

JACK SPENCE—Transcript

I'm Jack Spence. I'm an associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and I'm also the associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts at this university.

In 1932 you had a country that had been basically run by a small number of families for the previous at least two generations, and those families predominantly had made all their money from coffee. And coffee in mid-nineteenth century became a boom crop in Central America. And they had made a lot of money and they ran the country, and they had a national guard military that was basically sort of like personal armies. In 1932 that system hit a crisis as it did throughout Central America because coffee prices dropped to the basement, and they couldn't make a profit on their crops. You know, this took a couple of years, but what they started doing is drastically lowered wages and laid off coffee workers.

There was a very small, basically urban student-led Communist party in El Salvador. And these students first tried to run people for office in local elections and they were not allowed to win. So they thought, revolution is the only way out. They saw what was going on in the coffee plantations; they began to organize among peasants with a very considerable amount of success. I don't know whether they were amazed at their success or not, but if you look back on it and know anything about organizing, how did that happen? But nonetheless, they had quite a bit of success. And they had a demonstration in San Salvador which according to one history I read, probably Anderson's history... It was something like 80,000 people. I might have the number wrong, but whatever it was it was probably something close to the population of the whole city.

Then there was a kind of a reform government came in, but the coffee prices kept falling. And the students, they thought they'd organize an armed revolt. And basically, the army got wind of it, somebody betrayed them. And before the revolt started, they arrested the urban-based students. But the revolt started nonetheless. The peasants took over some areas right in the heart of the coffee belt. It was also an area that was heavily indigenous, and they basically captured territory, killed a few people with machetes. I forget the number of people that were killed, but it was a fairly small number of people. But then the army came in and they just suppressed it in two, three, or four days. And then after it was all over, that was when the slaughter began, that was when the Matanza happened.

And the police and the army and landowners moved in and basically came in and shot everybody who they had suspected of having participated in this. And the estimates range

from the most conservative estimate, it was something like 8,000 people killed and the highest estimated I've heard is something like 35,000 people.

And I remember reading a line that really stuck in my head. He said, you know the Matanza was so bad that nobody really knows how many indigenous people there are in El Salvador. Because after the Matanza, if you were indigenous, you just, you no longer dressed in traditional dress. You pretended not to be indigenous.

Well, 1932 made an incredible scar on El Salvador that lasted until the late 70s.

So after the '32 Matanza, can you talk a little bit about what the political situation was and what the viability of people to participate in elections.

The simple way of putting it, and maybe it's too simple, it was basically a dictatorship. In El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, the crisis brought on by the depression brought military governments into power, in all four of those countries in the 1930s. And they basically stayed in power—again, there are variations—but at the outset of the depression a military government moves in Guatemala, moves in El Salvador. And it's sort of like the big landowners (again, it's a simple way of putting it), they kind of made a pact saying, okay, you guys get to run the government the way that we want it to be run, and we'll run the economy.

Again the pattern gets more complicated. In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua you had personal dictatorships in the 1930s. Those get swept up in El Salvador and Guatemala right after World War II... And in Guatemala you have those ten years of elected governments: the Guatemalan spring time which was then overthrown by a CIA coup in 1954. In El Salvador you had elections coming in, but the military always won the elections. So the political competition was within the military about who, which group of military officers would be next in line.

And I think the causes of rebellion are more complicated, and there's a whole bunch of things that have been written about, well how come the Sandinistas won and the FMLN didn't win. And some of that analysis is, well the Sandinistas won because the dictatorship they were going against was this personalistic, rotten, corrupt dictatorship where many of the ruling class didn't support it. Whereas in El Salvador and Guatemala you had sort of class groups that had a lot of cohesiveness and were running the country. And the dictatorial government wasn't sort of centralized in the figure of one person. One group of officers would move in and they would all get rake-offs, and then another group of officers would move in and get rake-offs.

My own feeling about it is that there's some truth to that, but it's more that the Sandinistas won because they were first. So it's sort of like these sleepy little countries... Then all of a sudden, I'm sure to the complete surprise of Somoza, to the utter surprise of the United States, and very probably to the complete surprise of the Sandinistas; a viable rebellion breaks out in Nicaragua in early 1978. Well, all of a sudden then, the ruling classes in other countries became quite alarmed as did the State Department. So I think one of the

advantages that the Sandinistas had is that they were first, and by the time that they had won, the alarm bells were going on all over the place. There was a Central American crisis. Ronald Reagan was saying it in his campaign speeches. He was saying, Carter lost Nicaragua, and the domino theory... They're aiming for El Salvador and Guatemala next. And sure enough rebellions were breaking out in El Salvador and Guatemala.

And yet the Reagan administration, the way they sold the war to the U.S. population was that this was a war against communist infiltration and all these things...

Well, the first guerrilla group that got started was basically a split off from the communist party and there was a division in the party about whether to try pursue a peaceful road to socialism or a violent road to socialism. You know, the communist party, I guess you could say, they knew repression. They'd been around in 1932. So that may be one reason that accounted for their caution.

To the extent that they had ties with the Soviet Union... Castro in the early days of the Cuban revolution was actively trying to foment a revolution in Latin America and the Soviets didn't like that. They didn't support that all. And in fact, in Bolivia where Che was killed, the communist party in Bolivia didn't like the fact that he was there. And Castro basically gave up on that kind of activity because most of the groups got kind of wiped out in the 60s, including Che.

You know, there are sort of two movements happening simultaneously in El Salvador. There was, beginning in 1968 and through the 70s, little political openings in El Salvador. So, they allowed non-military political parties to form, they won mayorships. They won the mayorship of San Salvador, the Christian Democratic Party did. And then they ran for the presidency in '72, with a coalition ticket of the Social Democratic Party, with the vice presidential candidate Guillermo Ungo and Napoleon Duarte as the presidential candidate. So they were defrauded in that election, it was very very obvious. They were defrauded in the election. You know, what happened to Napoleon Duarte? Well, he was arrested, beaten up, and he was lucky to escape with his life. He went into exile into Venezuela.

And some of them thought, well, we'll try again. So in the '77 election, I think it was '77... They thought, we'll have a former military officer be our standard bearer and the military will find that more acceptable. And they were defrauded again. So you had this opening that closed and then opened again a little bit and slammed closed.

So there were a lot of people who had gotten on the electoral bandwagon who by 1977 said, you can't win this way. We have to try something else. So a lot of them began not organizing around elections but began organizing in communities, doing radical political organizing. And you had the beginnings of three, and eventually four, and eventually five guerrilla groups, that happened in '71, '73. A group that split off in two by '75, and then there was a small group that started maybe in '75, '76, and then the communist party got involved it. They were the last ones to get involved in it.

So, there's a political opening and a door slammed shut. So that's one current thing that's going on.

The second thing that was going on and it's the most stark in El Salvador, partly because of its geographic size, is that there is an economic crisis going on that is affecting the peasant class, affecting the poor people in the country quite dramatically. And that is, that... The lands that were available to the peasants decreased, and they began to decrease quite rapidly. And the reason for the decrease was, a) population growth, and b) the expansion in the size of farms that were going into export products. So coffee farms expanded—there are limits on what you can do because it won't grow every place. And then there is a big expansion in coffee planting in the 50s, so there's a lot of relatively inhabitable lands 50 years ago along the coast that went into coffee. And then there was a big expansion in beef production for export. They've always had a lot of beef, but they expanded it for export. And that was largely tied to the growth of hamburger chains in the United States. So export-oriented farmers were buying up or renting more lands and those lands were not available to poor peasants. In some cases like where cotton was, there had never been peasants on there but if you think population growth... Those peasants could've moved into those areas. And in the case of cattle, they take quite a few acres to feed and unlike coffee and cotton, they don't require any labor force, so it wasn't providing jobs.

So there's statistics you can look at that say, well, the number of landless peasants was growing. The number of peasants who were working in agricultural areas part-time was growing. The average size of land holdings of those who still had land was shrinking, thus they had three hectares and they would sell off one. And the average size of plots being rented by peasants was also shrinking because the cost of land is going up. They couldn't afford it. The cost of land is going up because people are bidding up the prices and so forth.

I understand there were a lot of land evictions too?

Yeah, yeah, and starting in the 50s or so, peasants started migrating to Honduras. And then, in 1969 came the soccer war, the war between El Salvador and Honduras. And they had a number of the disputes but the biggest part of the problem was that the Hondurans looked around and said, 10% of the population is Salvadoran. And it's true, we have more lands and there's some jobs in the banana plantations, but it's too much. So they began evicting them.

At the end of the war, basically the Honduras won on the issue that they could evict the Salvadorans. So you suddenly have tens of thousands of Salvadorans moving back, most of whom are peasants or agrarian workers. Moving back into this country where for the previous 15 years the problem of landlessness had grown rapidly. Well, that just sort of...

It's not a coincidence that ten years later you have a rebellion break out. So the political system was opening and slammed shut just at the point that the economic situation for the

poor peasants was getting worse and worse and worse. And then you had these people doing radical organizing and the beginning of guerrilla groups.

Can you give a bit more a reality situation of the human rights situation in the 70s right before the war?

There were a lot of disappearances that were happening in '77, '78, '79. So there were death squads that were operating, but we're talking about dozens of people over a three-year period of time, let's say. And then the supposed-reformist coup came in the middle of October of 1979, three months after the Sandinistas had won in Nicaragua. And then there was a huge increase, you went from... Let's say three dozen for the past nine months of the year to several hundred people who are disappeared or assassinated. And then it escalated still further in January, to over a thousand people disappeared or assassinated in January and similarly in February. So the repression was really growing in pace and then in early March, the United States comes in and says... It sponsors an agrarian reform law, it sponsors a law that would nationalize the banks, and it sponsors the 3rd junta since October 15th.

So the first 2 juntas resigned precisely because they thought they were being window dressing. And each successive junta was somewhat less radical, more conservative than the last, and the last one had Duarte in it. I think the United States had been courting him for some years and said, we'll have this agrarian reform. So he came in and Romero wrote a well-publicized letter to the United States saying, for god's sakes, don't send military aid. It's like throwing kerosene on the fire; you're giving guns to the wrong people. Then he gave a sermon that was addressed to soldiers in the military that said, if your officer commands you to kill this peasant, don't do it. That would be a violation of God's law. I think basically the military thought, this guy is telling soldiers to disobey their officers. So they shot him.

So I think that if you add everything all together, it's like, if you want some kind of significant social change in El Salvador, you can either sort of side with the Duartes, who are now running the country with the military and the United States. You can become a guerrilla. You can go into exile. Or you can go underground. Or you can do none of those things and stand a good chance of getting shot.

If you want to say, let's say in 1975, name the Americans who were specializing in Nicaragua. I think you would have a hard time getting up to the number of fingers on your hand. If Latin Americanists didn't know about Central America, then most Americans knew absolutely nothing about Central America. So why start to get involved in it?

No to mention that... That's interesting that you bring that up because I definitely feel that U.S. government went to war in El Salvador without really knowing anything about its history. Or very little.

They didn't know anything, nor did they care to know anything. They knew a little bit more about Nicaragua just because the Marines had been there so many times. There were comical lapses of intelligence. I'll give you one example, maybe you've heard of it.

At certain point, they were trying to prove that the Sandinistas were involved in El Salvador. And they were also trying to prove that the Cubans were involved in Nicaragua and then, in El Salvador. So somebody makes this announcement saying, we've examined these satellite photographs of Nicaragua and we've found bases of Cubans there. Really, how can you tell they're Cubans from a satellite photograph? Well, we can tell that because they're baseball diamonds and Cubans are fanatical about baseball. Of course Nicaraguans are fanatical about baseball too, but they didn't know that.

So when was your first trip to El Salvador?

My first trip to Central America was in 83 to Nicaragua. And my third trip was to El Salvador and that was in 1985, and that was with a group of professors from around the United States looking into human rights issues regarding education. My next trip to El Salvador was as a member of a delegation with the Cambridge-El Salvador Sister Cities project. And by that point you are at a stage in the war where the army has driven people out of villages, killed many of them particularly in Chalatenango and Morazan. And many of them fled to refugee camps either in San Salvador or in Honduras. And then there was this small movement called the repopulation movement, and their idea was that we would publicly go back to our villages. We have a right to stay in our villages. They can't drive us out of our villages. According to the laws of war you have a right to not be driven out of your homes.

A portion of that was to establish through groups in the United States doing work for El Salvador, a sister city relationship for each of the villages that was being repopulated. In Cambridge, the side of MIT and Harvard University there was a sister city relationship with San Jose de las Flores in Chalatenango which at that point had about 800 people living in it. They had the very rudimentary beginnings of an elementary school and nothing. I mean, when we went to these people they had nothing.

I mean, we asked people what to bring. We brought needles and thread. That was a big deal. I can remember the kids had no toys. And you see what people can do when they have nothing. I can remember some kids flying a little kite, and they had taken two sticks and a plastic bag. Like a grocery store plastic bag, which in itself was a pretty rare occurrence. And they had cut out a piece of plastic and had made a kite out of this plastic.

I think there was one hand-mill in the community to grind corn and make tortillas. I got sick one day and there was a woman who kind of took a fancy to me and she offered to iron my shirt. And she had an iron that you put hot coals in. There was no electricity, no running water, there was a spring nearby and the water was bad. The second night we were there a baby died. They had a funeral for him, we went to the funeral. And people told us stories about what the previous five years had been like.

Actually, one of the things I did was, someone said, take a Polaroid camera, these people have no pictures of their families. And it created a sensation. I mean, I had to have the town council kind of regulate it, you know, only one per family and line up this way and that and so forth. Anyway, it was an amazing week as I said...

Can you talk about after the peace accords are signed in El Salvador, what kind of progress was made?

Well, it goes without saying but maybe it should be said. It was a big step forward to stop the war. Nobody knows exactly how many people were killed, but the figure that is usually thrown out is 75,000. Well, this is a country that at the outset of the 1980s was 5 million people. So we're talking about 75,000 people killed over a 12-year period of time, by violence, and most of them not in combat.

If you were to read the peace treaty in Guatemala and the peace treaty in El Salvador, you would say that the guerrillas in Guatemala came out much better. Because there's all kinds of language there about indigenous rights, about the need for education, the need for better healthcare, about increasing the level of taxes. And you can read virtually nothing like that in the Salvadoran peace treaty. And yet, when they went into negotiations, the Salvadoran guerrillas were really quite strong. So how do you explain this paradox? There's two explanations.

One is, what the Guatemalans got was rhetoric, with very little implementation language. What the Salvadorans got had very strong implementation language. But the other side of it is, I think they (this is again simplifying things), I think they made a kind of calculation. They sort of gave up their socioeconomic goals in favor of ending the repression and creating political space in which they could operate.

So what they got was changes in the constitution which would change the way the Supreme Court was picked, which would change to some extent the electoral rules of the game, which would legalize them as a political party. And they also got some kind of socioeconomic things. Actually, a fairly significant amount of land changed hands.

In the end, what sort of progress has been made in El Salvador? Well, it ain't pretty but it's a working political democracy in which the FMLN has become... In the very first election became the second strongest party. In a couple of elections they've won more assembly seats, but they have never come close to winning the presidency. But they may this coming year.

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