's Moment of Truth

El Salvador has enjoyed a merciful but nervous peace since January, following a 12-year civil war that claimed more than 60,000 lives. The fighting ended with an agreement by guerrillas to lay down their arms and by the Government to discharge war criminals from a brutal army.

An important milestone is fast approaching. On Aug. 15, a special commission will present its evaluation of the officer corps to President Alfredo Cristiani for possible purging. This long-overdue weeding-out deserves the full support of the U.S. government.

The three commissioners, all respected Salvadoran civilians, came to Washington last week to meet with

officials and members of Congress. But they found that the bureaucratic wheels have turned slowly.

The State Department insists that it intends to share what it knows about notorious massacres, the murder of priests and of Archbishop Romero, and also about crimes attributed to leftist rebels. A full response, drawing on files of other agencies, would honor the cause of justice, and strengthen civilian scrutiny of a rough Latin army whose officers have had extensive U.S. training.

Past experience is cautionary. In December 1983, George Bush, then Vice-President, flew to El Salvador with a list of military officers believed to be involved in death squad atrocities. None were punished or discharged; the worst offenders were transferred to posts abroad.

Far more sweeping changes are envisioned in United Nations peace accords, which call for reducing by half the size of the army and for creating a national police force with guerrilla recruits.

U.N. monitors fault leftist rebels for seizing new farms after the cease-fire, and for providing lists of only a portion of the weapons they are supposed to surrender. But despite noncompliance by both sides, the accords have silenced guns to universal relief.

Exhausted belligerents show no wish to renew a stalemated war. And a war-wasted economy is reviving, helped by a wise U.S. decision to delay deportation of illegal Salvadoran migrants, prime source of \$800 million in annual remittances.

It will truly mark a new era in El Salvador if the commission identifies malefactors, and Mr. Cristiani removes them as officers. Fuller cooperation in Washington can hasten that salubrious day.

Because of our session with General Vargas, I drafted a letter to the *Times*, printed Aug 6, 1992, under the headline "U.S. Can't Abandon El Salvador Now":

To the Editor:

I agree with "El Salvador's Moment of Truth" (editorial July 13), that our State department must cooperate fully with the Salvadoran civilian commission's efforts to evaluate the army's officer corps. It is to be hoped that President Cristiani, acting on the commission's report, will demand the purging of war criminals from the military's ranks.

Gen. Mauricio Vargas, the Chief of Staff of the Salvadoran army, met with our university delegation in San Salvador on June 17 and at that time said, "The peace accords restrict the armed forces, giving them a new mission. We are much smaller, and answerable to civilian authority." After Aug. 15 the world will know if General Vargas means what he says.

In the meantime, atrocities and violations of human rights continue in El Salvador after the signing of the peace accords, and the country's judicial system is failing to mete out justice. Police officials and judges, confronted with allegations of criminal actions are looking the other way.

Since 1981 our Government has pumped more than \$4.5 billion into El Salvador, with \$1.2 billion in direct military aid. Just because the cold war had ended and the threat of Communism has all but disappeared, we can't suddenly wash our hands of El Salvador.

Fairfield, Conn., July 21, 1992