Targeting a U.S. Ambassador

For the record, his assignment was to convey President Reagan's congratulations to El Salvador's new president-elect, José Napoleón Duarte, and to accompany Duarte back to Washington. But when Reagan's ambassador at large, Gen. Vernon Walters, arrived in San Salvador that Friday last May, he was rushed to U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering's heavily guarded residence on an urgent secret mission. Waiting there with Pickering was not Duarte, but Roberto D'Aubuisson, the right-wing candidate still bridling at his defeat by Duarte two weeks earlier. And Walters wasted no time in announcing the United States had incontrovertible evidence that D'Aubuisson and other members of his ARENA Par-

Pickering and Helms: Was the letter to blame?

ty were plotting a political murder. The intended target: none other than U.S. Ambassador Pickering himself.

Walters's warning of dire consequences for El Salvador's right—should the murder plot succeed—seems to have squelched the alleged conspiracy. But the bizarre scenario, confirmed last week by sources in San Salvador and Washington, remained a disturbing lesson in the savagery of Salvadoran politics. And it was likely to cast a shadow over the administration's extensive—and expensive—policy there. There was also the politically damaging assertion that one of the U.S. Senate's conservative icons—North Carolina's Republican Sen. Jesse Helms, now battling for re-election—was blamed by some top administration figures for inadvertently triggering the assassination plot.

According to sources in El Salvador, the plot against Pickering was prompted by a letter Helms wrote to President Reagan—a rambling, vitriolic missive protesting U.S. interference in Salvadoran elections on behalf of the moderate candidate, Duarte.

Sources in El Salvador say that a Helms staff aide telephoned D'Aubuisson in San Salvador and leaked the contents of the letter before it became public. A top Helms aide denied any direct contact between anyone in his office and D'Aubuisson, but recalled that early copies had been made available to Salvadoran journalists in Washington. Whatever the source, "ARENA was livid about the elections," said a source in San Salvador. "The whole thing was unleashed by the Helms letter."

D'Aubuisson, who could not be reached for comment, has long been regarded by U.S. government officials as a principal architect of El Salvador's right-wing death squads. Sources in that country said that within days of the Helms letter becoming public, D'Aubuisson met with a "very small" group of party officials to discuss Pickering's murder as a response to U.S. meddling. "They mentioned Pickering by name," said one source. The plotters did not mince words or speak in code, the source said. "There was no doubt."

'Take It Seriously': There was also no solid evidence as to how far—if at all—the murder plans had actually progressed before the Walters mission. "One never uncovers a plot as such," says one knowledgeable U.S. government source. "One uncovers evidence and then has to decide whether to take it seriously or not. This one we took seriously." Indeed, the intelligence report prompted Reagan to dispatch former CIA official Walters, a veteran military and diplomatic hand respected by Latin conservatives for his strong anticommunist stance. A U.S. official said the general lectured D'Aubuisson on the proper "role of the loyal opposition" and did not have to dwell specifically on D'Aubuisson's pending request for a U.S. visa or ARENA's vulnerable lifeline to Salvadoran supporters living in the United States—who would not welcome federal investigations of their immigration status, currency transactions, tax returns and bank accounts.

In the wake of that meeting, the ARENA leader ceased his public denunciations of the election—and his hints about ignoring the returns. He was further encouraged in this lowered profile by Senator Helms himself—at President Reagan's request. Even before the death plot was discovered, Washington sources said, the president had summoned Helms to the White House private quarters for a "stern lecture" about the senator's public discussion of CIA involvement in the Salvador elections. Later,

with the help of Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker, Helms was hastily added to a delegation headed for Duarte's inauguration—and asked to make contact with D'Aubuisson. But far from being blamed for setting off a murder plot, one Helms aide insisted, the senator was called on as "a peacemaker . . . to rebuild links with the 46 percent of the people there who voted for D'Aubuisson."

Just four years ago former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White told a congressional hearing that D'Aubuisson was a "pathological killer" who could—at least by U.S. judicial standards—be convicted of murdering El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980. White's successor, Deane R. Hinton, tried a more conciliatory tack; emerging from a meeting with D'Aubuisson after his party's surprising strong showing in 1982 Assembly elections, Hinton proclaimed, "Bobby proved himself to be a fine, young democrat."

Plot: Now, despite the alleged conspiracy, relations seem cozier than ever—at least on the surface. On May 31 D'Aubuisson was granted a temporary U.S. visa previously denied him, and he was expected to meet with Helms and other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington this week. Though administration figures have privately contended that it is safer to have D'Aubuisson inside the political process rather than outside, the plot against Pickering may well complicate further efforts to work with him—or with anyone else on El Salvador's extreme right wing. The latest disclosure also will raise questions about the ethical sensitivity of an administration that complains loudly about harassment of U.S. diplomats overseas and then grants a visa to someone it believes has plotted to murder one.

· MARK STARR with ROBERT
RIVARD in San Salvador and JOHN
WALCOTT, JOHN LINDSAY and
THOMAS M. DeFRANK in Washington

Walters: Lifesaver