

DAVID DIAZ—Transcript

At about age 10, you probably didn't think much about the war unless something really came very close to you, and then you all of a sudden decided to wake up from that ignorance. But kids are kids, they didn't seem to know what was going unless their parents or someone told them that there was a war going on around them. From what I remember at about age ten, and maybe earlier than that, there had been about 4-5 years where the Policía de Hacienda basically kept control and they started to hear more and more about what happened during the curfews. The idea of the curfew was that, during that point, everybody had to be at their homes. So the idea was that while it was dark, the military corps could detain people who were suspicious of being in the guerrilla. The death squads operated as paramilitaries, so there were all these organized groups within El Salvador that would actually catch people but they'd try to have an operational mode where they would kill someone in a certain place and move that person somewhere else in the interior. And that way the police corps would not be tied to those crimes. It was a way of erasing your tracks. There used to be areas where you found dead bodies. One of those areas was called El Playón, and this other painting is actually inspired by El Playón. The dead bodies were left for the vultures and that's why I titled actually the painting, "Left for the Vultures." That's a bad memory from childhood that I have. Every time you saw a vulture it was a sign that they had found a dead body and they were feeding on it.

This painting basically tries to portray the Policía de Hacienda that controlled Citalá for a period of probably four years, until they got kicked out by the guerrilla. And their modus operandi was to torture people. It's a little bit like making a parody somewhat because there is an area where you see the Statue of Liberty with the American flag and it says, "Fly USA, the country of liberty." And at the bottom of the painting there is a newspaper that is basically telling you about those deported that are arriving and then on the other page it tells you how much the American government was sending in military aid. The military aid that probably the American people, not the government, the American people had no clue what it was used for. It was just a vehicle for the government in place in El Salvador to carry on even more massacres. And as I told you there were some massacres where they killed all the men, including the children. And in some cases like in Citalá's case, there were a lot of families—displaced people—that fled from those massacres, that we only knew women. There were no men.

That's the paper at the bottom, and then on the top, I could not leave out the ARENA party. Which was actually the most right-wing party in El Salvador. And part of the history of the ARENA party is that one of the founders of the party, Roberto D'Aubuisson, was a major in the army. He would encourage that message of hate towards

anyone that was dissident towards to the philosophy of the state. In the party itself there was a party song, or I should say the hymn of the party, that essentially said, "El Salvador will be the site where communism, the red ones, will die." So that was the idea of Major Roberto D'Aubuisson. He was really rallying for making sure that communism would not spread. And this came hand-to-hand with Ronald Reagan's statement that they had to fight communism because of that, because it would spread through nations and the U.S. would be threatened, directly threatened by communism. Which was probably not an unrealistic thing but... The truth is that behind this ideal of eliminating communism, the US government just helped the right-wing and the people that had no sense of decency, no sense of human dignity, to carry out atrocities. And things that should never happen in a country. In El Salvador, back in this time and still today but not as much, union leaders were threatened and in many cases they were disappeared, under the flag of being in a war. So that's the idea of the painting.

When Americans think that other countries don't like the US, it's not unsolicited. I mean, we didn't ask for Americans or the American government to come and intervene. We didn't ask for that. And the very fact that at some point there were reports that were clear that there were human rights violations in El Salvador, and the American government chose to not let the American people know about them, that speaks for itself. Because you tried to hide things from your people. You tried to manipulate the opinion that would have been otherwise against the military aid.

Well I was doing 8th grade and all of a sudden I found this job as a warehouse assistant, so I quit school. And as soon as the project was over I asked my parents if they would agree for me to move along with the company and go to other places. I mean, in my eyes that was better than just sitting around, or going to school, for what? What would I gain from going to school, if I could see that the country was not going in the direction where young people could actually aspire to have their aspirations fulfilled. So, they said, "No, that's not a good idea. At least here the army doesn't try to recruit people." So that's how the decision was made that essentially it was time for me to get out.

And my father basically came to town one day back from San Salvador and said, this is the time, you have to go now. So he said, you know, we brought the taxi, we're gonna pretend that you're sick and that we're taking you to the hospital. Anywhere in the military checkpoints when they stop us, don't say anything. Basically just play that you are ill, and I'm just gonna tell them that we are going to the hospital. So that's what we did. And my father and my mother, basically filed some paperwork so I could get a visa and I ended up getting a visa pretending to be a 21-year-old instead of a 15-year-old.

So my father basically just had to buy a visa. And also because I guess El Salvador had some law that you could not leave without parents permission before you were 21. So I had to be 21 in order to exit. But like I said, when my parents showed up, they just said, today's the day, without basically telling anyone goodbye or anything, I just left.

They had a small suitcase that had a few things ready, but I guess the experience was somewhat traumatizing because even though I knew that it would happen, it was too sudden.

Well back then it was a very bumpy road, it was paved but had a lot of potholes. And we did the trip in probably about four hours up to San Salvador. There 3-4 checkpoints between Citalá and Guazapa, that is actually in the area very close to San Salvador. The idea was basically to spot guerrilleros on the road. They would get you off of the buses, cars, whatever. They would spread your legs, check for papers, and they would look for signs to somewhat link you to the guerrilla. They would look for like, grown up beards and mustaches. Sometimes they would even look at your feet. Because on your legs, when you wear, say, a hard-duty boot, for example, you can actually tell from the indentation on your skin. You would look at all those signs; that's how they were trained to spot guerrilleros, and if you didn't have your cédula [id], you were in real trouble. The conclusion on their side was that if you didn't have a cédula was because you were in the mountains 'cause you were part of the guerrilla.

In an ideal world, the US first of all should acknowledge that there was a mistake was made. I know that it is probably difficult for this government to admit that. Throughout history, that has not been easy. First of all an official apology and second, to be consistent with the apology, to put hands off El Salvador. Because today, the hands are still there.

So I think all we would want is to have the ability to shape our own destiny...

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