

## FOREWORD

I remember the moment when I learned of Ignacio Ellacuría's murder as vividly as I do the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the death of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. This, I suspect, pigeonholes me as a member of a certain class and generation of Latin Americans. This cultural identity may also explain my reaction upon hearing the news—from a Guatemalan diplomat, in the ornate Council Chamber of the Pan-American Union in Washington, D.C. What shot into my mind were the words of the fascist general Millin Astray at a rally during the Spanish Civil War: "*¡Viva la Muerte! ¡Abajo la Inteligencia!*"

As the U.N. secretary-general's representative, I devoted the better part of 1990 and 1991 to conducting the negotiations between the government of El Salvador and the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) that culminated in the comprehensive peace accord signed on January 16, 1992 at Chapultepec Castle, in Mexico City. The negotiations had an ambitious, four-fold purpose: to end the armed conflict, promote democratization, guarantee unrestricted respect for human rights, and reunify Salvadoran society.

El Salvador has come a long way since then. As part of a radical reform involving unprecedented constitutional amendments, the Salvadoran armed forces have been restricted to defense from external threats, and deprived of their previous roles in public security matters and as the ultimate arbiter of national political life. They have been purged of

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*Disclaimer:* The opinions expressed in this foreword do not necessarily reflect the views or position of the United Nations.

officers judged unfit to serve in the reformed armed forces. A pioneering national civilian police force has been created and deployed throughout the country. Important changes to the electoral system have been adopted, to be followed by further improvements as a result of the lackluster 1994 performance. A national ombudsman for human rights has been established. A reform of the judiciary has been initiated. A program for transfer of land to former combatants and farmers who worked plots in the conflict areas is underway, as part of an effort to reintegrate them into legal society. One-quarter of the seats in the legislative assembly are now occupied by leaders of the FMLN after the March elections.

It is premature at this writing to assess how far the goals of the negotiations have been achieved. Delays and distortions occurred in the implementation of the peace agreements, including important ones such as those related to the police and the transfer of land. The report of the Truth Commission, which examined the most egregious crimes of the war years, was greeted with hostility and even slightly smothered by the government, thus impairing the salutary therapeutic exercise it was meant to produce. In addition, a number of specific reforms proposed by the Truth Commission have yet to be implemented. During the electoral campaign, political leaders were killed. At the very least, however, it can be said that, as a result of the peace agreements, the foundations of a more just society have been laid, and steps have been taken to build—on those foundations—a framework within which justice and human rights have a chance to prevail over intolerance and violence.

In her profound and deeply moving book, Teresa Whitfield seeks answers to two questions: Why were Ignacio Ellacuría SJ and his UCA brothers murdered, and what have their deaths meant? In providing these answers, she has largely succeeded in explaining why peace negotiations addressing the underlying causes of the armed conflicts were needed. She has also brought out the pivotal role played by the investigation of the Jesuit murders in keeping negotiations on track and at times propelling them forward.

Teresa Whitfield's book is replete with references to the negotiating process. In the same way, the story of the negotiation, yet to be written, will have to interlock with the Jesuit murder story from which it cannot be separated.

Without United States support, it is difficult to imagine that the El Salvador negotiations could have succeeded. Official support was voiced from the beginning at the highest levels of the U.S. government. In

private, particularly at the sub-cabinet level, the support was less enthusiastic. There was never any wavering, however, in the leadership of the U.S. Congress, and I agree with the author that this is in large part attributable to the moral outrage at the murder of the Jesuits. The U.S. Congress, with Representative Joseph Moakley in the lead, never let up its pressure. In the concluding rounds of the negotiations in New York, in September and December of 1991, Thomas Dickering, a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador then serving as permanent representative to the United Nations, and his deputy, Alexander Watson, currently assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, played a critical role in support of U.N. efforts.

I met Ellacuría twice, once over *chipirones en su tinta*, a Basque specialty, at my Favorite San Salvador restaurant, with my (Catalan) colleague Francesc Vendrell; the second time alone for two hours in his austere but airy office at the UCA, on the eve of President Cristiani's June 1, 1989 inauguration. I missed a third appointment in October—weeks before Ellacuría's death—having lingered too long at a meeting with Cristiani during a San Salvador stopover on my way to Church-sponsored talks in Costa Rica.

It would be presumptuous to claim Ellacuría's friendship on such frail grounds. I do know that on that second occasion he shared with me information that I have not heard anywhere else, and that in light of what is known today, sends shivers up my spine. I have no doubt that, had he lived, Ellacuría would have played a central role in the negotiations. In retrospect, I have the eerie feeling that in confiding in me at that early date, Ellacuría was somehow depositing valuables for safekeeping in a bank, or—who knows—sensing the worst, passing the baton.

Teresa Whitfield's apt title refers to "paying the price" in the sense of enduring a punishment, suffering a penalty—for the misdeed of promoting justice. I would like to suggest, from my perspective as a negotiator, that there is another, perhaps unintended dimension to this title. When we speak of paying a price, we allude to a transaction, an exchange, *do ut des*. But Ellacuría and his Jesuit brothers did not freely offer their lives for justice in El Salvador. There was no commerce, no deal was struck; the invisible, magic hand of the market did not operate. The lives of Ellacuría and his companions were expeditiously snatched away from them in a coldly planned military operation; their cook and her daughter fell because there could be no witnesses.

At a certain cosmic level, far above our heads, there may have been just such a sophisticated, one might say Jesuitical, transaction. The Jesuits

had to lose their lives to provoke the moral outrage that kept the Salvadoran armed forces on the defensive and forced the concessions at the negotiating table, without which a durable peace could not possibly have been built.

My own moral outrage was difficult to restrain. On one occasion, after I had harangued the government delegation on the grave danger confronting the negotiating process, David Escobar Galindo, the intellectual leader of the delegation, referred in private to my admittedly passionate performance as “the apocalypse according to St. Alvaro.”

I used to think, sporadic Catholic that I am, that if Ellacuría was contemplating from the heavens the zigzags of the investigation into the UCA murders, he would have been pleased at the fact that there was so much covering up, foot-dragging, and general dissembling, for thanks to that, the pressure at the negotiating table continued to the end. The investigation and the negotiations interwove in a fugue worthy of Bach; it seemed inspired in heaven.

Alvaro de Soto  
May 1994

## PREFACE

I had planned to be in El Salvador in late 1989, researching a documentary about Archbishop Oscar Romero. The film's point of departure was a photograph taken in March 1980, a year before his assassination, in which he stood amid a group of youths. His hands rested lightly on the shoulders of two small girls in front of him and all were caught wide-eyed, forever challenging the attention of the viewer. I had hoped to find the survivors pictured in the photograph and learn what they remembered of the man in their midst. Over the months it had become something of an obsession, a quest for both myself and the documentary's director, Peter Chappell. We had located the photographer and I was to return that November, but when November came it was not a month for the searching of the streets and back alleys of San Salvador.

The capital city was a battle zone, with the government combating the largest guerrilla offensive of the war with conventional ground forces, aerial bombardment, and a clampdown on organizations of the opposition. I was in Chile when I first heard that six Jesuit priests and two women had been murdered in the early hours of November 16, 1989. From New York and then from Nicaragua, I followed the news from El Salvador. I learned there was to be a memorial mass for the Jesuits on December 16 at the University of Central America (UCA), the institution to which they had dedicated their lives. I made sure I could be there.

At the mass I was moved by the number and variety of people who had come to pay tribute to the murdered Jesuits, by the poignancy of the service, and by the strength and humanity of what was said. Particularly striking were the words printed on a card given out as a memento of the

occasion: “What does it mean to be a Jesuit today? To commit oneself beneath the standard of the cross in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and the struggle for justice that that same faith demands.” In the following days I sought out a meeting with José María Tojeira, father provincial of the Jesuits of Central America. Tentatively, for San Salvador was still reeling from the violence of the past few weeks, I suggested that I raise the money necessary to produce some kind of documentary about the murdered Jesuits.

Eleven months later I returned to San Salvador for the fifth time within a year, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Jesuits’ deaths and the screening of the documentary about them that I had produced and Ilan Ziv had directed. It played repeatedly through the night-long vigil held in the grounds of the UCA, but I maintained a low profile, anxious not to be publicly associated with a film criticizing the Salvadoran armed forces and those elements responsible for the Jesuits’ murder. I had begun work on a book and feared jeopardizing the contacts I would need for its research, which would keep me in El Salvador for the next year and a half. Like the words that had so struck me at the memorial mass the previous year, the book’s title came from the documents of the Jesuits’ thirty-second General Congregation in 1975: “We shall not work for the promotion of justice without having to pay a price.” The phrase is now inscribed on the Jesuits’ tomb in the UCA chapel.

Fathers Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of the University of Central America, Ignacio Martín-Baró its vice-rector, Segundo Montes, Amando López, Juan Ramón Moreno, and Joaquín López y López were murdered, together with their housekeeper and her daughter, Elba and Celina Ramos, by members of the Salvadoran army, funded and trained by the United States. Why were they killed and what have their deaths meant? I felt these two questions should be answered in closely related narratives. And as my research developed I realized that this book, in a synthesis of the two questions, would be stronger for featuring the life of Ignacio Ellacuría. As his brother Jesuit Jon Sobrino pointed out, it was Ellacuría “who most often put into words what these Jesuits accepted as fundamental in their life and work.” But it was also undeniable that Ellacuría had been for two decades at the forefront of events that soon appeared to me like steps taken toward the dark night of November 16, 1989.

Ellacuría played an integral role in the radical change of direction undertaken by the Jesuits of Central America in the late 1960s and early 1970s and in the emergence of the UCA as what he called “a different kind of university.” As the university’s rector during the civil war Ellacuría was

a force in El Salvador's politics, engendering from some sectors of Salvadoran society a uniquely visceral hatred. His voice emerged as one of the most consistent and articulate champions of a negotiated solution to the conflict. Even after their deaths Ellacuría and the slain Jesuits influenced the negotiation of a peaceful settlement, because progress (or the lack of it) in the investigation into their murders became one of the defining features of the period that culminated in the signing of the peace agreements in January 1992.

The form I chose for this book, then, is something of a hybrid—neither straight biography, nor political or ecclesiastical history. To answer my original two questions I interweave the two narratives from a common starting point: the events of November 15 and 16, 1989. Together the narratives demonstrate that the killings were not an arbitrary act, but sadly expressive of the Salvadoran reality within which the Jesuits lived, and an act which, paradoxically, strengthened and prolonged the impact of their lives. From the description of the murders themselves one narrative returns to the beginning of this story, Ellacuría's arrival from Spain as a young novice, and traces the evolution of the Jesuits and the UCA over the next forty years: The other tells how the unfolding of the Jesuit case, painful and embarrassing as the murder had been for a U.S. administration eager to justify the flow of military aid on the grounds that it came hand in glove with improvements in human rights, contributed to the gradual emergence of a new realism in U.S. policy toward El Salvador. Ultimately, the murder of the Jesuits and all that the subsequent investigation and prosecution of the crime revealed, allowed for negotiations conducted under the auspices of the United Nations to prosper and for the foundations to be laid for a durable peace in El Salvador. For this peace, still precarious at the time of writing, the Jesuits lived and died.

Teresa Whitfield  
August 1994





## INTRODUCTION

# ONE NIGHT IN NOVEMBER

*All this blood of martyrs spilled in El Salvador and throughout Latin America, far from bringing discouragement or despair, inspires a new spirit of struggle and new hope in our people. In this sense if we are not a “new world” nor a “new continent” at least we are clearly and verifiable—if perhaps not by those from beyond our shores—a continent of hope. And this is a particularly interesting symptom of something that may be new in the future, different from other continents that have no hope, as all they really have is fear.<sup>1</sup>*

Ignacio Ellacuría, 1989

THE grounds of the university were unnaturally quiet that morning. On other weekdays students and staff began arriving soon after half past seven. Classes began at eight and the daily rhythm of a busy campus, host to some seven thousand students, took over. Ranged south from San Salvador’s Southern Highway, the University of Central America “José Simeón Cañas” stretches across slopes rising away from the city. The university’s functional, somewhat austere concrete buildings are scattered in a campus of gardens and trees, on this Wednesday fresh from the recent months of rain and brilliant green in the bright November sunlight. But there were no students, no staff to be seen, and from inside the university the only sounds were the whistles and trills of the birds in the trees, interrupted by the occasional shrill squawk of a parrot.<sup>2</sup>

From outside came the sounds of scattered gunfire, the dull thud of intermittent explosions, and, every now and then, the rumbling of an armored vehicle as the military patrolled the meets of Jardines de Guadalupe, the residential neighborhood behind the university. For while the silent classrooms, empty cafeteria, and network of steps and passages connecting the UCA’s twenty-three buildings spoke of peace, the country outside was at war. This was the fourth day of an all-out military offensive launched by the guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). It had started with a coordinated series of attacks on Saturday evening, and in the days following, the FMLN had made their most significant gains of the ten-year-old civil war. They were in control of entire sectors of the city and entrenched in some of the hardest fighting yet seen in the capital as the government and armed forces responded with

heavy artillery fire and air power, truly frightened that they might “lose” San Salvador to the rebels, or see it deteriorate into a Central American Beirut.

The concerns of the Jesuit priests running the university spanned the quiet inside and the turbulence beyond the boundaries of the UCA. As teachers and administrators, organizers of timetables and examinations, they were worried by the loss of at least a week’s classes by the entire university. On Monday, with the university already surrounded by the army and its Southern Highway entrance closed to all vehicles, they had placed signs outside both this entrance and the pedestrian entrance in the southwestern corner of the campus. The signs read “No classes today.” Now it was Wednesday and no one knew how long those signs would have to stay there.

But the UCA had long been a university where teaching forms but one element of a triple-threaded activity. Without belittling the importance of teaching, the Jesuits, with university rector Ignacio Ellacuría at their head, dedicated the resources, time, and energy of the entire institution to what they termed “social projection” into the tragic reality of El Salvador. More than just teachers and priests, the men gathered on the third-floor of the building known by all as the “rectory” for a meeting of the university’s board of directors were social scientists and political analysts with an unrivaled knowledge of the complex set of problems assailing the country. In its twenty-five-year history, the university they ran had assumed a strong sense of purpose within a society in crisis. In an interview on Spanish television years earlier, Ellacuría had explained that the university he led had “a very clear idea of what it has to do. . . . More than mold students, more than carry out research—although we do these two things—what the university has to do is set about solving the unacceptable problem of injustice in countries throughout Central America.”<sup>3</sup>

Presiding over the meeting, Ignacio Ellacuría was a philosopher and theologian and the editor of the UCA’s most prestigious publication, the monthly magazine *Estudios Centroamericanos* (*Central American Studies*, or *ECA*). Even among his fellow Jesuits his bearing was of one accustomed to leadership: the slight tilt of his head as he listened, the focused concentration in his eyes, the measured authority and undoubted brilliance of what he had to say commanded attention from those who met him. The academic vice-rector, Ignacio Martín-Baró, or “Nacho” as he was most commonly known, spread his activities throughout the university. An innovative social psychologist, he had founded and now directed the Institute of Public Opinion, an enterprise whose polling and canvassing

many had thought impossible in El Salvador's traumatized society. Segundo Montes had come down to this meeting from his office in the Institute for Human Rights, from where he also directed the university's Sociology Department. With his flowing beard, deep-set eyes, and direct and forceful energy, Montes cut a distinctive figure. Religious superior of this university community, within the UCA Montes was known as "Zeus."

With theologian Jon Sobrino, who was away at a conference in Thailand, Ellacuría, Martín-Baró, and Montes were the best known of the Jesuits of the UCA. The papers and books they had written, briefings and television appearances they had made, and interviews with local and foreign journalists they had given constituted a formidable body of work. But the commitment to "solving the unacceptable problem of injustice" in El Salvador was shared by the entire community, from the directors of the UCA's publishing and printing operations, Rodolfo Cardenal and Rogelio Pedraz, to theologians Amando López and Juan Ramón Moreno, economist Francisco Javier Ibisare, and administrator Miguel Francisco "Paco" Estrada.

It was not surprising then that the crisis facing the country should have been the Jesuits' prime concern at the Wednesday meeting. Like most of well-informed San Salvador, they had known an FMLN offensive was imminent, but the extent of the gains made in the first few days had taken them by surprise. As a body of analysts and observers they were convinced that what Martín-Baró had called, in an interview the week before the launching of the offensive, "the objective conditions for popular insurrection" did not exist.<sup>4</sup> Most worrying was the situation faced by the vast majority of the Salvadoran people, civilians already worn down by the war and economic attrition, unaligned with either side, and now in the midst of a battle zone. For the moment the FMLN occupied areas that were poor and heavily populated. All feared the civilian cost of the armed forces' counteroffensive. Artillery and aerial bombardment had left some families trapped in their homes without food, water or power; others were fleeing their neighborhoods, running through the streets beneath the paltry protection of white flags.

One of the Jesuits' employees, Lucia Barrera de Cerna, had telephoned to say that she and her family were evacuating their home in Soyapango, where the fighting was at its fiercest. Since 1981 Lucía had worked as a janitor in the rectory and in the *curia*, the Jesuit provincial's office some 200 meters uphill from the UCA in Jardines de Guadalupe. With her was her husband Jorge, a baker, and their four-year-old daughter.

Martin-Baró who answered the telephone, immediately offered the family a room in the old residence of one of the two communities of UCA Jesuits, a house at number 16, Calle Cantábrico that backed onto the university chapel. This house was empty at the moment because the Jesuits who had been living there had recently completed their move into their new residence, inside the UCA on the second floor of the Monsignor Romero Pastoral Center.

Other employees, the cook Elba Ramos and her husband, night watchman, and gardener, Obdulio, lived with their daughter, Celina, in a house at the southeastern extreme of the university grounds. The family's house backed onto a street where the sounds of fighting and bombs kept them awake at night and this sent Elba to seek help from the Jesuits. "I'm sorry, Father," she explained to Francisco Javier Ibisate, "but in our house we can't sleep with all the noise there is in the night. You wouldn't have a little room where my daughter and I could come and sleep?" Ibisate went to Amando López, who oversaw the running of the buildings. "Heavens yes, let them sleep in there," was his answer, indicating an empty room alongside the new residence. "In there they'll get more peace and quiet."<sup>5</sup>

An inevitable topic of conversation at the meeting was the Jesuits' own security. Over the years the university had been the target of no less than sixteen bomb attacks, with abuse, threats, and wild accusations heaped on individual Jesuits and on the UCA as a whole by members of extreme right-wing organizations, the military, and the local press. The UCA was commonly labeled a hotbed of Marxist ideas where the minds of the Salvadoran youth were "poisoned" and guerrilla operations plotted. No evidence had ever been produced to support such accusations. But this was El Salvador, and everyone in the UCA that morning knew that lack of evidence did not necessarily provide an obstacle: tens of thousands of civilians had been murdered in the last ten years with scant regard for the law.

On Saturday night, soon after the launch of the offensive, three or four members of the FMLN on the run from the army had burst into the UCA. They blew open the gate at the southeastern corner of the university with a small bomb, fled through the new Jesuit residence, and disappeared into the night. The next morning a military patrol asked for and was given permission to inspect the damage done by the guerrilla unit. From that moment the UCA was placed under heavy military guard, with all who entered or left checked and the entry and exit of vehicles forbidden.

On Monday the Jesuits had worried about Ellacuría or "Ellacu," as he was known, getting caught by the curfew and having to spend a night

at the airport. He was returning from a trip to Europe that evening, shortly before the six o'clock curfew began. Many of them may have been thinking about the 1980 murder and rape of the four American churchwomen on the road to La Liberrad; the women had been followed from the airport by a pickup truck belonging to the National Guard. In the end, Ellacuría had arrived safely back at the UCA. The soldiers on the Southern Highway gate had stopped his car, but only until they realized who he was. Then they let him through. The Jesuits in the new residence were relieved to have the rector home. They quickly called the other community in number 50, Calle Mediterráneo, a few meters away in Jardines de Guadalupe, with news of his arrival. Then they listened to his account of the successes of his trip, which included the receipt of a \$5,000 prize for the UCA he had brought back with him in a light brown case.

Scarcely half an hour after Ellacuría's return on Monday, the grounds of the UCA were invaded by a large military force and the new residence subjected to a detailed search. It was this search that was discussed when the conversation at the Wednesday meeting turned to the Jesuits' safety. While Rodolfo Cardenal had been deeply unsettled and had decided to sleep in Santa Tecla, a few kilometers south of the city, the others followed the line taken by Ellacuría: "They've come, they've searched us, and they've seen that we've got no weapons, nothing incriminating—we're safer for the fact that they have searched us." (Among those who stayed was 71-year-old Joaquín López y López—the oldest of the Jesuits and suffering from cancer, he was the only one not to work in the university he had helped to found twenty-five years earlier.) More frightening, they agreed, were the threats put out on the government-controlled radio station on Sunday, not twenty-four hours after the offensive began.

Facing a national emergency, the government and armed forces had assumed control of the airwaves from late Saturday evening. While this "national channel" allowed those who were unable to get home, or had lost track of a relative, to telephone in details of their whereabouts, other telephone calls, allegedly from members of the public, broadcast messages of a very different kind: "The Jesuits are communists—kill them!" "Get Ellacuría—off with his head!" "The Jesuits of the UCA are subversives and should be killed," and so on.<sup>6</sup> The Jesuits were not the only targets. Similar threats were broadcast against leaders of the FMLN, members of the democratic opposition, and even against the archbishop, Monsignor Arturo Rivera Damas, but this was hardly reassuring. "The threats," as one Jesuit put it, "were really something that induced you to go out and kill."

These worries aside, the Jesuits agreed that they were safe inside the UCA, in premises that had been searched and found “clean” by the army, and in a zone of the city too thoroughly and conspicuously militarized for “accidents” to occur. One of the Jesuits in the university that morning, Rogelio Pedraz, lived in a house in San Antonio Abad on the other side of the city and was of two minds as to whether to return home. At the base of the San Salvador volcano, San Antonio Abad is a poor neighborhood where makeshift huts cluster tightly against crumbling buildings. Long known for political activism, its proximity to guerrilla redoubts on the flanks of the volcano meant there had been plenty of fighting there since the offensive began. “I thought I’d be safer here in the UCA, but in the end I decided to go,” he remembered. “I have this mania about clean clothes in the morning, and I hadn’t a spare set with me.” The others agreed that it was too risky for him to try to take his car out through the army cordon dosing the university entrance, so Amando López and Juan Ramón Moreno drove him home at midday, across a tense, almost deserted San Salvador. The few vehicles in the streets had white flags protruding from their front windows or jammed into the antenna sockets. The people had their heads low as they hurried home, their faces drawn and frightened.

The university remained strangely quiet. That afternoon, Ibisate thought he would take advantage of the lack of students and get on with some of his own work at one of the concrete tables scattered under the trees in the upper levels of the campus. For several hours he worked away undisturbed. While the occasional sounds of conflict could still be heard, he was barely conscious of them until, at about four thirty, he became aware that the fighting was coming closer. Now it was obvious that there was a violent confrontation in Antiguo Cuscatlán, the neighborhood behind Jardines de Guadalupe. Soon stray bullets were skimming the buildings behind the UCA and whistling through the leaves of the trees above his head. He decided it was time to go home. Ibisate was one of those who lived in the Mediterráneo house; as he made his way out through the back of the UCA a neighbor called out a greeting, adding, “I should get home quick if I were you.”

There is no curfew breaking in El Salvador. By six o’clock, under the stringent emergency measures introduced on Sunday, the streets were deserted as families and households together faced a long and frightening, and, in many cases, dark and hungry night. The Jesuits ate supper, continued the discussions of the day, answered a few telephone calls from friends and pupils, and went to bed.

But it was a noisy night, and Ibisate for one found it difficult to sleep. He was awakened at midnight by a low-flying airplane, then drifted back to sleep until a barrage of gunfire at about two in the morning stirred him once again. Wide awake now, he got up and went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. As he sat there drinking his coffee and smoking a cigarette he tried to work out where the shooting was. He thought it most likely that it came from the corner near the supermarket a block from the house. He was tempted to look through the keyhole to see what he could make out, but decided against it. He could hear the sound of breaking glass and remembered that on Saturday, as the offensive started, an attack had been launched on that same corner. It had been close enough for a stray bullet to come hissing through a second-floor window. Better not to risk the chance of another such bullet with his eye at the keyhole. Before three o'clock the shooting died down. Ibisate drained his coffee and went back to bed, determined to try to get some rest before morning.

IN a version of events released to the public in January 1990, Lieutenant José Ricardo Espinoza would remember that he received the order over his radio at about 10:15 P.M. that Wednesday. He was to gather his unit at the Captain General Gerardo Barrios Military Academy, named after the general who was president of the country at the time of its founding in 1867. Like every other officer in the Salvadoran army, Espinoza had been formed by what he learned within its walls. Unlike most other officers, but not all, when he entered the academy he was a graduate of a high school run by Jesuits, the *Externado San José*.<sup>7</sup>

A statue of the portly Barrios presides over the forecourt of the academy that bears his name. He is still invoked in a maneuver that seems strange to the eyes of a visitor. In normal times the academy swarms with lithe, pristinely turned out cadets. At any moment an officer may call one to attention. Before receiving the order the cadet executes a distinctive jump, landing squarely on his feet, legs slightly bent, while shouting the one word, "Barrios!" In their four years at the academy the cadets learn absolute loyalty to an institution whose motto is prominently displayed: "As long as the institution lives, the republic lives." The first and last proof of this loyalty is obedience to any and all orders.

Twenty-eight-year-old Espinoza was the commander of a comando unit within the elite Atlacatl Battalion. With the dark complexion and compact build typical of his native Sonsonate, he had benefited from some of the most specialized training available to any young officer. When

he was younger he had wanted to study engineering at the UCA, but it had not been easy for his family to support his brother through medical school and so they had encouraged him to enter the armed forces. He had originally planned to become a pilot and then leave and work for a commercial airline, but in 1986 that had all gone wrong. He had run into trouble and been dismissed for what his military record had called “serious errors committed within the service.”<sup>8</sup> The English he learned for flying school, however, had stood him in good stead; he had been given responsibility in the Atlacatl—where he had been since 1987—and had spent several months in the last year on an advanced commando course at the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Until the previous Monday, Espinoza’s entire company had been involved in a training exercise overseen by thirteen U.S. Special Form experts flown in from Fort Bragg. The exercise was suspended when the army High Command called all available troops into active service to combat the FMLN offensive. Moving into the capital from the Atlacatl base in La Libertad, Espinoza and his sublieutenant Gonzalo Guevara Cerritos had reported directly to the general staff headquarters, the *estado mayor*. The commando unit was assigned to the military academy, under its director Colonel Guillermo Benavides. This was the operational center of a newly created security zone that included all the central military installations, nearby residential neighborhoods, and the UCA, a kilometer away to the south. The search of the university had been their first assignment.

Two days after that search, Espinoza would remember, he received his orders and returned to the academy with four of his eight patrols—those under the command of soldiers nicknamed Satan, Cursed, Streak, and Lightning. Nahum, Savage, Samson, and Lizard’s patrols had been beyond radio contact. Shortly after 11:00 P.M. he had been ordered to present himself to Colonel Benavides in the operations center. He was joined by Guevara, and a lieutenant from his own *tanda*, or graduating class from the military academy, Yussly Mendoza Vallecillos, currently posted to the academy itself.

Benavides was a relatively undistinguished member of the armed forces’ most powerful *tanda*. The class of ’66 had been larger than the classes before and after it and had always been known as the *tandona*, the “big class.” But it was also unusual in containing a remarkably high proportion of the sons, nephews, and godsons of the ranking colonels of the day. Behind-the-scenes influence had helped ensure that these boys from the most tightly-knit military families should be put together and, following the time-honored loyalty of *tanda* members to each other,



thereafter forever stick together. Members of the *tandona* now dominated the military hierarchy, from Chief of Staff Colonel René Emilio Ponce on down.

Colonel Benavides had returned from a crisis meeting in the *estado mayor* attended by around twenty-five of the armed forces' most senior commanders. In all the years of this war, things had never looked worse for the army. According to their accounts, Benavides suggested to the three young officers in front of him that they would have more privacy in his office. Once there he came straight to the point, ordering the assassination of those he described as "the intellectual leaders" of the guerrillas: "This is a situation in which it is them or us. We're going to begin at the top. Within our sector there is the university and Ellacuría is in there." Turning to Espinoza he added, "You did the search and your men know the site. Use the same layout as on the day of the search. He must be eliminated—and I don't want witnesses." Lieutenant Mendoza was to accompany them to make sure there were "no problems." Espinoza pointed out the seriousness of what he was being ordered to do. "Don't worry," answered Benavides. "You have my support."

Mendoza withdrew to his quarters while Espinoza and Guevara went to brief their men. Patrol leader Antonio Ramiro Avalos Vargas, nicknamed "Satan" or "Toad," would remember being told that they were going to carry out a delicate mission—one that had been ordered by the "higher-ups." They were to find and kill some priests inside the UCA, because the priests were the leaders of the "delinquent terrorists" (as most members of the armed forces refer to the FMLN). The priests, he learned, were in it up to the hilt; backing up the terrorists with logistical assistance as well as masterminding their operations against military targets and the civilian population.

After midnight the commandos gathered outside the academy's central guard post. There were about thirty-six of them, but not all could fit into the two beige Ford pickups they were to use for transport. Those left behind would have to be collected on a return trip. As the men sat waiting for their officers to order the departure, Lieutenant Yushy Mendoza emerged from inside. He carried an AK47 rifle and its loading chambers and the army's standard issue M16. "Which of you knows and can handle this weapon!" he asked, approaching the pickups and brandishing the AK47. "Pilijay!" they chorused back, referring to Oscar Mariano Amaya Grimaldi by his nickname. "Pilijay can handle that weapon."<sup>9</sup> A private in Avalos's patrol, Amaya climbed out of the pickup and went to collect his weapon. He had some three months' experience

with an AK47, although it was not a usual combat weapon. To most of El Salvador, a Russian-made AK47 had “FMLN written all over it, so its use within the army tended to be reserved for special operations such as this one. Amaya was not impressed with this particular AK47; from the most rudimentary checking over he considered it so dirty as to be inoperable. Sergeant Oscar Solorzano Esquivel immediately climbed down from a pickup and offered him oil, a rod, and a cloth to clean it up.

The pickups pulled out of the military academy and turned left up the highway toward Santa Tecla. Espinoza and Mendoza were in the lead vehicle, while Guevara was at the wheel of the one behind. The men were tense. They all knew they were being sent to kill, but some were unclear as to who they would be killing. Clutching the newly cleaned AK47, Amaya reckoned that, given the situation the country was in, it must be terrorist leaders they were after.

Turning left at Guadalupe Church, the trucks followed the access road onto the Southern Highway, then uphill to the Mortgage Bank behind the UCA. The men were unloaded beside some uninhabited apartment buildings, to the west of the university. Espinoza whistled and they were soon joined by twenty to twenty-five more men, the rest of the commando section and some additional reinforcements. Gathering around their commander, they learned that they had received an order to eliminate the intellectual leaders of the guerrillas. These men were inside the UCA and it was Pilijay who would actually kill them. Pilijay understood the importance of his role in the operation for the first time; as Lieutenant Mendoza told him, “You’re the key man.” At the moment of withdrawal there would be a flare, and the men would simulate a confrontation between themselves and the terrorists.

It was a clear night with a bright moon. Across the city, units like theirs were out in force, but it was only in this area that the electricity was out. They had never thought things would get so bad. Only months ago their colonel, León Linares, had assured them that the terrorists were on the retreat, which was why they wanted to negotiate. And now this! But they would show them, they were the Atlacatl, after all, “El Salvador’s best,” as their battalion chant went. “Who are you?” the officers demanded several times a day. “Special Forces of the Atlacatl, El Salvador’s best!” came the answer. “How long for?” “All our lives! All our lives!” “Until when?” “Always, always, always, Atlacatl!” They were the Atlacatl. People were afraid of the Atlacatl.

At approximately 1:00 A.M. Espinoza gave the order to march and, forming a column, the entire unit headed toward the UCA, crossing Calle

Mediterráneo to reach its entrance. Espinoza turned to Amaya who was walking beside him with his AK47. "Hide that shit!" The gates were quickly forced open. Inside the grounds all was quiet. The men walked down some steps, along a path bordered by tall trees whose leaves rustled faintly in the still night. Turning right, they followed a road that curves around the southern side of the university. They passed a covered parking lot, then a line of low buildings on their right. Next to them the steep angles of the chapel roof shone white in the moonlight.

As they approached a two-story building beyond the chapel, the lieutenants told their men that this was the residence of the "terrorist priests." Turning right beyond the chapel and up some steps, Avalos was one of the first to come to a locked door. Next to it was a high fence of meshed wire, easy to climb over, surrounding a garden. On the other side, a covered passageway with rooms opening off to the left led toward some steps at the far end. To the right and beyond the building, the garden was open, with a wide expanse of grass.

By the time Sergeant Tomás Zarpate Castillo got to the door, it was already open. He waded through and, a few meters into the passageway, turned as he heard a sound from inside one of the rooms. He looked in and a shaft of moonlight glancing through the open door showed two women, one older and larger than the other. The older one was seated on one of two divan beds while the other was lying, covered, beside her. Mendoza was just behind him with a lamp that helped them make out the form of the younger woman. He ordered Zarpate to stay there and not let anyone leave. Mendm then continued to search the building, moving through a kitchen, a dining room, and a sort of laundry area with a clothesline strung across it. All the rooms were empty.

The other commandos completely surrounded the building. To the left of the steps at the end of the passageway was the corridor they had searched on Monday. They knew that the priests' bedrooms were off this corridor, which led directly out into the wide grassy area at the front. At the far end of the corridor one soldier had found a piece of wood with which he was forcing a door that led onto a balcony above the road. Amaya came up behind him and saw that there was a hammock slung across the balcony. At that moment a man in a coffee-colored nightshirt came out and stopped beside the hammock, saying, "Wait, I'll open up, but stop making such a racket," and then disappeared inside again. From the front of the building, Amaya heard someone call out to him, "Hey, Pilijay, they're coming out here."

When he got to the door at the other end of the corridor, Amaya saw

that the man in the nightshirt was already outside, near Sergeant Solorzano, “Hercules” Avalos, and another soldier from their unit. Four other residents of the building were coming out of the corridor onto the grassy area in front of the building. Solorzano took some men from his patrol inside, leaving Amaya and Avalos alone with the five. Realizing that it was just the two of them covering five men, Avalos ordered them to lie down and spread out on the ground. While they did not look dangerous—they were quite old and unarmed, some wore pajamas with slippers or sandals, some had trousers and shoes—Amaya knew that it was their brains that counted. At that moment, as he would remember later, he was sure they were delinquent terrorists.

Lieutenants Espinoza and Mendoza were over near the steps, a few meters away from where the men had the priests on the ground. Espinoza called Avalos over to him and asked, “When are you going to proceed?” Avalos understood this as an order to eliminate the five men. He crossed back over to where Amaya stood watch at the head of the first three, who were stretched out in a line. Leaning toward him, he whispered into his ear, “Let’s proceed.”

Some thirty meters away, in the room at the back of the number 16, Calle Cantábrico house lent them by Martín-Baró earlier that day, Lucía and Jorge Cerna were awakened by gunfire. They thought it came from the trees to the west of where they were, but then they heard the sounds of banging, breaking glass, and voices coming from the Pastoral Center. Leaving her husband to watch over their little girl, Geraldina, Lucía went into the room next door. Peering through the curtains she had a partial view of the passageway that led from the gate to the chapel up toward where the Jesuits were sleeping—not that there was any chance they’d be sleeping now. Lucía could see five men standing near the gate. Three of them were in shadow, but the other two were lit by the moon. Their faces were hidden by caps and visors, but she saw their camouflage uniforms and the guns they were carrying. At that moment she heard the voice of Father Nacho cry out, “This is an injustice! This is an abomination!”<sup>10</sup>

“Quick, quick, give it to them quickly!” Amaya began to fire at the three men he had in front of him. He could see that he was getting them in their heads. Avalos shot at the heads and bodies of the two closest to him with his M16. Amaya then opened up at all five, although some of his shots at Avalos’s two went wild, hitting the wall behind.

Espinoza remembered that he felt bad about what was happening, that he tried to move away from the shooting, and that his eyes were filled with tears. One of the men on the ground, Segundo Montes, had been his

headmaster at the *Externado*. Another, Ignacio Ellacuría, he would recognize anywhere; his father used to switch the channel when he appeared on television. But he had his orders. “Put them inside, even if you have to drag them,” he told a corporal, Cota Hernández, standing nearby. Cota only had time to drag one body into the corridor, leaving it in the second bedroom on the right. He did not notice the shoe that fell off in the doorway, nor the book that slid from the bookshelf inside the bedroom and fell into the blood still flowing from the body. The book was by a German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann. Its title, *The Crucified God*.

Still guarding the two women down the passageway, Zarpate heard someone shouting, “Now!” and then a volley of shooting. He fired at the women in front of him, shot after shot. When the women were silent, and he was sure that they were dead, he turned and left through the door that led toward the chapel.

The shots were also heard by the soldiers downstairs in the Pastoral Center. They had broken the glass door, entered the building, and begun to burn computers, books, and documents. In one room they found a large portrait of Archbishop Romero. They aimed at his heart.

Leaving his soldiers in the downstairs offices, Corporal Angel Pérez Vásquez climbed up the steep bank on the road side of the building to the corridor above. He went around to the front and saw bodies lying on the grass. At that moment a sixth man emerged into the corridor. He was older than the others, thin, quite frail looking, and wearing a white undershirt. He came out, saw his companions lying dead on the grass and turned to go back in again, saying, as he went, “Don’t kill me. I don’t belong to any organization.” Several of the soldiers called out to him, “Out you come, *compa!*” but he paid no attention. As he turned to enter a room on the left, a soldier fired at him. Pérez saw him fall and moved in to search the room. As he stepped over the old man, a hand reached out and groped for his feet. Pérez stepped back and fired at him twice. Then again and again.

Avalos and Jorge Alberto Sierra Ascencio were heading down the passageway toward the gate leading to the chapel when Avalos heard muffled sounds coming from a room on his right. Standing in the doorway he lit a match and saw that there were two women lying on the floor, embracing and moaning in a widening pool of blood. He ordered Sierra to finish them off. The soldier fired off a round of cartridges from his M16 until both women were quiet.

Once the main business of the operation was completed, the men began to draw back. Amaya was in the parking lot drinking a Pilsner beer when the lieutenants arrived. Espinoza asked the soldiers with him

whether they had seen the flare they had agreed would be the signal for the retreat. As nobody was sure whether the flare had gone up, Cota fired his 40mm grenade launcher into the air as a sign for the others that it was time to go. Most of the unit now began to withdraw through the same entrance they had used earlier. One of the soldiers had a light brown case belonging to the priests in his hand. His beer finished, the can cast aside, Amaya volunteered to stay behind with Sergeant "Savage's" patrol to feign a confrontation between themselves and the terrorists. They fired at the building and at the cars parked in the lot with everything they had. By 3:00 A.M. they too were back in the military academy.

On their way out, the commandos noticed the sign hanging on the front of the gate. "No classes today," it read. They took it down, turned it over, wrote "The FMLN executed the enemy spies. Victory or death, FMLN," and hung it back on the gate.

It was November 16, 1989.