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Why I'm going to the SOA protest

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Each year around Nov. 16, nearly 20,000 people gather at Fort Benning, Ga., outside the gates of the notorious "School of Americas." The school has trained some 64,000 Central and South Americans, many of whom have gone on to commit murder and torture as members of Latin American death squads -- a sinister distinction that has earned the place the more infamous title, the "School of Assassins." The yearly protests are by now as rooted as the Georgia pines and have the Pentagon on the defensive. The Pentagon's first official response was a PR move. A name change came down. They now call the place "The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation."

The name has changed, but nothing else. The place still trains the aristocracy's thugs to brutalize the campesinos. There soldiers enroll in such courses as Counterinsurgency, Psychological Warfare, Military Intelligence and Interrogation Tactics. There soldiers study how to target Latin American educators, union organizers, catechists, student leaders, human rights workers, priests and nuns.

We train Latin American soldiers how to arrest, torture and behead. They learn how to stealthily assassinate a solitary target and massacre dozens in a village. To learn the art of killing, the SOA is the place to go.

I've gone four times already and was arrested with thousands of others in 1998 and 1999. But why go again? What good comes of it? I'm going for several reasons.

"Every known terrorist training camp must be shut down," said George W. Bush. I'm going to demand just that. Let the SOA be the first one to close. Immoral, inhuman, illegal, demonic -- this terrorist school

has no right to exist. It's part and parcel of the web of lies, murder and massacres that the U.S. inflicts in Iraq every day. The SOA brings no democracy to our sisters and brothers in Latin America. It brings only death. A truly democratic institution would ensure the well-being of every adult and child through only nonviolent methods. A school promoting democracy would teach nonviolence and proudly embrace the name "Institute of Nonviolent Cooperation."

I'm going because some months ago I visited Colombia, where I witnessed the sinister fruits of the SOA. There I met Jesuits who suffer under daily death threats because they publicly work for human rights. There I met hundreds of mountain villagers who survived the massacre of their villages -- and their loved ones. Their blood stains the hands of death squads, soldiers and paramilitaries -- trained by the U.S. at the SOA.

There I saw the Bush administration's commitment to steal Colombia's natural resources. Both the stealing and the cost in deaths bear lightly on his conscience. Over the last 20 years, some 200,000 Colombians have been killed. Thirty political assassinations a day take place -- an astounding figure that leaps from the statistics file into my heart. The lurking assassins were inspired by the Pentagon, funded by the Congress, and trained in Georgia.

I'm going to the SOA protest because it's one of the best organized and more hopeful events in the church and the country. And it's one of the best examples of active nonviolence in our history. Plus it is beautiful and urgent liturgy. Its founder, my friend Fr. Roy Bourgeois, and his team, took the movement directly to South America this year and convinced the governments of Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia not to send their troops to Georgia. And pressure grows in Congress for legislation that will put the SOA out of business.

I'm going to the SOA protest because Jesus himself was a victim of arrest, imprisonment and torture. And he died at the hands of imperial death squads. As one trying to be his follower, I want to side with him as he sides with the victims of the U.S empire around the world -- from El Salvador to Colombia to Iraq.

And I go to the SOA protest because I'm haunted by Ignacio Ellacuria and the other Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador. I worked with them for several months in 1985, four years before they were assassinated. They sent me and a few other young U.S. Jesuits to work in harassed refugee camps. Death squads lurked about, and on the occasions they approached, I went out to greet them. There was a rationale behind the plan. Perhaps the conspicuous presence of a North American would avert violence.

And so when they appeared, I hauled my trembling bones to the gate, all the while U.S. aircraft crisscrossed the sky and unleashed bombs in the near distance. Through my fear, I managed to learn a thing or two about faith, hope and love. It was the suffering people, and most of all the steadfast Jesuits who taught me best.

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Fr. Ellacuria, a renowned theologian, philosopher, and university president, said: "The purpose of UCA, (the Jesuit university in El Salvador) is to promote the reign of God. But we have learned that if you wanted to promote the reign of God, you have to stand up publicly, actively, against the anti-reign. You can no longer say you are for peace and justice unless you publicly, actively stand up against war and injustice. You can no longer claim to pursue the good, unless you are publicly, actively resisting systemic, institutionalized, structured evil."

His insight profoundly moved me. It sounded like a new morality for a new millennium. Turns out it's what Gandhi had taught decades earlier: "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good."

And they held on to it come what may. On Nov. 16, 1989, in the middle of the night, 28 soldiers -- 19 of them trained at the SOA -- burst in upon the Jesuits, shot up their house and forced them outside. They laid them on the ground and shot them dead. Then they removed their brains. It was "to send a message," said Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit who survived by virtue of his being in Thailand. "It was to say to all of Latin America -- 'This is what you get if you think about reality.' "

The Jesuits' steadfast spirit, fearless determination, and strong faith still inspire me. I think of them every day. And so I go to the SOA to carry on their great work, to think about reality, to name the destruction of the poor carried by our nation. I go gratefully on this anniversary of their murders. Come Nov. 17-19, it's the only place to be.

And I urge you. If you're anguished over our sisters and brothers in Latin America, and with America's pursuit of torture and death, then on Nov. 17 come. If you're concerned about murder and war upholding "our way of life" and enlivened by the Gospel's call to be peacemakers, join the protest.

Come and remember the martyrs. Campaign to close our national terrorist training camp. You'll be hastening the advent of a world without war or injustice. You'll learn anew what it means to follow Jesus. And you'll be greatly blessed.

See you there.

Editor's Note: Fr. Dear will speak Friday, Nov. 17, at 7 p.m. at the Pax Christi gathering during the SOA weekend. His topic will be "Colombia."

John Dear is a nationally known peacemaker, Jesuit priest and author, most recently, of *You Will Be My Witnesses*. For more info, see: www.fatherjohndear.org. For info on the School of Americas, see: www.soawatch.org or order a copy of the book *School of Assassins: Guns, Greed and Globalization* by Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, (Orbis, 2001).

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