

The Director of Central Intelligence  
Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

13 April 1984

NOTE FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer, Vice Chairman  
National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT: Potential Trouble in El Salvador

1. The attached paper was written by Harry Cochran at my request. Its key judgment: There is at least a 50 percent chance of a coup in El Salvador either before the May 6 runoff or in the three to six months after the election. This contingency arises from the fears of rightist military officers and their civil allies that a Duarte victory will bring to power a Christian Democratic-dominated government that will attempt to remove them from their commands and open a dialogue with non-Communist elements in the Democratic Revolutionary Front.

2. It seems to me that the chances for this sort of development would increase should the US be forced to distance itself from the Contras in Nicaragua. That is, the rightists in El Salvador would be under increased pressure to preempt the moderates should they fear that the US might also withdraw from El Salvador, leaving that country to its own resources.

*HEM*

Herbert E. Meyer

Attachment



SECRET



25X11

SUBJECT: Potential Trouble in El Salvador (NIC 02322-84)

VC/NIC:HM:lm (13 Apr 84)

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13 April 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Vice Chairman, NIC  
FROM : Special Assistant for Warning  
SUBJECT : Imminent Tests for US Policy in Central America

1. Events surrounding the runoff election in El Salvador on 6 May are likely to mark a major turning point in the protracted crisis. The past two years under interim President Alvaro Magana have been essentially a holding operation, and this period of political-military stalemate is now coming to an end. The Administration's policy faces severe tests in the next few months regardless of whether Duarte or D'Aubuisson wins the runoff.

2. There is at least a 50 percent chance of a domestic upheaval in El Salvador either before the runoff or in the three to six months after the election. This contingency arises from the fears of rightist military officers and their civilian allies that a Duarte victory will bring a Christian Democratic-dominated government to power that will attempt to remove them from their commands and open a dialogue with non-Communist elements in the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR). Duarte has predicted that he will win a 61 percent majority in the runoff. He will have a strong advantage over D'Aubuisson in this test of strength. Duarte probably will secure a majority of National Conciliation Party votes, and he will draw a greater majority in San Salvador than he won in the first round on 25 March. The capital city has long been a Christian Democratic stronghold that accounts for 30 percent of the national vote.

3. In view of this prospect of a decisive Christian Democratic victory, the crucial question is whether D'Aubuisson and his supporters will attempt to forestall a national mandate for Duarte or whether they will accept an electoral defeat and

then exert their formidable influence to prevent Duarte from taking actions to curtail their power and privileges. Rightist moves to derail the runoff and install an undisguised military regime cannot be ruled out. It seems more likely, however, that D'Aubuisson and company, aware that provocative moves would generate a backlash in the US Congress, will allow the runoff to proceed. In the meantime, they will concentrate on positioning themselves to shackle Duarte's capacity to pursue the aims he outlined in his election campaign this spring.

4. The Administration's statements hailing the 25 March elections as a success for Salvadoran democracy should not be allowed to obscure the reality that the ultra-rightists' position has been greatly strengthened in the past year since Defense Minister Garcia was replaced by General Vides Casanov and Colonel Nicolas Carranza was appointed head of the Treasury Police--a force which in effect functions as the praetorian guard of D'Aubuisson and his party. After Vides Casanova took over the defense ministry, rightist officers were appointed to key posts in the general staff and provincial commands. This aggrandizement of rightist power in 1983 represented a resumption of the process that had begun in the summer of 1980, when the rightists removed some moderate officers from their commands and assassinated others.

5. This pervasive reality of preponderant rightist power almost certainly will be demonstrated again if a victorious Duarte and a Christian Democratic government attempt to act on the agenda set forth during the election campaign. Duarte made it clear that he intends to pursue an opening to the left by means of a "national dialogue." His political strategy will be aimed at isolating and neutralizing extremists on both the left and the right. He has expressed readiness to arrange "a social pact open to all factions and sectors that believe in democracy." He has also indicated a willingness "to discuss their participation...not only in my government but in all institutions." Duarte, however, specifically excluded

D'Aubuisson's ARENA party and pledged to "work against" the "structure that has been created for these death squads." He acknowledged that the "structure" might attempt to destabilize his government, but he bluntly declared, "We will eliminate all the direct and indirect (support for the death squads)."

6. Duarte's prescription for a political solution to the civil war relies primarily on his belief that a "national dialogue" will not only split the non-Communists from the Marxists who lead the FMLN but divide moderate officers in the Armed Forces from the ultra-rightists. He hopes that many people who turned their backs on the political system and joined the FMLN can be drawn back into the system. Many of the leaders of the FDR, the political arm of the FMLN, were once proteges of Duarte and Julio Adolfo Rey Prendes, secretary-general of the Christian Democratic Party. Prendes has described Guillermo Ungo, president of the FDR, as a "man who believes very deeply in democracy." Prendes has also expressed hope that "if we can build a legitimate democratic government, Ungo and those around him can come back into the country to participate." Eduardo Molina, another Christian Democratic leader, views the FDR as an ally, not an enemy, in the struggle to block the Marxist guerrillas and the ultra-rightists from achieving total control of the government. He contends that, "If we continue to attempt to resolve the conflict militarily, we will lose. Only a dialogue and eventual incorporation of democratic elements of the left into our ranks offer any exist for us now."

7. The Christian Democrats plan sweeping reforms that will be viewed by the rightists as a direct threat to their power. They intend to revive the land redistribution program that they introduced in 1980 and to establish an independent judicial system. They have also promised to put the security forces under the control of a civilian attorney general and to disband the intelligence and

investigative branches of the National Police.

8. If an elected Christian Democratic government under Duarte actually proceeds with the reformist program and the "national dialogue" to which they are publicly committed, a showdown with D'Aubuisson's rightists will be inevitable. The Administration will then face a choice between acquiescing in the program of a democratically elected Salvadoran government or lending tacit support for ultra-rightist moves to overthrow this government.

9. There is virtually no chance that the dominant rightists in the Armed Forces will allow the Christian Democrats to embark on their program of political reform and national dialogue. Under the leadership of Vides Casanove the Armed Forces have positioned themselves for swift and decisive intervention. In early March, they announced that members of the Armed Forces would not vote in the presidential elections despite their constitutional right to do so. This ostensible political neutrality is designed, at a minimum, to place the high command in a stronger position to bargain with the new president. But it is also calculated to enable them to overthrow Duarte before or after his inauguration, using the pretext that the Armed Forces' obligation to defend the nation from the Communist threat takes precedence over any partisan interest in D'Aubuisson's candidacy.

10. Provisional President Magana is gravely concerned about the devastating consequences of a showdown between a Christian Democratic government and the ultra-rightists in the Armed Forces. In an interview on 21 March, he predicted hopefully that either Duarte or D'Aubuisson would be obliged to pursue moderate policies because of the limitations imposed by the national legislature and the Armed Forces. Magana disputed suggestions by Salvadoran politicians and some US officials that the election of either Duarte or D'Aubuisson would polarize the country. He argued that the Armed Forces "as a whole" are unlikely to stage a coup, "at least for a year," assuming that the new president does not try to wrench

the country in one direction or another politically. But Magana warned that if a Duarte or D'Aubuisson government attempts radical departures from his (Magana's) middle-of-the-road policies, "sooner or later the Army would be against them."

### Nicaragua

11. An internal upheaval in El Salvador precipitated by a rightist move against an elected Christian Democratic government may coincide with a crisis in the Administration's Nicaraguan policy triggered by the FDN contras' defiance of a Congressionally-mandated disengagement from the FDN. FDN leaders are capable of taking extreme measures to block any moves by the US to withdraw support, including provocative attempts to create a situation that will lock the US into continuing funding and other assistance.

12. Policy toward Nicaragua may also be threatened by changes in Honduras' willingness to cooperate with the US against the Sandinistas and the FMLN following the ouster of General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez. Although his removal has been portrayed by President Roberto Suazo Cordova as an exclusively domestic issue that will have no effect on Honduran foreign policy, events may prove that the real issue was growing concern in the armed forces' Supreme Council that Alvarez might embroil Honduras in an unwanted and potentially disastrous war with Nicaragua. Alvarez's close alliance with the US has offended Honduran nationalism and stimulated anti-American sentiment among students, labor leaders, and opposition politicians. Although Alvarez's successor, Gen. Walter Lopez, is known as an advocate of military cooperation with the US, some Honduran officials have suggested that Lopez may be less cooperative in allowing Honduran territory to be used to train Salvadoran troops.

13. It cannot be excluded that President Suazo, in an effort to contain the political polarization and potential instability caused by Alvarez's policies, will

move toward talks with the Sandinistas in the next 6 to 12 months. Internal repression had increased in the last two years as Alvarez embarked on what his aides described as "a preventive war" against the left. This trend alarmed Honduran Catholic bishops, who issued a pastoral letter in October 1982 that declared, "One can easily perceive a clear disenchantment in many sectors of the population that went to the polls (in 1981) with so much hope. There is a general feeling of greater fear and of less freedom."