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Introduction by Dustin Walcher

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Introduction by Dustin Walcher, Southern Oregon University

Central America's civil wars comprised a critical front in the Latin American and Global Cold War of the 1970s and 1980s. The United States, Argentina, the Soviet Union, and Cuba each provided support to geopolitical and ideological allies at different times, and to varying degrees. The conflicts were widely seen as significant; for a time during the 1980s, news of Central American distress frequently appeared on the front pages of major newspapers. U.S. assistance to the Nicaraguan contras, in violation of Congressional prohibitions, was a major component of the most significant political scandal of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Meanwhile, scholars, journalists, policymakers, and advocates wrote a host of usually polemical accounts of the wars, and of the U.S. role in the violence. Then, as the U.S.-Soviet Cold War came to a sudden end at the beginning of the 1990s, and democratic elections were held in previously war-torn Central American states, the attention of most of the rest of the world shifted to other areas and new priorities. In the intervening years, even academic historians have been slow to produce major monographs on El Salvador's war.

Within Central America, the story of El Salvador's civil conflict has perhaps been most neglected. Even during the height of the violence in the 1980s, the U.S. response to the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua received the most attention in the United States, both from policymakers and the public. El Salvador was hardly absent from coverage, but U.S. support for the nation's conservative governments usually commanded less attention than U.S. efforts to undermine or overthrow the Marxist government in Managua. However, as Russell Crandall persuasively explains in *The Salvador Option*, U.S. efforts in El Salvador between the late 1970s and the early 1990s were significant. The Salvador Option constituted the single major U.S. nation-building effort between the end of the Vietnam War and the onset of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. El Salvador's civil war was significant because of its profound impact on Salvadorian politics and society—including the loss of 75,000 lives—and also for its role in the history of U.S. engagement in the world. Crandall's well-researched book highlights the significance of El Salvador to U.S. foreign policy for more than a decade.

The 'Salvador Option' refers to a nation building and counterinsurgency operation involving only a limited U.S. commitment of forces and funds. In effect, that was the approach taken by successive U.S. administrations toward El Salvador. For Cold Warriors determined to continue undertaking nation-building projects in the post-Vietnam political environment, the Salvador Option held promise. Indeed, it experienced some degree of success. After all, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) did not come to power. Among Crandall's most notable contributions is to make a persuasive case that, contrary to the views of contemporary critics on the political left, the Reagan administration pursued a fundamentally moderate approach toward El Salvador that reflected general continuity with the Carter administration's policies. Reagan could have followed the advice of advocates on the far right in the United States, such as Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), and backed Roberto D'Aubuisson, a brutal, right-wing authoritarian who championed the use of violence against political enemies, for president. Instead, and in the face of howls of protest from domestic conservative allies, the Reagan administration supported the center-right Christian Democrat, Jose Napoleon Duarte. Duarte's government worked to move away from repression and sought to create a broader democratic civil society in El Salvador. Reagan and Duarte's course represented a moderately conservative option in the war-torn society.

Despite titling most of the sections in the book after U.S. presidents, Crandall operates comfortably in the international history tradition; he tells the story of the Salvadorian war from the perspective of that country,

emphasizing Salvadorian agency throughout. As Kyle Longley explains, Crandall “decenters the United States without removing blame and responsibility for the atrocities and the direction of a brutal civil war.” While it is clear that U.S. aid and support sustained Salvadorian governments, it is equally clear that Salvadorian leaders determined their own approaches to their nation’s challenges. There are no puppets here.

The reviewers find much to praise. Longley calls *The Salvador Option* an “extensively researched and well written book.” Jason Colby concludes that “Crandall succeeds in shifting the historical lens and forcing us to think in more nuanced ways about a deeply polarizing subject.” Michelle Getchell finds that “[t]he strengths of Crandall’s monograph undoubtedly lie in the even-handedness with which he approaches his topic and in his steadfast attention to the relationship between domestic and foreign policy.”

The reviewers also identify some areas of weakness. Colby and Theresa Keeley both comment on Crandall’s organizational choices. While Colby is generally supportive of the kind of short, focused chapters that populate the book, he does not find that they serve Crandall well in this case. The thematic organization sometimes leads to disorienting chronological jumps between chapters. Individuals are introduced, only to be re-introduced in later chapters. But they are rarely fully developed as compelling and multi-dimensional historical actors. Keeley also takes note of the book’s organization, but, given the nature of the material, finds the structure more understandable.

For Keeley, one of the book’s virtues also becomes one of its weaknesses. As the reviewers note, Crandall succeeds in providing a balanced perspective on U.S. actions in El Salvador, particularly during the contentious Reagan years. However, rather than just sketch the two perspectives—those of Reagan and his critics, juxtaposed side-by-side—Keeley would like Crandall to have drawn firmer conclusions and evaluate the merits of their claims.

Finally, despite the book’s length, some of the reviewers were left wanting more. While the political right is well developed, Getchell finds that “the book provides surprisingly little insight into the political aims, strategies, and tactics of the leftist participants in the military conflict – the Cubans, Soviets, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.” Acknowledging that sources on these participants are more difficult to come by, she nonetheless would like to have seen greater depth of analysis given to that side in the struggle. She would also prefer Crandall to have better contextualized his history of U.S. involvement in El Salvador in the broader story of Soviet and Cuban machinations in the area. Longley finds that “the reader is often left wanting to know more as some of the chapters are quite short and topics only developed superficially.” Getchell and Colby find that Crandall could more directly engage the extant literature. Colby would like Crandall to have “explore[d] the Salvadoran war’s long-term reverberations in U.S. policy.” Finally, Colby identifies an opportunity to examine gendered dimensions of the war.

Given the significance of the Central American wars, and their long-term effects on emigration and organized crime, the significance of Crandall’s monograph is clear. He also reminds readers that the war generated an important model for counterinsurgency. *The Salvador Option* will join William LeoGrande’s *Our Own Backyard* as a touchstone for future scholarship on El Salvador’s long civil war.¹

¹ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Participants:

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Kyle Longley is the Snell Family Dean's Distinguished Professor of history and political science at Arizona State University. He has authored or edited seven books including *The Sparrow and the Hawk: Costa Rica and the United States during the Rise of Jose Figueres, 1942-1957* (1997, winner of the A. B. Thomas Book Prize from the South Eastern Council on Latin American Studies), *In the Eagle's Shadow: The United States and Latin America* (2002, 2nd edition, 2009), *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (2006), *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (2008), *The Morenci Marines: A Tale of Small Town America and the Vietnam War* (2013, winner of a Southwest Book Award), *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security, 1981-1989* [with Brad Coleman] (2017). In 2018, he will publish *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency during America's Year of Upheaval* and *In Harm's Way: A Military History of the United States* [with Gene Smith and David Coffey].

Review by Jason M. Colby, University of Victoria

Almost twenty years ago, I entered graduate school determined to write the definitive book on the United States and El Salvador. Somewhere along the way, I decided I could not handle the pain of the subject matter as well as the slow declassification of the Reagan records. Thankfully, Russell Crandall has taken up the challenge in *The Salvador Option*. Recent years have brought a number of superb studies of U.S. Cold War policy in Latin America, among them Stephen Rabe's *The Killing Zone* (2011).¹ But no one has attempted a full-scale study of the U.S. role in the Salvadoran conflict—a bloody twelve-year civil war that took the lives of some 75,000 and displaced 20% of the population, leaving the small country's social fabric in tatters.

In my view, Crandall confronted two principal challenges in framing this study. First, he faced skepticism and disinterest from non-specialists, who, in light of more recent and higher profile conflicts in the Middle East, might be tempted to ask “Who cares about El Salvador?” Second, and more daunting, he had to reach those readers who remember the policy debates all too well and are almost certain to have pronounced, and perhaps immutable, opinions on the war and its meaning.

Crandall effectively dispenses with the first challenge in his opening lines, noting that the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was the “most formidable guerrilla insurgency in Latin America’s modern history” and that the effort to defeat it was “America’s largest counterinsurgency and nation-building campaign after Vietnam and before Iraq and Afghanistan.” (1) Not only did the conflict reveal much about U.S. policy in Latin America in the late Cold War, he observes, but policy makers such as former Vice President Dick Cheney later looked to the intervention in El Salvador for lessons that could be applied in other contexts, such as the war in Iraq—the origin of the phrase “Salvador Option.”

Yet Crandall focuses the bulk of his efforts on the second set of readers: those who long ago made up their mind about U.S. policy in El Salvador. They are a hardened bunch. During the 1980s, U.S. meddling in Central America became the most controversial foreign relations issue since the Vietnam War, and the publication of volumes that were critical of U.S. policy became an ideologically charged cottage industry. Although still entertaining and readable, for example, historian Walter LaFeber’s celebrated *Inevitable Revolutions* (1983) today reads almost like a Marxist history of the United States in Central America. Even more pronounced is journalist Tommie Sue Montgomery’s *Revolution in El Salvador* (1994), which interprets the conflict primarily from the standpoint of the Salvadoran left. Likewise, reporter Mark Danner’s riveting *Massacre at El Mozote* (1994), which I have used many times in class, presents one horrifying event as a parable for the entire conflict—and perhaps even for the whole Cold War itself. William LeoGrande’s *Our Own Backyard* (1998) attempts a more balanced treatment of U.S. intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua, albeit with limited internal documentation.² Now, with a larger supply of declassified material, Crandall has

¹ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983); Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil War to Civil Peace* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

attempted a reinterpretation of U.S. policy in El Salvador, declaring as his goal a “thorough and fair-minded evaluation based on the available evidence.” (7)

In this fundamental objective, Crandall unquestionably succeeds. He makes superb use of internal documents, media sources, memoirs, and interviews in the United States and El Salvador to explore the nuances and internal tensions that characterized U.S. policy in the 1977 to 1992 period. Unlike many writers, he takes a relatively long view of American involvement in El Salvador, and he gives ample attention to the Carter years. His assertion that Central America became “the focus of the Carter administration’s novel effort to recast America’s priorities abroad” (107) is debatable—after all, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Patricia Derian and other officials zeroed in on nations such as Argentina as well. But he shows very clearly that President Jimmy Carter’s response to the 1979 coup and ensuing reformist juntas framed the outlines of U.S. policy for the following decade.

It is with regard to the Reagan administration, however, that Crandall makes his greatest contribution, and he does so mainly by digging into the diplomatic side of the story. Although this partly reflects the greater availability of State Department documents, it also represents a welcome corrective to earlier accounts, which tended to focus on U.S. military advisors and counterinsurgency strategy. In contrast, Crandall explores the pivotal importance of the ‘imperial diplomats’ who shaped U.S. engagement with El Salvador’s changing political system, often with little direction from Washington.

This political emphasis enables Crandall to explore a paradox that has long bedeviled critics of U.S. policy in El Salvador. If, as many have argued, Reagan’s approach represented a conservative reaction to a popular revolution, why did the administration devote so much of its efforts and resources to strengthening El Salvador’s political center while isolating the violent groups on the right. Accepting the reality that the United States could hardly have been expected to welcome the victory of the Cuban- and Sandinista-supported FMLN, one wonders what better alternative U.S. officials had than to professionalize the Salvadoran military while bolstering Jose Napoleon Duarte and his Christian Democrats. Though largely unnoticed at the time, U.S. policy succeeded in weaning the Salvadoran military from the nation’s reactionary oligarchs, who were the driving force behind the infamous death squads.

In this regard, it seems impossible to read this book and not be struck by the stark disconnect between the hawkish rhetoric of Reagan and his advisors in the early 1980s and the basic continuities with the Carter administration’s policies. This is clearly one explanation for why, in contrast to the Contra War, the U.S. Congress never cut off aid to the Salvador government during the Reagan years. In fact, both the administration and its Democratic critics thrilled at the sight of Salvadorans voting in large numbers throughout the 1980s—even as the FMLN made violent attempts to disrupt elections.

Grasping the centrist nature of the Reagan administration’s policy also helps us understand the deep resentment it engendered from the U.S. and Salvadoran right. After all, Senator Jesse Helms and his right-wing allies hosted Salvadoran death squad leader Robert D’Aubuisson in late 1984, primarily to undercut U.S. support of the moderate Duarte regime. By the time he handed over power to D’Aubuisson’s National Republican Alliance party (ARENA) in 1989, Duarte was widely regarded as a failure. But as Crandall argues, “Duarte’s role as a moderate but decidedly anti-communist democratic reformer was essential for the evolution of El Salvador’s conflict.” (383)

In the final analysis, U.S. support clearly prevented the Salvadoran government's military and financial collapse. And while critics at the time denounced Washington for bolstering a repressive regime, Crandall correctly notes that a FMLN victory would have brought its own terrible costs, which pro-guerrilla organizations such as the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) in the United States never really acknowledged. At no point in the struggle did the FMLN enjoy majority support from the Salvadoran people, and its victory would surely have signified disaster for U.S. policy and El Salvador alike.

Despite these virtues, *The Salvador Option* still falls short in several respects. First of all, its organization might have been more effective. Crandall chooses, somewhat conventionally, to divide the book into five parts, three of them devoted to the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations, respectively. While this certainly reflects the real and perceived importance of U.S. presidencies, it obscures many of the nuances and continuities that his analysis reveals. It also clashes with his chapter organization.

Generally, I am a fan of brief, episodic chapters, but this approach does not entirely work here. Although Crandall tries in his short chapters to create a narrative drive, they often feel arbitrarily divided and chronologically misplaced. "Esquipulas," for example, discusses the Contadora peace effort through 1986, then bounces back to 1983, including the Pope's visit, but in the end has little to say about the Esquipulas negotiations themselves. Similarly, it is difficult to understand why the short "Air War" chapter was not combined with "Counterinsurgency II." Soon after, the "Iran-Contra" chapter takes the reader all the way to the FMLN's second "final offensive" in late 1989, which is the subject of its own chapter five chapters later. Despite my familiarity with most of the material, I found myself confused on several occasions, and one would expect a non-specialist to struggle with the book's chronological leaps.

Second, and partly because of these organizational issues, the book fails to evoke its historical characters in sufficient depth. Ambassador Robert White, for example, is introduced on several occasions yet never quite comes to life on the page as the colorful critic that he was. Crandall does a better job with Duarte, connecting his personal tribulations to his courageous, heartbreaking role in his nation's journey. Yet in contrast to Mike Schmidli's *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere* (2013), for example, this book lacks the kind of biographical portraits that help flesh out the historical issues at stake.³

Third, despite his thoughtful exploration of legacies and counterfactuals in his "Concluding Thoughts," Crandall does not sufficiently engage the popular and historical writing on the Salvadoran war. I was surprised, for example, that when he cautions against making a particular moment or massacre stand for the conflict and its meaning, he does not point directly to Danner's *Massacre at El Mozote* as an example of that pitfall. Nor does he explore the Salvadoran war's long-term reverberations in U.S. policy. Despite the book's title, the varied meanings of the "Salvador Option" are not addressed at length, and those looking for connections between U.S. Central America policy in the 1980s and later interventions in the Middle East will find more useful material in Greg Grandin's *Empire's Workshop* (2007).⁴

³ William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy in Argentina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁴ Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Holt, 2007).

A final quibble actually emerges from one of the book's strong points. Crandall makes very effective use of illustrations, both photos and maps, as an integrated part of his presentation. Yet I found myself surprised that at no point in his 500-page book does he address the gendered aspects of the conflict that his selected images clearly reveal. Salvadoran troops were entirely male, yet the majority of the guerrillas pictured in the book are women.

Those quibbles aside, Crandall has written an admirably detailed and exhaustively researched study that fulfills its primary objective. After reading this impressive book, it will be difficult for all but the most ideologically blinded to view the Salvadoran conflict as a simple case of reactionary U.S. Cold War policy. Despite the criticisms I have raised here, Crandall succeeds in shifting the historical lens and forcing us to think in more nuanced ways about a deeply polarizing subject. And that, in itself, is an admirable achievement.

Review by Michelle Getchell, U.S. Naval War College

The eponymous “Salvador Option” functions as shorthand not only for the extended U.S. intervention in El Salvador in the late half of the twentieth century, but the counterinsurgency strategy on which it was based. Because that strategy was developed in the context of another, much larger, Cold War intervention—the Vietnam War—the shadow of that prior engagement loomed over the public debates swirling around the regional conflict in Central America that erupted in the late 1970s and continued through the early 1990s. Russell Crandall, a scholar and practitioner of U.S. foreign policy, and author of *Gunboat Democracy* among other important works, has contributed a comprehensive study of the United States in El Salvador over a fifteen year time span that witnessed a period of deep freeze in the relations between the two Cold War superpowers, followed by a thaw that ultimately melted the global confrontation.¹

As a counterinsurgency war to combat communism, the U.S. intervention in El Salvador was constantly subject to the Vietnam syndrome, another convenient shorthand for the myriad ways in which that conflict influenced U.S. foreign and domestic policies for decades to come. The U.S. public and its representatives in Congress certainly sought to avoid foreign entanglements redolent of Vietnam, and so placed political constraints on the U.S. military engagement in El Salvador, which ironically made the conflict more likely to bog down. For instance, caps on the number of military advisers and limitations on the weapons technology that could be sent to the tiny Central American nation detracted from the military effectiveness of operations. One of the most notorious episodes of the war—the massacre at El Mozote—was committed by a battalion that had no U.S. military advisers present. It is very much an open question whether the presence of U.S. military advisers on the ground during operations like the one at and around El Mozote would have reduced the atrocities.

The strengths of Crandall’s monograph undoubtedly lie in the even-handedness with which he approaches his topic and in his steadfast attention to the relationship between domestic and foreign policy. Crandall’s attempts to maintain scholarly objectivity lead to a number of conclusions that may surprise readers. Contrary to the popular view of the Reagan administration as hawkishly supportive of the most brutal right-wing dictators, Crandall shows that moderate administration officials opposed the hard-right parties in El Salvador, instead throwing their support to centrist leaders of the Christian Democrat party. Crandall’s sustained focus on the domestic factors animating foreign policy also illuminates the policy shifts resulting from the varying influence of moderates and hawks within the administration.

This reviewer welcomes this more even-handed approach to the study of U.S.-Latin American relations, particularly during the Cold War; many specialists in the field have, however, bristled at any suggestion of moral equivalency between the political right and left, viewing the goals of the latter as worthy and those of the former as illegitimate. For most, if not all, scholars of Cold War Latin America, the atrocities of right-wing death squads are considered far more reprehensible than those of left-wing revolutionaries. This issue

¹ Russell Crandall, *Gunboat Democracy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); *Driven by Drugs: U.S. Policy toward Colombia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2008); and *America’s Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

goes to the heart of a debate that continues to rage among scholars of inter-American relations concerning how much blame the United States bears for the violent nature of Latin America's Cold War.²

Though this book is the only comprehensive treatment of the U.S. intervention in El Salvador published in the English language, it suffers from a few shortcomings. The historical context on U.S. interventionism in Latin America, for instance, is a bit over-generalized and at times reads like an undergraduate textbook account. Also, a few sentences seem imprecise at best and misleading at worst. The brief treatment of the Cuban revolution, for example, rehashes the same arguments that Cold War generalists have been spouting for decades. The author might have benefited from a deeper immersion into the most recent scholarship on Cold War Latin America.³ At the same time, the book's length (the main text, excluding endnotes, weighs in at a whopping 506 pages) makes it unsuitable for an undergraduate audience.

Finally, the book provides surprisingly little insight into the political aims, strategies, and tactics of the leftist participants in the military conflict—the Cubans, Soviets, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. Though these sources are naturally more difficult to locate and access than sources on the U.S. side, there are a number of works that Crandall could have consulted. For instance, Jan S. Adams's monograph, *A Foreign Policy in Transition: Moscow's Retreat from Central America and the Caribbean, 1985-1992*, is an excellent account of the conflict from the Kremlin's perspective, and is based on several published Russian-language sources, if not archival materials from the former Soviet Union.⁴ And while Crandall's work is of course a treatment of U.S.—not Soviet—policy, there are a handful of other scholarly accounts of Soviet involvement in Latin America and in the Third World more broadly that could have provided key context for exploring the U.S. intervention in El Salvador.⁵ In order to more fully understand U.S. aims and methods, we need to understand what exactly U.S. policymakers were (or believed they were) countering.

² On one side of this debate are scholars such as Greg Grandin and Stephen Rabe, who tend to focus on the U.S. role in instigating and perpetuating violence, or what is sometimes referred to as 'state-sponsored terrorism.' The most influential proponent of the other side of the debate is Hal Brands, whose monograph *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) advanced an interpretation concentrated on the domestic and regional factors giving rise to cycles of violence, while highlighting the external intervention of actors not only in Washington but in Moscow and Havana as well.

³ For instance, Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Mark Atwood Lawrence, and Julio E. Moreno, eds., *Beyond the Eagle's Shadow: New Histories of Latin America's Cold War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); Michael Grow, *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); and Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In From the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁴ Jan S. Adams, *A Foreign Policy in Transition: Moscow's Retreat from Central America and the Caribbean, 1985-1992* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).

⁵ For instance, W. Raymond Duncan and Carolyn McGiffert Ekedahl, *Moscow and the Third World under Gorbachev* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); Richard L. Harris, *Marxism, Socialism, and Democracy in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); and Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Moscow's Third World Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Review by Theresa Keeley, University of Louisville

With *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992*, Russell Crandall joins the growing body of scholars examining U.S. intervention in Central America during the Carter and Reagan years. The appeal of the topic is unsurprising given the controversy surrounding President Ronald Reagan's policies. United States-Central America policy has also become more of a viable scholarly pursuit as more sources have become available. In fact, Crandall himself relies on 15,500 government documents he received as part of a FOIA request related to his manuscript.

"Salvador Option," Crandall explains, is "easy shorthand" for U.S. policy from the late 1970s to 1992 (3). The U.S. approach was "a light footprint, counterinsurgency, and nation-building by proxy versus a full-scale campaign" (7). The Salvador Option was part of the broader U.S. Cold War containment strategy. At the same time, the Vietnam War's legacy was also particularly important. As Crandall notes, "El Salvador was a Rorschach test for seeing where people came out on post-Vietnam foreign policy" (6). United States-El Salvador policy was successful, Crandall concludes, if viewed "narrowly" in terms of U.S. objectives. But, the "more difficult" question is "at what human cost" this success came (8). The war left about 75,000 dead and more than a million displaced civilians. Overall, Crandall addresses the first measure of success to a much greater extent than the second.

The Salvador Option matters because it has been hailed as a blueprint for other U.S. counterinsurgency and nation-building efforts. Crandall notes how "U.S. policymakers and commentators looked to the lesson of El Salvador" in thinking about U.S. involvement in Iraq. They considered El Salvador to be "the 'anti-Vietnam' template" (3). Crandall's exploration of the Salvador Option as model recalls Greg Grandin's *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*.¹ Grandin, however, also examines the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations' ties with non-state actors, including the New Christian Right, in formulating foreign policy. Crandall's book is more concerned with state actors.

Crandall provides an in-depth look at U.S. policy. He details the pressure U.S. diplomats applied and the money the U.S. government spent to aid José Napoleón Duarte and the Christian Democrats, discusses internal debates among U.S. policymakers, and he highlights Cabinet members' divergent opinions in these discussions. Crandall describes the nature of U.S. military involvement and how it impacted the Salvadoran military's ability to fight the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The book includes an impressive array of 46 images, including maps and photographs.

Crandall stresses continuity between the Carter and Reagan administrations, but the extent of this continuity is different from the arguments of other scholars. Crandall contends that for all the "public bluster" of Reagan officials, the hardliners did not shape U.S. policy toward El Salvador (9). Instead, the more aggressive approach only won the day regarding Nicaragua policy. But, in an even longer examination of U.S. policy toward El Salvador and Nicaragua, the 773-page *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America*,

¹ Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

1977-1992, William M. LeoGrande disagrees.² He contends that the hardliners not only prevailed, but also that their influence endured “even after their chieftains . . . departed, because they accurately reflected the emotional commitment of the president himself” (581).

The two books also disagree on the Reagan administration’s position regarding a negotiated settlement. LeoGrande asserts that Reagan “had no interest in” the proposition. His position mattered because “only Washington had the power to force the Salvadoran military to make the concessions necessary to stop the war” (583). Crandall, by contrast, contends the Reagan administration “privately and publicly acknowledged the need for a political solution.” However, the administration’s understanding of what negotiations meant “was drastically different from the concept held by the guerrillas and their supporters inside and outside El Salvador” (9-10). The Carter and Bush administrations, Crandall contends, held similarly divergent views from those of the guerrillas.

The Salvador Option consists of 49 chapters divided into five main parts: “El Salvador in the Cold War,” “Jimmy Carter,” “Ronald Reagan,” “George H.W. Bush,” and “Postwar.” In using the names of three U.S. presidents in these headings, Crandall signals to the reader the main focus of his analysis: U.S. policy and policymakers. Before discussing the three presidents’ policies toward El Salvador, he provides background in Part I. He gives an overview of Salvadoran history, U.S. policy in Latin America, U.S. intervention in El Salvador, and the development of the guerrilla movement there, the Christian Democratic Party, the security forces, and the death squads. The majority of his focus in these chapters concerns the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. Chapter Two, “The United States in Latin America,” however, begins with Theodore Roosevelt’s Big Stick policy. Although the United States was far less involved in El Salvador than other Latin American nations, the overview helps the reader to situate U.S.-El Salvador policy into the broader historical framework of U.S.-Latin America policy. Chapter Two follows U.S. policy through the administration of President John F. Kennedy, who sought to counter Cold War guerrilla movements through “democratization, economic development, and security” efforts (37). These goals, Crandall argues, can be seen in later presidents’ policies, including those of Reagan. This background is for an audience that may be unfamiliar with El Salvador and even with U.S. involvement in Latin America more generally.

Within these five large sections, Crandall divides his chapters thematically. The structure allows topics to be encountered in isolation. On the other hand, the approach can cause confusion. For example, Chapter 14 “Land” discusses agrarian reform efforts in El Salvador and the January 1981 murders of two U.S. advisors from the American Institute for Free Labor Development and the Salvadoran president of the Institute for Agrarian Transformation. The next chapter, “The American Churchwomen,” moves backwards in time. Chapter 15 focuses on the December 1980 rape and murder of four U.S. missionaries. Similarly, Crandall discusses the Sandinistas’ electoral defeat in February 1990 in “Iran-contra,” the final chapter of Part Three: Ronald Reagan, not in Part Four: Bush. Given that this 698-page book covers such a long span of time and includes many actors in different countries, these structural choices are understandable.

My biggest wish was for more guidance from Crandall. He often discusses and then critiques both sides of debates. We hear from both those who supported U.S. actions and those who critiqued them. I would have preferred, however, hearing more of Crandall’s voice. For instance, he discusses the February 1981 State

² William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Department White Paper, which alleged that the Soviet Union, Cuba, and other Communist countries were behind the turmoil in El Salvador. Crandall notes that foreign diplomats challenged the document's conclusions, as did some members of the U.S. press, who contended the report contained factual errors. But Crandall does not comment on the substance of these allegations. Instead, he stresses that the White Paper added to the Reagan administration's growing credibility gap.

Crandall characterizes his manuscript as providing "a thorough and fair-minded third way interpretation" (7). As he writes in the conclusion, "Our story in these pages does not attempt to definitely resolve the debate over U.S. involvement in El Salvador, which remains, especially among scholars, emotionally charged and polarizing" (498). As Crandall recognizes, his book tackles an issue that continues to be controversial, in no small part because the impact of this earlier U.S. involvement continues to be felt. The transnational problem of gangs and how the United States should treat Central American migrants are hot-button political issues. The Salvador Option was a counterinsurgency and nation-building approach, but its consequences still affect El Salvador and U.S.-Salvadoran relations today.

Review by Kyle Longley, Arizona State University

This past June, I spoke at the State Department about an essay, “An Obsession: The Central American Policy of the Reagan Administration,” that I wrote for a book I co-edited with Brad Coleman, *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security, 1981-1989*.¹

While it covered the entirety of the region during the Reagan presidency including the Sandinistas and contras as well as the bloody genocidal war waged by the Guatemalan military against its own people (primarily the indigenous Mayans), the focus of the talk was El Salvador.

I emphasized the brutal civil war in the smallest of the Central American nations for several reasons. First, many people forget that in the early stages of the Reagan Administration, it was El Salvador, not Nicaragua, that dominated the headlines. It remained a contentious issue in the United States and globally, despite the fact that by the mid-1980s the fighting in Nicaragua eclipsed it.

Also, the lasting legacy of the war remains very much in the headlines today, with El Salvador still dealing with the outcomes, including the rise of the MS-13 and 18th Street Barrio gangs that arose among those fleeing to the United States who returned home and have created a country on the brink of becoming a failed state. The violence has returned to the United States and captured the attention of many, including President Donald Trump.

Thus, Russell Crandall’s extensively researched and well written book, *The Salvadoran Option*, reminds people of the centrality of the Salvadoran Civil War and its long term ramifications, including its use by some U.S. policymakers during the Iraq War as a model for combatting a counterinsurgency.

Few are better positioned to write this book than Crandall, whose other works on guerrilla wars and military interventions include *America’s Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (2014) and *Gunboat Democracy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama* (2006).² His experience within the National Security Council and Department of Defense helped shape his thinking on these matters, and makes a valuable addition to his works such *The Salvadoran Option*.

From the start, he asks some important questions including: “to what degree can the outcome in El Salvador be attributed to American intervention? And what lessons can be learned about the effectiveness and limitations of U.S. interventions in Third World proxy wars during the Cold War?” (2-3)

I will focus in this review on a strength of the book: Crandall does not center his narrative only around the Reagan Administration and pays significant attention to the domestic conditions of El Salvador. While acknowledging the U.S. role (usually by people on the ground in country) as well as other international

¹ Bradley Lynn Coleman and Kyle Longley, eds., *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security, 1981-1989* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2017).

² Russell Crandall, *America’s Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); *Gunboat Democracy: U.S. Interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

factors, he does not lose sight of the importance of understanding El Salvador and the plethora of actors in the country on shaping the outcome of the civil war.

Crandall's methodology begins the process of providing a balanced presentation. Utilizing multiple archives in the United States and El Salvador, he fashions a narrative that clearly underscores the agency of the Salvadorans.

There are many good examples, including ones that emphasize the significance of individuals. For example, Crandall devotes a concise chapter to Archbishop Oscar Romero, who emerged as a leading voice against the brutal repression of the conservative oligarchy. He petitioned the Carter Administration to stop aiding the killing in his country and to recognize all the groups struggling for equality and an end to the brutal terror of the right-wing death squads and their allies in the Salvadoran government.

For these activities, the conservatives murdered him as he performed a mass in March 1980. When mourners took to the streets to honor him, the world watched as people gunned down the marchers on the steps of the National Cathedral. While Romero was not perceived as a revolutionary, his words and deeds and his martyrdom ensured a new stage in the fighting as people grew hopeless in believing the ruling junta would do anything to stop the killing. One future guerrilla leader, Gerson Martínez, noted in 2008 that "this assassination was the consecration of the civil war." (145)

Crandall also shows the other extreme of the conflict with the person responsible for Romero's murder, the extremely violent right-wing leader, Roberto D'Aubuisson. A product of the Salvadoran Military Academy, he became known for his brutality toward any perceived leftist group, working closely with paramilitary groups including the White Warriors Union to intimidate and murder political opponents. He was largely responsible for the mass wave of killings that swept the country as his forces targeted labor union organizers, priests, and many others. By 1984, he became a presidential candidate for the ARENA party.

In this section on death squads and D'Aubuisson, Crandall clearly scrutinizes the importance of the United States in the process, noting that "one recurring question is whether U.S. training was instrumental in turning D'Aubuisson into such a maniacal anti-communist killer." (189) D'Aubuisson received instruction at the School of the Americas and trained with U.S. special forces in Panama and also had strong support among U.S. conservatives led by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC).

But the reality is that D'Aubuisson was a product of a country that would have been violent without the U.S. training and support (although probably not as effective). He and many others remembered the example of *El Mantanza* in 1932 where the Salvadoran elites aligned with General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez massacred 30,000 Salvadorans in six months. To D'Aubuisson and other conservative Salvadorans, this was a model for responding to discontent.

He and others in El Salvador also had watched the massive repression imposed in Guatemala beginning in 1954 and continuing through the 1980s in which hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans perished. D'Aubuisson, along with other Salvadoran elites, scoffed at the United States when the Carter Administration imposed sanctions, looking elsewhere in the region for support, including Argentina.

Emphasizing the domestic and regional roots of the repression does not diminish the fact that the United States played a role in the bloodshed and in training those who perpetuated atrocities such as the Atlacatl

Battalion during the El Mozote Massacre in late 1981. However, Crandall is much better at acknowledging the internal factors than many authors who write on topics related to the unfolding U.S. involvement in the Third World.

And by giving agency to the Salvadorans, Crandall succeeds in showing the complexity of the events. He decenters the United States without removing blame and responsibility for the atrocities and the direction of a brutal civil war. In the end, he notes: “Observers have fallen into the trap of giving Washington all the credit for the things that went well in El Salvador and none of the blame when they were wrong—and vice versa.” (11)

Of course, there are many other examples of the Salvadoran agency that Crandall includes. But in the end, he also covers many different points of view and actions of groups from the United States and El Salvador as well as international ones. And, he does this very well.

That said, the reader is often left wanting to know more as some of the chapters are quite short and topics only developed superficially. Part of this problem is created by the lack of resources due to classification and other challenges of accessibility, but it also arises because of the attempt to cover such a large and complicated subject from many different perspectives.

Thus, as with any good work, Crandall’s book has succeeded in opening up new avenues for research for anyone who is interested. This is a significant contribution in its own right and the fact that readers will want to know more shows a valuable nature of the book that already exceeds 500 pages.

In conclusion, Crandall clearly shows that the Salvadoran case had an immediate as well as long term impact on the region and U.S. policymakers. More work remains on the complex struggles in Central America and Caribbean Basin during the 1970s and 1980s, but this book does a good job, along with others by authors like William Leogrande and Walter LaFeber in re-examining the period from multiple perspectives. It is a most welcome addition to the historiography.³

³ William Leogrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

Author's Response by Russell Crandall, Davidson College

I am grateful to all four reviewers for their constructive commentaries on my book, and to Dustin Walcher for his introduction to the roundtable. As is often the case with any topic of this scale, organization can be a challenge. And I am guilty as charged for some chronological whiplash. As Theresa Keeley and Michelle Getchell note, I did not fully examine the motives of all this multi-sided conflict, especially Moscow and Havana. I did find scores of former Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas and Salvadoran military officers and troops who were often quite eager to talk to me. To be sure, there is still very much to the Salvador Option story. I very much wanted the book to serve as a shot over the bow to get us thinking about the spectrum of interpretations and evidence, especially after scholars (including myself) are no longer personally connected to the history.

One perspective that I had not previously seen addressed was how U.S. policy—and the internal war more broadly—was portrayed (left, right, and center) in the Salvadoran media. The indispensable source for this is the *Cronos* special collection at the archives at the Central American University (UCA) in San Salvador. Future scholars will have to contend with the entire absence of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) documents. I was only able to review a handful of DoD documents given that they remain classified.

Keeley keenly observes that one of my central findings is that, despite its often fiery and counter-productive rhetoric aside, the Reagan administration's Salvador policy was more a sort of 'Carter plus,' not the hardline, pro-oligarchy and death squad line that some U.S. policymakers like Senator Jesse Helms urged. And in this she is correct that my analysis departs from the standing work, William LeoGrande's *Our Own Backyard*.¹ Keeley also correctly states that my analysis departs from LeoGrande's over the question of the Reagan administration's support for a negotiated settlement. I had the enviable benefit of having access to thousands of declassified documents that were entirely unavailable to LeoGrande. Had I uncovered evidence that reinforced LeoGrande's conclusions, I would of course have endorsed them.

Jason Colby cites the fact that the FMLN did not enjoy majority support from the Salvadoran population. This reminds me of several declassified CIA intelligence assessments to Executive Branch policymakers that routinely put the FMLN's civilian support between 8-12 percent throughout the war (440). Whether this estimation is accurate or not, it does underscore the fact one of the greatest underreported stories of the Salvador Option is how this guerrilla juggernaut failed to win the hearts and minds of Salvadorans—a certain requisite for any overthrow of the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government.

In a point Colby raises, I could have explicitly mentioned that *The Massacre at El Mozote* (1994) is an excellent example of a tome with the potential to be used as a parable for the entire U.S. campaign in El Salvador. Again, my decision to omit these sorts of clear examples was based on a perhaps too cautious desire to not overplay the insight.

¹ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).