

Training Ground for Murderers by David R. H. Smith

At seven o' clock in the morning on December 11, 1981 an evil force entered the small El Salvadorian village of El Mezote (*School of Assassins*). With painted faces and army fatigues, the guerillas carried machine guns and automatic rifles into the peaceful village. As survivor Rufina Amaya recounts, "At ten o'clock the soldiers began to kill the men who were in the church. First, they machine-gunned them and slit their throats" ("Country Sheets" 3). After the men, the women were placed face down in the dusty streets and shot to death. Amaya remembers listening as "they killed four of my children; my nine-year-old, my six-year-old, my three-year-old, and my eight-month-old daughter. My husband was killed, too... I didn't see them kill the children, but I heard the children's screams" (3). After days of hiding in the tall grass that surrounded the village, Amaya emerged to find that over 900 of her neighbors had been brutally massacred. Out of the dead, one hundred and thirty children were massacred in the horrific event, including three infants that had been burned alive (*School of Assassins*; "Country Sheets" 3). Who was to blame for the El Mezote massacre? Surprisingly, ten out of twelve of the officers responsible for the massacre were American-trained guerillas and attendees of a Latin American military school located in Fort Benning, Georgia: the School of the Americas (Barber 144). Since its creation in 1946, the American government has provided extensive training for over 58,000 soldiers from seventeen different Latin American and Caribbean nations (Brophy 1; "School of the Americas" 3-4). Principally, the school was created to support Latin American militaries in their attempt to establish democracy and "to strengthen the internal security of their republics in peace and in war" (Barber 114-145). However, the school has been responsible for training dictators, assassins, and murderers like those at El Mezote. One would assume that the United States would discontinue support for an institution whose existence has escalated violence against civilians in Latin America. Yet, even in light of the massacres and dictators that have been directly linked to the school's operation, nothing has swayed the government in its unyielding support for the school.

The United States established the School of the Americas in Panama in 1946, for the purpose training of Latin American military and police forces ("School of the Americas" 1; "School of the Americas: U.S. Military Training" 1). Prior to 1984, the United States had a network of schools in Peru and Panama that trained soldiers under CIA instruction (Buckley 5). Panamanian officials requested the U.S. to move the school out of the country, citing the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty giving Panama territorial control over the land the school occupied. In compliance, the United States withdrew the school's operations in Panama and permanently moved the school to Fort Benning, Georgia (Buckley 5).

Training Latin Americans to protect their nation through strong-arm military tactics places an emphasis on the establishment of democracy through force. How can the American government claim rogue military and police forces create an environment conducive to fostering democracy? After all, democracy that rests on the shoulders of a military regime scarcely follows what the United States claims as "democratic principles" ("School of the Americas"). Outside the United States' supervision, there are no barriers that curtail the usage of force against civilians by Latin American militaries. David Passage, former director of Andean Affairs at the State Department recently said before Congress, "The only thing that Latin American militaries have ever done with any enthusiasm or proficiency has been to beat up and shake down their own citizens, overthrow their own governments or get their countries involved in scraps with their neighbors" (United States 1944 4). Passage's claim illustrates that there is a stability problem within the military and police forces of Latin American countries and, therefore, a nation like Columbia (where in 2001, thirty-eight people died every day as a result of political and military associated violence) should not make

up 17% of the population of students at the Schools of the Americas (“Taking Stock” 1; “School of the Americas: U.S. Military” 8).

Supporters of the School of the Americas claim that the school has substantially increased trade between Latin American nations and the United States. Latin American nations are among the leading exporters of natural minerals and raw materials in the world (Schoultz 158). For example, in 1985, 37.3% of oil imported into the United States came from Latin American nations (Schoultz 158). Also, the United States’ supply of iron ore such as cobalt, platinum, and nickel are primarily exported from Argentina, Chile, and Columbia (Schoultz 149-152). Charles E. Wilhem, Commander and Chief of U.S. Southern Command Center for the Marine Corp, testified before Congress in 1999 stating, “Importance of Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States has not diminished... Economic predications [say] that by 2010 U.S. trade with the region will exceed that with Europe and Japan combined” (United States, *Testimony* 1). Wilhem’s statement illustrates that there is a correlation between economic prosperity in Latin American nations and the United States’ interest in those nations. The School of the Americas has been on the forefront of ensuring the protection of these U.S. interests.

The creation of an international school, such as the School of the Americas, is an extension of the U.S. trade policies. Training Latin American militaries to maintain an environment conducive to U.S. trade benefits U.S. economic interests in that region. As author Lars Schoultz pointed out, “It was highly rational, therefore, for the U.S. policy makers to be concerned about the security of U.S. mineral supplies from Latin America” (158). According to Schoultz, it is understandable that the United States would train Latin American militaries to protect the revenue benefited from crops and minerals obtained from those nations.

Robert Bowman recently wrote, “How many times have we done it in Nicaragua and all the other banana republics in Latin Americas? We replaced them [popular leaders] with murderous tyrants who would sell out and control their own people so that the wealth of the land could be taken by Domino Sugar, the United Fruit Company, Folgers, and Chiquita Bananas” (2). Bowman confirms the moral depravity that is inherent in U.S. economics policies towards Latin American nations. Consider the 1973 C.I.A. sponsored Chilean group with resulted in the assassination of elected president Salvador Allende (Aued 1; “Country Sheets” 2). C.I.A reports reveal that Allende was assassinated because of his unwavering views promoting socialism and anti-capitalism, which affected U.S. trade with Chile (Jost 6; Aued 1). Blake Aued alleges that “The C.I.A. organized Allende’s assassination and installed General Augusto Pinochet as dictator.... [Pinochet was] a right-winged dictator or junta who will oppress the will of the people and institute economic policies friendly to U.S. corporations” (Aued 1). Out of thirty high-ranking officers responsible for the assassination of Allende, ten were graduates of the School of the Americas (“Country Sheets” 2).

During his sixteen-year dictatorship over Chile, General Pinochet was responsible for 3,000 civilian murders and the imprisonment of over 130,000 political dissidents (Jost 6). The alleged U.S. policy of training military assassins to benefit corporate interests in the 1973 Chilean conflict was anything but democratic. Years later the American sponsored military takeover of the Chilean government is known as the “the dirty wars” because of the gross number of civilians killed during the conflict (Jost 6).

Continued U.S. support for the School of the Americas, an institution that has trained dictators and political assassins, is completely unjustifiable. Because of the school’s existence Latin American countries have had to suffer through radical military regimes, unethical U.S. trade policies, and massacres of innocent people. Very little good could ever be associated with a school that has, for fifty years, consistently trained students how to dominate civilians living in their nations through strong-arm military tactics. The United States needs to reconsider its stance on the School of the Americas because it truly is nothing more than a training ground for murderers.

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