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Obama at Romero's grave: 'Missed opportunity'

by Linda Cooper by James Hodge



U.S. President Barack Obama stands with San Salvadoran Archbishop Jose Escobar Alas, a translator, and El Salvador's President Mauricio Funes beside the tomb of Archbishop Romero, who was shot dead by a hit squad while celebrating Mass in the capital March 24, 1980.(CNS photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)

President Obama's visit to the gravesite of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero Tuesday has been described as "one of the most symbolic stops" and "the most dramatic gesture" of his five-day Latin American trip.

Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes, who lit candles with Obama at the tomb inside the San Salvador Cathedral, praised his American counterpart for honoring Romero, whose public denunciations of the Salvadoran military resulted in his assassination on March 24, 1980.

The mainstream U.S. media almost universally characterized the visit as a tribute to the prelate, while current Salvadoran Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar, who accompanied Obama at the request of the U.S.

Embassy, called it "a global event," not a political stunt.

But for Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, the visit was at best a missed opportunity. His organization, SOA Watch, revealed that Romero's killers were trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas, now named the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC).

"I and many other human rights activists were hopeful," he said, that Obama would acknowledge "that Romero and thousands of others were killed, tortured and disappeared by graduates of this school."

The 1993 U.N. Truth Commission Report on El Salvador found that the U.S.-armed and trained Salvadoran military had killed tens of thousands of civilians in a systematic attempt to eliminate its political opponents. Forty-seven of the sixty-six officers cited for major atrocities were SOA graduates, including the killers of four U.S. churchwomen, six Jesuit priests and hundreds of civilians, mostly women and children, at the village of El Mozote.

Obama's visit "could have been a historic moment," Bourgeois said, one similar to former President Clinton's rare apology for the US role in the training and arming of Guatemalan security forces that slaughtered more than 200,000 civilians.

"Obama didn't even acknowledge, let alone apologize for, the U.S. role in El Salvador," Bourgeois said.

Before arriving in El Salvador, Obama visited Chile where he declined a request to apologize for the US-backed coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power. A U.S. Senate committee long ago confirmed that the CIA had orchestrated the coup, and SOA records show that hundreds of Chilean officers went through the school in the 24 months prior to the 1973 coup.

Obama refused to offer an apology despite the fact that he told Chileans that a necessary ingredient to create a democracy is "accountability for past wrongs."

That quote baffled Bourgeois as much as another by Robert White, the U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador at the time of the US churchwomen's murders. White called Obama's visit to Romero's tomb "a declaration that the United States is no longer identified with oligarchic governments."

As much as he would like to believe that, Bourgeois said the facts speak otherwise.

Indeed, in the summer of 2009, Obama stood by and watched as the Honduran military overthrew the democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya, the first successful military coup in Latin America in the 21st Century.

While Obama denounced the coup as illegal, his administration permitted Honduran officers to continue to train at SOA/WHINSEC -- despite the fact that the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act requires that U.S. training be suspended when a country undergoes a military coup.

The general who overthrew Zelaya -- Romeo Orlando Vásquez Velásquez -- and several of his accomplices -- were graduates of SOA, nicknamed by its critics as the school of coups.

Obama's visit to Romero's tomb did manage to ruffle the feathers of the Salvadoran right. Mario Valiente, a former member of the rightwing ARENA party, told the newspaper *El Mundo* that "half of Salvadorans do not believe Romero is worthy of sanctification" and that Obama "should also go to the grave of Major Roberto d'Aubuisson."

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D'Aubuisson, an SOA grad, was cited by the UN Truth Commission as the officer who ordered Romero's assassination.

The conservative Fox News agency suggested one reason Obama was inclined to visit El Salvador and its left-leaning president. Obama, it said, needs a partner in the region, and forming an alliance with the pragmatic Funes would isolate Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and diminish his influence in Latin America.

Whatever Obama's reasons, Bourgeois hopes his visit will make him more inclined to close the military training facility. SOA Watch has planned a mass rally in front of the White House April 10 to call on Obama to shut down the school by executive order.

"Archbishop Romero said those with a voice should use it," Bourgeois said. "Obama has a powerful voice," and if he wasn't trying to capitalize on Romero's international prominence, there would be no better way to show it "than to close the school that trained his killers."

[Cooper and Hodge are the authors of *Disturbing the Peace: The Story of Father Roy Bourgeois and the Movement to Close the School of the Americas.*]

VIEWPOINT

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador -- President Obama and his family spent a packed overnight March 22-23 here and took the place by storm. Reactions in this polarized society couldn't help but be mixed, but many were positive.

Obama surprised and pleased most people by his historic visit to the tomb of Archbishop Romero, the 31st anniversary of whose martyrdom we celebrate today.

Obama arrived under two clouds.

His administration had been decisively instrumental in allowing an illegal coup to stand in Honduras a year-and-a-half ago and for the elections organized by the coup-masters to go unchallenged. And, of course, he arrived as U.S. cruise missiles were raining down on one more Arab country. While Salvadorans know tyranny of the Gaddafi stripe, they are also very sensitive to war.

Many probably sensed that Obama, like Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes, has mounted a horse he cannot fully control. He said as much when asked about helping "legalize" undocumented Salvadoran immigrants in the United States: The U.S. Congress is tying his hands. (Few drew attention to the 50-odd immigrants that the U.S. has been deporting by air to El Salvador each day for the last three years.)

The most dramatic moment of Obama's stay was his visit to Romero's tomb in the cathedral crypt. He listened to the current archbishop, José Luis Escobar, in silence, then closed his eyes, ostensibly in prayer. Before leaving the cathedral, the protestant president lit a candle at the rack near Romero's tomb.

The press, dominated by the right, spilled barrels of ink about Romero, about his life and ministry. (The main media had air-brushed Romero from Salvadoran history until 1999 when the Anglican Church mounted his statue, along with seven other martyrs, on the façade of Westminster Abbey.)

Now there was the scramble to insist that the memory of this great spiritual leader be "de-politicized." One columnist felt the need to point out how he had denounced the Jesuits in 1973 (four years before becoming archbishop) for spreading "red" literature. Nowhere, among all the bloviation, was it breathed who had actually killed Romero: the founder of the main right-wing party which governed from 1989 to 2009.

Obama's visit says something about Romero, increasingly a man for all seasons and for all peoples. Jesus said, "If I am lifted up, I will draw all to myself." In Romero we see what that means.

His courageous defense of the poor, in the name of the gospel and unto death, is drawing everyone to him. The beauty of his life, his preaching and his self-gift, seduces. This is the way forward for all of us, especially, of course, for the Church.

Obama's visit also says something about the president. Surely, it burnishes his image, but give him credit. Even as he exercises U.S. power, with its militarism and imperial sway, he detours to acknowledge a champion of the poor and a martyr for the truth.

I imagine the president saying to himself, "Even if I'm not quite there, I want to acknowledge this greatness." Last year, recalling Romero, the U.N. General Assembly declared the anniversary of his death, March 24, the International Day of the Right to the Truth, especially for victims of human rights abuses.

The Obama Administration recognizes that it can collaborate with the Funes Administration, unlike more corrupt counterparts in neighboring countries, in the fight against narco-trafficking and the street crime and endemic poverty killing thousands and fueling massive emigration.

There is a convergence of interests between the U.S. government, on one hand, and, on the other, the FMLN, the party of the former guerrillas who brought Funes to power in an alliance with business groups fed up with the corruption of right-wing parties with personnel on the take with the cartels.

On this visit Obama announced funding of \$200 million for combating crime in the region. Guns and crime control open government spigots. But in June there will be more credit ready to flow for local development.

This will go mostly to the usual subjects for the usual kinds of projects, that is, to the construction companies (of course, through the banks) for expanding the airport, for a port, for highway and other infrastructure development.

Apparently a smaller component will go to re-activating agriculture and to medium and small enterprises. It's not how you and I would do it, but that is how politics works, both here and there.

This credit will steeply increase the already inflated Salvadoran national debt, making us still more dependent on the U.S. Whatever the intention, this Obama-hug will hold us close.

If a future FMLN government wishes to turn south and ally more closely with the social-democratic left in South America, if it wishes to trade broadly with China, it will have to think twice. Re-negotiating these big debts will come with thick strings attached.

Rumors are even floating that the government of Afghanistan may invite El Salvador to send troops there. San Romero, pray for us.

I confess: I was hoping, unrealistically, that before Romero's tomb Obama would silently ask pardon for

all that U.S. governments have done this past century to sustain privileged oligarchies and their militaries in Central America.

Shortly before his death, Archbishop Romero wrote to President Jimmy Carter begging him in no uncertain terms not to send military aid to the Salvadoran government that was murdering hundreds of civilians each month.

I am left wondering, What kind of letter would Romero write to President Obama today?

[Jesuit Fr. Dean Brackley has been at the University of Central America in San Salvador since 1990, when he volunteered with others to help replace members of the faculty killed during the Salvadoran civil war.]

For more coverage of Obama's trip to Romero's grave, see:

- Obama at Romero's grave: 'Missed opportunity'
- Obama's visit to the land of Romero leaves behind questions
- What would Oscar Romero say to Barack Obama?

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