

The Salvador option

THERE seems to be no bottom to the moral pit of depravity to which the band of criminals in the White House is determined to take our nation. Whenever I think we've hit bottom – we can't sink any deeper into the abyss – the White House diabolists prove me naïve. This week's devilry arrives in the form of what Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon, according to Newsweek, is calling "The Salvador Option."

The Salvador option refers to the U.S.-trained and armed para-military death squads that rendered the tiny Central American nation of El Salvador a virtual killing field in the 1980s. It was the Reagan/Bush administration that initiated the death squad option in El Salvador in order to quell democratic and guerilla opposition to an American-backed oligarchy controlled by 14 families that owned most of that nation's wealth. The current Bush administration hopes to unleash the same horrors on the Iraqi population in an effort to quell that nation's insurgency.

The most interesting thing about the Bush Junior regime's celebration of the Salvador option is the fact that until this pronouncement, the Bush family and the Reagan-legacy fantasy-casters in the Republican party have always been in denial about the existence of U.S.-backed death squads in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. In fact, as one of his first illegal acts in the Oval Office, Junior moved to seal the soon to be made public records of the Reagan presidency – most likely in an effort to conceal illegal Reagan/Bush administration complicity in Central American atrocities. If George Junior initially sought to cover up Reagan administration complicity in Central American death squad activity, he was too late. Scores of former Salvadoran military officers and American State Department officials have come forward during the past 20 years offering testimony regarding one of the darkest eras in American foreign policy.

What's most frightening about the current Bush administration embracement of the

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Salvador Option is just how brazen the Bushistas have become – and how morally bankrupt they believe the American people have become. To clarify this point, we need to be absolutely clear about what the phrase “Salvador option” actually means – what specific hell befell El Salvador during the Reagan years.

By 1989, when I was working as a journalist in neighboring Costa Rica, a colleague complained to me that he couldn't sell his freelance photos of dead Salvadorans since the market was “saturated” with such imagery. In a recent report on the Salvador option, BBC TV reminded its viewers that more than 70,000 Salvadorans were killed during the turbulent 1980s, with “tens of thousands” of the dead tortured and murdered by government and paramilitary forces because they were suspected of being sympathetic to the resistance. These forces, according to the BBC, would regularly display “horrendously mutilated corpses – sometimes decapitated” in full public view. The strategy was to deter the civilian population from openly supporting the democratic resistance in the political arena.

Today we're all too familiar with images of beheaded corpses hanging in public. It was one such image that led U.S. forces to level the Buffalo-sized city of Fallujah, where rebels hung a mutilated American corpse from a bridge. But wait. Isn't such barbarism the trademark of the “bad guys” and “the evil doers?” Yes, this is the essence of terrorism. But so is the Salvador option. It's about terrorizing the population into submission.

This is exactly what the Reagan administration did in El Salvador. The death squads targeted those who supported the opposition. At the onset, this meant the majority of the Salvadoran population. Hence, the death squads starting killing trade unionists, peasant organizations, opposition political candidates (in preparation for “democratic” elections), Catholic priests (Jesus was a bit of a commie), lay workers in the church, and just about anyone suspected of having any connection, causal or otherwise, with these targeted groups. Exposés published in *The New York Times* and *The Progressive* in the 1980s allege that the CIA provided the death squads with lists of leftists political leaders for assassination.

Death knew no limits. As an opening volley in what became a decade of carnage, death squads later found to be under the command of Roberto d'Aubuisson, an American-trained Salvadoran intelligence officer, killed the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. His crime was criticizing the government's human rights violations. Snipers situated in government buildings opened fire on Romero's funeral, killing 40 mourners (“rebel sympathizers?”) and wounding hundreds more.

Two years into the Reagan presidency, the Salvadoran death squads were running amok, tormenting El Salvador with a campaign of rape, torture and murder. In January

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of 1982, government troops (death squads in uniform) massacred between 700 and 1,000 "rebel sympathizers" in the village of El Mozote. With most of the men working as laborers on huge plantations away from the village, the victims were mostly women, children and elderly people. Subsequent press reports documented how victims were beheaded or chopped to death with machetes. Many young women and girls were either raped before being killed, or raped to death. One child was thrown in the air and caught spiked on a machete.

On January 28th, two days after the first press reports told of the massacre, Ronald Reagan reported to congress that the government of El Salvador was "making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights." Two days later, death squads abducted and tortured 20 more people – raping the women before killing them.

At about the same time, Salvadoran military personnel, sickened by the violence, began deserting and reporting horrific tales of torture and murder of innocent civilians to the world press. One reported how his unit practiced torture techniques on teenage prisoners under the supervision of eight American officers. In the ensuing years we've come to find out that many of the death squad commanders, including the one who oversaw the brutal murder of six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter, were trained at the U.S. military's School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia.

I could go on detailing what these words, "Salvador option" actually mean. But I'll stop here. Suffice to say, the Salvador option is terrorism at its worst. It's state terrorism.

The Salvador option puts the power of the state behind organized barbarism. The result is a Nazi-like orgy of unspeakable violence, in an effort, according to the BBC, at "out-terrorizing the Iraqi rebels." The act of proposing a "Salvador option," or a "crystalnacht option" for that matter, is an unspeakable horror in itself. According to former U.S. Marine Intelligence Officer and former U.N. Weapons Inspector Scott Ritter, by proposing the Salvador option, the U.S. "is prepared to compound its past mistakes in Iraq by embarking on a new course of action derived from some of the darkest, and most embarrassing moments of America's modern history." This is the Bush administration's most outrageous act yet. The fact that such an outrage can be proposed, and that we can wake up the following day and simply go on about our business without being paralyzed by horror, shame or disgust, documents the true moral crisis in America.