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# Unintended consequences: U.S. interference in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Diaspora, and the role of activist community organizations in establishing a Salvadoran-American community in Los Angeles

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Unintended Consequences: U.S. Interference in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Diaspora,  
and the Role of Activist Community Organizations in Establishing a Transnational  
Salvadoran-American Community in Los Angeles

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful parents, Gunnar and Liz, who have given me endless encouragement, support, and love throughout all of my pursuits.

To my younger brother and best friend, Luke, who has always believed in me and has helped me laugh in even my most stressed state.

And to my friends, new and old, who have reminded me to save time to enjoy my final two years at James Madison University and who kept me company in the wee hours of the morning in Carrier. I'm forever grateful for all of you.

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## **Abstract**

The U.S. intervention in El Salvador had a number of unintended consequences, some negative and some positive, that still have a great impact on the U.S., El Salvador, and the international community as a whole today. Although the focus of the mass media is on the negative unintended consequences, the positive really outweigh the negative. These so-called unintended consequences began with a massive increase in immigration to escape the violent human rights violations and political persecutions of El Salvador's Civil War. This migration to the U.S. in the 1980s is referred to as the Salvadoran Diaspora, which led to an increasing number of activist community organizations founded to help these Salvadoran refugees, even though U.S. policy would not recognize migrants arriving from El Salvador as such. These organizations were largely led by Salvadoran and Latin American immigrants who had arrived in the U.S. during the Salvadoran Diaspora and were all, for the most part, located within the communities in which the migrants were arriving, in this case Los Angeles, and settling in. This cycle of unintended consequences and reactions would change alongside the needs of the Salvadoran communities following the end of El Salvador's Civil War with the implementation of the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords in order to increase focus on helping the Salvadoran community gain legal residency status. Additionally, new activist community organizations were created to focus on continued legal representation and advocacy, access to education, and the maintenance and growth of a transnational Salvadoran identity through the promotion of a shared memory of the Salvadoran Civil War and the Salvadoran Diaspora. Therefore, in order to adequately explore the relationship between the U.S. and El Salvador, an emphasis must be placed on both the

positive and negative unintended consequences of intervention, including, but not limited to, the Salvadoran Diaspora, the creation of a distinctly Salvadoran transnational community in Los Angeles, and the establishment of activist community organizations.

## Introduction

The history of the United States contains a series of complicated international relationships and controversial foreign policy positions, as well as a number of political scandals and debates that have captivated the attention of the American public. However, due partially to the explosion of social media platforms and twenty-four-hour news cycles, none have been as pervasive as the presidential campaign, and subsequent election, of Donald Trump. So far, Trump's presidency can be characterized, as comedian John Mulaney put it, as if "there is a horse loose in a hospital...it's never happened before, no one knows what the horse is going to do next, least of all the horse – he's never been in a hospital before!"<sup>1</sup> One aspect of Trump's foreign policy, and immigration policy, that has garnered particular attention and outrage, for good reason, has been his stance on topics surrounding immigration and Central America. The debates that emerged in American society following the November 2016 election of Trump were not new in any way, but the significant level of attention given to Central America, and El Salvador in particular, in the eyes of the American public and international community drastically resurged.

Largely due to the widespread misinformation regarding the historical background of this migration pattern, the lasting effects of the role of United States foreign policy and intervention in Central America, and the constant barrage of negative depictions of Central Americans by the mass media, this increased focus has been polluted by inaccurate and negative alternative histories to fit the official narrative of

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<sup>1</sup> John Mulaney, "John Mulaney: Kid Gorgeous at Radio City," directed by Alex Timbers, May 1, 2018, Netflix video, 44:34-50-58.

Trump and his supporters. Additionally, the rise and intersecting of xenophobia, nativism, and patriotism within the United States over the past few years has led to a polarized anti-immigrant American public that has disproportionately impacted Central Americans within the United States. Although this conglomeration of xenophobic, nativist, and anti-immigrant rhetoric characterized by Trump's classic rallying cry of "Build a Wall" is not historically new, nor is it unique to the United States, its present version is dangerous and has the potential to have even more detrimental international consequences than what has already happened. There are a variety of reasons as to why these particular debates on topics surrounding the historically-intertwined relationship between the United States and Central America, specifically El Salvador, and the pattern of immigration from Central America to the United States had not previously pervaded the collective American public's consciousness despite the existence of similar political debates for years prior to Trump's election. Firstly, the uniquely Trumpian brand of polarizing and incendiary rhetoric based on incomplete, or entirely inaccurate, claims are unique at the very least in the modern age of social media. In other words, "when a horse is loose in a hospital, you've got to stay updated,"<sup>2</sup> and, due to the number of biased news media reports on complicated and deeply historically-based sociopolitical debates constantly available to the public through their fingertips, a majority of the American public is misinformed or unaware of the inaccuracies propelling Trumpian rhetoric forward.

Therefore, providing a more complete historical background that does not dwell solely on the negative and actually mentions the positive is necessary to combat the

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<sup>2</sup> Mulaney, "Kid Gorgeous."

further growth of the anti-immigrant and anti-Central American sentiment that is rooted in the underlying partial and negative narrative. For this reason, this thesis seeks to historically contextualize one of the largest contemporary debates plaguing both the United States and the international community as a whole through a more complete analysis of the entangled relationship of the United States and El Salvador since the Cold War. It will also discuss both the positive and negative unintended consequences of the U.S. intervention in the Cold War-era Salvadoran Civil War, the subsequent Salvadoran Diaspora to urban centers of the United States, specifically Los Angeles, and the long-lasting consequences of this relationship from the onset to the present.

Although the Cold War, and the U.S. interventions in countless nations perceived as going “red,” has been extensively covered by historians, the historiography focused specifically on the U.S. role in the Salvadoran Civil War has been comparatively limited up until recent years. Additionally, even though El Salvador did gain a place in the national consciousness of the American public, as well as the international community as a whole, in the later period of the Salvadoran Civil War and immediately following the end of the Salvadoran Civil War with the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords due to the increase in attention to the pattern of human rights violations occurring inside El Salvador from 1980 to 1992, this attention quickly shifted back away from El Salvador after the Salvadoran “fifteen minutes of fame” had ended. This comparatively small historiography related to, and public knowledge on, the Salvadoran Civil War and the subsequent increased relationship between the United States and El Salvador can partially be accounted for because of the relatively recent, and still incomplete, declassification of

Department of State and other official U.S. government documents detailing the role played by the U.S. and the ongoing human rights violations in El Salvador.

Additionally, many of the contemporary histories of U.S. immigration studies, foreign policy studies, and U.S. Cold War-era interventions focus exclusively on the negative unintended consequences regarding U.S. action, or inaction, regarding said topics. In recent years, starting largely in the late 1990s and accelerating in the 2000s, many disciplines outside of history, including political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and many others, have attempted to address this gap by moving away from analyses focused on traditional Cold War political histories to more social and transnational accounts. Recently and fairly limitedly, historians have reflected this academic shift regarding El Salvador, even just in comparison to the significantly larger focus on Nicaragua's similar historic experiences. Therefore, by focusing more on a combination of the "positive" unintended consequences, the political, social, and economic impacts of U.S. intervention, and a more social historical approach to a traditionally political history topic, this history functions as an attempt to bridge the gap. It is important to note that by referring to the unintended consequences largely focused on throughout the next three chapters as "positive," I am by no means attempting to trivialize the very real violence, political persecution, and trauma faced and endured by the Salvadoran people throughout and following El Salvador's Civil War. In referring to unintended consequences like the foundation of activist community organizations, a transnational Salvadoran identity, and a thriving Salvadoran community within Los Angeles as "positive," I only intend to emphasize the under-mentioned ability of the

Salvadoran community to make the best out of a terrible situation and ongoing sociopolitical exclusion.

Although the topics covered throughout the following three chapters are fairly expansive and are able to provide a comprehensive history of the unintended consequences of U.S. intervention in El Salvador, as well as the necessary information required to contextualize many of the contemporary foreign policy and immigration debates, the focus of this thesis does leave room for future scholarly exploration into related topics. Topics for future research include, but are not limited to, how the activist community organizations were funded, the demographic makeup of the activist community organizations, other similar organizations outside of the six focused on, the physical process of immigration during the Salvadoran Diaspora, and a more in-depth analysis than done here of El Salvador's sociopolitical and economic structures, the groups that made up the umbrella organization of the FMLN, and further instances of both negative and positive unintended consequences from 1980 to the present. As previously stated, part of this limitation was due to the limited accessibility of documents from Salvadoran sources, information from and on the roles played by other activist community organizations, and the delayed declassification process concerning U.S. government documents from around the mid-1990s and on. That being said, one historiographical contribution of this thesis is the extensive use of primary source documents from the United States government on the intervention in and the relationship with El Salvador that were found, researched, and incorporated into this thesis from personal archival research done in the National Archives at College Park, the National Archives in D.C., and the Library of Congress. Additionally, much of the information

included on the activist community organizations came out of interviews conducted personally with members of said organizations. The inclusion of findings from both the archival research and the interviews alone add to the existing historiography and the arguments made through an analysis of said sources, especially in conjunction with more widely used or referenced primary and secondary source material, allowed for this thesis to make a new contribution to the existing historiography.

The U.S. intervention in El Salvador began in the 1930s with economic motivations, as did many of the U.S. Latin American interventions, which would lead to an increased economic inequality that would cause an undue strain on the wellbeing of the working peasant class. The peasantry rebelled, and the Salvadoran government and military forces brutally responded in a violent and indiscriminate repression known as La Matanza. This set a violent and memorable standard for the general Salvadoran public and contributed to the Salvadoran government's all-encompassing power to deter future uprisings despite the continued and growing inequality and dissatisfaction of the Salvadoran public. Therefore, due to this standard set by the government's violent reaction, there was a fear within El Salvador of rebelling that persisted over the next few decades up until the years prior to the start of the Salvadoran Civil War in 1980. Additionally, U.S. influence in El Salvador shifted from solely economic to social and political following the start of the Cold War and the success of the Cuban Revolution.

However, in the 1980s, the umbrella organization Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or the FMLN, would unite a wide range of guerrilla and revolutionary forces within and would initiate El Salvador's Civil War. This Civil War was characterized by indiscriminate government repression and state-sponsored military

violence and persecution similar to that of La Matanza. However, the main difference between La Matanza and the Salvadoran Civil War was that the Salvadoran government and military had a much greater reach and ability to combat the revolutionary FMLN because of backing and financial support from the U.S. government. This U.S. intervention greatly contributed to the extended conflict and violence of El Salvador's Civil War, which lasted twelve years, and in furthering the Salvadoran government's goals of eliminating the revolutionary FMLN and reinforcing the legitimacy of the existing government and institutional structures that were beneficial to U.S. economic, social, and political interests in El Salvador.

The U.S. intervention in El Salvador had a number of unintended consequences, some negative and some positive, that still have a great impact on the U.S., El Salvador, and the international community as a whole today. Although the focus is on these negative unintended consequences, the positive really outweigh the negative. These so-called unintended consequences began with a massive increase in immigration to escape the violent human rights violations and political persecutions of El Salvador's Civil War from El Salvador to the United States in the 1980s under what is referred to as the Salvadoran Diaspora. This increased migration led to an increasing number of activist community organizations focused on helping these Salvadoran refugees, even though U.S. policy would not recognize migrants arriving from El Salvador as such. These organizations were largely led by Salvadoran and Latin American immigrants who had arrived in the U.S. during the Salvadoran Diaspora due to the violence created by the U.S.-backed regime and were all, for the most part, located within the communities in which the migrants were arriving, in this case Los Angeles, and settling in.

This cycle of unintended consequences and reactions would change alongside the changing needs of the Salvadoran communities following the end of El Salvador's Civil War with the implementation of the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords in order to increase focus on helping the Salvadoran community that had arrived during the Salvadoran Diaspora gain legal residency status. As the needs of the community evolved, more activist community organizations were created with programs that focused on continued legal representation and advocacy, access to education, and the maintenance and growth of a transnational Salvadoran identity through the promotion of a shared memory of the Salvadoran Civil War and the Salvadoran Diaspora. However, the negative unintended consequences of gang creation in the U.S. and the increasingly strict U.S. criminal, deportation, and immigration and refugee policies that evolved alongside these positive unintended consequences would have a negative impact on both the Salvadoran state and the Los Angeles-based Salvadoran community. This evolving nature of the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship ultimately contributed to a "new" Salvadoran Diaspora that sparked a resurgence of attention on El Salvador and, more broadly, Central America as a whole and renewed focus on contemporary debates concerning U.S. immigration and foreign policy. Therefore, in order to adequately and accurately explore the relationship between the United States and El Salvador, an emphasis must be placed on both the positive and negative unintended consequences of the Cold War-era intervention, including, but not limited to, the Salvadoran Diaspora, the creation of a distinctly Salvadoran transnational community and identity in Los Angeles, the establishment of activist community organizations, and the greater impacts of the Salvadoran-American community's conceptualization as El Salvador's "Departamento 15."

In order to best articulate these deeply complex and interconnected arguments, these next three chapters progress in a relatively chronological structure. Chapter One provides a majority of the historical background to the beginning of El Salvador's Civil War and the theoretical definitions necessary to understanding the following arguments. Chapter Two deals largely with the period containing a bulk of the actual conflict of the Salvadoran Civil War, the start of the Salvadoran Diaspora in the 1980s, and the initial stages of community building within Los Angeles. Additionally, Chapter Two introduces the first three activist community organizations that played a significant role in the Salvadoran community within Los Angeles during the Civil War. Chapter Three builds on the roles of the initial activist community organizations from Chapter Two, as well as the foundation of other activist community organizations within Los Angeles during the negotiations of and following the ratification of the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords. It is in this context that Chapter Three makes arguments on the evolving needs of the individuals within the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles and the simultaneous changing of the activist community organizations to accommodate and best serve the needs of the community. Finally, the Conclusion continues the contemporary connections begun in the Introduction and further extends the argument as to why, in the current sociopolitical climate, a more complete and source-based historical analysis of the U.S. relationship with El Salvador is vital for both policymakers and the American and international public's understanding of the underlying roots of immigration and foreign policy debates and practices.

## **Chapter One: Political Violence and the U.S. Role in El Salvador Prior to the Civil War**

In January 1981, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) launched their first “Final Offensive” against the Salvadoran government. This marked the official beginning of the brutal twelve-year Civil War in El Salvador. However, the roots of this conflict and the contributing causal factors are rooted much deeper in the history of El Salvador. Since the 1930s, economic inequality, military control of the government, and a pattern of human rights violations and state-sanctioned repressive violence has defined the Salvadoran socio-political landscape. However, throughout this fifty-year period, domestic efforts at reform, the gradual revolutionizing of key figures in the Salvadoran Civil War, and international intervention and influence in El Salvador grew and laid the foundation for the creation of the FMLN and the beginning of El Salvador’s insurgent Civil War. Therefore, the root causes of El Salvador’s Civil War can be broadly broken up into three periods, defined by the 1932 Matanza, the start of the Alliance for Progress in the 1960s, and the buildup to the unification of multiple insurgent groups under the FMLN umbrella organization through the 1970s up until October 1980. Salvadoran history asks us to question typical Cold War chronologies because it shows how communism played a role in Salvadoran-U.S. relations in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution (1917) and global depression of 1929.

Much of the preexisting historiography on El Salvador’s Civil War places it as a case study of the larger global Cold War. Both internal and external factors have shaped El Salvador’s conflict. Internally, El Salvador’s dramatically uneven economy was upheld by a small ruling class, leaving a majority of the population out of the economic

and political system. One of the most influential domestic structural problems plaguing El Salvador was that of the unified power held by the economic elites and the military over key economic, social, and political institutions. This power-based partnership began around the 1880s during the “golden age of coffee” and would persist, in one form or another, until 1979. Externally, the United States supported the Salvadoran oligarchy on the basis that they were anti-communist and protected U.S. economic interests. The Cold War politics of the region changed dramatically with the successful Cuban Revolution that took place 90 miles off the coast of Florida. Twenty years later, the successful Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua also dramatically shaped El Salvador’s geopolitical landscape.<sup>3</sup>

### **Historical Background**

The period from 1880 to the Great Depression was considered the “golden age of the coffee elite” in El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. According to historian Jeffery Paige, “coffee and power have been closely linked in Central America since the nineteenth century.”<sup>4</sup> As small El Salvador became an increasingly large player in the global coffee trade, it became more and more reliant on the export of the single product of coffee than other nations like Costa Rica and Nicaragua. In order to increase production of this export commodity, the coffee elites engaged in land speculation to concentrate their ownership over the previously communal agricultural land. Increased economic pressure led small peasant farmers, many of whom were Indians, to sell their land to the prosperous coffee estates. This led to an increase in available rural agricultural

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3-34.

<sup>4</sup> Paige, *Coffee and Power*, 3.

workers who ultimately received smaller and smaller wages due to the overabundance of labor.<sup>5</sup>

The coffee elite survived the challenge to their power and continued to control El Salvador's economy, despite a downturn in their power during the depression.

Oppositional movements in the late 1920s and early 1930s did reduce the coffee elites' direct political power and made it apparent that the coffee oligarchy would no longer be able to maintain complete social, economic, and political control on its own. This led to an alliance of convenience, rather than of ideological compatibility, between the economically powerful coffee elite and the newly politically powerful military dictatorships. Despite the negative experience in El Salvador prompted by the global Great Depression, the coffee elite "did not question the logic of the system of export agriculture on which the coffee republic had rested."<sup>6</sup> The sharing of power between the coffee elite and the military dictatorships allowed the former to avoid any economic reforms that might have helped Salvadoran society as a whole, but would have come at the expense of the coffee oligarchy. Ultimately, in the period following 1932 through 1979, the year of Nicaragua's socialist revolution, the alliance between the coffee oligarchy and the military dictatorships continued, and the Salvadoran "coffee elites traded the right to rule with the right to make money."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the lack of structural reform that would correct social, political, and, in particular, economic inequities during

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<sup>5</sup> Erik Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle Over Memory* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 26; Paige, *Coffee and Power*, 22; Diana Villiers Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17-21.

<sup>6</sup> Enrique A. Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Paige, *Coffee and Power*, 22.

the 1930s contributed greatly to creating the inequality in Salvadoran society that would persist and expand in the period leading up to the Salvadoran Civil War.

This new power structure in El Salvador became increasingly evident with the start of the sixteen-year authoritarian, repressive, and extremely violent rule of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in 1931. It was the military-backed dictatorship of Hernández Martínez that set in place the ongoing pattern of coups and military juntas that would define the next fifty years of Salvadoran politics. Hernández Martínez came to power less than nine months following what is widely accepted as El Salvador's first free and fair democratic presidential election in 1931 that resulted with the victory of Arturo Araujo. Araujo ran on a platform similar to that of the British Labour Party and was a reform-minded landowner who "promised economic and social reforms."<sup>8</sup> Although the presidential race was close, the election was ultimately called in favor of Arturo Araujo who became president and installed Hernández Martínez as vice president. As president, Araujo attempted to make good on the promises of reform he made during the campaign. Araujo decided that, in order to attempt to soften the impact of the Great Depression on the Salvadoran working class, he would pass tax reforms and reduce the military's budget. The military did not like that their perceived power was being challenged by Araujo's proposed reforms and military budget cuts. Attempting a reform that the military perceived to be a challenge to their power, proved to be the crucial mistake that ultimately put the final nail in the coffin of Araujo's presidency. In December of 1931, after only being president for nine months, a military officer-led coup overthrew Araujo's

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<sup>8</sup> Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 29.

democratically elected government and began the military dictatorship led by General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez.<sup>9</sup>

### **La Matanza**

Although the Matanza in January of 1932 would ultimately become famous for the sheer level of violence and state-sponsored murder and repression, before the Matanza, peasant uprisings were recurrent features in El Salvador throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because “peasants had a long history of resorting to violence when they believed all other avenues to achieving their goals had been closed to them.”<sup>10</sup> However, in suppressing and responding previous similar uprisings, the Salvadoran government did not come anywhere close to the level of mass slaughter as that in January 1932. There are many different competing and complementary interpretation as to why the 1932 Matanza turned into such an extremely large-scale massacre, but many of the dominant explanations include an anti-communism sentiment as playing a major role in El Salvador’s Matanza. Additionally, immediately following the Matanza, the state’s political violence against the peasant rebellion was justified as a means of preventing the spread of communism in El Salvador and the United States did not condemn the violence of the Salvadoran state because of its anti-communist stance. Therefore, the 1932 Matanza, although long before the U.S. anti-communist Cold War

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<sup>9</sup> Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 72; Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition*, 1-17; Paige, *Coffee and Power*, 22, 99; Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, Erik Ching, and Rafael A. Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: The Insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 1-2, 24-27.

<sup>10</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 61.

stance, helped set the precedent for U.S. foreign policy and hemispheric relations with Latin America throughout the Cold War.

In late January 1932, the combination of an increasingly exploitative economic system based on the production and export of coffee, ongoing social tensions, and dissatisfaction with the newly established military dictatorship of Hernández Martínez, a group of farmers, agricultural workers, and Indians staged a rebellion in western El Salvador. Another contributing factor to sparking this 1932 uprising was the notoriously high population density within El Salvador. Although the rebellion was distinctly centered in the western countryside, this region directly resembled the rest of the country. For example, El Salvador was a predominately agricultural nation with an “overwhelmingly rural, poor population,” and so “regardless of where people lived throughout the country, they tended to reside in rural districts on the outskirts of small regional towns.”<sup>11</sup> This high population density within El Salvador as a whole was especially problematic in western El Salvador, where a large amount of the nation’s Indian population resided. The combination of poor peasant farmers and Indians who were reliant on the coffee industry and the damage done to this industry in the wake of the Great Depression led the already disgruntled western portion of El Salvador to take action in the form of an uprising against the institutions of power that they saw as a major root cause of the daily problems they were facing.

The pressures imposed on the peasants by commercial coffee production in the western highlands of El Salvador led to the initial peasant revolt. The group of rebels

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<sup>11</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 24.

largely directed their attacks at “symbols of local power, such as government buildings, businesses, homes, military garrisons, and local Ladino elites.”<sup>12</sup> The military’s counteroffensive against this rebellion began almost immediately in order to stop the rebellion from spreading to the rest of El Salvador and would continue for almost a month. During this time, the government and military indiscriminately massacred anyone even remotely close to where the uprisings took place. This mass slaughter of Salvadoran peasants would, from then on, be known as the Matanza, or massacre. The estimated number of people murdered by the state ranges from 8,000 to 30,000, but there is no official number because actually counting the number of dead bodies was far too risky for anyone to undertake.<sup>13</sup>

Although the legacy of the Matanza was important in radicalizing a lot of the key figures in El Salvador, events over the next fifty years, particularly following the Cuban Revolution and during John F. Kennedy’s presidency, would use and build on this legacy to garner more widespread support in El Salvador for another uprising. Immediately following the Matanza, communism was recognized as one of the main driving forces behind the peasant uprisings by individuals in both in El Salvador and in the United States. Additionally, as time went on, the historical memory of the Matanza by individuals on both the left and the right increasingly attributed the role of communist and anti-communist sentiments to the uprising and the government’s reactionary

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<sup>12</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Paige, *Coffee and Power*, 103; Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 61-62; Alistair White, *El Salvador* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973): 86-116; Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador’s Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971): 49-50; Cynthia Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1982): 13; Hugh Byrne, *El Salvador’s Civil War: A Study of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996): 23.

slaughter of between 8,000 and 30,000 peasants. However, those on the left remembered the Matanza as “act of heroism by the Communist Party,” while the right “reinterpreted 1932 as a victory over communist subversion.”<sup>14</sup> Despite these conflicting views of the Matanza, the fact that multiple different interpretations of the event acknowledge the role played by anti-communist sentiment in contributing to the violent and repressive response of the Salvadoran government and military to the Matanza provides a fair amount of credibility to this argument. Additionally, the political polarization over the memory of the Matanza would only grow over the next fifty years, which contributed greatly to setting the stage for the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War in 1980.

The *Partido Comunista de El Salvador* (PCS), or the Salvadoran Communist Party, which was founded in 1930. Additionally, 1930 marked the return of Farabundo Martí, a student organizer and member of the Central American Socialist Party, to El Salvador. Martí also headed El Salvador’s chapter of *Socorro Rojo Internacional* (SRI) which, as it described itself in one of its leaflets, was a “vast organization, without party affiliation, which accepts the idea of class struggle. It proposes to defend all the workers who are persecuted by imperialism, capitalist governments, and all other agencies of oppression...proportioning its legal aid and material and moral support to workers and their families.”<sup>15</sup> Although SRI distinctly stated that they were unaffiliated with any party or communist organization, their support for the victims of capitalism was, in the atmosphere created by the first Red Scare, enough for them to be demonized in the eyes of the anti-communist Salvadoran government.

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<sup>14</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States*, 13-14.

The tensions surrounding the first Red Scare also played a role in how international outsiders would interpret, and react to, the Matanza. Only a few days after the initial peasant uprising, and long before the amount of reactionary state-sponsored violence and mass slaughter was even close to finishing, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled “Red Revolt Sweeps Cities in Salvador.” In this article, William J. McCafferty, the U.S. *Charge d’Affaires* in San Salvador, provided information on the high level of violence in El Salvador caused by these uprisings, and, in reporting back to the State Department, had advocated for the United States to dispatch naval vessels to El Salvador in an attempt to “prevent much bloodshed.”<sup>16</sup> The article reported that, after this initial report of violence in El Salvador’s cities, that the United States Navy, along with Great Britain and Canada, sent warships because of the information the State Department received from McCafferty. The State Department, through the information released in this article, then tried to frame this decision favorably by saying that this action was out of concern for the U.S. citizens in El Salvador. *The New York Times* article then reported that, just prior to telephone communications being cut off, McCafferty informed the State Department that “serious disorders of a communistic nature had broken out,” and that officials were convinced that the uprisings were a result of the “genuine drive of Reds...who have been fairly numerous in El Salvador.”<sup>17</sup> The use of the U.S. public’s fear of communism following the “Red” revolt was successful in framing and justifying intervening in El Salvador in 1932, and would somewhat foreshadow how the United

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<sup>16</sup> “Red Revolt Sweeps Cities in Salvador,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 1932, 1.

<sup>17</sup> “Red Revolt Sweeps Cities in Salvador,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 1932, 9.

States would use the Cold War ideological tensions to justify intervening in El Salvador's Civil War fifty years later.

Overall, the real level of influence communism and anti-communism played in the 1932 peasant uprising and the subsequent Matanza is unknown, but, during the 1920s and 1930s, the Salvadoran government did establish a pattern of using anti-communist sentiment to justify the repression of dissident workers. However, "many Salvadorans considered communism to be only one of many factors shaping their society," and often cited concern about "ethnic conflict over land" in the years leading up to and following the Matanza.<sup>18</sup> Despite the presence of economic and ethnic tensions, over time the Matanza would increasingly be interpreted as an uprising sparked by the Salvadoran Communist Party and brutally shut down by the anti-communist military dictatorship of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez.<sup>19</sup>

The violent legacy of the Matanza would continue to grow and influence a rising number of Salvadoran individuals and groups to begin thinking about the need for structural reform that would ultimately result in the Salvadoran Civil War. However, it would be far too simplistic to argue that this singular event was what led to the creation of the FMLN and the start of the Salvadoran Civil War. Therefore, the Matanza alone did not directly lead to the creation of the FMLN or the FMLN launching its first "Final

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<sup>18</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Another, less common, interpretation of why General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez and his military dictatorship reacted so aggressively to this peasant uprising attributes the reaction to a combination of pure sadism and Maximiliano Hernández Martínez's disturbing religious beliefs that were centered around the concept that when a human dies, he or she will be reincarnated, but when an animal dies, they are dead forever. Therefore, killing large amounts of people indiscriminately to ensure that they don't cause any undue harm to any surrounding animals is seen as perfectly acceptable through Maximiliano Hernández Martínez's perspective. (Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 63).

Offensive” in January 1981. However, the legacy of the Salvadoran government’s violent and repressive reaction to any potential reform-minded uprising, like that of January 1932, did set the standard of what would happen if another uprising was attempted without the support of the Salvadoran general public and the proper preparation of the rebel groups to adequately combat any counterinsurgency launched by the military dictatorships. This standard of state-sponsored violence, and the relative ongoing strength of the military dictatorships, prevented any real attempt at reform in El Salvador up until 1979.

Additionally, although the events of the 1932 Matanza did not directly lead to the start of the 1980 Civil War, they did provide a substantial contribution. In the FMLN’s report detailing their plans for El Salvador’ “democratic revolutionary victory,” the events surrounding the 1932 Matanza were directly referenced. In this document that accompanied the insurgent actions of the first “Final Offensive,” the FMLN begins their arguments on the issues surrounding the political process in El Salvador by stating that “with the uprising of 1932, in which more than 30,000 workers and peasants were massacred, the military dictatorship in El Salvador consolidated itself. Since then, the political power has been taken over by the Army, alternatively placing military men at the head of the government through coups or fraudulent elections.”<sup>20</sup> Although this document clearly has an underlying political motivation, the argument that the FMLN made surrounding the repression and issues with the political process in El Salvador and continuing up until 1981, when this was written, is fairly justified. Therefore, although

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<sup>20</sup> Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front and Democratic Revolutionary Front, “El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory,” U.S. Department of State, January 31, 1981, National Archives at College Park.

the historical roots of the Salvadoran Civil War cannot solely be traced back to the 1932 Matanza, it did play a large contributing factor and initiated many of the issues that persisted and evolved over the next fifty years.

Following the Matanza, political life in El Salvador continued to be largely characterized by strong military dictatorships monopolizing political power and the elite coffee plantation owners monopolizing economic power, which left little to no space for any real sociopolitical or socioeconomic reform. However, the social memory of the Matanza would contribute to the radicalization of Salvadorans that lived through, or were born shortly after, 1932. One of these key emerging revolutionary figures was Roque Dalton, who was born in 1935. Roque Dalton was a prominent Salvadoran poet and author that identified as a Marxist and would wind up becoming one of the political leaders of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), which was an important group under the umbrella coalition of the FMLN. Roque Dalton's father, Winnall, was a member of the Dalton Brothers Gang, who were outlaws that gained an infamous reputation by robbing banks in the United States. After completing a large heist in Kansas City, Winnall Dalton fled to El Salvador. While in El Salvador, Winnall Dalton invested in coffee plantations and had a child with María García, a Salvadoran nurse. Because of his father's fortune, Roque Dalton was able to attend a number of Jesuit schools in El Salvador but was alienated from his classmates due to his mother's social class background.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Margaret Randall, "Roque Dalton: Myth, Man, Martyr, and Poet Who Defined an Era," in *More Than Things* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013): 20-21.

After he spent his childhood witnessing firsthand the deeply divided social classes in El Salvador, Roque Dalton went to Chile to study law. Winnall Dalton had apparently hoped that by sending Roque to Jesuit schools that he would become more conservative. However, that backfired terribly, and it was in the university that Roque Dalton became increasingly interested in reading Hegel, Marx, and Lenin, as well as others, and solidified his knowledge of socialist texts that would “later develop into solidly Marxist positions.”<sup>22</sup> In 1966, Roque Dalton attended a meeting of the International Communist Party in Russia and, prior to returning to Cuba and then to El Salvador, Dalton spent some time in Prague. It was in Prague that Roque Dalton met Miguel Mármol, who would also become a key figure of the Salvadoran revolution.<sup>23</sup> It was Dalton’s conversations with Mármol and his writing on Mármol’s experiences during the Matanza that initially solidified Dalton’s status as a revolutionary figure in El Salvador.

Mármol was one of the founding members of the Salvadoran Communist Party in 1930 and one of the few individuals who survived the mass slaughter in the 1932 Matanza, even after being arrested under the suspicion that he was one of the communists who organized the uprising. After being arrested, Mármol was taken, along with eighteen other prisoners, to a large ditch to be executed by a firing squad. Mármol was shot four times, “but he survived, largely because so much blood had been spilled on him that as a police officer was preparing to deliver the *coup de grâce* a superior told him not to waste

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<sup>22</sup> Randall, “Roque Dalton: Man, Myth, Martyr, and Poet,” 21; Yanina Calderon, “Roque Dalton García: Salvadoran Poet, Internationalist and Revolutionary,” Liberation School (May 12, 2016): 2, <http://liberation-school.org/roque-dalton-garcia-salvadorian-poet-internationalist-and-revolutionary/>; Claribel Alegría, “Roque Dalton: Poet and Revolutionary,” <http://www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/surgery/dalton.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 2.

the bullet.”<sup>24</sup> While the two men were in Prague, Miguel Mármol told Roque Dalton his life story in a series of interviews that Dalton would eventually turn into a book entitled *Miguel Mármol: Los Sucesos de 1932 en El Salvador*, or *Miguel Mármol: The Events of 1932 in El Salvador*. It was in this book that Dalton cemented his own role as a key revolutionary literary figure, and, through the context of Mármol’s life, analyzed the events of 1932, the regime of Hernández Martínez, and the roles played by U.S. intervention and imperialism.<sup>25</sup>

Roque Dalton was a key figure in the Salvadoran revolution both as an intellectual leader and a militaristic guerrilla figure. Even while fighting in the ERP, Dalton continued to write extensive amounts of poetry and prose advocating for the ideals of revolution that he had become a crucial player in. Additionally, Dalton played a huge role in influencing his fellow countrymen in moving towards a revolution through his poetry’s focus on the polarization of Salvadoran society, as well as the deeply problematic structural issues within El Salvador, that stemmed from the Matanza’s impact on Salvadoran society. In this way, Roque Dalton’s role in shaping the ideology of the revolutionary groups that would make up the FMLN was a prime example of the significant impact that the Matanza, as well as the international atmosphere of revolution within Latin America, had on the ultimate beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War.<sup>26</sup>

### **Continued State-Sponsored Repression and U.S. Intervention in the 1960s**

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<sup>24</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 3, 132-140.

<sup>26</sup> Joaquin M. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador’s Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 2-3; Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 1-4, 132-147.

The next major period of attempted reform through insurgency, with immediate repressive counterinsurgent backlash from the Salvadoran military dictatorships in power, was the late 1950s leading into the early 1960s and John F. Kennedy's assumption of the U.S. presidency. The attempts of revolutionaries here are no longer best described as peasant uprisings, or the small-scale uprisings focused more on local reform that occurred in January 1932 and resulted in the Matanza. Instead, it was during this time period that revolutionary groups in El Salvador used insurgency methods that would become the foundation for the tactics taken by the FMLN during the Civil War. An insurgency can be loosely defined as "an organized attempt to overthrow a central government or state by subversion or by force of arms."<sup>27</sup> The pattern of repressive violence that the Salvadoran military dictatorships had continued since the Matanza, therefore, was engaging in counterinsurgency in an attempt to maintain the status quo.<sup>28</sup> A main contributing factor as to why the Salvadoran government's counterinsurgency strategy was able to be so successful during this time period was the intervention and aid from the United States. Although the presence of U.S. intervention was felt in El Salvador, and in Latin America in general, much earlier than Kennedy's presidency, it was at this point in time that the U.S. policy towards the insurgencies occurring throughout Latin America shifted through the implementation of the Alliance for Progress. Additionally, it was under Kennedy that the official Cold War anti-communism strategy "became one of not only

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<sup>27</sup> Russell Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 16.

<sup>28</sup> Counterinsurgency can be broadly defined as any measures adopted to suppress an insurgency, but more specifically, a state engaging in counterinsurgency "generally means that it is attempting to use some combination of political, administrative, military, psychological, and civic actions to maintain the status quo against an insurgent force that is trying to upend that order." (Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars*, 16).

counterinsurgency, but also support for democracy” through the use of “modernization theory.”

The adaptation of traditional Cold War strategies of the United States to fit the Central American context changed over time but, by the time of the start of El Salvador’s Civil War in 1980, the use of rhetoric detailing the need for the prevention of the spread of communism was prominent. In El Salvador, the United States’ Cold War strategy was based in part on “modernization theory,” which combined the traditional elements of counterinsurgency through military and economic aid with the promotion of democracy, economic growth, and security. Modernization theory countered dependency theory which had advocated that Latin American underdevelopment was a result of global development where resources flow from a “periphery” of poor and underdeveloped states to a “core” of wealthy states, enriching the latter at the expense of the former. Modernization theory, under the Kennedy administration, advocated that “to ensure protection from both internal and external subversion, states needed capable militaries and police forces, and the United States could and should assist anticommunist governments to arm and train their security forces.”<sup>29</sup> Although this counterinsurgency approach was adapted gradually over time, by the time that the Salvadoran Civil War was in full swing, the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush approached Cold War foreign policy regarding Central America had clearly developed from Kennedy’s implementation of policies based on modernization theory. The Reagan administration put great emphasis on the provision of support to ideologically

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<sup>29</sup> Crandall, *America’s Dirty Wars*, 156.

compatible, although sometimes highly oppressive, regimes like the Salvadoran junta in order to contain the perceived Soviet incursion and power in Central America.<sup>30</sup>

One way that the Kennedy administration pursued modernization theory in El Salvador was through the beginning of the Alliance for Progress. Although many public justifications were given by the Kennedy administration for instituting this “benevolent” and aid-oriented program, part of the underlying motivation for Kennedy to pursue the promotion of internal order in El Salvador, and Latin America in general, was to avoid the possibility of “another Cuba.”<sup>31</sup> In implementing the Alliance for Progress, “economic development” became one of two main facets because “its logic held that new government opportunities for the poor would reduce social grievances and the appeal of calls for revolutionary change...and it was thought that economic growth would create an expanding middle class, which was seen as the bastion of liberal democratic values.”<sup>32</sup> The second facet of the Alliance for Progress was closely intertwined with that of economic development, and it relied on U.S. military aid programs that would “professionalize” the Salvadoran military in order to prepare it “to combat Castro-style guerrillas.”<sup>33</sup> This professionalization of the Salvadoran Armed Forces was seen largely as a preventative step to ensure the protection of the new economic development programs.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Pee, *Democracy Promotion, National Security and Strategy: Foreign Policy Under the Reagan Administration* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 49; Joseph S. Tulchin, *Latin America in International Politics: Challenging US Hegemony* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016): 8; Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 307; Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars*, 156.

<sup>32</sup> Arnson, *A Revolution Confronts the United States*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Arnson, *A Revolution Confronts the United States*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars*, 155-156; Arnson, *A Revolution Confronts the United States*, 20; Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War*, 24-25; Diana Villiers Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to*

Ultimately, the Kennedy administration, as well as the following presidential administrations leading up to the start of El Salvador's Civil War, saw the Alliance for Progress as a means to prevent revolutionary insurgency. However, the prevention of insurgency through the Alliance for Progress would ultimately fail because of internal forces within El Salvador's provocation of the Salvadoran Civil War. Even though the exacerbation of existing internal strife during the 1960s and into the 1970s built largely off of the same structural issues of the Matanza, the preventative counterinsurgency preparation of the Salvadoran military by the United States would just exacerbate the violence leading up to and including the start of the twelve-year Civil War.<sup>35</sup>

Over the next few years, the Alliance for Progress programs that were intended to decrease the need for a revolutionary insurgency in El Salvador became increasingly less and less effective. By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the attempt to placate the call for reform through "economic development" failed because it did not address the structural problem with El Salvador's economy: the continued control by a few economic elites of an export-crop economy. Ultimately, the worsening economic conditions "forced the majority of the population into an untenable and deteriorating economic situation by the late 1970s."<sup>36</sup> Additionally, because the military dictatorship political structure did not allow for any space in which the peasantry could participate and institute potential

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*Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 23-25; Ronald G. Hellman and H. Jon Rosenbaum, eds., *Latin America: The Search for a New International Role* (New York: SAGE Publications, 1975).

<sup>35</sup> Arnson, *A Revolution Confronts the United States*, 20; Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War*, 17-27; Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador*, 23-25; Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara-Martínez, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador*, 88-89.

<sup>36</sup> Byrne, *El Salvador's Civil War*, 17.

reforms, the potential to inspire change through democratic means seemed impossible and many believed that an insurgent revolution was the only option left. Throughout the 1970s, an increasing amount of revolutionary groups had emerged and grown in prominence throughout El Salvador's society. However, it was not until 1979-1980 that the unification of these opposition groups, and the creation of the FMLN, that this idea of a revolutionary insurgency would change into a real possibility.

### **The Creation and Rise of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front**

The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front was symbolically named after Farabundo Martí, who was captured, tried, and condemned to death for “treason and conspiracy” for his role in the peasant uprising of 1932. Martí also founded the *Partido Comunista de El Salvador*, or the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS) in 1930, and, for this reason, became the “figurehead and martyr of the Salvadoran revolutionary movement.”<sup>37</sup> All of the guerrilla groups that would eventually combine under the umbrella organization of the FMLN in the 1970s can trace their roots back to Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS). However, despite ultimately unifying under the FMLN, it is important to note that all of these groups maintained their own autonomous and unique group identity and leadership. The FMLN was a “front,” which means it was a “coalition of various organizations, united for a specific goal and in which each retains its own identity.”<sup>38</sup> The main components that made up the FMLN were the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), the National Resistance (RN), the

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<sup>37</sup> José Angel Moroni Bracamonte and David E. Spencer, *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995): 1.

<sup>38</sup> Yvon Grenier, “Understanding the FMLN: A Glossary of Five Words,” *Conflict Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 51.

Central American Revolutionary Workers' Party (PRTC), and the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS). The FMLN combined a couple major groups that had been fighting against the oppressive Salvadoran government in the mid-1960s. All of the guerrilla and revolutionary groups that would eventually combine under the umbrella organization of the FMLN in the 1970s can trace their roots back to the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCES). One of the most significant of these groups was the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) which drew much of their ideological and tactical foundations from the revolutionary Marxist Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The political faction was led by Roque Dalton.<sup>39</sup>

These five groups that would ultimately come together in October 1980, although all leftist organizations, were far from a heterogeneous group and disagreed on almost everything, including the strategy that the FMLN should pursue in its insurgency. However, the event that ultimately allowed these individual groups to pursue revolutionary change successfully, at least to a degree, was their unification and "its ability to present itself to the world as a single entity and subsume the divisive factionalism between the groups."<sup>40</sup> Although this unification is largely attributed to the perceived need for a revolution, and the recognition that a unified front would have a better chance against the U.S.-backed counterinsurgent Salvadoran military forces, the international influence and mediation role of Cuba played a significant role in the original

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<sup>39</sup> Yvon Grenier, "Understanding the FMLN," 53-54; Andrea Oñate, "The Red Affair: FMLN-Cuban Relations During the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-92," *Cold War History* 11, no. 2 (May 2011): 134; Alberto Martín Álvarez, "From Revolutionary War to Democratic Revolution: The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador," *Berghof Conflict Research* (2010): 8; Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Forging Democracy from Below: Insurgent Transitions in South Africa and El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Directorate of Intelligence, "El Salvador: Significant Political Actors and Their Interaction," Central Intelligence Agency (April 1984): 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador*, 40.

process of unification. An additional connection between Cuba and the five revolutionary groups that would unify under the FMLN was that in 1961, Dalton was sentenced to death for inciting a communist revolution. He fled to Cuba where his personal communist ideals were cemented along with his belief in the need for revolution in his homeland. In Cuba, Dalton witnessed and took part in the Cuban Revolution, where he learned guerrilla tactics and received military training that he would bring with upon his return to El Salvador in 1965.<sup>41</sup>

In the period leading up to the October 1980 unification of the revolutionary groups, Cuba played a large role in mediating the conflicts between the groups and ultimately creating the space conducive of unification. As Andrea Oñate pointed out in her article entitled “The Red Affair: FMLN-Cuban Relations during the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-1992,” Cuban leadership pointed out three compelling points to the factions of Salvadoran revolutionary groups. First, unification of the revolutionary groups would make opposing the U.S.-backed Salvadoran military much more feasible, especially following the ramp up of repression and violence against insurgencies following the success of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua. The second decisively compelling argument in favor of unification was an analysis of the path taken by the FSLN. Like in El Salvador, the revolutionary insurgent groups in Nicaragua began as disunified organizations. However, following the unification of these organizations with Cuban support, the FSLN quickly was able to mount an offensive and overthrow Nicaragua’s military dictatorship. The third, and final, argument made by the Cuban

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<sup>41</sup> Calderon, “Roque Dalton García,” 2; Randall, “Roque Dalton,” 21-24; Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1982): 65.

leadership was by far “the most alluring incentive for unity: extensive Cuban support contingent on this unity.”<sup>42</sup> The leaders of the individual revolutionary organizations, therefore, agreed that a Cuban-backed insurgency would provide them the best chance against a U.S.-backed counterinsurgency, and so the groups finally unified under the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

### **Systemic Socioeconomic Inequalities and the Salvadoran Junta**

The systemic socioeconomic inequality in El Salvador was sustained through the prevention of land reform by a militarized and authoritarian political system that was designed to benefit the small upper class of the agriculture-export industries. Although El Salvador relied on multiple various agricultural products to sustain their agricultural-export economy, after the middle of the nineteenth century, coffee became the most important. In order to encourage productivity and increase the export and trade with the global community, including the United States, peasant farmers and the middle-class were forced by the government to sell their land to the agrarian elites to create more prosperous coffee estates. This marginalization of the lower classes by the Salvadoran government and the economic elites began a new wave of socioeconomic inequality in El Salvador that would continue in one way or another until the Cold War era. Up until the late-1970s, when the build up towards a revolution and FMLN-led insurgency was apparent, the violence in El Salvador was based on these socioeconomic inequalities. This form of violence is referred to as ‘institutionalized violence’ because its purpose was

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<sup>42</sup> Oñate, “The Red Affair,” 138.

to serve the social, economic, and political institutions that benefitted the economic elites.<sup>43</sup>

In 1980, the Salvadoran government under the Christian Democratic Party proposed a program of agrarian reform that would benefit a majority of the non-agricultural-elite population and was founded in decades of reform advocacy dating back to the nineteenth century that was popular with the lower and middle classes of Salvadoran society but was ultimately squashed by the political and economic elites. If the agrarian reform was allowed to continue, the socioeconomic status of the coffee elite, as well as their control of a significant amount of El Salvador's land, would be seriously threatened. This led the coffee elite, along with their allies in the military and their allies in Washington, to start an attempt to block the agrarian reform by any means necessary. Because of the large-scale aid of the Salvadoran military, as well as the comparatively smaller U.S. aid, the coffee elite were able to overthrow the 1980 government and establish a new, agricultural-export elite sympathizing junta. In turn, this outraged the middle-class revolutionaries that made up the FMLN and marked the official beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War. Therefore, the argument that scholars, like Diana Villiers Negroponte, make through this analytical approach to the Salvadoran revolution and Civil War is founded in two contentions that challenge the dominant Cold War battle for ideological hegemony and democracy promotion explanation. First, Negroponte contends that the internal actors, as opposed to external intervening actors, were the main forces in

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<sup>43</sup> Wim Savenije and Chris Van Der Borgh, "Youth Gangs, Social Exclusion and the Transformation of Violence in El Salvador," in *Armed Actors: Organized Violence and State Failure in Latin America*, edited by Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2004): 157-159; Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador*, 15-17.

the Salvadoran Civil War. In addition to recognizing the active role played by Salvadoran institutions, more and more scholars like Negropte are putting a greater focus on the role of socioeconomic inequality and various forms of violence prior to and during the Salvadoran Civil War in order to show the evolution of violence in the postwar period.<sup>44</sup>

With the historic roots of Roque Dalton's People's Revolutionary Army and continued Cuban support, the consolidation of revolutionaries under the FMLN's umbrella alliance in the period leading up to the Salvadoran Civil War made the reality of a successful social revolution in El Salvador appear possible. However, the FMLN underestimated the extent to which the United States-backed, Christian Democratic Party-run Salvadoran government, or the junta, and their counterinsurgent tactics would go to suppress the FMLN's insurgency.<sup>45</sup> The junta sought to "use some combination of political, administrative, military, psychological, and civic actions to maintain the status quo against an insurgent force that is trying to upend that order."<sup>46</sup> This counterinsurgent response of the Salvadoran central government and El Salvador's Armed Forces against the FMLN insurgency was financially and militarily supported greatly by the United States and, specifically, the Ronald Reagan administration. Support for the massive level of aid provided to the Salvadoran junta was framed through both traditional Cold War rhetoric promoting hegemony and, especially in the later years, through the argument that

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<sup>44</sup> Negropte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador*, 17-21.

<sup>45</sup> An insurgency is often but certainly not always an organized attempt to overthrow a central government or state by subversion or by force of arms. It is important to remember that insurgents are not synonymous with terrorists if we define the latter as targeting noncombatants in order to sow fear in a population for political ends. (Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 16-17)

<sup>46</sup> Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 15-17.

the aid allowed for the nation of El Salvador to move towards better democracy through more fair elections, human rights protections, and a professional military.<sup>47</sup>

The adaptation of traditional Cold War strategies of the United States to fit the Central American context changed over time but, by the time of the start of El Salvador's Civil War in 1980, the use of rhetoric detailing the need for the prevention of the spread of communism was prominent. In El Salvador, the United States implemented a form of John F. Kennedy's "modernization through militaries" approach to anticommunism. This combined the traditional elements of counterinsurgency through military and economic aid with the promotion of democracy, economic growth, and security. This led the Kennedy administration, and the following administrations in one form or another, to stress that "to ensure protection from both internal and external subversion, states needed capable militaries and police forces, and the United States could and should assist anticommunist governments to arm and train their security forces."<sup>48</sup> Although this counterinsurgency approach was adapted gradually over time, by the time that the Salvadoran Civil War was in full swing, the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush approached Cold War foreign policy regarding Central America under a clear influence of Kennedy's modernization theory. The Reagan administration put great emphasis on the provision of support to ideologically compatible, although sometimes highly oppressive, regimes like the Salvadoran junta in order to contain the perceived Soviet incursion and power in Central America.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 315-319; Negroponte, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador*, 24.

<sup>48</sup> Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 156.

<sup>49</sup> Pee, *Democracy Promotion, National Security and Strategy*, 49; Tulchin, *Latin America in International Politics*, 8; Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 307; John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015);

The United States justified intervention by saying it was a means to promote democracy. However, there were also other underlying rationales used while determining what the Cold War foreign policy towards El Salvador would be. For example, the promotion of democracy and economic reform over the adoption of communism would, in the long run, be more favorable to and protective of the US economic interests in El Salvador. Ultimately, the full scope of the intervention of the United States in Salvadoran affairs, as well as how this intervention was perceived by Salvadoran citizens, is summed up in Roque Dalton's poem entitled "O.E.A." In this poem, Dalton writes "...Y el Presidente de los Estados Unidos es más Presidente de mi país que el Presidente de mi país."<sup>50</sup> This translates to say that the "United State's President's more my country's President than my country's President is." This poem shows how the FMLN and its leaders viewed the role of the U.S. and that was as an indirect but powerful neo-colonial power. This point of view was justified through the experience of Nicaragua and other Central American countries that had gone through similar Cold War-era revolutions and faced a state-sponsored counterrevolution supported by the United States. Although the United States did not attempt to directly control the Salvadoran government, the indirect hegemonic influence, military training, and financial aid provided by the United States allowed for, as Dalton perceives, pseudo-control of the Salvadoran state.

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Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Marvin E. Gettleman, Patrick Lacefield, Louis Menashe, David Mermelstein, and Ronald Radosh, eds., *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1981); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Abraham F. Lowenthal, ed., *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America: Themes and Issues* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

<sup>50</sup> Roque Dalton, "O.E.A," in *El Salvador: A La Revolucion Por La Poesia* (Guadalupe: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 1983): 60.

Following the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War, it appeared to the Reagan administration and the United States that the American values of democracy and anticommunism were in danger due to the FMLN-led insurgency. The U.S. therefore justified their intervention in El Salvador, as well as their passive tolerance of the countless human rights violations committed by the junta and the military, by arguing that the levels of violence would be worse if the FMLN was to rise to power. However, to most Salvadorans, the Civil War was not considered to be yet another proxy battlefield for determining the ideological supremacy of the Cold War. The Salvadoran Civil War, in the eyes of a large amount of the citizenry, was founded in revolting against El Salvador's history of social, economic, and political inequality and the institutionalized violence these inequalities brought.<sup>51</sup>

Although the FMLN did argue for the overthrow of the junta, the revolution was not, as the United States government believed, an attempt to rid El Salvador of democracy. Rather, it was the FMLN's motivations of a reduction in social, economic, and political inequality, the marginalization these inequalities caused, and an end to the institutionalized violence perpetrated by the governing junta through socioeconomic and political reform through the creation of a more reliable democracy to end the agricultural-elite's control of El Salvador. In order to rally global support and to clear up any misperceptions as to the motivations of the FMLN in the Salvadoran revolution, the FMLN issued a document entitled "El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic

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<sup>51</sup> Tulchin, *Latin America in International Politics*, 82-87; Charles D. Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*; Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*; Tom Buckley, *Violent Neighbors: El Salvador, Central America, and the United States* (New York: Times Books, 1984).

Revolutionary Victory.” In this report, the FMLN laid out a brief history of El Salvador as a means of providing background for why the FMLN emerged and what the intended principles of reform were to be implemented following the success of the revolution’s launch of the “Final Offensive” in January 1981. The “Final Offensive,” as designed by the FMLN’s newly untied guerrilla umbrella organization, intended to capitalize on the public’s dissatisfaction with the recently failed agrarian reform in order to trigger a popular insurrection to overthrow the repressive junta government.

In “El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory”, the FMLN argues that the history of El Salvador “can be condensed in terms of repression, murder, torture, prison, exile, and social marginalization,” and that the junta’s prevention of the implementation of the 1980 agrarian reform was the latest iteration of the political violence committed against the citizens of El Salvador.<sup>52</sup> The FMLN also used this document to clarify to the global community that, despite the “distortion” of the conflict in the international press, the FMLN was not “a terrorist movement seeking violence for violence’s sake.”<sup>53</sup> The document went on to specifically call out the role played by the United States government as “dangerous and irresponsible” with detrimental consequences of the intervention, including the prolonging the conflict unnecessarily and the “raising of its cost in terms of human lives.”<sup>54</sup> Despite these clarifications and explanations of the FMLN’s intended purpose and ultimate goals of revolution, as well as

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<sup>52</sup> United States Department of State, “El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory,” in Record Group 59: El Salvador II Document Collection, Part 17: “Final Offensive” by FMLN, January 10, 1981, National Archives at College Park.

<sup>53</sup> United States Department of State, “El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory,” 20.

<sup>54</sup> United States Department of State, “El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory,” 43-44.

the explicit condemnation of U.S. intervention as a proxy battlefield for the Cold War ideological battle, the United States continued, and amplified, aid to the Salvadoran junta government and military forces. This caused the so-called “Final Offensive” of 1981 to ultimately fail in overthrowing the government, and so the period of massive political violence caused by the Salvadoran Civil War continued until 1992.<sup>55</sup>

### **The FMLN’s First “Final Offensive”**

In January of 1981, after only about three months of being a unified revolutionary insurgent front, the FMLN launched their first “Final Offensive.” Prior to the actual insurgent acts of the “Final Offensive,” the FMLN issued a report entitled “El Salvador On the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory.” In this document, the FMLN wrote “a brief report on El Salvador, its political process, human rights violations and the war of extermination,”<sup>56</sup> starting with the 1932 Matanza. This document was also meant to describe the composition of the FMLN straight from the source, and to show “the basic principles of the future democratic revolutionary government that we intend to establish in the near future.”<sup>57</sup> However, because the first “Final Offensive” happened so quickly after unification, the revolutionary groups within the FMLN did not yet fully know how to effectively work together while mounting a unified insurgency, which was ultimately one of the main reasons for the failure of this “Final Offensive.” Additionally, in the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War, many of the revolutionaries believed, due to the

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<sup>55</sup> Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 304-307; George R. Vickers, “The Political Reality After Eleven Years of War,” in *Is There a Transition to Democracy in El Salvador?* edited by Joseph S. Tulchin and Gary Bland (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992): 28-30.

<sup>56</sup> FMLN and FDR, “El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory,” January 31, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> FMLN and FDR, “El Salvador on the Threshold of a Democratic Revolutionary Victory,” January 31, 1981.

recent triumph of the FSLN in Nicaragua, that the insurrection would quickly triumph following unification of the FMLN and the launching of the “Final Offensive.” In fact, the “Final Offensive” was scheduled to take place so soon after unification so that the FMLN “would be able to seize power before the hawkish Reagan administration took office a few weeks later.”<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, this backfired and began the violent and drawn out twelve-year Civil War.

Another reason that the first “Final Offensive” failed was that the FMLN underestimated the willingness of the U.S. to intervene in internal affairs of their nation after the 1979 socialist revolution of Nicaragua. A declassified U.S. Department of State Memorandum between Abraham Rodriguez, a former Salvadoran presidential candidate from the U.S.-supported Christian Democratic Party (PDC), and U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Frank J. Devine, documents their conversation about the potentially dangerous similarities between Nicaragua and El Salvador. In fact, the memorandum revealed that the diplomats feared El Salvador might be “potentially worse than the crisis in Nicaragua because unlike Nicaragua where dissent is basically focused on one man and his family dynasty, political polarization in El Salvador is based on growing antipathy toward the entire civilian/military establishment which has governed the country since 1932.”<sup>59</sup> A month later, a message to the Assistant Secretary of State was sent that contained Ambassador Devine’s further assessment of the situation, and stated that “there is going to be political change, probably made more likely by events in Nicaragua.”<sup>60</sup> This

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<sup>58</sup> Crandall, *America’s Dirty Wars*, 306.

<sup>59</sup> Abraham Rodriguez and Frank J. Devine, “Memorandum of Conversation: Former Christian Democratic Party (PDC) Candidate Analyzes National Political Scene,” *U.S. Department of State*, June 15, 1979, National Archives at College Park.

<sup>60</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Patricia M. Derian, “El Salvador,” *U.S. Department of State*, July 17, 1979, National Archives at College Park.

acknowledgement of the potential for insurgency a whole year and a half prior to the FMLN launching their first “Final Offensive” showed that the United States was not only worried about the insurgency in El Salvador following the successful path of Nicaragua, but that the United States, and their allies in the Salvadoran counterinsurgency government and military, had time to, and did, ramp up their counterinsurgent preparation to effectively combat insurgency when, not if, it came. Additionally, the FMLN underestimated the extent to which the United States-backed, Christian Democratic Party-run Salvadoran government, or the junta, and their counterinsurgent tactics would go to suppress the FMLN’s insurgency.

El Salvador’s history has been a complex interweaving of domestic tensions and international exasperation of, and intervention because of, said tensions. Starting with the 1932 Matanza and its reactionary, repressive, and extremely violent government massacre of peasant uprisings, the power of El Salvador’s social, economic, and political institutions were effectively monopolized through the alliance of the coffee oligarchy and military dictatorships. The complete and overarching control that this alliance gave to a few powerful individuals, as well as the standard of violence set by the state-sponsored Matanza, was maintained up until the start of the twelve-year Salvadoran Civil War in 1980. In other words, by looking at the gradual radicalizing of individual revolutionaries, like Roque Dalton, and the insurgent revolutionary groups that would ultimately make up the FMLN, the ongoing legacy of the memory of the 1932 Matanza is apparent. Additionally, by analyzing the impact of the Alliance for Progress, and its ultimate failure to prevent an insurgent uprising in El Salvador, the evolution of the structural issues rooted in the 1932 Matanza, and directly argued against within the FMLN’s justifications

for mounting its first “Final Offensive,” shows just how far back into El Salvador’s history the issues being fought over in El Salvador’s Civil War went. Finally, although the existing domestic economic, social, and political tensions played a large role in the buildup to El Salvador’s Civil War, the global context in which these tensions existed further exacerbated El Salvador’s domestic political climate to a point that it was conducive to the beginning of an insurgency and a large-scale Civil War. The United States intervention in El Salvador, driven largely by Cold War-era tensions and the recent success of the Nicaraguan insurgency, played an influential role in the effectiveness of the Salvadoran government’s counterinsurgency, while the financial aid and influence of Cuba provided a necessary incentive for the unification of the insurgent groups under the FMLN. However, it was the combination of all of these deeply complex domestic and international tensions, actors, and organizations that ultimately led to the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War.

## **Chapter Two: Salvadoran Immigration and Responses in the U.S.**

Overall, the period following the initial 1980 beginning of El Salvador's Civil War up until the 1992 Peace Accords was a turbulent time for both Salvadorans in El Salvador and the newly transnational communities of Salvadorans in the United States. This humanitarian crisis and fairly profound change in immigration patterns from El Salvador to the United States began the Salvadoran Diaspora, and this moment in history continues to impact legal, social, political, and humanitarian policies, organizations, and debates in both the United States and El Salvador presently. Although most of this "blowback" from U.S. immigration and refugee policy has been portrayed negatively in recent media, especially under the Trump administration and regarding the "Salvadoran" gang MS-13, the upsurge in the creation of Salvadoran activist organizations and the establishment of transnational communities, like that of MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, that revolved around an evolving, yet distinct, Salvadoran identity is proof of a positive form of blowback that does not get its due recognition in the mainstream public consciousness. This activism of community organizations, like the Los Angeles Sanctuary Movement, El Rescate, and CARECEN, combined religious-based humanitarianism, preexisting activism that had been persecuted in El Salvador, and the few U.S.-based Central American-focused ideals in order to overcome a bias in U.S. immigration policy that excluded Salvadorans fleeing persecution from rightfully claiming refugee status within the United States. Additionally, although all three organizations did make an active attempt in the early years to address the root causes of the political violence that led to an increase in Salvadoran refugees, the main focus became the Los Angeles communities in which the organizations were located. By

focusing on the arrival city of Los Angeles and, more specifically, the MacArthur Park neighborhood in which a majority of Salvadoran refugees arrived, settled, and established lives in, these activist organizations were able to take the relatively small amounts of funding available to them and most efficiently, and directly, provide legal, social, political, and humanitarian aid and representation to the Salvadoran communities. Also, by creating a welcoming and helpful arrival city in which the refugees were able to set down permanent roots, the activist organizations contributed to the creation of a community within MacArthur Park that had a common history in and memory of the Salvadoran Civil War and El Salvador in general. This allowed the refugees to maintain their distinct Salvadoran identity and culture while, at the same time, created a new transnational identity and community of Salvadoran-Americans in Los Angeles that would continue to grow while still maintaining their connection with their country of origin, El Salvador. Therefore, the 1980-1992 was the foundational period for both the hyphenated transnational community of Salvadoran-Americans as well as the first grouping of major activist organizations focused on Salvadorans in the United States that would continue to grow in influence and scope, as well as influence the establishment of new, similar organizations, in the years following the 1992 Peace Accords in order to address the evolving needs of the Salvadoran-American community.

Immigration from El Salvador to the United States prior to the 1980s was relatively small. The Salvadoran Civil War in 1980 sparked a new pattern of migration resulting from Salvadoran civilians fleeing political violence and persecution hoping to claim asylum or be given refugee status. This Salvadoran Diaspora continued throughout the twelve-year period of El Salvador's Civil War and contributed to the creation of

distinctly Salvadoran communities within urban spaces in the United States, like Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. This diaspora also gave rise to activist community organizations that advocated for the recognition of the Salvadoran immigrants as refugees because this designation would provide a legally recognizable status for the Salvadorans arriving in the United States. Additionally, following the implementation of Peace Accords by a United Nations-sponsored Truth Commission, these Los Angeles-based activist community organizations evolved alongside of the needs of the Salvadoran community by shifting their advocacy focus away from recognition of Salvadorans as political refugees to the recognition of the members of these established Salvadoran-American communities as legal permanent residents. Through the activism of these community-based organizations, Los Angeles became one of, if not the, primary arrival city for Salvadorans fleeing political violence in El Salvador during the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the proliferation of said activist community organizations focused on the provision of aid to Salvadorans in Los Angeles, a growing Los Angeles-based group of Salvadoran activists, and the creation of a transnational Salvadoran identity and community.

### **Definitions of the Salvadoran Diaspora and Transnationalism<sup>61</sup>**

Although the term “Salvadoran Diaspora” has been accepted within the academic community as a way to describe the pattern of migration out of El Salvador to the United States following the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War in 1980, the identification of Salvadoran migration to other countries as a diaspora only began in the late 1990s and

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<sup>61</sup> In the context of this thesis the Salvadoran Diaspora will be diaspora with a capital “D” when referencing the actual event that began in the 1980s.

early 2000s. However, as diaspora is usually understood “as a collectivity of individuals who have been displaced from a common origin, and who are now dispersed in a variety of locations,” the term fits relatively well with the Salvadoran experience.<sup>62</sup> The Salvadoran Diaspora, in turn, has led to the transnationalism of the Salvadoran national identity. Transnationalism, or “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement,” is evident in the case of El Salvador and is epitomized through the example of the Salvadoran experience in Los Angeles.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, although migration from El Salvador to the United States had existed, and was likely to continue to exist, prior to the Salvadoran Civil War, the drastic increase in the Salvadoran out-migration during the Salvadoran Diaspora was heavily influenced by the push factor of the start of the Civil War and the subsequent political violence, persecution, and economic instability.<sup>64</sup>

### **Political Violence in El Salvador and the Start of the Salvadoran Diaspora**

As mentioned in Chapter One, the start of the Salvadoran Civil War in 1980 was characterized by a still ununified FMLN’s launch of the First “Final Offensive” in 1981, the ultimate failure of this “Final Offensive” to achieve any of its stated goals, and the overreaction of the Salvadoran junta, or military government, with backing from the United States, in suppressing this “leftist uprising.” On December 10, 1981, following the failure of the “Final Offensive” to be final, the pattern of political violence that

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<sup>62</sup> Susan Bibler Coutin, “Originary Destinations: Re/membered Communities and Salvadoran Diasporas,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 39, no. 1 and 2 (Spring-Summer 2010): 47.

<sup>63</sup> Beth Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004): 17.

<sup>64</sup> Coutin, “Originary Destinations,” 47; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 17.

characterized El Salvador's Civil War begun with a vengeance. The junta had received notice of a group of FMLN guerrillas gathering in the eastern province of Morozan, and so El Salvador's Armed Forces were deployed. Upon arriving, the Salvadoran troops did not try to distinguish between FMLN insurgents and innocent civilians that lived in the Morozan province and "deliberately and systematically executed hundreds of men, women, and children." This massacre of over 200 civilians, of which more than half were "children younger than eighteen," by the Armed Forces of El Salvador became known as the El Mozote Massacre.<sup>65</sup>

The conversations about the Civil War changed when it was discovered that a civilian massacre had taken place and these reports reached the U.S. mainstream press. In January 1982, international media attention and news reports on the El Mozote Massacre began. Alma Guillermoprieto, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, published an article, "Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing." She quotes the Salvadoran Ambassador to the U.S., Ernesto Rivas Gallont, who denied that the Armed Forces of El Salvador would ever indiscriminately and purposefully massacre women and children. Rivas went on to confirm that, yes, there was an offensive in Morozan by the Salvadoran Army in December, but that the actions were against the FMLN guerrilla insurgents and "definitely not been against the civilian population." Throughout the rest of the article, however, Guillermoprieto reports evidence, and retails stories from survivors who had escaped to a guerrilla-protected camp that witnessed the "alleged" massacre. Guillermoprieto personally communicated with the FMLN and then traveled to El

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<sup>65</sup> United States Institute of Peace, "From Madness to Hope: The Twelve-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador" (United Nations Security Council: January 26, 2001), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf>; Crandall, *Dirty Wars*, 323-325.

Salvador's Morozan province to see for herself if there was evidence of the El Mozote Massacre. She wrote about trekking through deserted towns in the Morozan province until she finally reached the town of Mozote, which she described as looted, destroyed, and smelling of "decomposing bodies." Guillermoprieto stayed in an FMLN guerrilla encampment and, while there, she was able to interview the few refugees staying in the guerrilla encampment from Mozote about the violence committed by the Salvadoran Army. Following the publication of this article, the Reagan administration, Ambassador Rivas, and the U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Deane Hinton, all denied the accuracy of Guillermoprieto's article as well as the accuracy of related news reports.<sup>66</sup>

In May 1982, Hinton, who had been the ambassador to El Salvador since 1981 and was appointed under Ronald Reagan, had still not reached a definite conclusion as to the involvement of the Salvadoran Army in the massacre of civilians at El Mozote. However, despite not being able to confirm anything, Hinton adamantly argued some important points related to the nature of violence in El Salvador. The first, and most significant, point Hinton argued in this telegram was that even if there were civilian deaths near Mozote, a systemic massacre by the armed forces was simply impossible. Secondly, Hinton stated that any possible deaths around El Mozote were not uninvolved civilians, but rather were guerrilla collaborators. Finally, Hinton stated that if civilian death did occur, it was nowhere near the amount reported by the international press because those numbers were inflated by "leftist propaganda." Hinton's ultimate message in this May 1982 telegram to Reagan administration officials in Washington was that the

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<sup>66</sup> Alma Guillermoprieto, "Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killings," *The Washington Post* (January 27, 1982), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1982/01/27/salvadoran-peasants-describe-mass-killing/bc5bb029-b5e6-4282-bd24-35739ea5b38c/?utm\\_term=.190a1de58163](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1982/01/27/salvadoran-peasants-describe-mass-killing/bc5bb029-b5e6-4282-bd24-35739ea5b38c/?utm_term=.190a1de58163).

political violence within El Salvador, as embodied by the Salvadoran government and armed forces, did not target civilians and therefore were not the human rights-violating “death squads” described in the international press. Because the United States provided funding and military training to the Salvadoran junta and armed forces in order to aid in their fight against the FMLN, the desire of the Reagan administration to portray the Salvadoran junta and armed forces favorably was high.<sup>67</sup>

Following the virtual denial of the El Mozote Massacre by Deane Hinton and by senior Reagan administration officials in Washington, news reporters and foreign correspondents, like Guillermprieto, began to disregard the government’s reports on the state of political violence in El Salvador. This especially regarded to information related to the Salvadoran junta or armed forces due to the underlying motivations of the U.S. government to paint a favorable picture of the Salvadoran junta. Following the El Mozote Massacre “credibility gap” that came out of the dramatically different stories told by the press and by the U.S. government about the same event, journalists and the American public began to dismiss the government reports as “propaganda.”

In late 1982, on the heels of the conflict between the press and the government on the “credibility gap” concerning the El Mozote Massacre, Deane Hinton and the American Embassy in San Salvador attempted to definitively chart the violence in El Salvador over a twelve-month period starting in September 1980 and ending in September 1981. This report was titled “A Statistical Framework for Understanding Violence in El Salvador.” Within this report, Hinton contended that the need for this

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<sup>67</sup> Deane Hinton, “Attempt to Confirm Data on El Mozote Massacre,” U.S. Department of State (May 1982), National Archives at College Park Record Group 59.

statistical framework was due to “the breakdown of the country’s social and political systems and the onset of the civil war exacerbated the march toward a society where violence is the central factor of daily life.”<sup>68</sup> This argument that Salvadoran society was, and would continue to be, an inherently violent state would have made sense if the data reported by Hinton was viewed in isolation. However, this analysis ignored many key outside influences to this period of widespread political violence. For example, this report did not attempt to situate the Salvadoran Civil War in the larger context of the Cold War-era revolutions in Central America or in the context of the Cold War-era U.S. intervention, and therefore does not acknowledge the role played by the provision of funding by the United States to the Salvadoran government.

Another problem of Hinton’s report was that the data collected by the Embassy relied largely on the reports of political violence and murder in the Salvadoran media. Although the Salvadoran media did report on the political violence and murder in in El Salvador, the data being reported was very nonspecific and vague. This limited and nonspecific data from the Salvadoran media led to increased unreliability in the reports founded on this data being analyzed and reported on from the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador. This margin of error became even more clear when Hinton compared the statistical data compiled by the Embassy to two reports compiled by the Central American institutions of the Central American University and the religious institution Socorro Jurídico. Both the Central American University and Socorro Jurídico regularly kept statistical data on the violence in El Salvador. All three various versions of the

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<sup>68</sup> Deane Hinton, “A Statistical Framework for Understanding the Violence in El Salvador,” U.S. Embassy in El Salvador (1982) Records of the U.S. Department of State, National Archives at College Park Record Group 59.

existing data on the levels of political violence and murder in El Salvador had their individual issues, but the two Central American institutions consistently reported similar figures to each other while the figures reported by the Embassy were drastically different. For example, during the month of April 1981, the Embassy reported 493 incidents of political violence. On the other hand, the Central American University reported 2,341 and Socorro Jurídico reported 2,311. The margin of error between the Central American University figures and the Socorro Jurídico figures was understandable, but the same could not be said for the figures reported by the U.S. Embassy and Deane Hinton. The credibility of the amount of political violence reported by Hinton was questionable, especially since this report was compiled so soon after Hinton's inability to confirm or deny any real details about the El Mozote Massacre.

This report on the statistics of violence in El Salvador did, however, contain some information that provided insight on the nature of violence in El Salvador's society. For example, this report supported the argument that political violence negatively impacted a greater number of Salvadoran youths than any other demographic. In his analysis of the data, Hinton stated that it was "without question" that it was the "young who are the principal victims here." This negative impact of the political violence of the Salvadoran Civil War on the youth stemmed from the original issues of social, political, and economic inequalities, as well as the subsequent marginalization, that the FMLN's initial "Final Offensive" strove to combat in 1981. Due to the twelve-years of intense political violence in El Salvador, and the ultimate failure of the revolution, the underlying inequalities were never wholly solved – in fact, it is easy to see that they worsened.

### **Definitional Differences and the Exclusion of Salvadoran Refugees**

During the 1980s, the Salvadoran migrants fleeing the aforementioned political violence and persecution of El Salvador's Civil War were seen, under U.S. immigration policy, as economic migrants and not political refugees or asylees. Therefore, the U.S. government's position on the Salvadoran migrants, many of whom had entered the United States without legal authorization, was that they were "economic immigrants who deserved to be deported to El Salvador rather than persecution victims who deserved political asylum in the United States."<sup>69</sup> This stance was especially controversial because migrants from "unfriendly" Central American nations, like Nicaragua, where the U.S.-backed regime was not in power, were recognized as refugees. For Salvadorans and Guatemalans, who were fleeing nations under the control of U.S.-supported governments, it would have been anathema to U.S. policy in the region to declare them as fleeing a hostile government. The failure of the U.S. government to provide a legal and accessible designation for the Salvadoran migrants fleeing persecution in the 1980s combined with increasing political violence there and an increasing number of Salvadoran activists seeking refuge in the U.S. led to the initial establishment of community organizations in Los Angeles. At first, these focused specifically on providing aid to the growing community of Salvadoran refugees. These community organizations began to work in the 1980s to secure legal protection for Salvadoran and, to a lesser extent, Guatemalan refugees. This was largely due to the interest of the Salvadoran activists arriving in Los Angeles prioritizing providing aid to their homeland and their fellow Salvadorans arriving in Los Angeles. Therefore, according to sociocultural anthropologist Susan Bibler Coutin, the early beginnings of many of these community organizations and

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Bibler Coutin, *Nations of Emigrants: Shifting Boundaries of Citizenship in El Salvador and the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007): 8.

nonprofits came out of “a solidarity movement composed of religious groups, political activists, and legal advocates [that] sought to establish that the United States government was discriminating against Salvadoran and Guatemalan asylum seekers due to foreign policy considerations.”<sup>70</sup> Additionally, many of these early manifestations of community organizations, nonprofits, and solidarity movements were founded by the educated and previously organized Salvadoran activists who had already fled the political violence and persecution of El Salvador with the ultimate goal of establishing legalization programs for Salvadorans fleeing the war as well as advocated to address one of the main root causes of the political violence of the period, the ongoing U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government.<sup>71</sup>

During the Civil War, Salvadorans that opposed both sides of the conflict, the FMLN and the Salvadoran junta, fled the civil strife within El Salvador to the United States, seeking protection through asylum. This pattern of migration that began, grew, and remained consistent throughout the early 1980s from El Salvador to the United States continued following the official ending of the Cold War, the signing of the Salvadoran Peace Accords in 1992, and well into the 2000s and 2010s. Under the 1980 Immigration and Nationality Act, political asylum could be granted to migrants that establish a “well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>72</sup> This definition adopted by the United

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<sup>70</sup> Susan Bibler Coutin, “Cause Lawyering and Political Advocacy: Moving Law on Behalf of Central American Refugees,” in *Cause Lawyers and Social Movements*, edited by Austin Sarat (2006): 104.

<sup>71</sup> Coutin, “Cause Lawyering and Political Advocacy,” 101-119; Coutin, “Originary Destinations,” 47-72; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 17; Norma Chinchilla and Nora Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 133-134.

<sup>72</sup> Donald Kerwin, “The Faltering US Refugee Protection System: Legal and Policy Responses to Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, and Others in Need of Protection,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2012): 3-4.

States was very similar to, and founded in, the definition created by the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention that sought to define and provide new protections for a class of migrants fleeing the violence of World War Two. The United Nation's broad definition of "refugee" are "persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection."<sup>73</sup> The 1951 Refugee Convention details the various conditions under which a person could claim refugee status in the eyes of the United Nations but, for the most part, the U.N. High Commission on Refugees, or UNHCR, keeps the definition purposefully broad and generalized so that it can be easily applicable to future refugee situations, like those of Cold War-era Central America and, more specifically, Civil War-era El Salvador.<sup>74</sup>

Almost immediately following the U.S. adoption of this definition of refugee and asylee, the U.S. role in Cold War Central America entered a newly intense stage. Between 1981 and 1990, "almost one million Salvadorans fled repression at home" and made the dangerous journey to the United States to seek asylum. However, because of the U.S. involvement in the conflict in El Salvador, and the support it pledged for the Salvadoran government, the United States government classified these fleeing migrants as "economic migrants" that were ineligible for political asylum status. If the United States would have granted asylum to individuals fleeing El Salvador, that would imply that the United States was acknowledging that the potential Salvadoran asylees were

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<sup>73</sup> United Nations, "Refugees and Migrants Definitions from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees," accessed March 1, 2019, <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/definitions>.

<sup>74</sup> Rebecca Hamlin, "Ideology, International Law, and the INS: The Development of American Asylum Politics 1948-Present," *Polity* 47, no. 3 (July 2015): 320-336; Kerwin, "The Faltering US Refugee Protection System," 3-8; United Nations, "Refugees and Migrants Definitions.;" Leisy J. Abrego, "On Silences: Salvadoran Refugees Then and Now," *Latino Studies* 15, no. 1 (2017): 73-85.

oppressed and, because the United States had an explicit role in supporting the Salvadoran junta financially and militarily, it would have been viewed as political suicide to label these regimes as oppressive. This was where the acute differences between the United Nations and United States definitions of who qualified as a refugee or asylee really mattered. For example, while, under the United Nations definition, Salvadorans fleeing the political violence and routine pattern of massacre that characterized the early Salvadoran Civil War were individuals who “feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order,” the U.S. definition was ever-so-slightly different and, therefore, exclusionary towards Salvadorans. Rather than just adopting the UNHCR definitions’ “feared persecution,” the U.S. definition of refugee included the phrase “well-founded fear of persecution.” This small, but significant, change required those fleeing persecution and claiming refugee or asylee status to have substantial evidence of state-sponsored repression or violence against an “immutable” personal characteristic, like “race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>75</sup> Not only is this “well-founded fear of persecution” immensely difficult for anyone to obtain whilst fleeing a repressive regime, the ability of Salvadoran refugees to show evidence of the Salvadoran state’s political violence was made even more difficult due to the active refusal of the United States government to acknowledge the repressive role of the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government and military, as shown through the vague and inconclusive nature of Ambassador Deane Hinton’s reports.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, from the beginning,

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<sup>75</sup> Kerwin, “The Faltering US Refugee Protection System,” 3-4.

<sup>76</sup> Kaitlin L. Locascio, “The Modern Refugee: Crafting a New Asylum Policy to Address the Realities of Today’s Refugee Oppressors,” *Loyola Journal of Public Interest Law* 17, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 40-41; Kerwin,

Salvadorans entering the United States during the early 1980s faced huge roadblocks and the need for non-governmental assistance and aid for this growing community became increasingly clear. This need, in conjunction with the portion of Salvadoran refugees already involved in activist networks in El Salvador, led to the rise of Salvadoran-led and focused activist groups in the United States dedicated to providing aid to this new distinctly Salvadoran community.<sup>77</sup>

The United Nations as an outside international perspective on the human rights situation in El Salvador was important in the debate over the status of Salvadorans arriving in the United States and claiming refugee status. A similar outside contribution on the monitoring of human rights violations in El Salvador was made by Amnesty International's annual reports. In these reports, Amnesty International acknowledged the wrongdoings of groups on both sides of the Civil War, which was an important outside contribution from an international organization in adding to the reports from the United States, the United Nations, and El Rescate, which will be mentioned in depth in upcoming sections. In the 1985 report, Amnesty International wrote that they "continued to be concerned about massive human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention without trial, torture, "disappearances," and individual and mass extrajudicial executions."<sup>78</sup> The report went on to acknowledge the role of the FMLN in related human rights violations and persecution, but then emphasized that the

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"The Faltering US Refugee Protection System," 3-4; Hamlin, "Ideology, International Law, and the INS," 326-328.

<sup>77</sup> Kerwin, "The Faltering US Refugee Protection System," 3-10; Locascio, "The Modern Refugee," 40-43; Hamlin, "Ideology, International Law, and the INS," 326-328; Coutin, "Cause Lawyering and Political Advocacy," 102; Coutin, *Nations of Emigrants*, 8-30.

<sup>78</sup> Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 1985 on El Salvador," London: Amnesty International Publications (1985): 143, National Archives at College Park Record Group 59, Box 35.

overwhelming majority of the human rights violations occurring in El Salvador came from either official government forces or “death squads” made up of both military and civilian supporters of the Salvadoran junta. This claim was supported by Amnesty International’s inclusion of a quote from a 1984 report entitled *Extrajudicial Executions in El Salvador: Report of an Amnesty International Mission to Examine Post-mortem and Investigative Procedures in Political Killings* that found “that many of the estimated 40,000 people killed in political violence in the preceding five years had been murdered by government forces who openly dumped mutilated corpses in an apparent effort to terrorize the population.”<sup>79</sup>

This general sentiment on the human rights violations in El Salvador being committed largely by the Salvadoran junta and military in an officially supported capacity was continued in the 1987 Amnesty International Report. However, the main difference between the 1985 and 1987 reports was that in 1985 the compilation of information by Amnesty International workers was relatively unhindered. The amount of information contained in the 1987 report and the “collection of human rights abuses,” however, “was hindered by a wave of arrests of human rights workers and by interference in the work of journalists.”<sup>80</sup> This increased repression of human rights workers in El Salvador was representative of the increasing levels of violence and persecution of individuals and groups outside of those in support of the Salvadoran junta, including the FMLN, and echoed the UN’s advocacy for the recognition of Salvadorans fleeing a “well-founded fear of persecution” as refugees. Additionally, the information compiled in

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<sup>79</sup> “Amnesty International Report 1985,” National Archives at College Park, 145.

<sup>80</sup> Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Report 1987 on El Salvador,” London: Amnesty International Publications (1987): 160, National Archives at College Park Record Group 59, Box 36.

these reports, as well as other Amnesty International reports, spanning the years of the Salvadoran Civil War gave further fuel to activism in the United States for the adaptation of U.S. refugee and immigration policy to make the official refugee status more inclusive of and accessible to those arriving in the U.S. during the Salvadoran Diaspora.

### **Salvadoran Activism in the United States**

The term “activism,” as it is used in this paper, is necessarily broad and encompasses a wider range of activist and advocacy-focused individuals and groups. Activism, as a form of advocacy, in this context consists of “ongoing efforts, often by members of nongovernmental organizations, to influence policy in a particular area.”<sup>81</sup> Additionally, the term “activism,” in the context of this thesis, should not be read with the negative connotation typically associated with the term in the United States. In Latin America, the word “activism” or “activist” can be used in a more neutral way than the militant way that it is traditionally used in the United States. In this case, the policy area on which activism is focused is immigration and the rights of refugee and immigrant groups in the United States. Additionally, in this context, the terms “activism/activist,” “community organizations,” and “nonprofit organizations” are often used interchangeably, and usually refer to groups with the same or similar goals. For example, a community organization like the ones that will be discussed are often also nonprofits that are a group of individuals with the activist goal of providing aid to the U.S.-based Salvadoran communities and influencing policy regarding the legal recognition and rights of said Salvadoran community.<sup>82</sup> For the sake of this paper, the focus will be on the early

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<sup>81</sup> Coutin, “Cause Lawyering and Political Advocacy,” 102.

<sup>82</sup> “The term community organization is difficult to define. Most of the Los Angeles-based immigration-related organizations that claim this designation are nonprofits that work with low-income people and

activist groups that emerged in Los Angeles following the initial start of the Salvadoran Diaspora including, but by no means limited to, the Los Angeles Sanctuary Movement, El Rescate, and the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN).<sup>83</sup>

The Central American Sanctuary Movement officially began on March 24, 1982 in Tucson, Arizona under Jim Corbett, a Quaker, and John Fife, a Presbyterian minister, when the two were caught illegally escorting undocumented Salvadoran refugees into the United States and then threatened by INS officials for sheltering these people in churches and homes of those who supported the movement.<sup>84</sup> The Sanctuary Movement as a social movement quickly grew and spread beyond solely Tucson and Catholic religion-based sanctuary to other major U.S. cities, like Los Angeles, and other religious institutions, such as Jewish synagogues, as well as non-religious institutions such as colleges and entire cities, and also grew to provide aid to refugees from Central American nations. Additionally, the start date of the Central American Sanctuary Movement – March 24, 1982 – was symbolically significant to the increasingly transnational Salvadoran identity within the United States and the growing Salvadoran communities because it was the second anniversary of the politically motivated assassination of the Salvadoran archbishop Monsignor Oscar Romero. Msgr. Romero was a saint-like figure in the eyes of the Salvadoran community. Additionally, as of October of 2018, Romero has been officially recognized by the Catholic Church as a saint, further showing his significance

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whose mission includes not only providing services but also some form of political advocacy concerning immigrants' rights. Community is a legitimizing term within both United States and Central American legal and political activism." (Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 80-81).

<sup>83</sup> Susan Bibler Coutin, *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants' Struggle for U.S. Residency* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000): 80-81; Paul Almeida, *Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizen Protest* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>84</sup> Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, Nora Hamilton, and James Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," *Latin American Perspectives* 169, no. 6 (November 2009): 105.

as a martyr for much of Latin America. Therefore, the beginning of the Sanctuary Movement occurring on this anniversary carried both real and symbolic weight in the eyes of Central American activists.<sup>85</sup>

The combination of the beginning of the Sanctuary Movement and the founding of activist organizations like El Rescate and CARECEN in Los Angeles at the same time led to the full scope of social and political advocacy on behalf of gaining refugee status for the community of Salvadoran immigrants. However, it was the Sanctuary Movement's ability to transcend religiously-based humanitarian concerns and lead to the beginning of a widespread questioning of the social and political conditions that were the root causes of why Salvadoran immigrants indeed qualified for refugee status, and why, under U.S. policy, this group was not recognized as such. Even though the Sanctuary Movement in Los Angeles was one of many programs that advocated on the behalf of Salvadoran refugees, it is widely accepted that it had a profound effect, especially "with respect to its most immediate, humanitarian goals" of protecting Salvadoran refugees from deportation and providing aid to this growing community.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, many of the activists that got their start with the Sanctuary Movement have continued fighting for the provision of humanitarian aid to asylum-seekers and migrants making the dangerous journey from Central America to the U.S. border. For example, Fife, who I mentioned was one of the founders of the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, more recently helped found

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<sup>85</sup> Susan Bibler Coutin, "From Refugees to Immigrants: The Legalization Strategies of Salvadoran Immigrants and Activists," *The International Migration Review* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 906-908; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 145; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," 102-123; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 2-4.

<sup>86</sup> Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," 123.

the group No More Deaths in 2004 as the same founding beliefs of the Sanctuary Movement. In an article for the Los Angeles Times, Fife is quoted on the topic of No More Deaths, saying, in language similar to that of the Sanctuary Movement, that “We have every legal right to provide humanitarian aid in a human disaster like the thousands of deaths that have occurred here in the Sonoran Desert” after being recently charged, prosecuted, and told to desist “interfering” in what is the U.S. Border Patrol’s job, according to the federal prosecutor.<sup>87</sup>

### **Origins and Early Years of El Rescate and CARECEN**

Another important unintended consequence that resulted from the U.S. intervention in El Salvador’s Civil War and the resulting Salvadoran Diaspora was the increasing focus on the rights of Central American refugees and immigrants within the United States. The upsurge in immigration out of Central America to the United States began in the 1970s due to similarly escalating conflicts in Nicaragua and Guatemala, and further increased with the humanitarian crisis caused by the political violence of El Salvador’s Civil War in the 1980s. The individual identities of these refugees were diverse, and included “students, labor leaders, religious representatives, and others who had been persecuted because of political involvement in their respective countries.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Molly Hennessy-Fiske, “Should Activists Aid Migrants in the Desert, or Leave Their Fate to the Border Patrol?,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-arizona-migrant-rescue-trial-20190308-story.html>; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 123.

<sup>88</sup> Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 108.

Developing around the same time as the Los Angeles Sanctuary Movement were two nonprofit community organizations that focused specifically on the growing Salvadoran community in the Westlake, Pico Union, and MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles.<sup>89</sup> This location reflected the transforming neighborhood of Pico Union – although it had historically been a poor African American neighborhood, following the Central American, and more narrowly Salvadoran, Diaspora, this MacArthur Park region became the hub for the Salvadoran refugees arriving to the United States, and is still today very recognizably a Salvadoran and Central American community.<sup>90</sup>

The first organization, El Rescate, was founded in 1981 by a group of Salvadoran refugees who had previous activist experience primarily through schools and universities in El Salvador. In the beginning, El Rescate served as a catchall organization for a variety of the needs of Central American refugees and also worked to implement a “multi-faceted approach to address past human rights abuses perpetrated by military and paramilitary forces.”<sup>91</sup> El Rescate did not attempt to frame the violence as solely one-sided and coming only from the Salvadoran armed forces but also actively acknowledged the violence coming from the FMLN. This distinction allowed for the reports done by El Rescate, along with the data on human rights abuses in El Salvador during the Salvadoran Civil War, to be much more credible than that coming from either the Salvadoran media

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<sup>89</sup> As far as I can tell, Pico Union, Westlake, and MacArthur Park are all referring to the same general neighborhood.

<sup>90</sup> Milton R. Machuca, “In Search of Salvadorans in the U.S.: Contextualizing the Ethnographic Record,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 39, no. 1 and 2 (Spring-Summer 2010): 9-10; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 2-4; Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping Our World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010): 76-82.

<sup>91</sup> Todd Howland, “How El Rescate, a Small Nongovernmental Organization, Contributed to the Transformation of the Human Rights Situation in El Salvador,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 30 (2008): 704; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 108.

or the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador. Additionally, it would be this data on each reported circumstance of human rights violations, compiled under El Rescate's "Index to Accountability" leading up to and during the 1992 end of the Salvadoran Civil War that the United Nations would use to run a Truth Commission and shape the Salvadoran Peace Accords. Therefore, in the beginning, El Rescate not only focused on providing aid to the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, but also on ending the political violence and Salvadoran Civil War while also ensuring that there would be an appropriate reference point, the Index, to be used in assigning accountability for the human rights violations committed throughout the Salvadoran Civil War.<sup>92</sup>

El Rescate began as a very small nonprofit organization with only three paid staff members – a lawyer and two paralegals – along with a substantial network of activist volunteers. This network of volunteers was one of the main reasons for El Rescate's success and influence, because these individuals were largely "Salvadorans linked to an array of organizations and social movements," so, "the NGO was able to factor many of the complexities into its work to provoke and facilitate change."<sup>93</sup> Over its 38-year history, it has helped thousands of people while remaining relatively small, with a paid staff of only 10 people. Because El Rescate was the first of its kind in the United States, it attempted to address a wide range of needs of the Los Angeles-based Salvadoran

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<sup>92</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 3; Howland, "El Rescate," 704-709; Coutin, "Cause Lawyering," 104; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 66-67; Coutin, "From Refugees to Immigrants," 906; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 133-134; Coutin, "The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles," in *Latino Los Angeles: Transformations, Communities, and Activism*, edited by Gilda Ochoa and Enrique Ochoa (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016): 159-161; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," 108, 123; Almeida, *Mobilizing Democracy*; Interview with Salvador Sanabria.

<sup>93</sup> Howland, "El Rescate," 707.

community through the provision of services such as homeless shelters, a medical clinic (*Clínica Monseñor Oscar Romero* or the Archbishop Oscar Romero Clinic), deportation defense, and the legal representation of refugees seeking political asylum. El Rescate developed a strategy to address the root causes of refugee flow, or the political violence within El Salvador, as well as a specific Legal Department, developed in 1987, to petition international organizations, such as the United Nations, on the dire situations plaguing the Salvadoran refugees.<sup>94</sup>

The Central American Refugee Center, or CARECEN, was founded two years after El Rescate in 1983 by “a Salvadoran refugee committee, United States church leaders, attorneys, and community activists,” and its development was undoubtedly influenced by the early successes of both El Rescate and the Los Angeles Sanctuary Movement.<sup>95</sup> However, CARECEN differs from both El Rescate and the Los Angeles Sanctuary Movement in that it is a national organization with four regional offices, in addition to the initial office in Los Angeles, in San Francisco, Houston, New York, and Washington, D.C., which are, and were during the 1980s, major arrival city hubs for Salvadoran and Central American refugees arriving in the United States. The initial office in Los Angeles offered “legal and social services to those fleeing the war and, after the war, it created new programs, including cultural programs and educational activities for

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<sup>94</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 3; Howland, “El Rescate,” 704-709; Coutin, “Cause Lawyering,” 104; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 66-67; Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 906; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 133-134; Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 159-161; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 108, 123; Interview with Salvador Sanabria.

<sup>95</sup> Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 108.

youth.”<sup>96</sup> However, like El Rescate and the Los Angeles Sanctuary Movement, CARECEN relied heavily on the already existent networks of religious and other activists that were already established in El Salvador prior to the Salvadoran Diaspora. Additionally, because religion, specifically Catholicism, is a large part of Salvadoran identity, the incorporation of this value and the use of religious leaders in activist groups was very strategic and contributed to the solidification of a transnational Salvadoran identity and community in the Westlake Los Angeles neighborhood.<sup>97</sup>

### **The Sociopolitical Strategy of the Salvadoran “Refugee” Classification**

Due to the aforementioned differences in the United Nations and United States definitions of refugee, and because U.S. policy excluded Salvadorans from accessing this status, one of the main focuses of the three activist groups, as well as many others, focused specifically on advocating for Salvadorans to be identified as refugees in the United States. Therefore, these activist community organizations adopted a strategy founded in framing Salvadorans as refugees in the United States. Additionally, the initial hope of Salvadoran refugees was that the Salvadoran Civil War would be quick. However, this hope pretty much fully vanished in 1983 when the “FMLN in El Salvador shifted to a strategy of *guerra prolongada*,” or prolonged war.<sup>98</sup> This realization that the conditions in El Salvador would not be getting better anytime soon also contributed to the

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<sup>96</sup> Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 67.

<sup>97</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 3; Coutin, “Cause Lawyering,” 104; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 66-67; Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 906; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 133-134; Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 159-161; Almeida, *Mobilizing Democracy*; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 108, 123.

<sup>98</sup> Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 161.

increased activist for the legal, political, and social recognition of the Salvadoran communities within the United States as communities of refugees and also led to the foundation of more groups like El Rescate and CARECEN that focused specifically on “the legal, political, and humanitarian needs of the burgeoning United States Salvadoran population.”<sup>99</sup> These activist groups, as well as the Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees themselves, made an active attempt to invoke a political strategy founded on distinguishing themselves from “other immigrant groups on the ground that they were entitled to refugee status and had more compelling reasons to be in the United States.”<sup>100</sup> This would remain a key component of the political and legal strategy of the activist organizations up until the late 1980s and early 1990s when the switch from the focus of Salvadoran identity as refugees to an identity of a legitimate group of immigrants deserving of legal status in the United States.<sup>101</sup>

Prior to the late 1980s and early 1990s switch from Salvadoran refugee identity to Salvadoran immigrant identity, the political tactic of continuously framing Salvadoran refugees as refugees, which they were under United Nations law but not United States law, was a key component of the political, legal, and humanitarian approaches taken by all three of the activist groups previously mentioned. These activists who employed this strategy that “sought not only to save lives and prevent deportations, but also to affect the

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<sup>99</sup> Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 161.

<sup>100</sup> Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 161.

<sup>101</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 3; Howland, “El Rescate,” 704-709; Coutin, “Cause Lawyering,” 104; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 66-67; Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 906; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 133-134; Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 159-161; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 108, 123; Hamlin, “Ideology, International Law, and the INS,” 320-336; Coutin, “Legalizing Moves,” 149-150; Kerwin, “The Faltering US Refugee Protection System,” 1-33.

course of the Salvadoran Civil War.”<sup>102</sup> By framing Salvadorans in the U.S. as refugees, activists hoped to extend federal legislation that would grant Extended Voluntary Departure (EVD) status, similar to an early form of Temporary Protected Status, to Salvadorans in the U.S. and, therefore, recognize them as refugees. This would not only aid the individual lives and communities of Salvadorans that had been established, and were the main focus of the activist organizations, but it also, as the activist organizations argued, could lead to an earlier end to the Salvadoran Civil War. The activist organizations thought that the granting of EVD status to Salvadoran refugees in the U.S. could lead to an earlier end in the Salvadoran Civil War because if the U.S. government officially recognized Salvadorans in the U.S. as what they were, refugees, “the U.S. government would be unable to continue sending military aid to the Salvadoran government, which would in turn promote either a guerrilla victory or a negotiated settlement.”<sup>103</sup>

However, this was a difficult strategy to pursue, especially under the Reagan administration which was, by 1987, “supplying over \$1 million a day in military and other aid to the Salvadoran government,” and therefore continued to recognize Salvadorans in the U.S. as economic migrants deserving of deportation rather than refugees deserving of protection and aid.<sup>104</sup> Activist organizations continued to fight back through this necessary legal and political strategy, and they incorporated the publication of refugee “testimonies” or narratives of persecution and flight because the activists believed that, “just as they had been galvanized into action by hearing detained

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<sup>102</sup> Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 905-906.

<sup>103</sup> Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 906.

<sup>104</sup> Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 906; Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 137-138.

Salvadorans' and Guatemalans' accounts, other listeners' consciousness about the events in Central American policy could be changed by these narratives."<sup>105</sup> This strategy continued until, as previously mentioned, the late 1980s and early 1990s and the changing political climate within the United States necessitated the change in Salvadoran identity from refugee to immigrant.<sup>106</sup>

During the early 1980s, Salvadoran activists invoked the refugee identity of the Salvadoran communities in the United States and tied it to narrative refugee "testimonies" that often included a reminder to the intended audiences of these testimonies of the "bombings, tortures, massacres, and other abuses that pervaded El Salvador during the Civil War" in order to assert that Salvadorans would have been entitled to refugee status in the United States due to their experiences of persecution if the United States' immigration and refugee policy was not biased to exclude refugees from "friendly" nations in the context of the Cold War. This strategy was effective in "linking this suffering that is grounds for political asylum to the hardship that is a basis for suspension of deportation." Additionally, this framing strategy greatly contributed to the activist community organizations' effort to counter the official position of the U.S. government, as shown through a declassified 1987 Department of State memo, that most Salvadorans arriving in the 1980s "are not fleeing political persecution, but rather are leaving for economic reasons."<sup>107</sup> By advocating for the recognition of those arriving

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<sup>105</sup> Coutin, "From Refugees to Immigrants," 908.

<sup>106</sup> Coutin, "From Refugees to Immigrants," 906; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 133-134; Coutin, "The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles," 159-161; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," 108, 123; Hamlin, "Ideology, International Law, and the INS," 320-336; Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 149-150; Kerwin, "The Faltering US Refugee Protection System," 1-33.

<sup>107</sup> "El Salvador Refugee Report 1988," U.S. Department of State, National Archives at College Park Record Group 59, accessed March 22, 2019.

during the Salvadoran Diaspora in the 1980s as refugees, rather than economic migrants, the activist community organizations utilized a political strategy that would be most effective in countering this official narrative of the U.S. government. However, as the 1990s began, and more Salvadorans chose to stay in their established communities rather than go back to a nation that they had little to no real connection to anymore, framing the Salvadoran communities as communities of refugees no longer made the most political sense. This led Salvadoran activists to redefine these communities as individuals who had set down roots and were entitled to a legal status in the United States while simultaneously moving away from the term “refugee,” which had increasingly gained a connotation of helplessness and dependency, two terms that no longer fit the well-established Salvadoran communities. During the 1990s, specifically following the 1992 Peace Accords, activist organizations furthered this argument for legal status for the established Salvadoran communities by arguing that, by recognizing the legal permanent residence status of Salvadorans, the United States would be supporting the peace process in El Salvador. This argument was founded on the concept that “mass deportations would destabilize economic and social reconstruction, potentially giving rise to renewed conflict” and contributed to the U.S. government creating the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and first applied it to the Salvadoran communities established throughout the Salvadoran Diaspora.<sup>108</sup>

### **Mimicry as the Highest Form of Flattery: The Washington, D.C. Parallel**

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<sup>108</sup> Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 906; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 133-134; Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 159-161; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 108, 123; Hamlin, “Ideology, International Law, and the INS,” 320-336; Coutin, “Legalizing Moves,” 149-150; Kerwin, “The Faltering US Refugee Protection System,” 1-33.

Although El Rescate and CARECEN were the two premier activist community organizations involved in providing aid to the growing Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, there were many other organizations that existed either before or soon after El Rescate and CARECEN. However, it was after the creation of El Rescate and CARECEN, and the examples that these activist community organizations set, that either preexisting Latin American-focused organizations created a specific El Salvador-centered program or entirely new activist organizations were founded. Additionally, although the most significant number of Salvadorans arrived and settled in Los Angeles during the early 1980s, Washington, DC also had a fairly large increase in Salvadoran population within the community during the Salvadoran Diaspora. Therefore, Washington, D.C. and, in the later years, the Northern Virginian suburbs of Washington, are an important parallel to the Salvadoran refugee experiences in Los Angeles. The groups that existed during this early portion of the Salvadoran Diaspora and the Salvadoran Civil War that will be covered in this section are the Latin American Youth Center, D.C. (LAYC-DC), the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), and the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). Additionally, although two of these organizations focus on Latin America broadly, it was during the 1980-1992 time period, specifically following the start of the Salvadoran Diaspora and the creation of El Rescate and CARECEN, that these organizations began to either focus specifically on El Salvador or establish a program dedicated uniquely to the needs of Salvadorans in the United States.

The first Washington, D.C.-based activist community organization that dealt specifically with the growing Salvadoran community was the Latin American Youth Center in DC (LAYC-DC). LAYC-DC was founded in 1968 as a wide-ranging

community organization dedicated to “address the absence of services for the emerging Latino community” by “offering educational and vocational activities in after school and in the summer at several locations in the community.”<sup>109</sup> The real focus of the organization narrowed around the mid-1980s to provide “social services and mental health counseling program to assist traumatized immigrant youth arriving in DC after fleeing the civil wars engulfing Central America.”<sup>110</sup> It is especially important to note that the focus on the provision of aid and a welcoming community to traumatized Central American youth fleeing the political violence developed in the years immediately following the development of El Rescate and CARECEN in Los Angeles, as well as at the same period during which the violence of the Salvadoran Civil War and the resulting Salvadoran Diaspora was at its height. Therefore, although the LAYC-DC has a wider focus of all of Latin American youth in need of a community within the D.C. area, many of its goals and specific programs developed in tandem with increased Salvadoran immigration to the D.C. area, said programs mirrored many of those established within the Los Angeles community, and many of the programs addressed the specific needs of the growing D.C.-based Salvadoran community. In 1974, the LAYC-DC was officially recognized as a nonprofit entity with 501(c)(3) status and moved into the Woodrow Wilson Center where it stayed until the Wilson Center’s programs grew too big and moved into the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars is “the nation’s key non-partisan policy forum for tackling global issues through independent research and open dialogue to inform

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<sup>109</sup> “History,” The Latin American Youth Center, accessed March 14, 2019, <http://www.layc-dc.org/about-us/history/>.

<sup>110</sup> “History,” LAYC-DC, <http://www.layc-dc.org/about-us/history/>.

actionable ideas for the policy community.”<sup>111</sup> The close partnership between the LAYC-DC and the Wilson Center in both of the organization’s early years was apparent and can be seen through the fact that the Latin American Program at the Wilson Center was established in 1977. Although El Rescate and CARECEN did not focus specifically on the provision of resources dedicated to the building of a community of youth in their early years, this did become a focus of both organizations, and other LA-based organizations that will be discussed in Chapter 3, as a way to strengthen the Salvadoran communities as a whole. However, the LAYC-DC’s focus on creating a community and providing a safe space for Salvadoran refugees arriving in DC did closely resemble the goals of El Rescate and CARECEN of fostering a way for Salvadorans to have access to a group with individuals that had similar experiences, additional educational resources on both language and how to apply for citizenship, and a mental health clinic to aid the community.

Another DC-based organization that preexisted the start of the Salvadoran Diaspora but adapted to specifically accommodate the increasing Salvadoran community in the DC area was the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). WOLA’s early focus was more similar to that of the legal aid programs of El Rescate than LAYC-DC, especially due to its unique focus on the advocacy for human rights in the Americas. WOLA was founded in 1974, so prior to the official start of the Salvadoran conflict and Salvadoran Diaspora, by church leaders as a reaction to the U.S. intervention and support for the military junta in Chile. Although created prior to the start of El Salvador’s Civil

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<sup>111</sup> “About the Wilson Center,” The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/about-the-wilson-center>.

War, the important parts to recognize about this activist community organization is twofold. First, WOLA was founded by church leaders, mirroring the importance of the Los Angeles-based Sanctuary Movement and the role of church leaders in conjunction with Salvadoran activists in establishing El Rescate and CARECEN. Additionally, religion is and was a significant portion of Salvadoran identity, so by incorporating church leaders into human rights-focused political advocacy would have contributed to the legitimacy of the organization in the eyes of the Salvadoran community, as well as the Latin American community in general. Secondly, WOLA continued to exist, and expanded to focus on El Salvador, following the start of the Salvadoran Civil War and the increased Salvadoran community in DC resulting from the Salvadoran Diaspora in order to “connect policymakers in Washington to those with first-hand knowledge of the thousands of deaths, disappearances, cases of torture, and unjust imprisonment occurring under the dictatorships of that era.”<sup>112</sup> Not only does this purpose very closely resemble the use of testimonials under the Sanctuary Movement, but the strategy of increasing the awareness of policymakers on the political violence in El Salvador was an ultimate goal of El Rescate and CARECEN as part of an attempt to stop the funding going out of the U.S. to El Salvador.

The third and final activist community organization that began during the early years of the Salvadoran Civil War and the Salvadoran Diaspora was the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). CISPES’s foundation is different from all of the aforementioned activist community organizations in that it started as an

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<sup>112</sup> “Our History,” Washington Office on Latin America, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.wola.org/history-of-wola/>.

umbrella organization of a widespread and autonomous group of activists. Additionally, CISPES was founded “by conventions in Los Angeles and Washington, DC in October of 1980,” and would grow into a national grassroots solidarity organization focused on supporting the Salvadoran people’s “struggle for social and economic justice.”<sup>113</sup> The impact of the organization’s national grassroots campaign was maximized starting in 1985 when “CISPES transformed from a loose network into a unified national organization committed to a common program, which proved critical.”<sup>114</sup> Therefore, the focus of CISPES was also more international rather than focused on the domestic issues within the communities it was located in like the other organizations previously discussed. However, it is important to note that CISPES’s two initial bases were in Los Angeles and DC, the two arrival cities in which all of the community-focused organizations previously mentioned were located in. This further shows just how important the connections between the activists and refugees were to the ultimate creation of Salvadoran-led and focused organizations. On a similar note, the centering of Salvadoran communities in LA and DC in the early 1980s foreshadowed the importance of the physical neighborhoods in establishing a new transnational Salvadoran identity in the United States while still maintaining a connection to the refugees’ memories and connections to El Salvador due to their access to others who had gone through similar experiences. Most of CISPES’s early activities were protest-driven and resulted from the Reagan administration’s slogan of “El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam.” Although the

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<sup>113</sup> “History,” Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador,” accessed March 14, 2019, <http://cispes.org/section/history-cispes>.

<sup>114</sup> “History,” Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador,” <http://cispes.org/section/history-cispes>.

strategies for the other activist community organizations were not quite as protest driven, at least not in their early/foundational beginnings, most of them included the same ultimate early goal of CISPES: to use highly visible mass protest campaigns in order to draw public and policymaker attention to just how negative the ongoing U.S. financial and political support for El Salvador's violent military dictatorship was while at the same time showing that the FMLN was not the villain nor were the Salvadoran refugees dangerous economic migrants.

Although the sheer number of Salvadorans entering the Washington, DC area during the early years of the Salvadoran Diaspora pales in comparison to its parallel in Los Angeles, the growing Salvadoran community in DC was significant compared to the rest of the United States. Even though both LAYC-DC and WOLA existed with a focus on Central Americans in the DC community prior to the beginning of the Salvadoran Civil War and Salvadoran Diaspora, both organizations were greatly impacted and adapted by emphasizing a new focus on Salvadorans arriving in DC specifically in the early 1980s. Additionally, although WOLA and CISPES both had a greater focus on advocacy and protest to influence policymakers regarding foreign policy and immigration policy impacting El Salvador, this focus makes logical sense due to the locations of the organizations in the capital, which would inevitably give said organizations greater access to and visibility from said policymakers. Finally, although the focus on the needs of the Salvadoran refugee community based in Los Angeles was much greater than that of similar organizations in DC, the activism of said DC organizations served as a complimentary parallel to those in Los Angeles, especially in the years following the 1992 Salvadoran Peace Accords that will be discussed in Chapter Three.

### **Chapter Three: An Increasingly Salvadoran Los Angeles and the Evolution of the Activist Community Organizations**

This chapter focuses on the later period of the Civil War in El Salvador as well as the aftermath of the 1992 Salvadoran Peace Accords. It traces the evolution of the established communities of the Salvadoran Diaspora as well as the creation of new activist community organizations, and the evolution of existent ones. This chapter also highlights the changes in U.S. law related to immigration, refugee, and relevant foreign policies. Finally, this chapter will address both the positive and negative forms of unintended consequences that resulted from a combination of the above factors, and how said unintended consequences impacts the transnational Salvadoran community in the U.S. and El Salvador, as well as the present-day consequences of these unintended consequences and the role of the mass media.

#### **U.S. Legislation and Immigration Policies**

Around the mid-1980s, a number of political shifts happened within U.S. law that would directly impact the growing Salvadoran immigrant communities. These policies greatly impacted the legal status of Salvadoran immigrants, the roles played by the already established activist community organizations, and the increasingly tense relationship between the United States and Central America.

Up until the mid-1980s, the primary way Salvadorans could have legal status in the U.S. was achieved by applying for political asylum. This, as well as refugee status, as previously mentioned in Chapter Two, was quite difficult for Salvadorans to achieve. To be granted political asylum, one had to have documented proof of a “well-founded fear of

persecution,” for example. Due to the nature of the conflict, where the U.S. sided with the Salvadoran government – the group that was perpetuating violence and repression – it was politically complicated for Salvadorans to be granted asylum from an ally of the U.S. government. Not surprisingly, many Salvadorans did not obtain legal status in the United States during this pre-1986 era.

The first piece of federal legislation to be adopted during the Salvadoran Diaspora was the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. IRCA was the first major revision of American immigration legislation and was an amendment to the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act. The main provisions of IRCA allowed for the legalization of undocumented migrants who had been continuously present in the U.S. since 1982, created official punishments for employers that knowingly hired undocumented workers, and required increased monitoring and enforcement at U.S. borders. This greatly impacted a large portion of the Salvadoran refugee community, many of whom still did not have a legal status in the United States due to the nonrecognition of Salvadoran migrants as refugees, largely by seemingly providing a path to legal status that, in reality, would still be quite difficult to access.<sup>115</sup>

Most Salvadorans came into the United States after 1982, because the violence of the Salvadoran Civil War increased dramatically following the strengthened activities of the organization of the FMLN, and the subsequent response of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, in 1983. Additionally, because Los Angeles was a key arrival city for Salvadoran

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<sup>115</sup> “Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA),” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), last updated September 29, 2016, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/glossary/immigration-reform-and-control-act-1986-irca>; Louis DeSipio and Rodolfo O. de la Garza, *US Immigration in the Twenty-First Century: Making Americans, Remaking America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015): 11.

migrants, IRCA “imposed particular challenges in Los Angeles given the large undocumented population in the region, which included not only refugees but also many other immigrants, chiefly Mexicans and Central Americans.”<sup>116</sup> Additionally, prior to and even after the passage of IRCA, the main legal concern of the Salvadoran community was “to avoid deportation, not to legalize their stay,”<sup>117</sup> therefore, few Salvadorans applied for a legal status unless they had been apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Initially, many Salvadoran refugees were disinterested in obtaining legal status in the U.S. because they believed that the Civil War would be short, yet effective, and that they would be able to return to their homes and families relatively soon. As the Civil War dragged on, and the violence and persecution devastated El Salvador, many of the refugees realized that this hope was not the reality and, therefore, began to seek legal status. Similarly, for Salvadorans who did seek legal status in the United States under IRCA, the court cases were largely unsuccessful. For these reasons, IRCA was not as effective as it was intended to be, especially in Los Angeles where activist community organizations worked to find loopholes in the law and continued to pursue other sociopolitical and legal strategies outside of IRCA in order to continue to provide aid to the Salvadoran community.<sup>118</sup>

Outrage over the U.S. immigration and refugee policies that seemingly excluded Salvadorans from accessing the legal asylum or refugee status characterized the period leading up to and including the mid-1980s. This outrage had manifested into a legal suit

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<sup>116</sup> Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 118.

<sup>117</sup> Coutin, *Nations of Emigrants*, 8.

<sup>118</sup> Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 118; Coutin, *Nations of Emigrants*, 8; DiSipio and de la Garza, *US Immigration in the Twenty-First Century*, 11.

against the U.S. Attorney General and the head of the INS in 1985. Although this lawsuit was first filed in 1985, and the court granted the plaintiffs the right to litigate the “issue of a pattern and practice of discrimination carried out by the INS by denying the asylum claims and refusing extended voluntary departure to these refugees,”<sup>119</sup> nothing really came to fruition until 1990. In *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*, which is colloquially referred to as the ABC lawsuit, the main plaintiff, the American Baptist Churches, alleged that the U.S. Attorney General and the head of the INS “violated domestic and international laws when they denied asylum to Salvadorans and Guatemalans fleeing political repression in the 1980s.”<sup>120</sup> The suit argued that by not allowing for equal access to asylum or refugee status for individuals from “friendly” nations, like El Salvador and Guatemala, compared to “unfriendly” nations, like Nicaragua, demonstrated how the U.S. asylum process was inherently biased against refugees facing political violence, repression, and persecution coming from nations in which the U.S. supports the governing regime in power. Additionally, although the court recognized the plaintiff’s right to litigate these issues, it also maintained that international refugee law, like that of the United Nations, does not supersede the domestic U.S. 1980 Refugee Act. Although the ABC lawsuit was not wholly successful in every aspect, it did lead and contribute greatly to the passage of the 1990 Immigration Reform Act and gave Salvadoran refugees who had been denied asylum after 1980 the opportunity to have their

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<sup>119</sup> “*American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*,” Center for Constitutional Rights, last modified October 9, 2007, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://ccrjustice.org/home/what-we-do/our-cases/american-baptist-churches-v-thornburgh>.

<sup>120</sup> “*American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*,” Center for Constitutional Rights, <https://ccrjustice.org/home/what-we-do/our-cases/american-baptist-churches-v-thornburgh>.

asylum applications re-adjudicated, or reviewed for a second time, through a legal process to receive formal judgment on the disputed asylum status.<sup>121</sup>

A major factor of the Immigration Reform Act of 1990 was the provision that created the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program. Just as its name suggests, TPS gives individuals to have a temporary legal status within the United States. Salvadorans were the first recipients of TPS. TPS also provided the legal space for Salvadorans to reapply for political asylum under rules that prevented the previous bias against granting asylum to migrants from “friendly” nations. TPS meant that the U.S. government implicitly acknowledged that Salvadorans had a right to be in the United States because of the conditions in El Salvador “that temporarily prevent the country’s nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately.” Both of these conditions directly applied to the still Civil War-stricken Salvadoran state until 1992 and, following the end of the Civil War, the weakened Salvadoran state institutions unprepared to effectively repatriate the substantial number of Salvadorans who had left during the Salvadoran Diaspora.<sup>122</sup>

Although Nicaragua had a revolution over similar issues as El Salvador, the Nicaraguan revolutionary group, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was able to successfully oust the repressive Somoza dictatorship from political power in 1979. Therefore, from 1979 to 1990, the FSLN was in control of the Nicaraguan government. Additionally, from 1981 to 1990, Nicaragua suffered through the Contra War, which was an uprising against the revolutionary FSLN government by the Contras, which was a

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<sup>121</sup> DeSipio and de la Garza, *US Immigration in the Twenty-First Century*, 40, 79.

<sup>122</sup> Coutin, *Nations of Emigrants*, 8; DeSipio and de la Garza, *US Immigration in the Twenty-First Century*, 11-12.

counter-revolutionary group that was backed by the U.S. in a manner similar to the U.S. backing of the Salvadoran government during the Salvadoran Civil War. Like the Salvadoran Civil War, this was a long drawn-out and bloody conflict. However, the Contra War, unlike the Salvadoran Civil War, has been much more historically contextualized as a Cold War “proxy war” between the United States through the Contras and the Soviet Union and Cuba through the FSLN. This contributed to why, under U.S. asylum and immigration policy, Nicaraguan refugees fleeing an “unfriendly” FSLN revolutionary government were accepted while Salvadorans, fleeing a “friendly” U.S.-backed government, were not. The point is that much of the immigration law directed to Central Americans throughout the Cold War was piecemeal and contradictory. Therefore, the U.S.’s antagonism towards the Nicaraguan government ultimately opened the door for Salvadoran legal status.

The final piece of national U.S. legislation from the 1990s that directly impacted the Salvadoran community came five years after the official end of the Salvadoran Civil War. The Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), passed in 1997, was initially created to apply to Nicaraguans alone. NACARA addressed the difficulty in the re-adjudication of asylum cases promised by the *ABC* suit that many Central Americans were having under the Immigration Act of 1990 and the TPS provision. NACARA creates the possibility of “amnesty for Nicaraguans who entered the United States before December 1, 1995, and restores suspension [of deportation] eligibility for ABC class members, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans who applied for asylum before April 1, 1990.”<sup>123</sup> Many of the activist groups continued to work on

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<sup>123</sup> Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 918.

obtaining a legal status for the Salvadoran communities under NACARA by linking the social situation within El Salvador to Nicaragua and made multiple arguments on the potentially destabilizing effects on the Americas as a whole that would result from the mass deportations that would inevitably come from not extending a form of legal status to Salvadorans similar to that extended to Nicaraguans. Although IRCA, the ABC suit, TPS, and NACARA all addressed portions of immigration and refugee policy issues that complicated Salvadoran migration, all four still had gaps in legal protections that activist community organizations would be crucial in during the post-Peace Accords period through legal advocacy and general aid. However, these policies that characterized the political climate relating to Central American immigration in the 1990s would also redefine the struggle for refugee and immigrant rights and, consequently, redefine the necessary role of the activist community organizations in the period following the end of the Salvadoran Civil War.<sup>124</sup>

### **1992 Peace Accords**

The Chapultepec Peace Accords were a seemingly huge success for the people of El Salvador and the international community concerned with El Salvador's history of human rights violations and inequality. Following the FMLN's 1989 "Second Final Offensive," the transition to peace and disarmament within El Salvador began. The transition took place between 1990 and 1992. Peace negotiations were an international affair that relied heavily on the leadership and structure of the United Nations because

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<sup>124</sup> Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," 118; Coutin, "The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles," 170; Coutin, "From Refugees to Immigrants," 909-911, 918; Coutin, *Nations of Emigrants*, 8; Susan Bibler Coutin, Sameer M. Ashar, Jennifer M. Chacón, and Stephen Lee, "Deferred Action and the Discretionary State: Migration, Precarity, and Resistance," *Citizenship Studies* 21, no. 8 (September 2017): 951-955.

tensions were very high between the warring factions. The Chapultepec Peace Accords, which was the negotiated end to the Salvadoran Civil War, has been cited as a great success by the international community. However, that ultimate ending point was very difficult to achieve and was due to a variety of intersection factors both within El Salvador domestically and within the international community as a whole. In 1989, the hope of a real negotiated peace seemed far-fetched. The first reason for this negative outlook was due to the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) political party winning the Salvadoran presidency. ARENA was the political party founded by the U.S.-backed Salvadoran oligarchy that was in charge of, and the progenitor of, the human rights abuses of the military dictatorship and the group that the FMLN was fighting throughout the Civil War. This alone seemingly threatened the chance of any negotiated peace settlement in El Salvador's near future. Additionally, the November 1989 "Second Final Offensive," an offensive that has been referred to colloquially as "the El Salvador Tet," was launched by the FMLN in the hopes of ending the Civil War through an FMLN victory over the ARENA government. In response to this "Second Final Offensive," the Salvadoran military continued to commit a number of human rights violations including the murder of six Jesuit priests which sparked the outrage of the international community. Yet, despite this series of increasingly terrible events that seemingly would make the potential of a negotiated peace settlement a far-off dream, the Chapultepec Peace Accords were signed by all parties involved in the Salvadoran Civil War just three years later.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ernest H. Evans, "The El Salvadoran Peace Process Five Years On: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 21 (1998): 171-172; Angelina Snodgrass Godoy, "Making Meaning of Violence: Human Rights and Historical Memory of the Conflict in El Salvador," *Journal of Human Rights* 17, no. 3 (2018): 370-373; Almeida, *Mobilizing Democracy*, 66-67, 86; Coutin, "The Formation and Transformation of

In contrast to the FMLN's "First Final Offensive," mentioned in Chapter One, in which the FMLN was clearly unprepared to wage a full-on Civil War against the Salvadoran military dictatorship, the "Second Final Offensive" revealed just how evenly matched the two sides of the Salvadoran Civil War had become. As one assessment of the Salvadoran peace process put it, "the 1989 FMLN offensive starkly dramatized the fact that the military situation was stalemated; specifically, while this offensive showed that the FMLN had the ability to launch a major, sustained, countrywide offensive, it also showed that the El Salvadoran military was strong enough to indefinitely prevent the FMLN from being able to stage the sort of victorious "final offensive" that the Nicaraguan Sandinistas had launched in July 1979."<sup>126</sup> This acceptance of a relative stalemate for the foreseeable future of the conflict, as well as the economic, social, and political toll and stress this ongoing conflict would place on both sides and the general public of El Salvador, was reinforced by the ending of the Cold War in 1989. Not only did this drastically change how the Salvadoran Civil War was conceptualized in the international community, but it also led to a dramatic decrease in outside support and assistance from the United States, the Soviet Union, Cuba, and revolutionary movements in the surrounding Latin American nations to both sides of the Salvadoran Civil War. Additionally, with the ending of the Cold War and the decrease in interest in the small Central American nation from the global superpowers, specifically the United States, "an

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Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles," 165-166; Lawrence Michael Ladutke, *Freedom of Expression in El Salvador: The Struggle for Human Rights and Democracy* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2004): 44-48; Irina Carlota Silber, *Everyday Revolutionaries: Gender, Violence, and Disillusionment in Postwar El Salvador* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011): 38-40; Bertram I. Spector, *Negotiating Peace and Confronting Corruption: Challenges for Postconflict Societies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2011): 25-32; Peter W. Van Arsdale, *Forced to Flee: Human Rights and Human Wrongs in Refugee Homelands* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006): 106-110.

<sup>126</sup> Evans, "The El Salvadoran Peace Process Five Years On," 172.

opening was created for various other international actors to do what they had tried to do (with little success) during the Cold War – to mediate a negotiated settlement of the conflict.”<sup>127</sup> The two largest, and most influential, international organizations that led this new push for a negotiated peace settlement and transition to democracy were the United Nations and Amnesty International, both of which had played a role during the Cold War but were ultimately overshadowed by both the roles of both sides of Salvadoran actors within the conflict and the United States. Although the United Nations and Amnesty International played the most significant roles in the transition from massive violence, repression, and human rights violations to a negotiated peace and democracy, organizations like the Organization of American States (OAS) and various religious groups that were, for the most part, founded in the Catholic Church.<sup>128</sup>

Throughout the Salvadoran Civil War, Amnesty International had been compiling data on and releasing reports detailing the human rights situation within El Salvador. These reports contributed greatly to the ability of the United Nations to both negotiate a peace settlement and establish a Truth Commission intended to hold human rights violations perpetrators on both sides of the Salvadoran Civil War accountable for their role in the conflict. Additionally, during the early stages of negotiation, both the FMLN and the ARENA-led Salvadoran government agreed to allow for the establishment of a United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) which would begin its initial work in 1991 for one year and then have its presence in El Salvador extended until 1995. However, prior to the ONUSAL establishing a Truth Commission dedicated to

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<sup>127</sup> Evans, “The El Salvadoran Peace Process Five Years On,” 173.

<sup>128</sup> Evans, “The El Salvadoran Peace Process Five Years On,” 172-173; Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 296-305; Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 165; Howland, “El Rescate,” 710.

combatting impunity within El Salvador and leading to the assignment of accountability and responsibility for the human rights violations that were committed throughout the Salvadoran Civil War, the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords needed to be negotiated and agreed upon by the FMLN and the Salvadoran government.<sup>129</sup>

The Salvadoran process to peace included a series of four agreements that culminated in the Chapultepec Peace Accords over the two-year period of negotiations largely mediated by the United Nations. These agreements and negotiations covered a wide range of topics, including, but not limited to, “economic and social problems (for example, land reform), demobilization and integration of FMLN and government soldiers back into civilian society, and confronting the country’s tragic past, including its systemic violation of human rights.”<sup>130</sup> This emphasis on the need for land reform in a more equitable way was an issue that historically had plagued El Salvador and had been a large motivation for both the aforementioned revolts that ended with the 1932 La Matanza as well as a large motivating goal of the creation of the umbrella organization of the FMLN. In fact, issues surrounding the desire for land reform had been a significant motivating factor in many of the other Central American revolutions in which the United States intervened in during the Cold War era. In El Salvador, and under the Peace Accords, this desire for land reform culminated in the creation of the accord-mandated program called the *Programa de Transferencia de Tierras*, or the Land Transfer Program (PTT). The PTT mandated that “over the six years following the signing of the accords, 10% of the

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<sup>129</sup> J. Michael Dodson and Donald W. Jackson, “Re-inventing the Rule of Law: Human Rights in El Salvador,” *Democratization* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 111-112; Evans, “The El Salvadoran Peace Process Five Years On,” 172-173; Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 296-305; Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 165; Howland, “El Rescate,” 710.

<sup>130</sup> Howland, “El Rescate,” 710.

nation's agricultural land was transferred to ex-combatants of both sides and to civilian supporters of the FMLN."<sup>131</sup> Although this land reform was significant, it was not the only portion of the Peace Accords that would contribute to the transition to peace and democracy in El Salvador.<sup>132</sup>

Additionally, the Peace Accords established three separate yet interconnected mechanisms in order to focus on and adequately address El Salvador's history of a pattern of human rights violations. These three strategies were founded in "mandating structural reforms, creating a quasi-judicial Ad Hoc Commission to remove from military service those implicated in human rights violations and corruption, and creating a Truth Commission to compile an official public accounting of El Salvador's history of human rights abuses."<sup>133</sup> The United Nations was particularly highlighted for laying the groundwork to democracy through "a scaling back of the Salvadoran armed forces and their subordination to civilian authority, the demilitarization of public security through creation of a new civilian police force, and broad reforms of the Salvadoran justice system."<sup>134</sup> Unfortunately, many of the agreed upon negotiations were not fully achieved following the end of the Peace Accords, contributing to the "new" wave of violence and inequality in El Salvador that was founded in organized crime, a continuously corrupt government, and a still highly militarized, biased, and violent police force. For example,

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<sup>131</sup> Ariane De Bremond, "The Politics of Peace and Resettlement through El Salvador's Land Transfer Program: Caught Between the State and the Market," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 8 (2007): 1538.

<sup>132</sup> De Bremond, "The Politics of Peace and Resettlement," 1538; Evans, "The El Salvadoran Peace Process Five Years On," 172-173; Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 296-305; Coutin, "The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles," 165; Howland, "El Rescate," 710; Godoy, "Making Meaning of Violence, 370-373; Dodson and Jackson, "Re-inventing the Rule of Law, 111; Ladutke, *Freedom of Expression in El Salvador*, 106-114; Silber, *Everyday Revolutionaries*, 92-94; Van Arsdale, *Forced to Flee*, 106-108.

<sup>133</sup> Howland, "El Rescate," 710.

<sup>134</sup> Dodson and Jackson, "Re-inventing the Rule of Law," 111.

although the Peace Accords and the ONUSAL Truth Commission promised judicial reform and an increased accountability for the perpetrators for the human rights violations of both sides of the Salvadoran Civil War, this was made more difficult by the passing of a wide-encompassing blanket amnesty and impunity law only five days after the final version of the negotiated peace agreement was ratified. While the Chapultepec Peace Accords did end the massive and ongoing human rights violations and political persecutions that characterized the Salvadoran Civil War, they failed to follow through with the complete implementation and continuation of all of the various negotiated agreements between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government. This created a new kind of unofficial, as in no longer state-sponsored, type of violence and political persecution facing El Salvador from the 1990s until the present and contributed to the out-migration of Salvadorans to the United States for years to come. The failure to achieve peace, so to speak, resulted in an increasingly complex relationship between El Salvador and the United States. This is also a great factor in the transformation of identities and roles of the activist community organizations focused on Salvadorans in the United States.

### **A Shift in Strategy of the Activist Community Organizations**

Meanwhile, as the Salvadoran Civil War was coming to an end and the Chapultepec Peace Accords were being ratified, a different, yet just as significant, change in the approaches of U.S.-based activist community organizations serving the growing Salvadoran communities in the United States was occurring. This shift in strategy also occurred alongside the shift in immigration, refugee, and foreign policy of the United States. Even in the later years of the Salvadoran Civil War while activists were still generally referring to Salvadorans as “refugees,” many of the individual Salvadorans

began settling and establishing roots in their communities after recognizing that the Civil War was not going to be short nor were the long-term impacts and damage caused by the fighting going to be quickly or easily repairable. This led to an increase in Salvadoran businesses and restaurants within the urban Los Angeles community, further showing both the “vibrancy and permanence of the community.”<sup>135</sup> It was during this moment that preexisting activist community organizations, like El Rescate and CARECEN, began to reassess their strategic claim that Salvadorans, and other Central Americans, were refugees and moved towards referring to the members of their communities as immigrants. This strategic shift was even implemented on an institutional level within CARECEN through the changing of its name from the Central American Refugee Center to the Central American Resource Center. As activist community organizations redefined themselves and the Salvadoran community, the goals of the organizations were redefined as well, going from striving for the legalization in the 1980s as a means to prevent “untimely and perhaps life-threatening deportations,” to the 1990s goal of legitimization of the transnational identity Salvadoran community by “securing the legal rights enjoyed by citizens and legal permanent residents” for said Salvadoran communities who had established roots in the United States.<sup>136</sup>

During the 1990s, the strategy of activist community organizations shifted in order to argue for the legitimization of the legal status of the members of distinctly Salvadoran communities within the United States on the basis of their “now lengthy period of residence, the ties they have created, the work they have performed, the taxes

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<sup>135</sup> Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 144.

<sup>136</sup> Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 146; Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 916; Edward T. Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 1999): 84-91.

they have paid, and the role that the United States played in the conflict that caused them to emigrate.”<sup>137</sup> This strategic shift was arguably necessary for multiple reasons, the first of which was that the term “refugee” inherently implied that the need for U.S. residency was based solely on the temporary conditions of El Salvador and, following the end of the Civil War and the implementation of the Peace Accords, this strategy no longer had as compelling grounds to stand on compared to the very obvious and visible issues of violence and persecution of the Civil War. Therefore, under this track of argumentation, the strategy of self-identifying the Salvadoran community as refugees was no longer likely to succeed which led to an increased risk of deportation. The second major rationale for the switch in strategy from classifying Salvadorans as refugees to classifying them as immigrants was because of the “negative connotations” that were/are associated with the term refugee. These connotations, especially during the 1990s, were associated with individuals or groups who were powerless, helpless, or fleeing. Activists recognized that not only did these connotations not adequately embody the Salvadoran experience, but they also did not depict the Salvadoran community within Los Angeles as “a successful community that had set down roots in the United States and intended to stay.”<sup>138</sup> These established roots were embodied by not only the establishment of activist community organizations dedicated to the Salvadoran community, but also through the creation of businesses on the El Salvador Community Corridor in Westlake and the revitalization of the MacArthur Park space. Additionally, in support of this argument, activist community organizations pointed to the fact that many Salvadoran Los Angeles residents maintained good standing in the communities they helped to develop by acting

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<sup>137</sup> Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 916.

<sup>138</sup> Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 146.

“like a good citizen,” contrary to the mass media’s extensive coverage and fearmongering related to “Central American” gangs like MS13.<sup>139</sup>

Activist community organizations that led this shift in strategy also were most often heavily involved in not just the social sphere, but the legal and political spheres as well. By continuously advocating for the legal residency status of the Salvadoran immigrant population, and having both major and minor successes and setbacks through the gradual increase in accessibility of legal residency status for Salvadorans who arrived during the Salvadoran Diaspora as shown through the series of various pieces of legislation aforementioned directly relating to the Salvadoran battle for changes in the U.S. asylum and immigration laws, the activist community organizations established during and after the Salvadoran Diaspora made a real difference in the Los Angeles Central American community during the late 1980s and 1990s. Said activist community organizations were also able to gain success in their goal of obtaining legal residency status for Salvadorans through the argument that the individuals who made up the Salvadoran communities were justified in their claims to legal residency membership by reminding both policymakers and the general public of the dreadful experiences in El Salvador during the Civil War that ultimately caused the Salvadoran Diaspora in the first place. Activists, thus, persuasively reminded people “of the bombings, tortures, massacres, and other abuses that pervaded El Salvador during the Civil War” in order to further support their overarching argument that Salvadorans would have been entitled to asylum during the 1980s and legal residency status in the 1990s had their claims been

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<sup>139</sup> Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 146-150; Angelina Snodgrass Godoy, “Finding El Salvador’s Disappeared: What the US Files Reveal,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (May 2018): 246; Coutin, “The Formation and Transformation of Central American Community Organizations in Los Angeles,” 155; Chang and Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City*, 84-91.

adjudicated fairly.<sup>140</sup> This strategy went beyond simply pointing out the bias in the U.S. asylum courts by “linking this suffering that is grounds for political asylum to the hardship that is a basis for suspension of deportation” in order to not-so-subtly imply that “the past hardship that caused immigration is as relevant to legalization as the future hardship that deportation would pose.”<sup>141</sup> Moreover, in relation to this argument against mass deportations, activist community organizations pointed to the still present danger awaiting many Salvadoran citizens if they were to return to El Salvador, specifically, the new post-Peace Accords crisis of the Salvadoran state of “contemporary “disappearances” due to organized crime, with multiple thousands of victims believed to have gone missing in recent years.”<sup>142</sup>

Along with the two aforementioned arguments, activist community organizations made two broader final arguments for their shift in strategy from framing Salvadorans as refugees to immigrant communities worthy of legal residency status. The first of these wide-ranging arguments was that the United States, due especially because of its involvement in the Salvadoran Civil War and in Cold War-era Central America in general, had a moral responsibility to accept Central Americans as residents because without U.S. intervention it was unlikely that the Salvadoran Diaspora would have happened, or would have been as extensive, or as long lasting as it was. The persuasive qualities of this very emotionally charged and hypothetical argument when made in combination with the other arguments, was a very strong point made by the activist

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<sup>140</sup> Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 149.

<sup>141</sup> Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 149.

<sup>142</sup> Godoy, “Finding El Salvador’s Disappeared,” 246; Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 149-155; Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*, 300-302; Coutin, “From Refugees to Immigrants,” 915-917; Chang and Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City*, 84-91.

community organizations. The second broad argument was that by supporting the activist community organization's goal of legal residency status, the United States would be playing a crucial role in the young Salvadoran peace process. To support this claim, activists argued that without the application of some form of sweeping legal residency status to the established Salvadoran community members, there was a high risk of mass deportations of Salvadorans out of the United States and to El Salvador. Any nation that would have to face a sudden influx of people needing repatriation in a short amount of time would struggle, however, the new state institutions that arose out of the recent Peace Accords in conjunction with both a weakened governmental authority and a general public traumatized from the Civil War's twelve-year period of violence would make recovering from the Civil War and fully implementing the goals of the peace process especially difficult. Therefore, as activist community organizations argued, "mass deportations would destabilize economic and social reconstruction, potentially giving rise to renewed conflict."<sup>143</sup> This argument, although ultimately unsuccessful in acquiring sweeping legal residency status for Salvadorans in the U.S. or fully preventing its goal of mass deportations, was a very strategic move on the part of the activist community organizations. For one thing, this argument framed the role of the United States as vitally important in the "new" history of post-Peace Accords El Salvador which subliminally played off of the ever-present view, especially in the post-Cold War-era, that the United States was, and was needed to continue to be, the dominant hegemonic power in the American sphere of influence. Secondly, the activist community organizations implied that without U.S. support El Salvador risked failing economically, socially, and

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<sup>143</sup> Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 150.

politically in achieving the goals of the Peace Accords. Additionally, without U.S. support, El Salvador could be at risk of starting, or restarting, a Central American conflict similar to that of the Cold War-era Civil War. Although both broad arguments were fairly persuasive on their own, when argued in conjunction with both the contention that the Salvadoran immigrant community in Westlake had set down roots and were productively and positively contributing to the Los Angeles community as a whole as well as an argument founded in reminding the U.S. policymakers and general public of the causal role of the U.S. intervention in driving the Salvadoran Diaspora, the activist community organizations' shift in strategy from framing Salvadoran members of the communities as refugees to immigrants worthy of legal residency status was relatively persuasive and comprehensive. Additionally, the shift in strategy was, at least in the short run, fairly successful in driving the success of the ABC lawsuit, the resulting TPS program being first applied to Salvadorans, and to the, albeit not permanent or generalized, legal residency of members of the Salvadoran immigrant community.

### **The Evolution of El Rescate and CARECEN**

El Rescate and CARECEN both played a crucial role in the shifting of strategy in order to better cater to the evolving needs of the Los Angeles-based Salvadoran community in the post-Peace Accords era. After experiencing a short “identity crisis,” these organizations began to reflect the changing needs of the Salvadoran community within the changing sociopolitical climates of both the United States and El Salvador by beginning to orient their “political activities towards pushing for legal permanent residence for Salvadorans” as well as beginning to provide “the kinds of services that long-term settlers might utilize, such as educational programs, legal services, and the

promotion of home ownership, savings, and investment.”<sup>144</sup> Additionally, looking at these organizations in the even more long-term scope of their goals and purpose presently, El Rescate and CARECEN have built on those goals and have “turned their energies to providing the sorts of social services that more established migrants need, including information about higher education, purchasing homes, professional licensing, and legal aid.”<sup>145</sup> This transition in the identities of El Rescate and CARECEN was not seamless nor did it happen overnight, but, throughout the transition, both organizations were able to continue to serve the Salvadoran community within Los Angeles and while at the same time advocate for the creation of a legal residency status for the Salvadoran immigrant population. This was possible both because of the established histories of the two organizations as well as because of the increasing number of activist community organizations that were established in Los Angeles throughout the late-1980s and 1990s period of transition.

During the transition from conflict to peace following the 1992 Peace Accords, El Rescate played a crucial role in both El Salvador and Los Angeles. Since the establishment of El Rescate’s Human Rights Department in 1985, El Rescate had “monitored, maintained a database of violations, and...published reports on the country’s human rights situation.” However, in the years leading up to the ultimate ratification of the Peace Accords, El Rescate’s goals “shifted from documenting and denouncing human rights abuses to defining a strategy for facilitating positive social change in El Salvador based on human rights law.”<sup>146</sup> In order to achieve this, El Rescate focused largely on the

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<sup>144</sup> Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 66.

<sup>145</sup> Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 67.

<sup>146</sup> Howland, “El Rescate,” 708-709.

obstructions caused by the generalized impunity law passed five days following the Peace Accords that limited the scope of the process of determining accountability for the violence throughout the Salvadoran Civil War. Under the Peace Accords, which were monitored by a United Nations Special Mission, El Rescate gained a fairly large win because of the Peace Accords' provisions dedicated to "significant structural changes in the Salvadoran security forces, the creation of an Ad Hoc Commission to "purify" the security forces of human rights abusers, and a Truth Commission designed to create an official human rights history."<sup>147</sup> Although not all of these mandates would actually come to full fruition, they did set a standard against any potential future similar military dictatorships or cases of state sponsored political violence and human rights violations in El Salvador.<sup>148</sup>

Additionally, under El Rescate's leadership, the issues surrounding impunity, amnesty, and accountability were addressed through a fact-based reporting tool entitled the Index to Accountability. The Index covered the entire 12-year period of the Civil War, and its findings were based largely on the data from *Tutela Legal*, a Salvadoran-based human rights organization, and a two-year study completed by El Rescate. According to Salvador Sanabria, the founder and current head of El Rescate, the "Index became like an official source of information for the U.S. government and the Canadian government to be used against human rights violations perpetrators applying for adjustment of status in the U.S. or Canada, or for those that the governments of the U.S.

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<sup>147</sup> Howland, "El Rescate," 709.

<sup>148</sup> Howland, "El Rescate, 709-711; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 65-68; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, "The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles," 119; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 182-183; Chang and Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City*, 84-91.

and Canada established that they committed fraud by admitting to answer questions as to their military, police, or persecutor status.”<sup>149</sup> Although the database is not currently available online, its publication is being worked on under the Center for Human Rights at the University of Washington in Seattle under the leadership of Angelina Snodgrass Godoy with the goal of publishing it online and making it available to researchers at some point later this year. It was the information compiled under the Index that, according to Sanabria, “provided critical information to the UN’s Peace Accords Special Mission in El Salvador to advise them in the work of the Truth Commission, and the Truth Commission set up by the UN worked by publishing reports on the atrocities committed during the war and established who were responsible for those.”<sup>150</sup> This focus on documenting and denouncing human rights abuses within El Rescate through the Index to Accountability in order to contribute to the process of accountability that was absent throughout the Salvadoran Civil War and during the actual writing of the Peace Accords remained a major portion of El Rescate’s focus until the mid-1990s. The focus then shifted again to “defining a strategy for facilitating positive social change in El Salvador based on human rights law.”<sup>151</sup> This shift recognized the need for a focus on accountability in El Salvador’s past history, but also on the ongoing issues preventing full recovery in the collective Salvadoran social memory that stemmed largely from the “institutionalized impunity for past human rights abuses in El Salvador.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Salvador Sanabria, Interview, February 5, 2019.

<sup>150</sup> Salvador Sanabria, Interview, February 5, 2019.

<sup>151</sup> Howland, “El Rescate,” 708-709.

<sup>152</sup> Howland, “El Rescate, 709-711; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 65-68; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 119; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 182-183; Chang and Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City*, 84-91; Salvador Sanabria, Interview, February 5, 2019.

As for El Rescate's changes in goals and programs reflecting the 1990s shift in the specific needs of the Los Angeles Salvadoran community from its foundation in 1981, many new programs have become a part of El Rescate. For example, although El Rescate had previously focused on the legal and sociopolitical structures and legislation that directly impacted the growing community of Salvadorans in the Los Angeles area, after the end of the Civil War, El Rescate focused on the legal need of Salvadorans in the adjudication of individual immigration court cases. Sanabria emphasized the importance of this focus, both in the 1990s as well as in the more modern era, especially under the Trump administration presently, but also emphasized the establishment of El Rescate's citizenship program, saying that "we consider that [citizenship is] the most effective shield against the xenophobic and anti-immigrant policies of this current administration governing our country is to have U.S. citizenship."<sup>153</sup> Another program developed around the same time of the signing of the 1992 Peace Accords was that of a transnational program under which El Rescate extended the reach of their humanitarian aid and legal programs into their already established role of defending the rights of immigrants living in the Los Angeles community. Additionally, this transnational program sought to "educate immigrants migrating in irregular forms from Central America to the United States in how to protect their rights on their way to the United States" because of the need, in the case of Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans, "to cross two or three nations and they need to face, they will face, different realities in their trek through the territories of those nations."<sup>154</sup> Overall, from the 1980s to the 1990s to the present, El Rescate maintained and increased their role in providing services unique to the evolving

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<sup>153</sup> Salvador Sanabria Interview.

<sup>154</sup> Salvador Sanabria Interview.

needs of the growing Salvadoran communities in Los Angeles and greatly contributed to the Los Angeles-based Salvadoran community's recognition as legitimate immigrants deserving of legal residency status, and all the benefits that come along with this status, in the United States.<sup>155</sup>

CARECEN, like El Rescate, also maintained and grew their role in Los Angeles after the 1992 Peace Accords. According to its website, over the thirty years CARECEN has existed, it has gone from “a small grassroots group to the largest Central American organization in the country, providing low-cost immigration legal services, policy advocacy in immigration, education reform and workers' rights, and organizing know-how for parents, youth and workers.”<sup>156</sup> CARECEN's website also specifically acknowledges the shift in strategy of many of the activist community organizations that have a focus on the Salvadoran Los Angeles community from refugee to immigrant by stating that “its clients also changed, from refugees fleeing war to vibrant immigrant families and workers sinking roots in the United States.”<sup>157</sup> CARECEN, like El Rescate, recognized the importance of educational services to the established Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, and provides “education, enrichment, and leadership development programs for children, youth, and adults through its Parent Center, Youth Center, and citizenship classes.”<sup>158</sup> In addition to CARECEN's Los Angeles headquarters, a sister office was established in Washington, D.C. Although this office

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<sup>155</sup> Howland, “El Rescate, 709-711; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 65-68; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, “The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles,” 119; Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 182-183; Chang and Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City*, 84-91; Salvador Sanabria, Interview, February 5, 2019.

<sup>156</sup> “History,” Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.carecen-la.org/history>.

<sup>157</sup> “History,” CARECEN, <http://www.carecen-la.org/history>.

<sup>158</sup> “Education,” Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.carecen-la.org/education>.

was established at the same time as CARECEN in Los Angeles, it really began to grow in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coinciding with the increase of Salvadorans migrating to the Washington, D.C. area. The shift in the focus of programs in both CARECEN-LA and CARECEN-DC reflected the evolving needs of the growing Central American communities surrounding the two arrival city hubs and, like El Rescate, no longer just focused on ensuring that the immigrant communities were legalized but that the individuals within the community were accepted and able to further establish roots within the United States. CARECEN did this through a series of new 1990s community support services like job application help, document translation, job searches, and obtaining insurance and housing. Additionally, the legal advocacy of CARECEN during the 1990s, especially in the D.C. area, was especially vital in helping reform the aforementioned series of refugee and immigration laws that “destabilized the residency statuses of many Central American immigrants.” Although CARECEN clearly continued to play a very significant role in the lives of the Salvadoran communities during the 1990s, one of the greatest, yet less direct, impacts that it had was on the creation of two new activist community organizations: The Salvadoran American Leadership and Education Fund (SALEF) and the Asociación de Salvadoreños in Los Angeles (ASOSAL).

### **New Activist Community Organizations**

In the 1990s, two new activist community organizations that had direct ties with CARECEN were founded in the Los Angeles community. The first of these organizations to be established was the Asociación de Salvadoreños in Los Angeles (ASOSAL). ASOSAL was established in 1991 as a direct offshoot of CARECEN with the intended purpose to “fight for an immigration legal status and to defend the rights of

immigrants.”<sup>159</sup> A secondary goal of ASOSAL was to help create a cultural space to allow for a distinctly Salvadoran “cultural identification” that could be disseminated to future generations of Salvadoran-Americans that ran the risk of being disconnected from El Salvador. The initial purpose for its establishment was to focus solely on obtaining an extension of the TPS program for Salvadorans and, in conjunction with El Rescate and CARECEN, ASOSAL lobbies the U.S. and Salvadoran governments to “promote the establishment of legal permanent residency for Salvadorans in the United States.”<sup>160</sup>

ASOSAL’s greatest achievement is the grassroots support that it has been able to drum up in the support of its legal advocacy and cultural programs. However, by working alongside of El Rescate and CARECEN, ASOSAL has also been able to focus on providing educational, cultural, and social services that blend the Salvadoran identity with the American identity through providing English and citizenship classes that would increase the integration of the Salvadoran community members into the greater multicultural Los Angeles area while at the same time not abandoning but, rather, encouraging the continuation of distinctly Salvadoran culture and identity within the community. This thematic focus on education and the blending of the Salvadoran identity with the American identity into a transnational Salvadoran-American identity came out of the post-Peace Accords shift in strategy of organizational focus on gaining acceptance for the established Salvadoran communities. Additionally, these types of programs would continue to grow in importance throughout the 1990s until they were just as important within the communities served as the initial legal and political focus of activist

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<sup>159</sup> “ASOSAL History,” Asociación de Salvadoreños in Los Angeles (ASOSAL), last modified in 2017, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.asosal.org/about-us/>.

<sup>160</sup> Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 67.

community organizations and programs, like El Rescate and CARECEN, that came out of the 1980s and the Salvadoran Diaspora during the Civil War.<sup>161</sup>

The second organization that emerged in the 1990s, the Salvadoran American Leadership and Education Fund (SALEF), also embodied this new increased emphasis on the transnational Salvadoran-American identity and the promotion of the importance of education for Salvadoran youth in Los Angeles. SALEF was founded by Carlos Vaquerano, who had previously worked as a community activist for CARECEN, in 1996 with the stated mission to “promote the civic participation and representation of the Salvadoran and other Latino communities in the U.S., promote the economic development and democracy in El Salvador, as well as to advocate for its economic, educational, and political advancement and growth.”<sup>162</sup> Additionally, according to Karla Cativo, the current Outreach and Organizing Manager of SALEF, SALEF was “created with the intention of opening up a space for the youth from Central America that was coming into the U.S. to have access to higher education, to going to college, to going to universities if that was what they wanted to do.”<sup>163</sup> Therefore, by establishing SALEF, which was the first educational fund established in the Los Angeles region dedicated to creating those opportunities, SALEF was able to address a need that Vaquerano saw as missing, but necessary, whilst working for CARECEN in order to address the evolving needs of the Salvadoran-American community in Los Angeles during the 1990s. Over time, SALEF would grow to address many of the same areas as El Rescate, CARECEN,

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<sup>161</sup> “ASOSAL History,” ASOSAL, <http://www.asosal.org/about-us/>; Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California*, 65-70; Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 95.

<sup>162</sup> “Our Mission,” Salvadoran American Leadership and Education Fund (SALEF), last modified in 2014, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.salef.org/about>.

<sup>163</sup> Karla Cativo, Interview with Author, Phone, February 2, 2019.

and ASOSAL, like naturalization services and legal services, but would remain largely focused on the importance of youth education through their scholarship, youth employment, and community college course programs. By partnering with a local community college, SALEF is able to “offer college courses revolving around the topic of Central American studies to local youth.”<sup>164</sup> This college course program was established to address the problem that the “youth is very disconnected with the history of Central America, and what we [SALEF] are doing with these courses is opening that line of communication for them so that they can explore a little bit more where they come from because, at this point, a lot of local youth is born here and no longer coming straight from the country.”<sup>165</sup> The purpose of the focus of these classes was, according to Cativo, was both to preserve the Salvadoran culture and identity within the disconnected youth generations born in the United States as well as to explain, through historical context dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, “a little more background on why the countries are the way that they are and why there is so much immigration coming from those areas.”<sup>166</sup> This shows that, like ASOSAL and the newer programs of El Rescate and CARECEN, the youth-specific focus in the 1990s was becoming increasingly important, as was the focus on programs that encouraged the Salvadoran community to maintain their unique transnational identity while still integrating their community as a whole into the multicultural identity of Los Angeles.

Collaboration between the Los Angeles-based activist community organizations has been an important key in their ability to obtain a positive outcome from a variety of

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<sup>164</sup> Cativo, Interview, February 2, 2019.

<sup>165</sup> Cativo, Interview, February 2, 2019.

<sup>166</sup> Cativo, Interview, February 2, 2019.

projects. Cativo emphasized the role of collaboration with other activist community organizations focused on Salvadorans and Central Americans in the more recent successes of SALEF. She acknowledged that, during the 1980s when a majority of the original activist community organizations were founded by people arriving through the Salvadoran Diaspora, many of the founding activists came together to determine what types of organizations and programs were needed to address all of the various needs of the growing Salvadoran Los Angeles population. This collaborative inception of the Salvadoran and Central American-focused activist community organizations was vital in contributing to their initial success and the legacy and standard set by said success and, so, in order to continue this collaborative legacy, SALEF put an important emphasis on working together with other organizations for the ultimate well-being of the communities being served. This collaborative legacy, according to Cativo, allowed the comparatively new and small organization to make a lot of headway on a variety of projects. When asked how SALEF was able to provide so many various services successfully with a staff of only seven, Cativo answered “I know how it gets done – it’s because we have awesome, kickass community partners and we all stick together, and we are able to get things done together.”<sup>167</sup> SALEF typically worked with El Rescate and CARECEN but has also collaborated on projects benefitting the community with a number of Los Angeles Catholic organizations. Additionally, in the near future, SALEF has the very real possibility of further expanding its transnational focus by establishing an office in San Salvador to continue SALEF’s focus on Salvadoran youth by through extending their youth services, scholarship fund, and history course programs into El Salvador. Cativo

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<sup>167</sup> Cativo, Interview, February 2, 2019.

stated that the purpose of expanding into El Salvador would also help address many of the same issues facing Salvadoran youth in Los Angeles, especially “in terms of understanding intergenerational trauma and connecting with historical memory, which are things that have almost been erased from the academic and consciousness of the Salvadoran youth.”<sup>168</sup> Finally, an example that encompasses SALEF’s dedication to the Salvadoran transnational identity and historical memory in Los Angeles was the 2012 installation of a statue commemorating Monsignor Oscar Romero in the center of the increasingly Salvadoran within MacArthur Park. The effort to get this statue installed in the public space of Los Angeles was extensive, and it took a fairly long time, but the effort was led by SALEF because of the importance of MacArthur Park as a key landmark for the Central American community of Los Angeles.<sup>169</sup>

The third, and final, new activist community organization that emerged following the Peace Accords was Homies Unidos. Although initially founded in 1996 in San Salvador, Homies Unidos soon thereafter gained a Los Angeles-based office in 1997. The stated mission of Homies Unidos was to “end violence and promote peace in our Central American communities through gang prevention; the promotion of human rights in immigrant communities and the empowerment of youth and families in El Salvador and Los Angeles to achieve their full potential in a just, safe, and healthy society.”<sup>170</sup> The foundation of Homies Unidos was largely in response to the proliferation of U.S.-based gangs, like Mara Salvatrucha 13 or MS-13, that began in Los Angeles and the subsequent

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<sup>168</sup> Cativo, Interview, February 2, 2019.

<sup>169</sup> Cativo, Interview, February 2, 2019; Robert J. Lopez, “Groundbreaking Set for Monument to Slain Salvadoran Archbishop,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2013, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-xpm-2013-jun-21-la-me-ln-archbishop-oscar-romero-plaza-20130620-story.html>.

<sup>170</sup> “History,” Homies Unidos, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://homiesunidos.org/about/history/>.

problems U.S. policy and deportation practices caused for the Salvadoran government and people following the transnationalization and spread of these gangs into Central America. However, Homies Unidos does not try to pull the gang members out of the gangs. Instead, Homies Unidos attempts to accomplish their mission by eliminating violence and providing gang members with training in nonviolence and conflict resolution as well as skills such as computer graphics and design. The Homies Unidos Los Angeles chapter was founded by Alex Sanchez as a way to provide an alternative to “gangs, drugs, and other negative activity”<sup>171</sup> for the youth in the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles, where gang membership was especially prevalent and common. Additionally, Homies Unidos worked to promote other educational opportunities for the Salvadoran youth in Los Angeles.

Although Homies Unidos has a different overarching goal than many of the other activist community organizations in Los Angeles, they still serve generally the same communities and have had to adjust their approaches to programs and problems in similar manners to other activist community organizations. Additionally, Homies Unidos has also collaborated with many of the other aforementioned activist community organizations on larger projects related to topics such as legislative policy advocacy. For example, in 1997, “several gang members linked with the network traveled to El Salvador with a delegation arranged by CARECEN.” Upon this delegation’s return to Los Angeles, many noted that the “conditions in El Salvador were even worse than on the streets of Los Angeles, and the network has incorporated goals such as reducing the

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<sup>171</sup> “Letter from Alex,” Homies Unidos, last modified in 2015, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://homiesunidos.org/about/letter-from-alex/>.

deportation of gang members to El Salvador and other countries.”<sup>172</sup> This sentiment was echoed by Alex Sanchez, as shown through his actions and focus on new programs, along with the other members of the Los Angeles-based chapter of Homies Unidos, such as negotiating with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to allow Homies Unidos to “distribute literature to gang members facing deportation with information on how to contact Homies when back in El Salvador,” as well as his cooperation with U.S. attorneys on “efforts to block gang deportations on the grounds that gang members (who have been targeted by death squads in El Salvador and other countries) face the danger of being killed on their return.”<sup>173</sup> Elena Zilberg points out a depressing parallel in her article “Refugee Gang Youth: Zero Tolerance and the Security state in Contemporary U.S.-Salvadoran Relations,” stating that the “U.S. and El Salvador appear to be locked in a repeating history. Salvadorans were forced out of El Salvador as civil war refugees in the 1980s, only to be forced out of the United States in the 1990s as criminal deportees. Today, Salvadoran youth and young adults are fleeing El Salvador once again, this time as a result of the combined pressures of both gang and state violence.”<sup>174</sup> It was under this sociopolitical context that MS-13 was created in Los Angeles and subsequently was what created the space and need for an organization founded in nonviolence like Homies Unidos.

### **Negative Unintended Consequences**

The formation of activist community organizations, a transnational Salvadoran identity, and growing Salvadoran-American community in Los Angeles were all

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<sup>172</sup> Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 196.

<sup>173</sup> Chinchilla and Hamilton, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 196-197.

<sup>174</sup> Elana Zilberg, “Refugee Gang Youth: Zero Tolerance and the Security State in Contemporary U.S.-Salvadoran Relations,” *Youth, Globalization, and the Law* (2006): 62.

relatively “positive” unintended consequences resulting from the Salvadoran Diaspora. Even though these consequences are being referred to as “positive” in this context, by no means were any of the series of events sparked by the extremely violent Salvadoran Civil War and the subsequent fleeing from persecution and violence of Salvadorans to the United States as a part of the Salvadoran Diaspora positive. Rather, the ability of Salvadorans arriving in the United States, and specifically Los Angeles, to make the best out of a terrible situation through the formation of activist community organizations focused specifically on the Salvadorans who were arriving in Los Angeles and by establishing roots, livelihoods, and communities following fleeing persecution were, in this sense, a positive outcome compared to the much more negative point of view on the terrible series of events that led many Salvadorans to their new Los Angeles communities. Additionally, these “positive” unintended consequences of U.S. intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War and the subsequent ten year period of massive levels of violence, repression and human rights violations could also be considered positive in comparison to two very negative unintended consequences of the continued relationship between the United States and El Salvador in the 1990s: the creation of the gang MS-13 and the exportation of strict U.S. criminal policing legislation into El Salvador.<sup>175</sup>

Following the end of the Cold War and the Salvadoran civil war, the pattern of state-sponsored political violence ended, but the underlying social, political, and economic inequalities and tensions remained. Both negative unintended consequences

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<sup>175</sup> Zilberg, “Refugee Gang Youth,” 61-69; Thomas Bruneau, Lucía Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner, eds., *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011): 53-68; T.W. Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders: An Ethnography of a Salvadoran Street Gang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 73-84.

can be viewed as a result of the switch in Salvadoran society following the end of the Civil War and the ratification of the final version of the Chapultepec Peace Accords from having to constantly endure the official state-sponsored political violence committed directly from the Salvadoran government and military to gang violence which is a more unofficial type of violence and persecution. This led to the transition from state-sponsored political violence to the “new” dominant form of violence in the postwar period: gang violence. The rise of gang violence in El Salvador similarly most negatively impacted the marginalized urban youth demographic of El Salvador. However, unlike the political violence of the Civil War era, the violence was committed by gangs, which are non-state actors.

Despite the official end of the Civil War and the resulting reduction of state-sponsored political violence, the nation of El Salvador still experienced high levels of structural violence. It was in this context that the parallels between the violence in El Salvador in the 1980s and the 2000s-2010s were most apparent. This comparison is most effective by the continuation of the evaluation of elements of the Salvadoran civil war previously discussed with the “new” manifestations of violence in El Salvador, the changing roles and impacts of structural inequalities, the detrimental impact on Salvadoran youth, and the transformation of the role of the United States in driving the emergence of “new” gang violence in El Salvador. This “new” violence, although not perpetrated by state-sponsored actors like during the Civil War, still has traceable roots in the institutionalized structural causes of “rising social and economic inequality, poorly functioning systems of law and order, and the illicit criminal networks functioning in the

region.”<sup>176</sup> This contemporary manifestation of violence was often attributed to the rise of youth street gangs, or *maras*, during the postwar period. The young members of these *maras*, like the revolutionaries that made up the FMLN, had a common feeling of social exclusion and marginalization that was rooted in the frustrations with social and economic hardship caused by the disruptive Salvadoran Civil War.<sup>177</sup>

The inability of the Salvadoran state to address the historical problem of social inclusion is a vital contributing factor to this transformation from political violence to gang violence. Social exclusion, which is defined as “the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live,” is a breeding ground for the increasing Salvadoran youth participation in gang violence.<sup>178</sup> For Salvadoran youths experiencing social exclusion and marginalization, “belonging and otherwise unobtainable recognition” can be found in gang membership.<sup>179</sup>

The most well-known, but also most commonly misunderstood, Salvadoran gang is MS-13. MS-13 was founded in Los Angeles during the 1980s and exported to El Salvador following the end of the Salvadoran civil war. With the exportation of MS-13 into El Salvador, and its subsequent incorporation of the smaller, territorial domestic youth gangs, the former street gangs have become political actors in El Salvador. The politicization of MS-13 is shown through the social and political objectives of the gang that transcended the previous motivations of economic prosperity. In looking at the new

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<sup>176</sup> Kirsten Howarth and Jenny H. Peterson, *Linking Political Violence and Crime in Latin America: Myths, Realities, and Complexities* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016): xvii.

<sup>177</sup> Abrego, “On Silences,” 74-80; Howarth and Peterson, *Linking Political Violence and Crime in Latin America*, xvii; Zilberg, “Refugee Gang Youth,” 61-69; Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner, eds., *Maras*, 43-69; Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders*, 48-55.

<sup>178</sup> Savenije and Borgh, “Youth Gangs,” 158-159.

<sup>179</sup> Savenije and Borgh, “Youth Gangs,” 167.

forms of power gained through the politicization of the gangs, it can be argued that the presence of the gangs in El Salvador, and the threat of violence against any opposition to the gangs, have allowed these third-generation gangs to take de facto control of the Salvadoran state. This de facto control of the Salvadoran state is further strengthened by the inability or unwillingness of legitimate Salvadoran state institutions to effectively combat the increasingly politicized, transnational gang organizations. Additionally, although MS-13 has become a transnational organization, this spread was largely unintentional and was a result, for the most part, of “the secondary migration of Central American families within the United States...and later as a result of the mass deportations of gang members back to their home countries in Central America.”<sup>180</sup> According to the eight-year immersive anthropological study of T.W. Ward, many of the Salvadoran youths arriving during the second Salvadoran Diaspora of the 1990s in Los Angeles chose to join a street gang in Los Angeles “partly as a product of their childhood socialization to violence and the traumas of war, partly as a result of his feelings of abandonment, resentment, and alienation, and partly as a response to this new form of oppression.”<sup>181</sup> Therefore, because of the unsafe feelings caused by the Salvadoran Civil War’s unintended consequences, Salvadoran youth that desired a sense of belonging in Los Angeles were disproportionately more likely to join a street gang of peers with similar experiences, which is what MS-13 began as, in order to gain this sense of belonging and, later, protection. These somewhat nonviolent origins of MS-13 would quickly shift to a more violent and protection-oriented organization in order to stand up to

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<sup>180</sup> Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders*, xvii.

<sup>181</sup> Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders*, 2.

the other violent street gangs in Los Angeles, and this violence would be what ultimately led to a mass deportation and transnationalization of MS-13.<sup>182</sup>

Once back in El Salvador, the recently deported gang members recruited Salvadoran youth from the already existing small-scale youth street gangs. Although Homies Unidos did help abate some of the violence coming into El Salvador from the U.S.-based gang members, the reach of the organization was ultimately not enough, and the transnational gang organization grew in power and violence. This increase in violence, as well as the need of the Salvadoran government to repatriate the returning Salvadoran citizens, led to the second large negative unintended consequence of an increasingly preventatively harsh anti-gang and anti-crime legislation and policing strategy within El Salvador. This anti-gang legislation in El Salvador manifested into the policy *El Plan Mano Dura* and, like U.S. anti-gang legislation, it works, under the guise of prevention, “to build a criminal record against youth through petty infractions and channels young people into the criminal justice system before serious crimes are committed.”<sup>183</sup> *El Plan Mano Dura*, like the first negative unintended consequence, inordinately impacted Salvadoran youth while limiting the ability of Homies Unidos to actively work on the promotion of nonviolence in gangs in El Salvador.

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<sup>182</sup> Isabel Bonilla-Mathe, “To Group or Not To Group? Refugee Status for Central American Victims of Gang Violence,” *Tulane Journal of International & Comparative Law* 22 (2013): 148-151; Hamlin, “Ideology, International Law, and the INS,” 321; Locascio, “The Modern Refugee,” 32-36, 42; Patrick J. McNamara, “Political Refugees from El Salvador: Gang Politics, the State, and Asylum Claims,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (December 2017): 8-11; José Miguel Cruz, “*Maras* and the Politics of Violence in El Salvador,” in *Global Gangs: Street Violence Across the World*, edited by Jennifer M. Hazen and Dennis Rodgers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): 125-129; Abrego, “On Silences,” 77-80; Howarth and Peterson, *Linking Political Violence and Crime in Latin America*, xvii; Zilberg, “Refugee Gang Youth,” 61-69; Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner, eds., *Maras*, 43-69; Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders*, 48-55.

<sup>183</sup> Zilberg, “Refugee Gang Youth,” 79-80.

While the flow of immigrants from El Salvador to the U.S. continues as a long continuum of failed Cold War and post-Cold War policies, contemporary immigrants face more obstacles to achieving legal status due to archaic language of what it means to be a “refugee” or “asylee.” The U.S. definition of refugee and asylee focuses on their being persecuted by state-sponsored actors. However, in most gang-related asylum claims, the persecution is from nonstate actors. In order for asylum in a gang-related claim to be granted, it “is often necessary to establish that the state is unwilling or unable to provide protection to these individuals.”<sup>184</sup> The recent politicization of the gangs in El Salvador combined with the failure of the Salvadoran state in combatting the violence used by the gangs in El Salvador for youth recruitment and to gain social, political, and economic control is the main justification for the surge of asylum-seekers from El Salvador during the 1990s and 2000s. This led to, like during the Salvadoran Diaspora in the 1980s, the exclusion of Salvadoran migrants from evenly accessing asylum status that would allow them to more easily and safely enter the United States.

Additionally, these negative unintended consequences founded in the ongoing, and increasingly complex and tense, U.S.-Salvadoran relationship inordinately impacted youth, both within El Salvador and in the United States. As previously mentioned, many of the new activist community organizations within Los Angeles attempted to somewhat combat these youth impacts through education and community building, however, this did not change much, especially for the youth involved in the gangs in the U.S., involved in the gangs in El Salvador, or attempting to flee membership in or persecution from the gangs in El Salvador by obtaining asylum in the United States.

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<sup>184</sup> Bonilla-Mathe, “To Group or Not To Group?,” 155-158; McNamara, “Political Refugees from El Salvador,” 21-22.

### **History, Memory, and the Solidification of a Transnational Salvadoran Identity**

The official site of memory and remembrances of martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero have been especially important to the Salvadoran community in MacArthur Park as well as to the greater Los Angeles community. Romero, an exponent of liberation theology who advocated for the poor in El Salvador, was assassinated on March 24, 1980 while delivering morning mass. However, even though Romero's assassination was unsolved under the official investigations, it was largely accepted and known by the Salvadoran general public that the assassination was committed by one of the right-wing, pseudo-military "death squads" under the orders of death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson because of the so-called "radical" messages Romero preached in his masses and radio addresses.<sup>185</sup>

The official investigation of who, or which side of the Civil War, was responsible for the assassination of Romero in the United States, in the eyes of the international community, and under the Salvadoran state was an investigation that went unsolved for a number of years following his assassination and remained a topic of interest throughout, and following the ending, of the Salvadoran Civil War. This "unsolved" nature of the assassination of Oscar Romero, as well as his ongoing importance as a figure of martyrdom throughout the Salvadoran Civil War, is best illustrated through a series of documents compiled under a 1987 "Secretary's Panel" under Secretary of State William L. Ball. Minnesota Senator Republican David Durenberger, who was apparently

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<sup>185</sup> Anna L. Peterson and Brandt G. Peterson, "Martyrdom, Sacrifice, and Political Memory in El Salvador," *Social Research* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 511-542; Jeanette Rodríguez and Ted Fortier, *The Power of Narrative: Archbishop Romero and the Option for the Poor* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007): 58-62; Matt Eisenbrandt, *Assassination of a Saint: The Plot to Murder Óscar Romero and the Quest to Bring His Killers to Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017): 1-15.

advocating on behalf of a constituent, wrote the following: “I urge you to begin a thorough investigation into the brutal assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. I do not believe that U.S. officials have a serious interest in finding those responsible for this atrocity!”<sup>186</sup> This not only showed the still unresolved nature of Romero’s assassination, even in the eyes of the American public and government, seven years following his assassination, but also revealed how significant of a figure and martyr Romero was that recognition of his assassination by “death squads” was still a focus of individual citizens and those concerned with human rights violations. The rest of the documents within the compiled file span in dates of origins from 1987 to 1992 and contain a fairly wide-ranging and deep amount of information detailing the various official investigations into who was to be held accountable for Romero’s assassination, ultimately ending with a post-Truth Commission document in which these questions were finally officially resolved. It was here that the U.S. Secretary’s Panel recognized that:

Monsignor Romero had become a well-known critic of violence and injustice, and as such, he was seen in right-wing civilian and military circles as a dangerous enemy. His homilies provoked profound irritation in these circles because they included accounts of incidents in which human rights were violated...Therefore, individuals of high rank in the government as well as the Armed Forces viewed the actions of the archbishop as aiding subversion.<sup>187</sup>

These religious messages that were perceived as dangerous are exemplified through Romero’s January 14, 1979 speech in which he stated “God is the judge of all social systems. Neither the gospel nor the church can be monopolized by any political or

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<sup>186</sup> Who Durenberger was advocating on behalf of is unclear due to redactions made to the document.

<sup>187</sup> Department of State Documents on El Salvador: Human Rights, 1980-1993, Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State: Special Collection of Records Relating to the El Salvador Human Rights Cases, 1979-1993, Box 21, U.S. National Archives at College Park, accessed March 22, 2019.

social movement.”<sup>188</sup> In this quote, Romero was still seemingly attempting to keep church and state separate, however, by not providing approval for the repressive ARENA government, Romero was inherently challenging the power of the political party in charge and reasserting the power of both himself and the church as a leader in the eyes of the Salvadoran people. This religious leadership assuring the Salvadoran people that the Church will not be coopted by the repressive regime was important, even though Romero himself in the near future would move from implicitly political to more directly political in support of the rising revolutionary FMLN prior to his death and official martyrdom in the memory of the Salvadoran collective consciousness. The official politicization of Romero was especially apparent only about a year after his January 14, 1979 speech in his February 17, 1980 homily entitled “Poverty of the Beatitudes, Our Strength.” In this homily, Romero passionately stated that:

promises continue to be made but action is lacking. What has become more evident this week is that neither the Junta nor the Christian Democrats are governing the country. They are only allowing that impression to be given nationally and internationally...and the bloody eviction of the occupants from the Christian Democrats’ headquarters show clearly that it is not they who govern, but rather the oppressive sector of the armed forces... They assassinated them: they assassinated various people in brutal manner...If the Junta and the Christian Democrats do not want to be seen as accomplices of so much abuse of power and accomplices of so many criminal acts, then they ought to single out and punish those responsible for these actions.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, edited and translated by James R. Brockman (Farmington, PA: The Bruderhof Foundation, Inc., 2003): 133,

<http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/violenceoflove.pdf>.

<sup>189</sup> Oscar Romero, “Poverty of Our Beatitudes, Our Strength,” The Romero Trust, February 17, 1980, accessed March 20, 2019,

[http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/poverty\\_beatitudes\\_strength.pdf](http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/poverty_beatitudes_strength.pdf).

Although the messages Romero was preaching throughout his public addresses to the Salvadoran people had contained “revolutionary” or incendiary undercurrents of which the death squads and the Salvadoran government would have seen as dangerous long prior to this speech, it was at this point that Romero became not only explicitly political, but a significant leader in the eyes of the repressed Salvadoran public and the FMLN.

The right-wing, ARENA-led government and D’Aubuisson feared Romero’s messages would lend itself to the formation of more FMLN revolutionaries due to the power of liberation theology to appeal to the poor. Liberation theology is most closely associated with Latin American versions of Catholicism and is a synthesis of traditional Catholic theology and Marxist concepts founded in advocating for a belief in the salvation for the poor and oppressed members of society through their liberation from social, economic, and political oppression. A prime example of Romero’s dedication to this ideology was his September 23, 1979 public address in which he stated that “I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence, we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression.”<sup>190</sup>

Romero’s work had deep historical roots in El Salvador, dating back to the desire for agrarian and land reforms that sparked the 1932 Matanza. In the late 1970s preceding Romero’s assassination, the dissatisfaction of the Salvadoran general public with the inequalities of Salvadoran economic, social, and political structures was growing. It was this dissatisfaction with the ongoing inequalities and oppressions of the poor that created the space for the FMLN to first launch a revolution against the Salvadoran government.

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<sup>190</sup> Romero, *The Violence of Love*, 169-170,  
<http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/violenceoflove.pdf>.

At the same time, it was the messages of Oscar Romero that were able to voice the discontent of the people while at the same time preaching a message of ultimate hope through the salvation from this oppression and inequality. This was a dangerous message in the eyes of the Salvadoran government, especially in the context of the other Cold War-era Central American revolutions that were ignited over similar issues.

Immediately following Romero's assassination, he became, in the eyes of the Salvadoran people, even if they had not previously been politicized or apart of one of the revolutionary organizations combined under the FMLN umbrella, a martyr representing the extreme violence and repression of the Salvadoran Civil War. The heroic status of the martyred Romero was maintained in the social memories of Salvadorans and, more widely, Central Americans from the time of the Civil War to the present. Additionally, Romero's messages founded in liberation theology, specifically his focus on the poor and oppressed, continued to be highly applicable throughout the Salvadoran Civil War, the Salvadoran Diaspora, the period immediately following the Chapultepec Peace Accords, and through the 1990s and 2000s and into the present. Romero, although already widely recognized as a martyr, received sainthood status on October 14, 2018 by Pope Francis who, due to his Argentinian roots, was highly influenced by Oscar Romero. In Romero's canonization, Pope Francis emphasized Romero's "dedication to the poor and marginalized" and wore "the blood-stained rope belt Romero wore when he was gunned down."<sup>191</sup> Not only does the official recognition of Romero's influence in El Salvador, and Latin America as a whole, but the physical wearing of Romero's "blood-stained rope

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<sup>191</sup> Camila Domonoske, "Oscar Romero, Pope Paul VI Elevated to Sainthood," *NPR*, October 14, 2018, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/14/657277667/oscar-romero-pope-paul-vi-elevated-to-sainthood>.

belt” further linked the sociopolitical significance and martyrdom of Romero in the collective social memory of the transnational Salvadoran community.

The memory and importance of Romero to the transnational Salvadoran, and Latin American, community as a whole also has gained more physical manifestations in recent years within Los Angeles. For example, under the leadership of SALEF and in conjunction with other community organizations and Los Angeles city officials, finally got approval for the installation of a statue honoring Oscar Romero in MacArthur Park on November 24, 2013. This was significant for the Salvadoran, and Latin American, community within the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles because MacArthur Park is located right inside of this neighborhood and had, since the beginning of the Salvadoran Diaspora, served as a gathering place for Latin American people in the neighborhood in which soccer games were played, people participated in the informal economy by selling food and goods, and people held protests against the Civil War and the exclusionary immigration and deportation policies of the United States.<sup>192</sup>

In an interview following the installation of the statue within MacArthur Park, Carlos Vaquerano, the founder and director of SALEF, stated that “Msgr. Romero is a legend for Salvadorans, and having the statue in Los Angeles, the second largest concentrations of Salvadorans, what more can we ask?”<sup>193</sup> Vaquerano emphasized the importance of Romero in the memory of the Salvadoran transnational community by stating “he represents the struggle of many of us. He represents the beliefs and all those

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<sup>192</sup> Kelly Main and Gerardo Francisco Sandoval, “Placemaking in a Translocal Receiving Community: The Relevance of Place to Identity and Agency,” *Urban Studies* 52, no. 1 (2015): 72-76.

<sup>193</sup> Leslie Berestein Rojas, “A Statue to Salvadoran Icon Rises in McArthur Park,” *89.3KPCC*, November 24, 2013, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.scpr.org/blogs/multiamerican/2013/11/24/15271/a-statue-to-salvadoran-icon-rises-in-mcarthur-park/>.

ideas of social justice, and I think having him in L.A. just sends a powerful message for the future of our community.”<sup>194</sup> The physical statue itself further emphasized the transnational connections between El Salvador and the “faraway” community within Los Angeles since the bronze likeness was “created in El Salvador by artist Joaquin Serrano and flown to Los Angeles.”<sup>195</sup> This journey of the physical statue from El Salvador to the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles in which a majority of the Salvadoran migrants arrived and settled was representative of the Salvadoran Diaspora through the fact that the statue, or source of memory, was created in El Salvador and then sent away to Los Angeles to be given a new transnational meaning. Additionally, although the statue was now a part of the Los Angeles community, like the creation of a uniquely Salvadoran-American identity for the migrants arriving and settling in Los Angeles, the statue will always maintain a Salvadoran history and identity because of its origins in El Salvador.

The impact of the statue itself within MacArthur Park is twofold. First, the placement of a statue of a martyr of the Salvadoran Civil War, in which the U.S. and Oscar Romero were supporting opposing sides, explicitly recognized the significance of the Salvadoran community to the Pico Union neighborhood. Secondly, it further legitimizes all of the arguments previously made by the activist community organizations in support of acknowledging the legal residency status of Salvadorans in the United States and the importance of Salvadorans specifically to the growth of MacArthur Park, and vice-versa. Finally, as acknowledged by then Los Angeles Councilman Ed Reyes that

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<sup>194</sup> Berestein Rojas, “A Statue to Salvadoran Icon,” <https://www.scpr.org/blogs/multiamerican/2013/11/24/15271/a-statue-to-salvadoran-icon-rises-in-mcarthur-park/>.

<sup>195</sup> Berestein Rojas, “A Statue to Salvadoran Icon,” <https://www.scpr.org/blogs/multiamerican/2013/11/24/15271/a-statue-to-salvadoran-icon-rises-in-mcarthur-park/>.

represented the neighborhood surrounding MacArthur Park, the statue of Oscar Romero “will not only serve the Central American community, but it will offer Angelenos an insight into the rich history and culture of our diverse city.”<sup>196</sup> This sentiment is representative of the importance of not just promoting the memory of Romero to the Central American community’s social memory, but also in furthering the knowledge and education of the rest of the Los Angeles community on the history and importance of the ever-growing transnational Salvadoran community in Los Angeles.<sup>197</sup>

Overall, although all three of the activist community organizations that emerged in Los Angeles during the 1990s had fairly distinct and different focuses from one another, all three, in one way or another, focused on youth and education as a way to address the evolving needs of the Salvadoran-American community. The emergence of these organizations, as well as the continuation of El Rescate and CARECEN, allowed for a wider range of needs of the Salvadoran and Central American communities within Los Angeles to be addressed. Additionally, because all of these organizations focused on and were headquartered in and around the Pico Union/MacArthur Park neighborhood in which a majority of the community had arrived and settled in, it allowed for a greater legacy of collaboration between organizations in advocating on the behalf of the community in larger projects. Another positive outcome of the creation of the transnational Salvadoran community within MacArthur Park was the establishment of Salvadoran sites of culture and business that would contribute to the further development

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<sup>196</sup> Lopez, “Groundbreaking Set for Monument to Slain Salvadoran Archbishop,” *The Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-xpm-2013-jun-21-la-me-ln-archbishop-oscar-romero-plaza-20130620-story.html>.

<sup>197</sup> Main and Sandoval, “Placemaking in a Translocal Receiving Community,” 85; Lillian Guerra, “Late-Twentieth-Century Immigration and U.S. Foreign Policy: Forging Latino Identity in the Minefields of Political Memory,” in *The New Latino Studies Reader: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*, eds. Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Tomás Almaguer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016): 143-144.

and vibrancy of the community. As previously mentioned, the public space of MacArthur Park would ultimately recognize this established community by establishing a statue memorializing the Salvadoran martyr Oscar Romero, but this was not the only public manifestation of Salvadoran culture in the Pico Union neighborhood. Another park within the community was renamed “Oscar Romero Park” and, after years of petitioning, the City of Los Angeles officially renamed part of the community “Little El Salvador.” These are just two of the official manifestations of Salvadoran-American transnational identity in and positive influence on the City of Los Angeles as a whole. Salvadoran-Americans have also been able to find “new sites to anchor, cultivate, and restore their much ravaged memory and cultural knowledge” while at the same time promoting the growth of Salvadoran-founded and run businesses on a section of Vermont Avenue known as the “El Salvador Community Corridor.”<sup>198</sup> The vitality of the Salvadoran-American community in Los Angeles really began to accelerate in the 1990s following the Salvadoran Peace Accords, despite the ongoing legal and political limitations to obtaining official legal residency status. This growth of the Salvadoran-American community throughout the 1990s allowed for the creation of a transnational Salvadoran identity and culture and was due, in a large part, to the evolution of the preexisting activist community organizations along with the needs of the community as well as the foundation of additional activist community organizations to address, in more depth, the growing focuses on youth, education, and the preservation of the collective social and historical memory of the Salvadoran Civil War and Salvadoran Diaspora that first began the creation of a Salvadoran community in Los Angeles.

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<sup>198</sup> Guerra, “Late-Twentieth-Century Immigration and U.S. Foreign Policy,” 144.



## Conclusion

How does an understanding of the evolving U.S. relationship with El Salvador and the resulting unintended consequences relate to the sociopolitical climate of today? How are the contemporary debates over immigration and foreign policy related to these historical moments? News coverage about the “northern triangle” countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras that dominate news cycles in the era of the Trump presidency – a president whose campaign promise was to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico—are rooted in the cycle of unintended consequences sparked by the U.S. intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War. Despite the history and identity of the U.S. as a “nation of immigrants,” the U.S., over the last 40 years, has moved toward an increasingly exclusionary national policy against Central American immigration. Much of this historic exclusion has come with a dehumanization and villainization of Central Americans by both the national government and the mass media and, although this is by no means a “new” product or sociopolitical reality, this misrepresentative caricature of Central Americans has drastically increased since the election of Donald Trump as the nation’s 44<sup>th</sup> President. His use of this strategy based in fearmongering and vague, factually inaccurate claims in such a short space would be impossible due to both the number of public statements or tweets Trump makes per day on average and the amount of mass media coverage on these claims, however, this plethora of information, or, perhaps more accurately, misinformation does make it easier to show how all of the arguments made over the past three chapters matter to developing a more complete understanding of the greater story on which Trump’s narrative is loosely based on.

Neither the villainization of Central American immigrants nor having hardline immigration policies is unique to the Trump administration. In fact, the Trump administration might be seen as following in the footsteps of Barack Obama's administration on this issue – although both men are likely to hotly contest any such characterization. President Barack Obama was referred to as “Deporter in Chief” by his critics on immigration policy due to his administration's ability to “forcefully expel more than 3 million people from U.S. territory.” However, the Trump administration has not only taken these anti-immigrant and deportation policies to an entirely new level than the previous administration but has also managed to “strike down” the minor protections the Obama administration conceded, like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) – a renewable suspension of deportation for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. at the age of two or younger – and TPS protection for Salvadorans, that had been a major point of success for the advocacy of Central American-focused activist community organizations.<sup>199</sup>

El Salvador specifically has been the disproportionate focus of Trump's anti-immigrant stance and have faced mass deportations as well as “dehumanizing depictions of scowling, tattooed MS-13 gang members to stigmatize immigrants and justify escalating enforcement.” As previously argued, this depiction is emblematic of the ongoing problem with the mass media and U.S. government's focus on the small portion of the unintended consequences that were negative compared with the overwhelmingly larger and more significant “positive” unintended consequences. This disproportionate

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<sup>199</sup> Hilary Goodfriend, “Capitalizing on Fear: El Salvador's Far Right is Using Trump's War on Migrants for Political Gain,” Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), October 24, 2017, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://cispes.org/article/capitalizing-fear-el-salvador-s-far-right-using-trump-s-war-migrants-political-gain>.

focus, the almost constant anti-immigrant and anti-Central America-founded xenophobic and nativist rhetoric of Trump, his supporters, and the conservative media, and the lack of adequate education in American schools on the role the United States played in the violence of the Salvadoran Civil War has contributed to the misinformation surrounding many of the contemporary debates surrounding topics related to immigration from Central America and foreign policy. Therefore, by providing a more complete historical background to these debates and emphasizing the “positive” unintended consequences, as opposed to just the negative unintended consequences, this thesis makes a valuable contribution to the overall understanding of a variety of topics, including the U.S. interference in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Diaspora, and the role of activist community organizations in establishing a transnational Salvadoran-American community in Los Angeles.

Additionally, through this emphasis on the positive, this thesis confirms, and adds to, Doug Saunders’s argument made in *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping Our World* that the presence of migrants in “arrival cities” or urban centers, like Los Angeles, is beneficial to the urban center as a whole and representative of humanity at its best. The Los Angeles-based Salvadoran migrant community is a prime example of the rural-to-urban migration on which Saunders’s arguments are based. Furthermore, the positive impact made by Salvadoran-focused and founded activist community organizations on Los Angeles as a whole echoed his optimistic view of global urbanization in which migrant communities in arrival cities play a vital role. Therefore, the focus on activist community organizations and positive unintended consequences of the Salvadoran Diaspora is an important contribution to the small, yet growing,

historiography on a more positive view of arrival cities and the necessary inclusion of immigrants into the legal, social, and political structures of a city.<sup>200</sup>

Despite the end of the Cold War, as well as a number of ultimately unsuccessful attempts at reform, the violence facing the Salvadoran youth remained founded in the inequalities that existed prior to the Salvadoran Civil War. Since long before the Salvadoran Civil War, the marginalized individuals of El Salvador have been fighting against economic, social, and political inequality and repression. This fight began largely under Salvadoran youth and revolutionary groups because the political system, and the past attempts at governmental reform, had failed them. Decades after the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, it is still the transnational community of Salvadoran youths that are most detrimentally impacted by the failure of the Salvadoran state to protect them from inequality, repression, and violence. The main changes from the period of the Salvadoran Civil War to the postwar period of the 2000s-2010s was not represented, as the revolutionaries intended, by reforms within El Salvador targeting the structural causes of inequality and marginalization. Instead, the major change from the Salvador Civil War to the postwar period was represented by the switch from state-sanctioned political violence and persecution to gang violence that the state has proven to be ineffective at combatting.

Therefore, the question of Salvadoran asylum, immigration, and ongoing and deeply interconnected relationship between El Salvador in the context of today's political climate is complicated. This complex issue regarding both U.S. immigration policy and U.S. foreign policy has historical roots that are best explored through the analysis of the

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<sup>200</sup> Saunders, *Arrival City*, 1-5.

Cold War-era United States intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War, the sociopolitical impacts this had upon El Salvador, and the transition from the Cold War instability and political violence to the modern versions of violence that El Salvador faces today.

Additionally, by looking more specifically into the narrower impact these inequalities and violence have on the Salvadoran youth, as well as on the growth of activist community organizations, both the unintended and direct consequences of the Salvadoran Civil War and the post-Peace Accords period are extra apparent. The debate between policymakers surrounding how to best approach a potential solution to ending violence in El Salvador has historically been a major focus and will continue to be a modern and future focus of debate.

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