

Introduction

This book offers tales of awakening.

And these personal narratives by sixteen U.S. military veterans could not be more timely. In light of the changed social and political climate following September 11, 2001, and considering our current wars against drugs and terrorism, it is critical that we listen to our veterans. They have “been there,” have experienced U.S. militarism from inside the system, and in many cases have encountered “the enemy” personally. For them, foreign policy has an unavoidable human dimension.

These sixteen veterans were warriors (one a chaplain and unarmed) for the Army, the Navy, and the Marines. Many of them describe how they came to a deeply disturbing discovery: United States military interventions have seldom been motivated by concerns for national security, democracy, or human rights. In fact, as one veteran observes, “...our government has often confused economic opportunities for national security.” Official rhetoric rarely has matched the reality on the ground.

And so these former warriors have become wide-awake resisters. Eleven of these sixteen veterans were featured in the first edition of this book, as part of the effort to close the notorious School of the Americas or SOA (the School currently uses another name, which will be discussed shortly). One of them, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, MM, is the founder of the national grassroots organization SOA Watch (SOAW). Since 1990, SOAW has persistently researched, educated, lobbied, demonstrated, and practiced nonviolent civil disobedience and prison witness.

More than 180 SOAW activists have served federal prison terms—more than 81 years, collectively, as of September 2005—for nonviolent direct actions at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Nearly 50 others have served sentences of probation. These prisoners of conscience include six of the warriors-turned-resisters in this volume. All this—in order to become what slain Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero called “voices for the voiceless” of Latin America.

What inspires such committed resistance? And why are the people of Latin America “voiceless” and in need of such advocacy?

Since its first days in Panama in 1946, the U.S. government-sponsored SOA has dedicated itself to training Latin American soldiers in Low

Intensity Conflict (LIC). Also known as civilian-targeted warfare and counterinsurgency, LIC emphasizes seeking out so-called internal enemies or subversives, then marking them for intimidation or assassination. Those labeled “subversive” are usually the poor and those who advocate for them—including progressive teachers, lawyers, health care and church workers, and labor and human rights organizers.

Their subversion? Whether inspired by a class analysis, a Biblical “preferential option for the poor,” or simply their children’s hunger, these people are claiming economic and political democracy as their birthright. LIC counters their demand—and their birthright—in order to keep wealth and power concentrated in the hands of national elites and foreign investors. Government-sponsored terror especially targets popular movements, using native military personnel whenever possible. SOA courses that have served this purpose, all too well, include Combat Tactics, Combat Arms, Psychological Operations, and Propaganda.

But not all SOA training has appeared in their course catalogs. In September 1996, the *Washington Post* ran on its front page “U.S. Instructed Latins on Executions, Torture: Manuals Used 1982-91, Pentagon Reveals.” The Defense Department—in a stunning development and under enormous pressure—had released what SOA critics would soon call “the torture manuals.” And with good reason: the manuals encouraged soldiers-in-training to view nonviolent civic organizations as subversive, and referred them to the use of blackmail, torture, abusive interrogation techniques, and extrajudicial execution.

Clearly, LIC is not “Low Intensity” for those who are repressed. Rather “Low Intensity” reflects a public relations consideration: it is a ploy to keep blatantly anti-democratic measures out of the headlines—and out of the awareness of U.S. taxpayers. After all, taxpayers underwrite this repression as a hidden subsidy to U.S. corporations, providing them with access to cheaper labor and resources outside the United States. So LIC is really a kind of “psychological operation” conducted against U.S. citizens, who would have good reason to object to such repressive policies—morally, legally, and out of concern for protecting their own jobs from outsourcing.

Not surprisingly, there has been a heavy civilian death toll at the hands of SOA graduates. So heavy, in fact, that Latin Americans have long called the SOA “la escuela de asesinos,” the School of Assassins. Some of the more famous targets of assassination by SOA graduates have been Archbishop Oscar Romero; four U.S. churchwomen who worked with poor Salvadoran communities; the approximately 900

residents of the village of El Mozote in El Salvador; six Jesuits at the University of Central America, along with their housekeeper and her young daughter; and, more recently, Guatemalan Bishop Juan Gerardi. Gerardi, for example, had summoned the courage to publish an extensive human rights report through his interdiocesan office, titled *Guatemala: Nunca Mas* (Never Again). He was murdered days after publication by an SOA grad cited in his report.

Reputable human rights groups have cited literally hundreds of SOA graduates for extensive human rights abuses. Astonishingly, these include many of the SOA's most honored graduates and even some commencement speakers and guest instructors. Former Guatemalan Defense Minister Gen. Hector Gramajo, for example, was invited to give a commencement address six weeks after having been found guilty of war crimes in a U.S. court! And the 1999 *UN Truth Commission Report on Guatemala* cites the SOA itself for its "significant bearing on human rights violations."

Long recognized as a source of destabilization in Latin America, the SOA has been known there as "la escuela de golpes," the School of Coups—as well as "la escuela de asesinos." When the SOA moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1984, it brought its troublesome history with it—and eventually it would have yet another name. In December 2000, responding to mounting congressional scrutiny and massive public protest, the Pentagon and Defense Department got permission to "close" the SOA. Then, the very next month, the same doors re-opened as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC, also known as WHISC)—with hopes that Congress would not hold WHINSEC accountable for the SOA's lethal record.

Few observers were fooled—because it was, indeed, the same school. In fact, a number of Congresspeople immediately drafted legislation, HR 1810, to close the SOA/WHINSEC and establish a joint congressional task force to assess U.S. training of Latin American military personnel. That effort is ongoing with HR 1217, the Latin America Military Training Review Act of 2005, and there is movement toward companion legislation in the Senate.

The veteran resisters featured in this volume note that the current "war on terrorism" rhetoric does not square with reality. Much has been said of the U.S. commitment to closing all terrorist-training camps and holding all supporters of terrorism accountable, yet the SOA/WHINSEC remains unrepentant and unsanctioned. The reality is that—even with abundant evidence of the School's complicity with

terrorist practices throughout Latin America—the SOA/WHINSEC still operates in the good graces of the U.S. government, subsidized by millions of U.S. tax dollars every year.

Nevertheless—in the face of so much atrocity, grief, and callous official denial—these seasoned resisters write from their deep faith in the dignity of the human spirit and the possibilities of human community. All are working toward a justice that excludes no one. All have chosen conscious solidarity with the poor over unconscious collusion with privilege. All are wide-awake.

MCK

The introduction to the first (2002) edition has been updated for the 2005 edition. See www.soaw.org for the latest developments in efforts to close the SOA/WHINSEC.