

**School of the Assassins: El Salvador's Involvement in the School of the Americas and
Resulting Human Rights Consequences**

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GLBL 446

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March 6, 2026

Introduction

Producing over 100,000 foreign trainees per year, the U.S. Army is the world's largest provider of military training to non-U.S. nations (Amnesty, 2002, p. i). These trainings occur across more than 275 facilities, including the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), formerly known as the School of the Americas (SOA) (Amnesty, 2002, p. i). Between 1946 and 2000, the SOA trained 61,000 Latin American personnel—in the 1980s, one third came from El Salvador (Blakeley, 2006, p. 1440; National Security, 1996, p. 8).

Despite its popularity as a training facility, by the 1990s the SOA became entrenched in political notoriety, criticized by human rights organizations who nicknamed the facility the “School of the Assassins” (Gill, 2004, p. 26). The 1996 publication of SOA training manuals, later regarded as the “Torture Manuals,” became a primary driver behind the growing social movement to close the program (Gill, 2004, p. 49; Blakeley, 2006, p. 1442). Around the same time, a database of graduates was declassified under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), revealing the names of SOA graduates who had committed mass human rights violations across multiple Latin American nations (Gill, 2004, p. 211).

In the wake of these releases, many researchers sought to understand the relationship between the SOA and human rights violations. In 2004, Lesley Gill published *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Police Violence in the Americas*, which stands as one of the most comprehensive accounts of training methods and human rights violations at the SOA. Other independent researchers have statistically evaluated the likelihood of SOA attendees committing human rights violations (McCoy, 2005). Beyond investigations into the SOA itself, a well-established foundation of research examines human rights violations carried out by SOA

graduates, including reports from international organizations, academic case studies, and unofficial reports by watchdog organizations.

Despite these well-established findings, little information exists about the current teachings, graduates, or attendees of the WHINSEC. While several researchers have investigated the effectiveness of human rights reforms in the early 2000s, after this time period, there is a substantial lapse in the literature pertaining to the SOA or WHINSEC. Few researchers have investigated how the SOA contributes to current socio-political dynamics or how it impacts specific nations. Instead, human rights organizations such as the SOA Watch and the Committee in Solidarity With the People of El Salvador (CISPES) have taken a leading role in tracking and publicizing information about attendees, despite the Department of Defence no longer releasing public data about graduates (SOA Watch, 2021b).

This investigation builds upon existing academic literature by closely examining El Salvador's involvement in the SOA and its broader implications. Drawing on declassified documents, reports from international institutions, academic research, and information from human rights organizations, it contextualizes the relationship between El Salvador and the U.S. This investigation seeks to provide insight into how engagement with the SOA impacted military practices and patterns of human rights violations within El Salvador. It also examines measures that have been taken to address the resulting political and human rights consequences.

Methods

This investigation uses a combination of primary and secondary sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of El Salvador's involvement in the SOA. Primary materials include documents released through FOIA, such as a 1992 Secretary of Defence Report, and declassified memoranda. It also references the public database of SOA graduates provided by the

SOA Watch. Additional primary evidence includes U.S. congressional records, as well as reports from the United Nations and Government Accountability Office, offering insight into the awareness and evaluation of SOA activity by official governing bodies.

To contextualize these findings, this investigation draws upon established areas of study, including peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and reports by non-governmental organizations. It also incorporates publications and public statements from human rights organizations such as CISPES and SOA Watch, providing insight into ongoing activism related to the SOA and U.S. relations with El Salvador.

Observations and Findings

Background

In 1946, the U.S. Army established the Latin American Ground School (later renamed the SOA) in the Panama Canal Zone, serving as a premier training facility for both American and Latin American personnel (Gill, 2005, p. 26; McCoy, 2005, p. 49). By 1956, the school ceased providing English instruction, driven by an increased interest from Latin American attendees (National Security, 1996, p. 20). Researcher Kathrine McCoy (2005) characterizes the appeal of the SOA using the term “military professionalism,” which describes the perception among military advocates that U.S. training would support attendees’ career development, while curtailing human rights violations among countries with poor records (p. 48). The school itself claimed that its goals were to ““provide doctrinally sound, relevant military education and training to the nations of Latin America; to promote democratic values and respect for human rights; and to foster cooperation among multinational military forces””(McCoy, 2005, p. 47). After examining the human rights records of its graduates, however, these purported goals seem highly unlikely.

In the years following its establishment, the SOA received significant public backlash within Panama, facing accusations of promoting repressive, antidemocratic behavior (McCoy, 2005, p. 49). In the wake of this controversy, the SOA relocated to Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1984, where it currently remains. This decision was further influenced by the Cold War narrative of communism's spread throughout Latin America, with particular fear directed towards Nicaragua and El Salvador (Gill, 2004, pp. 26-28). With narratives of "spheres of influence" circulating throughout the country, the decision to continue SOA training on American soil aligns with a theme in U.S. foreign policy of maintaining hegemony throughout Latin America using political and military influence.

This relocation, however, marked only the beginning of controversy and backlash at the SOA. Throughout the 1990s, the anti-SOA movement rapidly escalated, driven by the substantive release of information condemning both its training and graduates. Initial public outcry began in 1996 with the publication of training manuals used in a Military Intelligence class between 1982 and 1991 (Gill, 2004, p. 49). The manuals recommended tactics such as torture, extortion, execution, and blackmail, which were acknowledged by the Pentagon as objectionable practices (Amnesty International, 2002, p. iii; LAWMAKERS PUSH, 1996). Upon closer examination, however, the passages are not only objectionable but in clear violation of Article 4 of the Geneva Convention (Blakeley, 2006, p. 1442). The atrocities of these manuals were clearly communicated to the Secretary of Defence as early as 1992, with records acknowledging their objectionable content dating back to 1991 (Michel, 1992; Husband, 1991).

This information is particularly important when considering the string of human rights violations committed by SOA graduates whose attendance overlapped with the distribution of these manuals. While it is difficult to assign full responsibility without knowing the extent to

which students engaged with them, they provide important contextual evidence when considering ensuing human rights violations connected to the SOA.

Human Rights Violations by El Salvadorian Graduates

Between 1950 and 1979, the U.S. trained 1,971 Salvadoran officers at the SOA in courses ranging from Urban Counter-insurgency and Military Intelligence to Basic Combat and Officer Preparation (Binford, 2016, p. 47). By the early 1990s, newly disclosed documents and investigations by the UN connected many of these graduates to mass abuses of human rights. The following section explores the case studies of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the rape and murder of four U.S. churchwomen, the El Mozote Massacre, and Jesuit murders as illustrative cases of the repercussions of El Salvador's participation in SOA training.

Archbishop Oscar Romero was a forceful advocate for progressive change in El Salvador, denouncing repression, poverty, and human rights violations (Eisenbrandt, 2019, p. xv). In 1980, three years following his appointment as archbishop, Romero was assassinated by a death squad one day after ordering the police to stop their oppression (Gill, 2004, p. 202). Roberto D'Aubuisson, the man named by the court as the "mastermind" behind Romero's assassination, is listed on the database of SOA graduates, having attended the school in 1972 (Eisenbrandt, 2019, p. xxiv; SOA Watch, 2021). He was also named on the Senate floor during a presentation advocating for legislation to close the SOA (*Congressional Record*, 1999). Although at the time of the murder, the public was not yet aware that two of Romero's three killers attended the SOA, in hindsight, it raises serious questions about the influence of U.S. training on attendees.

In 1980, the same year as Romero's murder, four American missionaries were raped and murdered by five members of the El Salvador National Guard. The bodies of the women were found on a roadside, unclaimed for multiple days before being identified by an American

Ambassador. The U.S. and El Salvador both launched investigations into the crime, but despite incriminating evidence, no one was held responsible (Posner et al., 1982). In 1993, the UN Security Council investigated the crime, finding substantial evidence that the execution was both planned and covered up. The report states that El Salvador “failed in its responsibility to investigate the facts thoroughly, to find the culprits and to punish them in accordance with the law and the requirements of international human rights law” (United Nations, 1993, p. 62). Three of the five officers involved in this crime attended the SOA (Amnesty, 2002, p. 36). Similar to Romero’s murder, this fact brings into question broader training policies at the SOA. Even before the time of the torture manuals, graduates have engaged in egregious, unlawful behavior.

Although these two cases elicited public outcry, the anti-SOA movement gained significant momentum only after public evidence linking SOA graduates to crimes in El Salvador, including the El Mozote Massacre and Jesuit Murders. In December of 1981, units of the Atalacatl Battalion, the first Salvadorian infantry battalion trained and equipped by the U.S., detained and killed without resistance over 200 identified men, women, and children in the village of El Mozote (Binford, 2016, p. 3; United Nations, 1993, p. 114). The massacre extended beyond El Mozote into surrounding towns, leaving over 1,000 casualties whose bodies were burned (Binford, 2016, p. 3). Although U.S. troops did not physically participate, sixty percent of the recovered ammunition from the massacre sites was manufactured on American soil for the U.S. Government. Most of the victims were minors (United Nations, 1993, pp. 116-117).

Nearly two months later, investigative journalists from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* released stories publicizing the massacre. According to the UN, “the Salvadorian authorities categorically denied that a massacre had taken place. No judicial investigation was launched, and there was no word of any investigation” (United Nations, 1993,

p. 117). While the UN assigns primary responsibility to the State of El Salvador, experts on the massacre criticize the U.S. for arming and training the Atlacatl troops, instilling a paranoid anticommunist ideology used to justify the atrocity (Binford, 2016, p. 55). Expanding on this notion, Binford (2016) asserts that “the Salvadoran officers who ordered and led the El Mozote massacre viewed mass terror as a legitimate tactic of counterinsurgency warfare,” a lesson which they learned from U.S. training (p. 55). Binford’s claims about the massacre are unsurprising considering that ten of the twelve responsible officers were SOA alumni, including second-in-command Colonel Natividad de Jesús Cáceres Cabrera, a 1970 graduate (Amnesty, 2002, p. 36; SOA Watch, 2021). Considering this affiliation, the El Mozote massacre raises serious questions about the culpability of U.S. institutions in enabling serious human rights violations, both physically and psychologically. Had the SOA truly been promoting respect for human rights, it seems unlikely that such violations would have occurred, especially since the El Mozote massacre was not an isolated incident.

Eight years later, the 1989 Jesuit Murders became a defining atrocity for the anti-SOA movement, further exposing the recurring involvement of SOA-trained soldiers in major human rights violations. Similar to the El Mozote Massacre and the assassination of Oscar Romero, the UN Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador highlights the Jesuit Murders as an illustrative case, using it to exemplify violence against opponents of the state. This characterization is interesting considering the report was published three years prior to initial revelations about corrupt training manuals at the SOA, revealing that the crimes were perceived as significantly appalling before any SOA affiliation was publicized.

The massacre was conducted by members of the Atlacatl Battalion, who shot and killed six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her sixteen-year-old daughter (Doggett, 1993, p.69).

According to the UN Report, officers attempted to falsely implicate El Salvador's Guerrilla army, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), writing "FMLN executed the enemy spies. Victory or death, FMLN" on a cardboard sign left at the site (Dogett, 1993, p. 70). Despite their efforts, however, the crimes were eventually connected back to the battalion. Out of the twenty-six soldiers implicated in the murders, nineteen had received training at the SOA (Amnesty, 2002, p. 4). The intentional murder of women and priests is both unjustifiable and morally abject—any training that encourages this behavior should be seriously questioned.

When viewed in conjunction, the assassination of Archbishop Romero, the missionary murders, the El Mozote Massacre, and the Jesuit Murders reveal a clear pattern of SOA graduates committing human rights violations in El Salvador. In 2005, researcher Kathrine McCoy investigated this pattern, finding that despite the fact that only 1.3% of total attendees stand accused of human rights violations, officers who received SOA training were nearly four times more likely to be reported as human rights abusers than enlisted soldiers (p. 58). She also discovered that the odds of committing an abuse increased 5.61 times for students who took two courses, and 6.94 times for students who took three or more (p. 57). While it is impossible to assign full responsibility to SOA, these patterns clearly demonstrate that U.S. training did not encourage respect for human rights but rather emboldened the opposite.

Activist Movements in Response to the SOA

Following the public revelation of these atrocities, activist and priest Roy Bourgois spearheaded the American anti-SOA movement, beginning with a vigil on the one-year anniversary of the Jesuit Murders (Gill, 2004, p. 203). In 1990, he founded the SOA Watch, a grassroots organization driven to "expose, denounce, and end US militarization, oppressive US policies and other forms of state violence in the Americas" (SOA Watch, 2021c). Throughout the

1990s and early 2000s, the SOA Watch played a decisive role in publicizing the wrongdoings of SOA graduates, acknowledged by Amnesty International in their 2002 report (Amnesty, 2002). Their activism efforts include political engagement, lobbying to shut the school down, vigils, public protests, and publications regarding U.S. foreign policy in Latin America.

Within their publications, the SOA Watch criticizes not only corrupt training policies, but also patterns of colonialism and U.S. hegemony exemplified by the school. In doing so, they frequently highlight U.S. foreign policy as a principal root cause of migration from Latin America (SOA Watch, 2021c). In this regard, the organization has diverged from an isolated focus on the SOA, addressing regional political inequality throughout the Americas. As Bourgois describes, “this movement is not so much about the school, but about U.S. foreign policy” (Blakeley, 2006, p. 1448). The movement emphasizes that the SOA does not exist in isolation—it is not the crux of U.S. foreign policy but rather a broader symptom of geopolitical dynamics.

Although the SOA Watch is not focused exclusively on El Salvador, its activism frequently addresses historic and contemporary injustices within the country. Recent publications include articles such as *Conviction of SOA grad for Jesuit massacre in El Salvador*, which provides updated information on the conviction of an SOA graduate by a Spanish court in 2020 (SOA Watch, 2021a). Other publications include *End U.S. complicity in the State of Exception in El Salvador*, which criticizes the Burkele administration's suspension of several constitutional rights, pointing to “decades of U.S. security cooperation promoting ‘militarized, punitive policing’ as part of the problem” (SOA Watch, 2022). The SOA Watch published this critique of current policy in conjunction with a joint statement from over sixty-five organizations condemning arbitrary arrests and violations of due process in El Salvador (Committee, 2022).

The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) was the principal organization behind the statement, a grassroots solidarity organization formed in the 1980s to support the Salvadoran people's struggle for social and economic justice (*Who We Are*, n.d.). Although CISPES is not focused specifically on the SOA, they work in solidarity with the SOA Watch and share similar critiques of U.S. foreign policy. Within their joint statement, CISPES criticizes the U.S. for financing Burkele's war on gangs, despite documented instances of deadly violence perpetrated by the state. As a call to action, CISPES writes: "We call on the U.S. government to end its complicity in promoting militarization and punitive responses to gang violence and the routine human rights violations in which they result" (CISPES, 2022, p. 2).

Beyond issuing statements, CISPES has sent over 2,000 people on delegations to El Salvador and engaged in activism ranging from labor demonstrations to vigils (*History*, n.d). This sustained activism has attracted scrutiny from the U.S. government, with the FBI launching a secret investigation into CISPES and labeling them as a terrorist organization only three months after their founding. In 1989 however, the Senate Intelligence Committee condemned the investigation, revealing that "the FBI international terrorism investigation of CISPES was initiated primarily on the basis of allegations that should not have been considered credible; it was broadened beyond the scope justified even by those allegations; and it continued after the available information had clearly fallen below the standards required by the applicable guidelines" (US Senate, 1989, p. 1). Despite government scrutiny and attempted delegitimization, CISPES has continued its advocacy work for decades. Its persistence demonstrates the enduring role of transnational solidarity movements in drawing attention to human rights violations in El Salvador and continuing to challenge U.S. foreign policy.

Conclusion

Examining El Salvador's involvement in the SOA reveals a clear trend of human rights abuses carried out by military personnel who received training from the U.S. Army in affiliation with the SOA. This deep-rooted connection significantly complicates El Salvador's history with human rights, particularly during the Civil War, during which the U.S. backed the Salvadorian government. The repeated involvement of SOA-trained officers in major human rights atrocities raises serious questions about the role of U.S. training in encouraging sustained patterns of violence. Since many notorious perpetrators were directly trained by the U.S. military, some degree of responsibility should be acknowledged. Although U.S. support for authoritarian governments with poor human rights records extends beyond SOA alone, the school provides concrete evidence that American military training did not promote respect for human rights as its mission stated. Considering this, any U.S. military institution, especially those responsible for training foreign personnel, should be subject to rigorous scrutiny and a high standard of transparency. Without these safeguards, the consequences of poor human rights training extend far beyond the U.S., enabling mass acts of violence as seen in El Salvador.

Despite these concerns, the case study of the SOA also illustrates the critical necessity of transnational organizations in pursuing accountability for the consequences of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. Groups such as SOA Watch and CISPES have played an essential role in documenting abuses and achieving higher levels of insight into facilities such as the SOA. Although these organizations have faced significant challenges— including restricted access to information and attempts to delegitimize their activism— their activism provides a critically important mechanism to hold the U.S. government accountable. Beyond accountability, their advocacy publicly underscores that human rights violations in countries such as El Salvador

cannot be understood as isolated acts of corruption or brutality, but instead direct manifestations of U.S. foreign policy, military training, and the enduring legacy of Cold War intervention throughout Latin America.

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