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Latin Lesson

U.S. Effort to Win 'Hearts and Minds' Gains in El Salvador

Tactics Will Get Next Test In the Nicaragua Conflict; Peru, Ecuador Mentioned

A Mariachi Band and Barbers

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SAN FRANCISCO MORAZAN—In this small El Salvador town on the edge of one of Central America's bloodiest war zones, an army operation accompanied by U.S. advisers looks like a festival.

Clowns, a mariachi band and skimpily clad dancers perform between speeches by Salvadoran army officers and social workers calling on peasants to reject the guerrillas. Meanwhile, army barbers cut hair, and soldiers pass out rice, dresses and medicine.

An agent of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, clad in battle fatigues and carrying an M-16 carbine, inspects this "psychological operation" with obvious satisfaction. "You wouldn't have seen this in 1981 and 1982. You see the army winning hearts and minds," he says. "This is low-intensity-conflict doctrine in action."

San Francisco Morazan, like scores of other Salvadoran towns, serves as a testing ground for an emerging U.S. military strategy for the Third World. The "low intensity conflict" strategy, or LIC (pronounced "lick"), is designed to win prolonged "small" wars without escalating them and engaging U.S. ground forces.

Building Bridges

By integrating humanitarian activities such as bridge-building and veterinary instruction with jungle-warfare tactics, LIC attempts to convince civilians that anti-Communist forces are fighting to improve both local security and living standards.

Low-intensity-conflict operations aren't new, and they failed to bring an American victory in Vietnam. Now, however, they appear to be bearing fruit in El Salvador, where Washington has worked for several years to tailor LIC doctrine to Central American conditions.

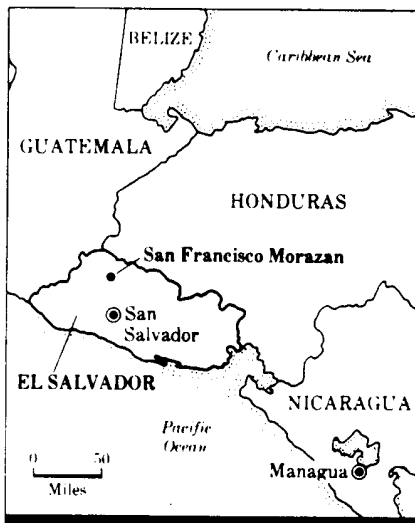
Although the Salvadoran war isn't yet won, LIC operations guided by U.S. advisers have helped the pro-American government here to push back Communist guerrillas. Many of those same tactics are about to be employed under President Reagan's Contra aid program in Nicaragua, where the challenges are greater. And if the strategy works in Nicaragua, LIC proponents say, that could fuel interest in increasing aid to anti-Communist insurgents in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola, Laos and Vietnam.

Useful in Philippines?

Already officials from the Pentagon's Pacific Command are studying propaganda operations in El Salvador to see if they could work in the Philippines, where a Marxist insurgency also opposes an ally. Others mention Peru and Ecuador as countries where LIC might work. "You see a developing theater and a developing doctrine," says Gen. John Galvin, chief of the U.S. Southern Command in Panama. Maj. David Petraeus, a Galvin adviser, says, "LIC is a growth industry."

LIC fits comfortably with the "Reagan Doctrine," the president's determination to support anti-Soviet, pro-American insurgencies in the Third World. But it isn't clear that the U.S. has the patience or the political will to carry out the long wars—often marked by setbacks and inconclusive battles—that LIC is designed for.

When the U.S. tried to "win hearts and minds" in Vietnam, it lost to a more tena-



cious force. "We fought a war in Vietnam that we knew how to fight, not the war that there was in the rice paddies," complains Col. John Waghelstein, a Special Forces commander with wide experience in Asia and Latin America. But Pentagon strategists say they have learned from the failure in Vietnam, and they insist they can make LIC work this time.

In El Salvador and Nicaragua, unlike Vietnam, the U.S. is limiting its involvement to funding, advising and training local forces to fight. And U.S. officials point to the improving military situation in El Salvador as evidence that LIC can work.

"The big danger is that once you make a commitment to a side in a military conflict—even if it starts as a low-intensity conflict—it's hard to back out," says William LeoGrande, a political-science professor at American University in Washington. "Remember, Vietnam began as a low-intensity conflict. All we were going to do was train the South Vietnamese army to fight the war by themselves."

El Salvador easily could have become another Vietnam. The army and government were brutal, corrupt and unpopular; the guerrillas, up until mid-1983, were gaining military strength even though their popularity waned after late 1980. For a time it looked as though large-scale U.S. involvement would be needed to stop the left, but congressional opposition stymied that possibility.

Now, persistence and LIC training—including CIA-financed propaganda films stressing the importance of building popular support—have considerably improved the Salvadoran army's efficiency and behavior. The U.S. pushed the Salvadoran army to rid its ranks of officers who participated in right-wing "death squads" that killed many Salvadorans who opposed them. Washington also called for elections, and they helped give the government of Jose Napoleon Duarte legitimacy at home and abroad.

"The precedent has been set in El Salvador," says Col. Waghelstein. "to allow us to use the doctrine without looking over our shoulder at Vietnam."

Gen. Galvin claims that the same kind of LIC tactics that weakened the guerrillas in El Salvador can be used to help anti-Communist Contra rebels win in Nicaragua. U.S. military officials say that under the aid package recently passed by Congress, U.S. advisers will train the Contras to fight in small units and to organize potential followers among the peasants.

Attrition and Rights

The Contras, these officials say, will be taught how to fight a slow war of attrition and will be trained both to respect human rights and to improve the lives of civilians by digging wells and treating routine health problems.

They also will learn to train their civilian supporters to aid the war effort without exposing themselves to Sandinista repression. Civilians would learn, for instance, how to let the Contras know that a Sandinista unit is around by sending secret signals, such as leaving a tray of red peppers at a particular spot.

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But it will be hard for the U.S. to sell the Contras a program that weeds jungle warfare to Peace Corps-type development and building projects. Many Contra officials are unimpressed by LIC doctrine.

"We aren't going to have the time to become engineers, constructors and entertainers," argues Contra spokesman Frank Arana. And a CIA-trained Contra platoon leader who goes by the name "Pecos Bill" disparages the Green Beret trainers who will soon be advising the Contras. He calls them "Green Beans" who "don't know the tactics of the rabid-dog Sandinistas."

Even if the Contras were prepared to cooperate, it would be difficult for them to build the type of popular support the U.S. expects. Although economic shortages and political repression have eroded support for the Sandinistas, the Contras have failed to gain much backing, particularly in the cities. While people have doubts about the Managua regime, they fear the Contras because many Contra leaders are former soldiers in the National Guard of deposed dictator Anastasio Somoza. Some U.S. officials want an El Salvador-style shakeup of the Contra leadership to dilute the power of former Guard officers.

Reminder of Occupation

Another problem is that the American financing of the Contras reminds most Nicaraguans, whatever their ideology, of the unpopular U.S. Marine occupation of their country in 1912-25 and 1926-33. This allows the Sandinistas to paint the Contras as foreign-backed mercenaries, while presenting themselves as nationalists despite their own ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union.

Overcoming these legacies won't be easy. Even LIC proponents worry that the U.S. lacks the patience for a prolonged guerrilla war. The U.S., they fear, could stumble before Soviet-backed Sandinista forces that are better equipped than the Contras. Soviet leaders can set long-term goals and stick to them, even when things go badly, as in Afghanistan, they note, while U.S. leaders must deal with a fractious Congress and an impatient public.

Gen. Edward Meyer, a retired Army chief of staff, worries that the administration may forget an important lesson of Vietnam: Ambiguous wars can produce ambiguous objectives that are difficult for the public to support. "Take, for example, the non-clandestine clandestine war in Nicaragua. People are confused," he says. "If you ask [CIA director William] Casey and [Defense Secretary Caspar] Weinberger what our goals are in Nicaragua, you still couldn't get a coherent answer."

'A Classic Case'—If

But retired Maj. Gen. John Singlaub, a former commander of U.S. forces in Korea and currently an adviser to the Contras, believes that Nicaragua "can be a really classic case to be taught in future classes at our service schools in how to overthrow a Communist government—if it's successful." If it isn't, Nicaragua could set LIC doctrine back for years, as Vietnam did.

In El Salvador, where the U.S. is limited by Congress to 55 permanent military advisers to prevent a buildup of American troops, LIC activities evolved slowly—and haven't always worked as planned.

The much-vaunted National Plan, which was hatched by officials in the U.S. embassy in San Salvador in late 1982, was designed to clean out guerrillas in targeted areas, then reestablish public services, which would be defended by government civil-defense units. But the plan's first two years were disastrous. Guerrillas stole medicines from National Plan hospitals and held night classes at National Plan schools.

The U.S. made adjustments and persevered. It also was lucky. The guerrillas fighting the Salvadoran army were weak and disorganized. The left's constant internal bickering and insensitive economic-sabotage campaign eroded its popular support. Meanwhile, bombings by the Salvadoran air force—a tactic of conventional war rather than of low-intensity conflict—forced the guerrillas to disperse their battalion-size units, and their strength faded.