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'Get-tough' visits helped El Salvador to shape up

SAN SALVADOR

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At the time of Vice President George Bush's seminal Dec. 11, 1983 visit to El Salvador, his impact on the Salvadoran civil war received cursory press treatment. It was overshadowed, like almost everything else, by the apparently endless "death squad" killings.

Seldom had an American leader been so tough. First, he met with the acting executive, then with the top military leadership, then with El Salvador's 31 military commanders. His visit was designed so that no one could mistake the message.

Mr. Bush told them clearly that certain military officers had to be reassigned, that all arrests by plainclothesmen (in effect, the death squads) must end, and that arrests must be followed immediately by cables to the prisoners' families, to the Catholic archbishop, and to the International Red Cross.

Mr. Bush stressed that this should not be construed as undue American "pressure." It was just that the United States, which, after all, is a crucial source of aid for El Salvador, was approaching an election year — and Congress questions aid to a government that has not cleaned up its act.

The vice president's message was followed not only by clear and persistent signals, but by a few more pointed visits. In 1984, when the right-wing Roberto D'Aubuisson, reputed head of the death squads, was threatening to kill the American ambassador, Gen. Vernon Walters was sent down to deliver, well, a "perfectly clear" message about the consequences of such actions.

Gen. Walters, whom some American officials sometimes admiringly call the "rat-killer," apparently dissuaded the vacant-

eyed D'Aubuisson from his violent course.

American policy has been far from perfect in the violent cauldron known as El Salvador — President Reagan, for example, should have immediately seized on the killing of the four American churchwomen four years ago in El Salvador to destroy the death squads. But U.S. policy toward El Salvador has seldom been what most Americans think it is. It has not been, for instance, traditional "imperialism" or even interventionism.

The United States could be condemned more for not caring than for intervening in El Salvador during the crucial years when the military was taking over and the Marxist guerrilla movement was growing. From 1972 to 1978, the CIA station here was closed. El Salvador, at a most crucial juncture, was considered that unimportant in the grand scheme of things.

The first significant step out of El Salvador's feudal past occurred in 1979, when reformist officers and politicians took over the country. Unfortunately, elements of the old regime still remained in many key areas. It was these members that Mr. Bush addressed in 1983 on behalf of the reformist groups. Subsequent U.S. ambassadors also pushed for reform. So did others in an embassy often considered brilliant by analysts here.

Little known, for instance, is the case of a young foreign service officer, Carl Boettinger, who personally broke the terrible case of the four murdered American missionaries. He dug up the roster of the Salvadoran soldiers who had been at the airport on the night of the killings, and it was his work that finally identified these subhuman murderers — killers that the new, reformed military rightly is trying to get rid of.

El Salvador is at a new point now, and so is the United States. Salvadoran Gen. Eugenio Vides Casanova told me recently that the "influence" of the United States was important in the beginning, in terms of moving El Salvador toward a democratic system, but that now it is not so "necessary" because El Salvador is moving in that direction anyway. That is correct — and it is a very welcome development.

But has the United States itself learned from El Salvador? The most fascinating aspect of the relationship, apart from the benefit to the Salvadoran people, is what El Salvador has given to American understanding of the Vietnam "syndrome."

To put it perhaps crassly but with respect for the people of El Salvador, U.S. aid and pressure have worked here. They have worked because the United States used intelligent counterinsurgency tactics and strategy. They have worked because men like Mr. Bush and Gen. Walters were sent at the right moment to make clear (as we did not in Vietnam) what we would tolerate and what we would not.

Finally — and while this point may be the most difficult for the American people to understand, it remains the most crucial — democracy is working in El Salvador because the United States supported a democratic political process that was already in place. We could successfully support a reformed military only because a truly democratic and representative group, in this case the reformist Christian Democrats, had already captured the imagination and met the needs of the people. It is really that simple.

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