The United States' Effect on the Salvadoran Civil War and Immigration

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Blanca was born on May 6, 1959, in San Miguel de Mercedes, Chalatenango, a municipality in El Salvador. She was twenty years old when her country, El Salvador, erupted into a deadly civil war in 1979. Like so many other Salvadorans fearing for their lives, she decided to immigrate to the United States in 1981.[1] El Salvador's government had been an oligarchy in which power was shared between fourteen families until the Matanza Revolt of 1932, when a peasant revolt led to a military coup that resulted in over 30,000 deaths and created a government run by corrupt military officials. Survivors of the Matanza Revolt formed insurgent groups that became guerrilla fighters that fought against the government during the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992). As the war in El Salvador raged, so did United States' paranoia about communism, which resulted in a decision to support the military government against the communist guerilla army. Throughout the war, the United States intervened by supplying weapons, ammunition, and training that caused mass destruction throughout the country, which ultimately increased Salvadoran immigration to the U.S. The sources mentioned in this evaluation provide evidence that the United States caused mass immigration by intervening in the Salvadoran Civil War, which forced Blanca and thousands of others to flee the country.

In 1932 General Maximiliano Martinez and his military forces murdered 30,000 Salvadoran civilians to gain governmental power for his military allies. In her article, "Forces that Propelled the Civil War in El Salvador: Peasant Mobilization, the Catholic Church, and United States Intervention," Sarai Kashani gives insight into the violent events that led to the Salvadoran Civil War. Kashani notes El Salvador had struggled with structural inequities since its colonization

[1] Blanca in discussion with the author, 2024.

by Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in 1524.[2] The Civil War led to economic disparities from landownership to misappropriation to Martinez's military attacks on civilians. Violence against peasants, religious officials and working-class individuals caused El Salvador to erupt "into a bloody and calamitous civil war that lasted a total of twelve years."[3] The oppression of and violence towards the civilian population led to the creation of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and caused its leftist factions to wage war against the government forces and escalate the conflict in 1979.

During the Salvadoran Civil War, the FMLN's leftist ideology was seen as a threat to the United States government, which was involved in the Cold War. In "The United States' Involvement in the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran Civil Wars," Emily Tejada touches upon U.S intervention in the war and the destruction that resulted from such decisions. On October 12, 1979, the Salvadoran Air Force staged a coup against General Romero, who had previously overseen the government, and announced their wishes to nationalize banks, conduct land reforms and have stronger state control of export crops; however, the alliance between elites and military personnel caused an escalation of war.[4] The coup against Romero brought the United States into the conflict. The threat to the United States' socio-political system under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan influenced President George H.W. Bush to aim to prevent the spread of communism in Latin America without the deployment of American troops. The growth of the FMLN caused President Carter to allocate several millions of U.S dollars to military assistance to the Salvadoran government and provide the entity with "M16 rifles, ammunition, grenade launchers, Huey

[2] Sarai Kashani, "Forces that Propelled the Civil War in El Salvador: Peasant Mobilization, the Catholic Church, and United States Intervention," *Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences* 17, no. 1 (2020): 120-121.

[3] Kashani, "Forces that Propelled the Civil War in El Salvador," 121.

[4] Emily Tejada, "The United States' Involvement in the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran Civil Wars" (master's thesis, Southern New Hampshire University, 2023), 36.

helicopters and teams of military advisors."[5] Tejada states that the weaponry received from the United States led to the deaths and disappearances of over 75,000 people. When asked about the carnage she observed in the pueblos she enjoyed visiting as a child, Blanca recalled that those pueblos had transformed into war zones where women became targets for sexual assault and men became targets for kidnapping and forced enlistments from both warring sides.[6] At the start of the Civil War, the Salvadoran military had close to 10,000 troops; despite the ongoing destruction, the United States helped this number of troops grow to 60,000 by the end of the war.[7] Over half the soldiers were under the age of eighteen.

One morning in October 1980, Blanca was on a bus to work when a bomb detonated in a bank as it was driving past, causing the bus to lose control and crash into oncoming traffic. The incident she experienced was one of countless acts of violence that drove thousands of Salvadorans to seek refuge by immigrating to the United States. Molly Todd's book, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War*, shows the hardship Salvadorans faced while traveling to the United States. In 1979, the U.S. government supported the Salvadoran Armed Forces, which adopted a war strategy known as *tierra arrasada* (scorched earth) to use against the FMLN, and the destructive strategy gave many no other option than to escape.[8] In 1981, Blanca took many different buses and trains to cross the Central American borders before being captured by U.S. Border Patrol in the Mexican desert before crossing into the United States. Traversing such a desert path to the U.S. was a grueling feat; when asked about the experience, Blanca stated the desert was a "scorching wasteland with many hills and nowhere to

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[5] Tejada, "The United States' Involvement in the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran," 36.
[6] Blanca in discussion with the author.
[7] Tejada, "The United States' Involvement in the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran," 37.
[8] Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 3-4.

hide,"[9] which made crossing even riskier and more dangerous. Blanca was fortunate enough to succeed in immigrating to the United States eight months later, an opportunity many others did not have. In 1982, 180,000 Salvadorans escaped from their country, and two years later, the number rose to 750,000. Many publications, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) magazine called *Refugee's*, showed wrenching images of "barefoot women and children wending up unpaved roads."[10] The mass exodus of the citizens of El Salvador resulted in the displacement of two-fifths of the population across Central America and in the United States.

In 1981, as an increasing number of desperate Salvadorans took refuge outside the United States border, the UNHCR and other human rights organizations pressured the United States to grant Salvadoran refugees extended voluntary departure but were ultimately denied. The U.S. government argued Americans had no obligation to grant Salvadorans or any other Central American refugees asylum since they claimed they evacuated over unwarranted fear from political struggles between political the right and left.[11] However, there was evidence that implicated the U.S.-funded right-wing government with the direct deaths of Salvadorans. In May 1987, Congress legalized amnesty provisions that granted legalization to undocumented Central American immigrants who entered the country prior to 1981.[12] The provision allowed Blanca and thousands of other Central Americans to gain their United States citizenship. Blanca recalls the feeling of finally becoming considered a part of U.S. society, stating, "I was ecstatic that after years of suffering and constant danger I could finally live the American Dream."[13] For the first time since the beginning of U.S. involvement in the war, Blanca had an opportunity to start a new life as an

[9] Blanca in discussion with the author.
[10] Todd, *Beyond Displacement,* 4.
[11] Carlos B. Cordova, *The Salvadoran Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 36.
[12] Cordova, *The Salvadoran Americans*, 45.
[13] Blanca in discussion with the author.

American citizen. However, as more Salvadorans and other Latin American refugees gained U.S citizenship, xenophobic Americans began to fear a "Brown Invasion." The influx of Latin Americans threatened xenophobes, which resulted in the introduction of Proposition 187 in 1994 that targeted immigrants. *The Salvadoran Americans* by Carlos Cordova notes the effects the proposition had on the assimilation of Latinos entering the country. The impact of Prop 187 was instantly felt throughout Latino communities as the law gave school districts the power to verify the citizenships of pupils and their parents and restricted social services that were traditionally available to immigrants.[14] Xenophobia and the immigration hysteria caused Latinos to test their newly acquired rights and "organize a series of extremely effective citizenship drives"; between 1994 and 2002, nearly 157,000 Salvadorans became U.S. citizens.[15] Empowered Salvadorans such as Blanca strengthened American democracy by participating in electoral campaigns at local, state and national levels of government to fight against xenophobic legislation. Although Prop 187 was later deemed unconstitutional, it forced Salvadorans to advocate for all Latin Americans and encourage them to protect their future in the U.S.

In conclusion, the United States effected the immigration of Salvadorans by funding the Salvadoran government during their war against the FMLN. The intervention caused an exodus of Salvadoran immigrants from the country. The onslaught of violence and the *tierra arrasada* strategy caused the death of many civilians, forcing them to risk their lives to immigrate to the United States. Although faced with tremendous odds, Blanca and many other Salvadorans made the journey to become United States citizens and make an impact on U.S. society. Their legacies and struggles still echo through generations.

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[14] Cordova, *The Salvadoran Americans*, 51.
[15] Cordova, *The Salvadoran Americans*, 51-52.