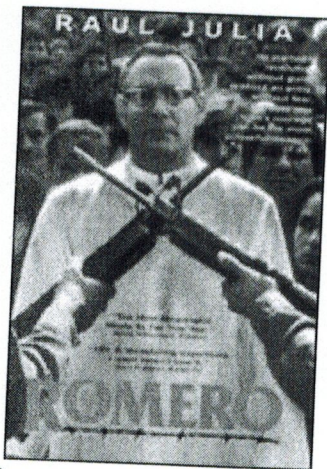


El Salvador—Another Vietnam?

A popular bumper sticker in the early 1980s read “El Salvador is Spanish For Vietnam.” This perception arose in part because the two countries both had experienced peasant-led rebellions against local elites who were supported by U.S. military assistance. One difference in the case of El Salvador was that the Carter and Reagan administrations elected not to send U.S. combat troops as Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon had done in Vietnam. Instead, they chose to support the Salvadoran government and military with weapons and military advisors.

Between 1979 and 1992 El Salvador suffered a terrible civil war in which thousands of civilians were killed. On one side was the Salvadoran military, backed by death squads and the U.S. government. On the other side was the rebel group—the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—and numerous groups and individuals calling for change in El Salvador, many from the Catholic Church. Three acts of violence brought the conflict in El Salvador to the headlines in the U.S. media. The first of these was the assassination of San Salvador’s Archbishop Oscar Romero as he served mass. Romero had been critical of attacks on the poor and their supporters within the church and he had written to President Carter asking him to suspend military aid to El Salvador’s government on humanitarian grounds. In the wake of Oscar Romero’s assassination, many



What is the message about Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero on this DVD cover?

individuals from faith communities went to El Salvador to “stand with the poor” in the spirit of the teachings of liberation theology. In December 1980 four churchwomen from the U.S., Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, were beaten, raped and murdered by members of the El Salvador National Guard. Then, one year later, hundreds of Salvadoran people in the village of El Mozote were murdered by their own nation’s soldiers who had been armed and trained by the U.S.

As these murders came to light in the U.S., the peace movement mobilized to challenge President Reagan’s financial support for the Salvadoran military, which had grown to 32 million dollars during his first year in office (Zinn 590). Some solidarity activists like Vietnam veteran Dr. Charlie Clements traveled to El Salvador and returned to share their experiences as he did in his book, *Witness To War*.

In 1980 activists in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. founded CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People Of El Salvador. CISPES organized teach-ins, marches and direct action protests to put pressure on the Reagan administration to end what they called “the largest U.S.-backed counterinsurgency war since Vietnam” (El Salvador). In May 1981 CISPES helped to organize 100,000 marchers in Washington, D.C. to protest U.S. intervention in El Salvador. In 1983, 500 protesters blockaded the State Department, an action leading to 126 arrests. This activism rose from efforts to stop a civil war that, according to CISPES, took six billion dollars from the U.S. treasury for U.S. military assistance and training for the Salvadoran armed forces and police, and which eventually displaced one and one half million Salvadorans from their homes and took 75,000 Salvadoran lives. In 1992, a UN-sponsored peace agreement brought an end to the war—with democratic elections, a restructuring of the military, and the FMLN’s emergence as a political party.