

July: UCA

# Remembering the UCA Martyrs: Ten Years Later

DEAN BRACKLEY, S.J.

This November marks ten years since soldiers entered the campus of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in San Salvador in the middle of the night and murdered six Jesuits, a domestic employee, and her young daughter.

Every November 15 since then, thousands of *campesinos* and workers, mothers and fathers and young people fill up the UCA campus. They light up the night with candles and song. After the outdoor Eucharist, they stay for tamales and coffee to sing and dance and catch up with old friends until dawn.

Those who gather understand the importance of remembering. Some in El Salvador simply want to bury the horrors and the heroes of recent history, to blot out the past in order to shape the future in their interest. But those who suffered most need to remember, and at the UCA we insist that the November festivities commemorate *all* the martyrs of El Salvador, not just those who died at the UCA.

Remembering heals old wounds. The martyrs—those who bore witness to the truth and paid the price—engender hope and a sense of direction in times of discouragement and disorientation. They continue

to challenge us. A regular stream of foreign visitors reminds us that the martyrs inspire people beyond El Salvador as well.

Ten years later their story is worth re-telling.

## *The Context*

After nine years of war, the Salvadoran armed forces and their United-States patrons had become convinced that the guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) had lost steam and could be beaten militarily. So, despite war-fatigue on all sides, they were stalling the peace talks, even though the government had committed itself to good-faith negotiations toward a political settlement as part of the regional Esquipulas Accords of a few years before.

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The peace talks were probably the ultimate target when the ultra-right carried out a series of terrorist attacks against civilian opposition groups in October 1989. In reaction, the FMLN launched a broad offensive, hoping to force a settlement of the conflict.

When the offensive began on Saturday evening, November 11, its force and scope shocked the army and its gringo advisers. Soon the guerrillas held a third of the capital. A U.S. adviser later recalled his fears that helicopters would need to be deployed to scoop U.S. personnel off Salvadoran rooftops, in a scene reminiscent of Saigon in 1974.

Sunday, November 12. The day after the offensive began the military locked all radio stations into its own broadcasts. These included orchestrated call-ins denouncing and threatening critics of the government, including the archbishop, his auxiliary, and the Jesuits, especially Ignacio Ellacuría, the outspoken rector (president) of the UCA. One caller said "Ellacuría is a guerrilla. Off with his head!" Others accused the Jesuits of being communists and hiding weapons at their university. Callers urged that all Jesuits be thrown out of the country.

Even before the war Ellacuría and the UCA Jesuits had been vocal advocates of social change in El Salvador. As a result, the UCA and the Jesuit residence had been bombed sixteen times. The Jesuit pastor of rural Aguilares, Rutilio Grande, had been killed in 1977 for his defense of his poor parishioners; and shortly thereafter the White Warrior Union had threatened to kill all the Jesuits if they did not leave the country in thirty days. They stayed. The death-date passed without incident, but the hatred and persecution remained.

The Salvadoran military had long claimed that the UCA was a hotbed of guerrilla activity and perceived Ellacuría and the other Jesuits as intellectual godfathers of the FMLN. The U.S. State Department shared this skewed perspective.<sup>1</sup> No one had ever found evidence of arms or guerrilla training in the UCA, however. The university administration had avoided any organic links to the guerrillas. In fact, Ellacuría had been calling for a negotiated solution ever since the war began in 1981—a position that earned him the wrath of both sides. But although they criticized the guerrillas, Ellacuría and fellow Jesuits Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martín-Baró and Jon Sobrino recognized that the cause of the poor was just and that the armed forces fought to preserve an unjust status quo, with terror, torture, and murder of civilians as an integral part of a counter-insurgency strat-

egy. They repeatedly denounced abuses by government security forces and allied death squads. In the prevailing climate of fear, only the archbishop, Arturo Rivera Damas, and his auxiliary, Gregorio Rosa Chávez, could speak out with the moral authority that Ellacuría and his colleagues commanded.

Born in the Basque country of Spain, Ellacuría, 59 when he died, had arrived in El Salvador in 1948 for the second year of his Jesuit novitiate. All the other Spanish-born Jesuits killed at the UCA followed the same pattern. Montes, 56, had arrived in 1950. Juan Ramón Moreno, also 56, arrived the following year. Amando López, 53, arrived in 1953; Martín-Baró, 44, in 1960. The only native Salvadoran Jesuit killed, Joaquín López y López, 71, son of a prominent family, was also the only one who did not work at the UCA—which he had helped to found in 1965—but rather in the Jesuit-sponsored *Fe y Alegría* education project for the poor, which he had also helped to start in 1969.

A gifted philosopher and political analyst, Ellacuría had been rector of the university since 1979 and had been forced into exile shortly afterward. Montes was head of the sociology department and the UCA's human rights institute. Martín-Baró was academic vice-president, founder and director of the university's public polling project, head of the psychology department—and a prolific writer. He is recognized as a pioneer thinker in social psychology. The affable Amando López and the shy, versatile librarian Juan Ramón Moreno both taught theology. All except Ellacuría engaged in weekend pastoral work.

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Doggett, *Death Foretold: The Jesuit Murders in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press / Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1993), pp. 33-34. This is the most thorough account of the killings, the cover-up, the legal case, and the political implications. Teresa Whitfield treats the wider story masterfully in her *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1995). For a fine account of the history of the UCA and its educational philosophy, see Charles J. Beirne, S.J., *Jesuit Education and Social Change in El Salvador* (New York: Garland, 1996). For a brief account of the educational philosophy, see my "The Christian University and Liberation: The Challenge of the UCA," *Discovery* (Jesuit International Ministries), December 1992, pp. 1-17.

## The Killings

Monday, November 13. Two days into the offensive Ellacuría returned to El Salvador from a three-week trip to Spain. President Alfredo Cristiani had asked him to serve on a commission to investigate the October 30 bombing of a Salvadoran labor confederation office that had left nine dead. Amando López and Francisco "Paco" Estrada picked up Ellacuría at the airport. As they arrived at the UCA gate a little before 6:00 p.m., soldiers stopped their car. During the offensive the area was swarming with troops, since the High Command, senior officers' family residences, the Military Academy, and other major installations were all clustered within a mile of the university. Recognizing Ellacuría, the soldiers let the car enter the campus where the newly-constructed Jesuit residence was located.

Forty-five minutes later a commando unit of the U.S.-trained counter-insurgency Atlacatl Battalion entered the university grounds. Colonel René Emilio Ponce, chief of the High Command, had summoned the unit himself that afternoon from its headquarters in Sitio del Niño, a half hour to the west, where its members had been undergoing training by U.S. green berets. The soldiers broke into the Theological Reflection Center, which occupies the ground floor of a two-storey building built into a low embankment. The Jesuits' residence occupies the second floor, its entrance opening out onto a grassy yard behind the building. When the soldiers demanded to inspect the residence, the Jesuits let them in, complaining about the disruption and challenging the legality of the search. Segundo Montes apparently failed to recognize the commando unit leader, Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinoza Guerra, who had been a student at the local Jesuit high school when Montes was its principal. The soldiers disturbed nothing in the residence itself but did break into university classrooms afterward. The Jesuits invited them to return the following day to inspect the university in the daylight, but they did not return. As this was the same commando unit that did return two nights later to kill the Jesuits, many interpret the search of November 13 as reconnaissance for the murder operation.

"Salvadoran military officers have repeatedly said that neither weapons nor guerrillas were found during the search," writes Martha Doggett. Nevertheless, on July 12, 1990, President Alfredo Cristiani would tell reporters that some arms were discovered, and a November 13, 1989 cable from U.S. military intelligence agents to the Defense Intelligence Agency referred to

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"initial reports that the following equipment was captured by the Salvadoran Armed Forces . . . in the Jesuit priests' dormitory at the Catholic University":

- 3 AK-47 (Soviet) rifles
- 3 RPG-18s (rocket propelled grenades)
- 2 M-16 rifles
- 4 .45 pistols
- 3 YAESU radios

Though the report was "entirely untrue," continues Doggett, it "inexplicably surfaced in Senate offices in the days preceding the October 19, 1990 vote on a U.S. foreign assistance bill, which included a fifty-percent reduction in military aid to El Salvador" (52-53).

Wednesday, November 15. Around 10:00 a.m. an army officer told one of the Jesuits living near the UCA that there would be a lot of "movement" later that day. In the mid-afternoon, about 125 members of the Atlacatl searched the Jesuit-run Centro Loyola retreat house, a mile up the hill from the UCA to the south. The Loyola staff served them coffee and pastry. One soldier remarked, "This also belongs to the UCA, right? Here they are planning the offensive." A little after 5:00 p.m., a captain gathered the officers and, consulting what looked like a map, pointed to the campus below. An officer remarked to someone present, "Yes, we're going to look for Ellacuría and all these Jesuits. . . . This has got to end!" A soldier told retreat house employees that "tonight there is going to be a big uproar around here. Stay inside and keep your heads down!" Another said they were "going to look for Ellacuría, and if we find him we're going to be given a prize." Around 7:00 p.m. the unit moved down the hill toward the UCA (Doggett 54).

At just about that time, twenty-four top-ranking military officers, including the Defense Minister and the Chief of the High Command, were gathering at High Command headquarters a mile to the south of the campus. Four days into the offensive the military found itself unable to dislodge the guerrillas. Fearing the loss of the capital—and maybe the war—the top brass met to discuss drastic measures. At the meeting they decided, first, that the air force would rocket and bomb the poor neighborhoods where the rebels were entrenched and, second, that civilian opposition leaders who supported the guerrillas would be hunted down and eliminated. Any officer who did not agree was invited to raise his hand. No one did. According to separate reports, at the end of the meeting the officers joined hands in prayer to ask God's blessing. The meeting ended at 10:30 p.m.

The officers then summoned President Cristiani, formally their commander-in-chief, to military headquarters where he arrived between 11:00 p.m. and 12:30 a.m. Thursday (depending on versions) to sign an order authorizing the harsh measures. (Later, in the face of U.S. pressure to charge more officers with the UCA killings, Cristiani would wryly recall the presence of U.S. military advisers at military headquarters that night.) The president remained at the military complex until 2:00 on Thursday morning, when the military commando unit was already at the UCA. To this day it is not clear if Cristiani knew the details of what he had just approved.

Bombs and rockets soon began to fall on guerrilla-held neighborhoods. "Residents in Soyapango and other neighborhoods remember November 15-16 as the night of the worst aerial bombardment" (Doggett 57).

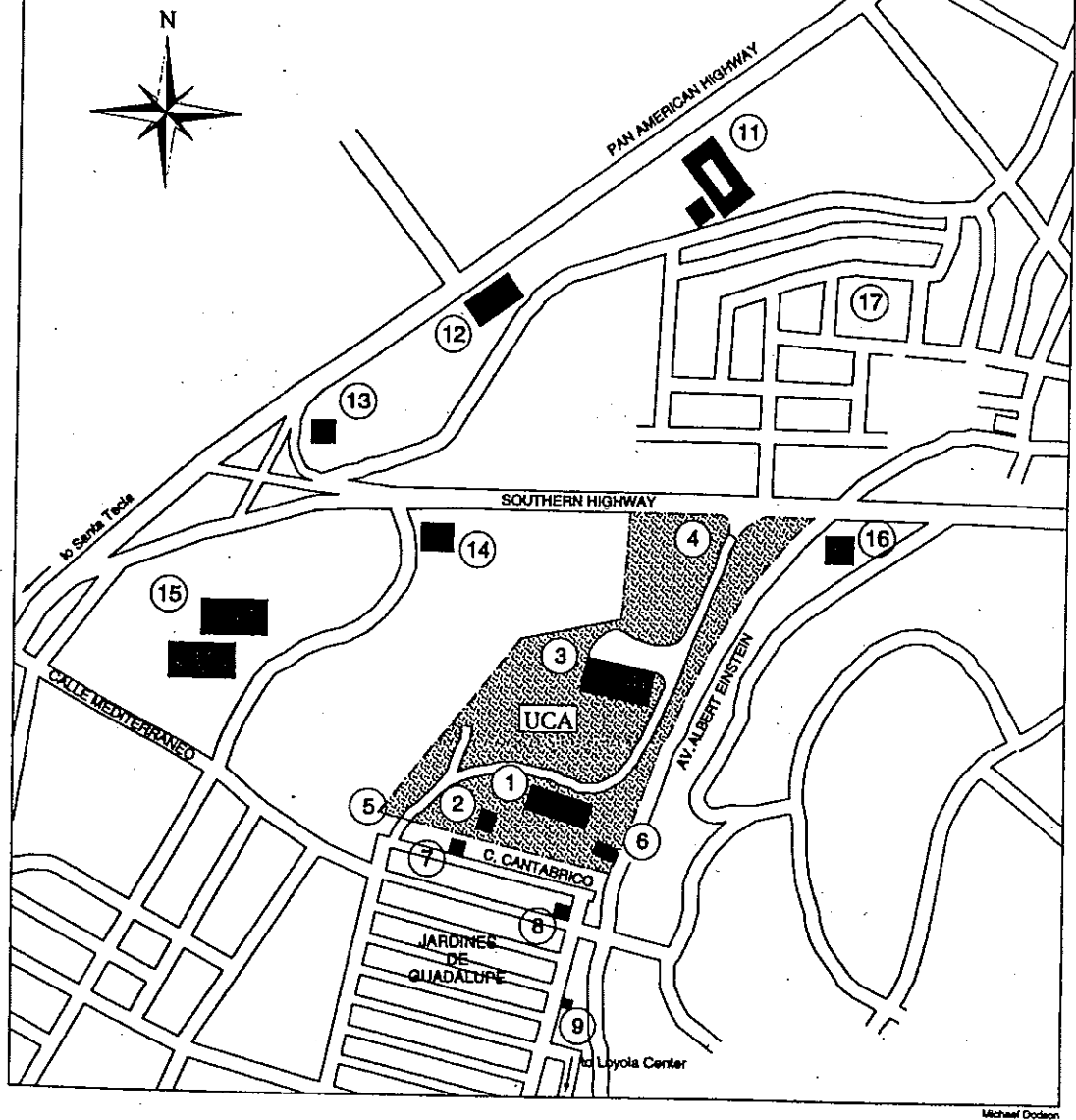
Reliable sources also cite a Wednesday afternoon meeting of top officers at the Military Academy at which members of the High Command ordered the elimination of Ellacuría, at least. But even before these meetings, plans had been drawn up to kill Ellacuría and other opposition leaders. Some believe the UCA killings were part of a so-called *Djakarta Plan* to eliminate over one hundred civilians. If that is the case, ultra-right officers executed the plan using the guerrilla offensive as cover and pretext. In any event, around the same time as the UCA killings, army units also raided Lutheran Church headquarters and were seen near the homes of civilian opposition leaders. These leaders, previously alerted by the guerrillas of the offensive, had gone into hiding. Archbishop Rivera Damas later told an audience in Europe: "[Auxiliary] Bishop Rosa Chavez and I could have died too on that night. Our names were on the list of *Plan Djakarta*, whose aim was the physical elimination of all of those of us who denounce human rights violations and the system of injustice here in El Salvador."<sup>2</sup>

Unlike other targeted leaders, the Jesuits decided to stay where they lived. The Monday search had uncovered nothing, and, they reasoned further, the campus was a stone's throw from military headquarters and was surrounded by soldiers. It would be totally irrational for the military to attack them. Everyone would know who had done it.

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Smyth, "The Truth Will Out," *The Village Voice*, July 31, 1990, p. 19.

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL AMERICA (UCA)  
AND ITS ENVIRONS



Michael Dodson

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| 1. Monsignor Romero Pastoral Center,<br>new Jesuit residence | 9. Curia, Jesuit Provincial's office    |
| 2. Chapel  | 10. Estado Mayor, Army General Staff HQ |
| 3. Rector's office   | 11. Military Academy                    |
| 4. Main entrance   | 12. National Intelligence Directorate   |
| 5. Pedestrian entrance                                       | 13. Guadalupe Church                    |
| 6. Gatehouse   | 14. Mortgage Bank                       |
| 7. Jesuit residence, 16, Calle Cantabrico                    | 15. Uninhabited apartment buildings     |
| 8. Jesuit residence, 50, Calle Mediterraneo                  | 16. Democracy Tower                     |
|  | 17. Military housing                    |

Map Credit: Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuria and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1995).

The Jesuits were right. What was about to happen was absurdly stupid, an action that would severely weaken the armed forces themselves. But—as frequently happens in war—precisely the irrational was about to occur.

Following the meeting at military headquarters, a group of officers stayed behind to assign the tasks to the hit squads. There, according to the United Nations Truth Commission Report, Colonel Ponce ordered Colonel Benavides to eliminate Ellacuría and to leave no witnesses.<sup>3</sup> Benavides then returned to the military academy (two blocks away) and briefed his staff on the decisions that had been taken.

Meanwhile, the Atlacatl commando unit that had searched the UCA was split in several patrols around the perimeter of the university. Around 10:15 p.m. its leader, Lieutenant Espinoza, was summoned to the Military Academy where he arrived with half his troop, about thirty-six men. Shortly after 11:00, Benavides summoned him and, according to an eye-witness, told Espinoza and his assistant, Lieutenant Guevara Cerritos, “[t]his is a situation where it’s them or us; we are going to begin with the ringleaders. Within our sector we have the university and Ellacuría is there.” Benavides ordered Espinoza to see to the elimination of Ellacuría. When Espinoza noted the gravity of this action, Benavides promised him his support and assigned academy instructor Lieutenant Yushy Mendoza to lead the mission. Espinoza gave Oscar Mariano Amaya Grimaldi, known as Pilijay (the “Hangman”), an AK-47 for the operation.

Thursday, November 16. Around midnight two Ford pick-ups began to shuttle the soldiers from the academy to a half-finished building two hundred yards to the west of the UCA where they re-grouped with their comrades. About seventy soldiers would enter the UCA—the university was surrounded by about three hundred others—and these now received their instructions: They were to kill priests who were leaders of the terrorists. It is not clear whether Mendoza or Espinoza actually led the mission or just who told Pilijay that he was to kill Ellacuría with the AK-47 captured from the guerrillas.

A little after 1:00 a.m. the unit walked to the pedestrian entrance of the campus and forced the gate. For some reason they paused at least half an hour in the parking lot, damaging some cars and setting off a grenade. A plane roared low overhead, probably a show of support. (Congressman Joseph Moakley, whom U.S.

House Speaker Thomas Foley later appointed to investigate the killings, would name Salvadoran Air Force Commander, General Juan Rafael Bustillo, as the chief instigator of the murder mission.)<sup>4</sup>

Proceeding a short distance from the parking lot, part of the unit encircled the Theological Reflection Center. Some soldiers scaled the embankment on the east side of the building and banged on the side door of the residence with a tree branch. Others entered the Center below and began damaging equipment. One Jesuit, probably Ellacuría, shouted for the soldiers to stop hammering the door. The Jesuits would let them in as they had before. Meanwhile other soldiers were scaling the chain-link fence alongside the gate on the other side of the residence, opening into the yard. The soldiers then had Ignacio Martín-Baró open the gate into the yard of the Jesuit residence, as he loudly berated the troops.

Twenty yards away Lucía Cerna, an UCA maintenance worker, looked out the window. She and her husband were sleeping at the former Jesuit residence on account of the offensive and the curfew. The next day Lucía would testify that she heard “Padre Nacho” yelling and saw men who looked like government soldiers. This was the beginning of an adventure that would change her life.

Nacho Martín-Baró let the other soldiers into the yard; perhaps they were fifteen in all. At some point they discovered, in a parlor near the gate, Julia Elba Ramos and her fifteen-year-old daughter Celina. The mother cooked for the Jesuit theology students; her daughter studied at a nearby high school. They had asked to sleep in the parlor because there had been so much shooting near the caretaker’s house where they lived at the other end of the yard abutting the street. Caretaker Obdulio Lozano, husband of Julia and father of Celina, remained in their house all that night. He would not discover what had happened until dawn.

By now the soldiers had forced five Jesuits into the yard and ordered them to lie face down. Some moments passed. Then the shooting began. Antonio Ávalos exe-

<sup>3</sup> “De la locura a la esperanza. La guerra de doce años en El Salvador. Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador.” *Estudios Centroamericanos*, Vol. XLVIII, no. 533 (Mar. 1993), p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Representative Moakley, Nov. 18, 1991.

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cuted Juan Ramón Moreno and Amando López with his M-16. Pilijay turned the AK-47 on Ellacuría, Martín-Baró and Segundo Montes. Tomás Zarpate shot the two women.

Suddenly, Joaquín López y López appeared in the residence doorway, his hands raised in a plea to be spared. As he re-entered the residence, he was shot but not killed. Corporal Ángel Pérez killed him as he lay on the floor of a bedroom. López y López had cancer and had been given perhaps six months to live.

The soldiers entered the dining room, and one opened a beer. Before leaving the yard, they found the women still groaning in each others' arms. Brutally, one made sure they were dead.

Corporal Cota Hernández dragged Juan Ramón Moreno's body back to the residence and into the room of theologian Jon Sobrino. (Sobrino was on a lecture tour in Thailand when the offensive began.) Then, apparently finding himself alone in the yard, he left the other bodies in the garden and joined his comrades.

On the campus side of the Jesuit compound, in front of the Theology Center attached to the residence, soldiers fired an anti-tank rocket and two M-79 grenades at the building and strafed it with heavy machine-gun fire. The following morning over two-hundred cartridges would be found in the street. Then, firing Bengal flares to signal the time to withdraw, the soldiers returned the way they had come. One made off with the light-brown satchel containing the five-thousand-dollar award that Ellacuría had just received in Spain. The soldiers returned to the Military Academy between 2:30 and 3:00 a.m.

The point of simulating a battle (and probably that of attempting to drag the bodies back into the residence and, of course, of using the AK-47) was to leave the impression that the Jesuits had been killed by the FMLN guerrillas. As they prepared to leave, the soldiers scribbled FMLN slogans and propaganda in the residence and on the UCA gate, in an attempt to suggest that the Jesuits were killed for betraying the leftist cause.

Ellacuría had publicly expressed hope of working with recently elected President Cristiani toward a negotiated peace. Because of this, the military could hope to portray the Jesuits as FMLN traitors. In fact, some believe they targeted Ellacuría to prevent peace and keep U.S. military aid flowing—and lining officers' pockets. Ironically, the UCA killings would do more than anything else to terminate that aid and to advance the peace process toward a negotiated settlement.

When the curfew lifted at 6:00 a.m., Obdulio Lozano emerged from his cottage to find the bodies of the Jesuits and his wife and daughter. He immediately walked to the Jesuit provincial residence a half-block outside the service gate. The provincial, José María Tojeira, was halfway through shaving when Obdulio told him the news: "They killed the padres and my wife and daughter."

Shortly thereafter, at the daily briefing of the National Intelligence Directorate (NID) near the Military Academy, Captain Carlos F. Herrera Carranza burst in to announce that he had heard on military radio that Ellacuría had been killed while "resisting arrest." According to some reports, the officers present greeted this news with enthusiasm. Later that morning, Herrera accompanied a CIA officer to view the site of the killings. The NID is a CIA creation, and the two agencies collaborated very closely during the war, sharing office space. (It has never been explained why Herrera sent an NID officer to accompany the Atlacatl Battalion during the Monday-night search of the Jesuit residence.<sup>5</sup> Herrera was later killed in combat while serving under the colonel who commanded the Atlacatl Battalion at the time of the UCA killings.)

As the news of the killings spread, scores of people, including the two bishops of the capital, congregated at the murder site.

Later, between 2:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon, a military sound truck passed by the headquarters of the Catholic Archdiocese announcing: "Ellacuría and Martín-Baró have fallen. We will continue killing the Communists." Minutes later the truck made a second pass, the same voice calling out, "Surrender! We are of the First Brigade" (of the Salvadoran army).

That same day the Jesuit provincial and the archbishop announced that the evidence suggested the armed forces committed the murders.

### *Aftermath and Cover-up*

November 18. Two days after the killings, Salvadoran Attorney General Mauricio Eduardo Colorado writes to the pope expressing his "fear for the lives of some of the bishops who . . . have persisted in keeping alive this questionable ideology of the 'church of the poor.'" Alluding to bishops Rivera and Rosa Chávez, he suggests that the two be transferred out of El Salvador for their own safety.<sup>6</sup>

November 19. The Salvadoran Minister of Defense accuses the FMLN of the murders.

November 21. A military helicopter hovers over the administration building at the UCA and fires a round of bullets through the window of Ellacuría's office.

On November 22-23. Lucía Cerna, the worker who saw soldiers in the UCA at the time of the killings, testifies to that effect in the Spanish and French Embassies in El Salvador. On November 23 she, her husband, and her daughter board a plane for Miami where they hope to receive asylum. They are to be welcomed by Jesuits in Miami. However, a U.S. Embassy officer and an FBI official insist on accompanying the family on their flight; and, once in Miami, they turn the family over to the FBI. The FBI holds the family incommunicado for a week and interrogates Mrs. Cerna with the help of a Salvadoran colonel. After four days she breaks down and changes her story. With that, her interrogators administer a lie detector test which she fails. This report is then leaked to the press. On December 9 President Cristiani tells reporters that Mrs. Cerna has lied about seeing soldiers in the UCA.

It soon became impossible, however, to deny military participation. On January 7, 1990, Cristiani announced that military personnel were responsible for the killings. Rodolfo Parker, a lawyer who aided the military Honor Commission that accused the soldiers, recently disclosed that Lieutenant Espinoza informed him in January 1990 that orders had come from top officials. Parker says he had this news relayed to Cristiani.

But from that point on any evidence pointing beyond the nine accused, mostly low-level soldiers, was smothered. The U.S.-created Special Investigation Unit assigned to the case actually helped orchestrate the cover-up. Sources and suspects were never questioned; evidence was destroyed; promising leads were ignored; people were threatened. Throughout the judicial process military officers perjured themselves and stonewalled. Some officers linked to the case died under circumstances that raised suspicion.

Washington practiced damage control, protecting its military clients. For weeks after the killings, ambassador William Walker mused in public about FMLN involvement while privately acknowledging military responsibility (recall Captain Herrera's CIA friend). It

<sup>5</sup> Jefferson Morley, "The Jesuit Murder Mystery," *Washington Post*, July 18, 1993, p. C1, C4.

<sup>6</sup> Doggett, *Death Foretold*, p. 128 n280.



soon became widely known that a U.S. military advisor (Major Eric Buckland) had been informed of Benavides's role in the killings just one month after they occurred. When Buckland came forward with this information in early January, it helped force the military's hand. Then, back in the States, on January 12, Buckland told the FBI that he had had *prior* knowledge of the killings. One week later he retracted that testimony. U.S. officials and Cristiani then hid their knowledge of Buckland's FBI testimony from the public and the court.

Among the bitter ironies is the saga of the High Command chief, Colonel Ponce. The U.S. Embassy promoted Ponce as a candidate for Defense Minister in 1991, as someone who could win over the Salvadoran officer corps to a negotiated settlement. After he became Defense Minister, it fell to the Moakley task force to inform the ambassador, if he didn't know already, that Ponce had played a major role in the UCA killings. As Defense Minister, Ponce simultaneously pushed the peace negotiations and coordinated the cover-up of the murders. After the Peace Accords, he was one of more than one hundred top officers cited to be purged for gross violations of human rights. In fact, he hung on and retired in July 1993 with full honors and a full pension.

When the trial of nine soldiers concluded in September 1991 (one, having fled, was tried *in absentia*), the Atlacatl commandos who had confessed to the killings were acquitted. Benavides and Mendoza of the Military Academy were convicted, the former for all the murders and Mendoza for the murder of Celina Ramos, which he surely did not commit. It was the first time that Salvadoran officers had been convicted of human rights violations.

Eighteen months later, on March 15, 1993, the U. N. Truth Commission released its report implicating top-level officers in this and many other war crimes. With unaccustomed speed, five days later the Salvadoran National Assembly passed a blanket amnesty covering war-time conduct. On April 1, Benavides and Mendoza walked out of prison.

The Jesuits and their dogged collaborators had pursued the legal case as a kind of class-action suit on behalf of tens of thousands of civilian victims of the armed forces and allied death squads. For most of these victims legal justice was unthinkable. The judicial results were disappointing and revealed more about El Salvador's corrupt and antiquated judicial system than anything else. Still, the process helped the truth to emerge outside the courtroom. And the truth about this case, however it

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came out, was what really counted. The UCA case uncovered the essential truth, or at least part of it, about state terror in El Salvador and U.S. complicity with it. (Punishment interested the Jesuits less than truth. Some felt a symbolic punishment was necessary to fortify social morality and a state of law. Therefore, in December 1992 the Jesuit Provincial petitioned the National Assembly to grant a legal indult to the two convicted men.)

Ten years later questions remain. "The UCA case" may not yet have run its course. Were others—politicians or other prominent civilians—involved? What did Cristiani know, and when? What did Major Buckland and the U.S. government know, and when? Those who ordered the killings are free today, and some have been accused of post-war criminal activity. Future legal action and fuller disclosure might be possible, especially if the 1993 amnesty were to be overturned as unconstitutional. The case of Augusto Pinochet, pending in Great Britain, may curb vacation plans for Salvadoran ex-generals, especially with a new International Criminal Court gearing up in Rome.

### *The Ramifications*

The murders activated a political earthquake, both in El Salvador and abroad. Inside the country, this became the crime that refused to go away. A few years later a high-ranking Salvadoran officer would confide to Ellacuria's successor, Francisco Estrada, that the killings of the Jesuits had done more damage to the Salvadoran armed forces than eleven years of guerrilla warfare. By badly undermining the prestige of the armed forces, the "Jesuit case" helped consolidate the peace process once the accords were signed two years after the murders.

Beyond El Salvador, shock waves reverberated far and wide, but nowhere more than in the United States. Central America watchers will always remember where they were when they heard the news. I was in an office at Fordham University when I received a phone call at about 9:00 a.m. on November 16. A while later, on my way to a meeting, I blurted out to a fellow professor that the Jesuits of the UCA had just been murdered. His reply stunned me: "I can't believe the guerrillas would do such a horrible thing!"

My colleague assumed that the guerrillas were responsible! By November of 1989, people had stopped following events in El Salvador. The State Department had succeeded in selling its version of reality: The U.S. was helping to consolidate democracy. Our military aid

had succeeded in professionalizing the Salvadoran armed forces. The UCA murders woke us from our bipartisan slumber. Outrage spread across the U.S., especially in the religious community. Congress was deluged by protests. In a matter of days it became apparent that military aid to El Salvador was doomed. It was just a matter of time.

The convergence of events was uncanny. It was on November 12, the second day of the FMLN offensive, that East and West Berliners first took their hammers to the Berlin Wall. It was becoming increasingly difficult to justify barbarity in Central America as necessary to counter the international communist menace. The offensive itself showed that neither party could achieve a military victory in El Salvador, but that the guerrillas could sabotage the economy indefinitely. But what if a negotiated peace led to ex-guerrillas participating in Salvadoran politics? Or even coming to power? That nightmare scenario—or pretext, if you prefer—for the "security" establishment in the U.S. evaporated when the leftist Sandinista government went down to electoral defeat in neighboring Nicaragua in February of 1990. The following month General Maxwell Taylor of the U.S. Southern Command announced that the Salvadoran armed forces were incapable of defeating the FMLN. That signaled Washington's public commitment to a negotiated peace in El Salvador.

The Peace Accords were signed on the last day of 1991. They were designed not to distribute wealth and income to El Salvador's impoverished majority—one side lacked the power for that and the other side lacked the will—but to move Salvadoran society from a state of barbarity in which the powerful prey on the weak at every level of society to a state of law in which there might be chance for reform in the future.

Now, eight years later, there has been some political and judicial reform. Unfortunately, you can't eat that, and the majority remains mired in misery. Meanwhile, violent crime rages out of control. All that is a story for another day. Suffice it for now to say we need to remember the martyrs to find our way in these tough times.

### *Looking Back and Moving Forward*

The UCA Jesuits dared to speak the truth in defense of the poor when that was mortally dangerous. They did this from a university of Christian inspiration. They understood that central to their vocation to serve the truth was the task of unmasking the public lies that deal death to the poor and that cover up their despoilment.

They taught about this in the classroom and they "projected" that discussion into the public forum. They fostered serious study and research and proposed positive solutions to problems.

Nine months after their deaths, John Paul II issued his apostolic constitution *Ex corde ecclesiae*. He said this about the Catholic university:

Included among its research activities, therefore, will be a study of serious contemporary problems in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level. University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions.

The pope went on to recognize that "if need be, a Catholic university must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society" (no. 32).

It was a fitting, if unconscious, testimony to those who had given their lives for making their university just such an institution in service to the truth, the poor, the Reign of God.

There is plenty of reason to be discouraged these days, and not just in Central America. But there are also solid grounds for hope. Visitors are struck by the hope—and goodness—which abound in El Salvador. Crisis seems to bring out not only the worst—like the death squads—but also the best—like Oscar Romero. Hope and generosity, hard to keep alive even in good times, hang on here like stubborn desert flowers, no small thanks to martyrs. This November we will gather again to let their memory nourish our hope and point us forward. Not just the UCA martyrs but *all* the martyrs. And they are legion. The Salvadoran bishops are collecting the names of the church's martyrs to send to the Vatican as the pope has requested for the Jubilee Year 2000. The bishops' list—of catechists, layworkers, priests, nuns and bishops—runs to more than one hundred pages.

Roses bloom today in the garden that now grows where the Jesuits, Celina, and Elba were killed ten years ago. It was Don Obdulio's idea. And each day people from all over come to the garden to nourish their hope and renew their commitment.



