



The Salvadoran Crucible: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency in El Salvador, 1979–1992 by Brian D’Haeseleer.

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Review by Erik Ching, Furman University (erik.ching@furman.edu).

It is now over four decades since the United States became a key participant in El Salvador during its civil war (1980–92). Ever since, some American policymakers have held up US counterinsurgency strategy there as a model for current and future campaigns. This even as tens of thousands of refugees have fled from the so-called Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras) to the southern border of the United States in the past decade. Therefore, it is high time that a volume like *The Salvadoran Crucible* appeared.

There are, of course, many accounts of the Salvadoran struggle by war correspondents and participants in the conflict. But in 2016, political scientist Russell Crandall published the first sophisticated, comprehensive academic analysis of US involvement in the civil war,¹ prompting an instant historiographic dialogue. Historian Brian D’Haeseleer (Lyon College) has, in less than two hundred pages of main text, produced a lucid chronological narrative based on a mix of relevant primary and secondary sources.

The book comprises an introduction, two context-setting chapters that concentrate on growing American interest in El Salvador in the post-Cuban revolution phase of the Cold War, and three chapters on phases of the war itself (respectively, 1981–84, 1984–88, 1989–92). A “Coda”—“The Salvador Option’ in Iraq”—questions whether US policy in El Salvador in the 1980s is a useful template for present-day American counterinsurgency campaigns.

D’Haeseleer sets up El Salvador as an archetype of great-power counterinsurgency campaigns throughout the twentieth century. Besides the American efforts in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War and in Nicaragua against Augusto César Sandino in the 1920s, he considers, among others, the British involvement in Malaya (1950–62) and the French campaign in Algeria (1954–62). He consistently rejects the traditional concentration on the post-World War II Cold War chronology by including US quasi-colonial activities dating back to the late nineteenth century. While many American policymakers and commentators perceived events in El Salvador in the 1980s through a US-vs-USSR lens, D’Haeseleer joins the proponents of the “long-cold-war” historiographic tradition.² His overarching thesis is that

the notion that El Salvador represents a “successful” model for pacifying insurgency rests on shaky ground. When Washington’s efforts are viewed from a holistic perspective—and not from a short-term military vantage point—such claims are not only historically inaccurate but also wrong. Rather than being heralded as an exemplar of US nation-building, Washington’s efforts in El Salvador should be viewed as an expensive effort that prolonged the conflict, led to the further devastation

1. *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2016).

2. See, e.g., Greg Grandin and Gil Joseph, *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America’s Long Cold War* (Durham: Duke U Pr, 2010).

of the country, and failed to address the roots of the insurgency, which still reverberate in El Salvador today. (181)

Definitions of success and failure are relative. D’Haeseleer makes his own standard very clear. If the goal in El Salvador was simply to prevent the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) guerrilla army from taking power, as the Sandinista National Liberation Front had in neighboring Nicaragua in 1979, then the Americans’ intervention was a success. But, if any larger goals were espoused, then US policy was a dismal failure.

His position on the meaning of success and failure distinguishes D’Haeseleer from Crandall, who is less critical of US measures in El Salvador. Although Crandall recognizes that many American actions and policies were problematic, he ultimately judges that stopping the FMLN was a worthy and reasonable policy objective “in the effort to hold the line in El Salvador” (501). Thus, the two scholars were (evidently unawares) working nearly simultaneously on the same subject, relying on roughly the same source base, and yet arriving at contrasting conclusions.

That said, I find D’Haeseleer the more persuasive of the two. His book does more in fewer pages and adds to the primary source base nearly twenty interviews with key stakeholders (including guerrilla leaders). It also clarifies the messy complexities of American counterinsurgency policy. The United States was a positive force for change in opposing the vicious fascist army officer Roberto D’Aubuisson in the 1982 and 1984 presidential elections, and insisting that the Salvadoran army improve its record of human rights abuses, as Vice President George H.W. Bush did in his 1983 visit to El Salvador. But the US government also enabled the Salvadoran military’s gross human-rights violations by maintaining its funding and turning a blind eye to atrocities like the El Mozote massacre (11 Dec. 1981) and the murder of six Jesuit priests at the Universidad Centroamericana (16 Nov. 1989), among virtually countless other examples.

The author is laudably careful to give Salvadoran actors prominence in his narrative, especially ranking military officers. Notwithstanding the pressure exerted on them by American policymakers and politicians to fight the war according to their dictates, these men knew that no US leader—Democrat or Republican—could countenance an FMLN victory. The United States would back the Salvadoran army, even if it did sometimes support purges of abusive officers. The army as an institution was going to survive no matter what. Thus its leaders had little incentive to act contrary to their own interests and sensibilities. In this regard, D’Haeseleer demonstrates that the Salvadoran civil war portended what was to come in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11.

The Salvadoran Crucible is now the go-to study of US policy in El Salvador’s civil war. Experts familiar with its subject may find little new here, but lay readers, students, and scholars in other fields of study will find the book to be highly instructive and accessible.