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A U.S. Ambassador Extremists Hate

If violence-ridden El Salvador manages to avoid an all-out explosion between extremists of the right and left, a lot of the credit will go to U.S. Ambassador Robert E. White.

A veteran diplomat at 53, the plain-spoken White made his career in Latin America and his reputation in human rights advocacy. He was probably the best choice President Carter could have made last March for the unenviable position of the man in the middle in El Salvador.

White's assignment was to make clear to every element in El Salvador — right, left and center — that for once the United States is determined to support middle-of-the-road moderates. It's an overdue switch from Uncle Sam's traditional backing of tinhorn tyrants whose only claim on our allegiance is their devout anticommunism.

Because it is such a drastic change in policy, it has aroused outrage from the "betrayed" right, and disbelief from the suspicious left.

White has become the lightning rod for the extremists' wrath. "The situation is dangerous for me because I'm a symbol of the United States," White admitted philosophically to my reporter Katharine Koch.

After only four months in El Salvador, White already has the distinction of being the only "gringo" on the hit list of 250 individuals to be "physically eliminated" by the right-wing secret Anti-Communist Army. The list also includes leftists, members of the junta, members of the intelligentsia and religious, labor and professional leaders.

White's residence was surrounded by right-wing demonstrators for an entire weekend in May. He sat tight till

Monday morning, when the Marines used tear gas to disperse the mob. The American Embassy is a fortress described by one visitor as "better guarded than the vault in Fort Knox."

White's enemies are not just Salvadoran extremists. After a reception he gave for the U.S. citizens there, one U.S. businessman was overheard muttering, "I'd like to kill him." Undeterred by the hostility White coolly informed the local chamber of commerce, "As strongly as we reject a solution of the extreme left, we reject the right. We want a democratic solution."

The rightists see the U.S.-backed junta's agrarian and banking reforms as "railroading socialism into El Salvador." The leftists say the land reform was "made in U.S.A. from the old dictatorship's blueprints, and suspect the CIA may be behind it. In fact, one of the first things White demanded — and got — when he moved into his Salvadoran hot seat was the recall of the CIA station chief."

On Second Thought — Unlike most mortals, members of Congress have the privilege of correcting slips of the tongue, misstatements of fact and other boo-boos they commit in the heat or confusion of public debates before their mistakes can be printed for all the world to see.

During a recent House debate on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, for example, Appropriations Chairman Jamie Whitten (D-Miss.) jumped all over Rep. Berkley Bedell (D-Iowa) for criticizing the project. Bedell's objections were justified: The price tag on the controversial, 219-mile canal-and-river network has soared from \$300

million to \$3 billion over the past eight years.

Whitten's remarks could have been interpreted as a veiled threat against future public works projects in Bedell's district. But when the Congressional Record appeared the next day, Whitten's sarcastic comments had been excised.

During the same debate, Rep. David Bowen (D-Miss.) noted that the Louisville & Nashville Railroad opposes the waterway, which would parallel its rail line. "I do not blame it," said Bowen in floor debate, referring to the railroad. "If I ran the L&N Railroad, I would have to oppose it also."

Evidently fearing he appeared to be supporting the railroad's antiwaterway position, Bowen amended his remarks to: "This is a misguided policy. This waterway would be an asset to this railroad as such waterways have been to other rail lines."

And Rep. Jack Edwards (R-Ala.), who stated flatly on the floor of the House that he would not support an extension of the waterway from Demopolis to Mobile, "extended" his spoken remark to read that he wouldn't support the extension "based on what is known at this time."

Cuban Cover-Up — Fidel Castro continues to meddle in the affairs of his Latin American neighbors, but he is trying to keep a low profile. One way he does it, according to secret reports by the Defense Intelligence Agency, is to give his guerrilla clients weapons stamped "made in U.S.A." They're genuine, some of the thousands of guns captured by Castro more than 20 years ago when he overthrew the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.