

## Obama in El Salvador

Written by Belén Fernández  
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As part of his visit to El Salvador yesterday, the last stop on a [Latin American excursion](#) occurring despite events in Japan and Libya, Barack Obama [visited the tomb](#) of Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, assassinated on March 24, 1980.

Observers [have noted](#) that the current bombing of Libya began on the same date as the start of the Iraq war eight years ago. Coincidentally, Obama's appearance in El Salvador occurs exactly nine years after George W. Bush's. As the BBC's [Tom Gibb](#) [wrote](#) at the time:

"There is a tremendous irony that President George W Bush has chosen to visit El Salvador on the anniversary of the murder of the country's Archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, 22 years ago.

A campaigner against the Salvadorean army's death squad war, Monsignor Romero was shot through the heart while saying Mass, shortly after appealing to the US not to send military aid to El Salvador.

The appeal fell on deaf ears and for the next 12 years, the US became involved in its largest counter-insurgency war against left-wing guerrillas since Vietnam....

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To defeat the rebels, the US equipped and trained an army which kidnapped and disappeared more than 30,000 people, and carried out large-scale massacres of thousands of old people women and children."

Regarding yesterday's visit by Obama, [SOA Watch](#) writes:

"Oscar Romero's assassins were members of Salvadoran death squads, including two graduates of the [School of the Americas](#). The 1993 United Nations Truth Commission report on El Salvador identified SOA graduate Major [Robert o D'Aubuisson](#)

as the man who ordered the assassination. While we welcome President Obama's interest in visiting Archbishop Romero's tomb, a more fitting tribute to Romero's legacy would be the closure of the school that trained his murderers.

**President Obama's gesture rings hollow in the face of the continued U.S. support for repressive regimes such as Honduras that further U.S. interests and in the face of the continued funding for the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation [current incarnation of the School of the Americas], the U.S. military training facility that has left a trail of blood and suffering throughout the Americas."**

Honduras, which also boasts a concentration of SOA alumni—including General [Romeo Vásquez Velásquez](#)

, perpetrator of the 2009 coup against President Mel Zelaya—just last week witnessed the killing of 59-year-old assistant principal

[Ilse Velásquez](#)

, who was run over after being hit by a tear gas canister fired by the police at a peaceful protest in Tegucigalpa.

Her brother Manfredo Velásquez was disappeared in the 1980s during Honduras' service as preferred U.S. military base. As Stephen Kinzer writes in [The New York Review of Books](#) :

"American military engineers built bases, airstrips, and supply depots at key spots around the country. American troops poured in for saber-rattling maneuvers whose main purpose was to intimidate the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. American intelligence agents trained Hondurans in techniques of surveillance and interrogation. Between 1980 and 1984, United

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States military aid to Honduras increased from \$4 million to \$77 million."

Kinzer [goes on](#) to note the thoughts of Honduran SOA trainee General Gustavo Álvarez Martínez on how to properly deal with Marxist subversives, "their sympathizers, and outspoken leaders of labor, peasant, and student organizations":

"American documents show that General Álvarez, who was chief of the Honduran security police and then the country's top military commander, favored the simple expedient of murder. Among the special units he created to carry out this policy was Battalion 3-16 (or 316), which has become the most infamous military unit in Honduran history. According to a heavily edited version of a CIA report that was released in 1998, Brigade 3-16 emerged as an independent entity 'based on recommendations from the "Strategic Military Seminar" between the Honduran and the US military.\* Some of its members were flown to the United States for training by CIA specialists."

Especially given the [resurgence of right-wing death squads and paramilitaries](#) in Honduras in the aftermath of the 2009 coup, Central American citizens may be forgiven for being less than enthused by Obama's promise yesterday to [provide more training for security forces in the region](#)

*\* "The 316th MI Battalion," secret CIA cable dated February 18, 1995, declassified October 22, 1998, as Document H4-4, approved for release September 1998.*