Forgotten Opposition: Cal Poly Reactions to American Imperialism in the 1980s

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By

Cooper Lock

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Abstract

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The Reagan Administration employed aggressive rhetoric in combating the supposed spread of communism in Latin America during the 1980s. The El Salvador ruling party’s fight against the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front became a hotspot for United States foreign aid and involvement. Extensive amounts of money poured into the region, inciting equally extensive disapproval and distrust from the American people. The reactions to these events at a national level have been extensively covered, whereas university students’ have been left relatively in the dark. This paper analyzes Cal Poly reactions and responses to United States foreign policy throughout the decade. Students and faculty did not remain within the bounds of the modern status quo, which would deem the school and its students as political conservatives; nor did they remain on the sideline in opposing American Imperialism in Latin America.

Introduction

“El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam.” While this phrase is far from true in the literal sense, it was not uncommon to come across in the latter quarter of the 20th century. It made reference to the United States involvement in the El Salvadoran Civil War; equating the funds pouring into the small Central American country to the Vietnam war. Initially, it may seem like an exaggeration, but in the words of Greg Grandin, “El Salvador became Washington’s most ambitious nation-building project since South Vietnam.” It would be unreasonable to imagine

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that such an “ambitious project” would pass without yielding a litany of responses across the United States.

The United States began projecting power upon the continental siblings to our south soon after our fruition as a new nation. In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed that the Western Hemisphere was to be free from European affairs, and ever since that first quarter of the 19th century the United States has become increasingly intertwined with its American neighbors. In 1945 the Cold War went into full effect; the world became an ideological battleground between the new global superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States. Countless actions were taken by these two entities, both equally attempting to subdue the proliferation of the other’s political philosophy. The latter quarter of the 20th century saw these actions manifested - for the United States - frequently in the nations of Latin America. The newly-formed CIA first got its feet wet in the nations of Central America and the State Department only escalated this involvement as the century continued onward. Covert involvement rarely seems to stay that way, and that was the case for United States policy in Latin America, stirring up an agglomeration of reactions. The public response of the American people in general has been extensively examined; however, the response of Cal Poly students, faculty, and administration to these events has not.

**Historiography**

The United States’ involvement in Latin America has been extensively recorded for a slew of events that were initially labelled top secret. However, analysis of these events’ connection back to Cal Poly has experienced a notable deficit. Greg Grandin writes in his book

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Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of New Imperialism about the relationship between the Americas. Grandin makes an argument that the United States has utilized Central and South America exactly as the title suggests, as a workshop to sculpt its imperial strategy. He makes multiple points showing how the United States’ experiences in Latin America helped prepare for later conflicts, or more importantly, helped resculpt new strategies if they fell short in another theater, such as in Vietnam. Another important secondary source for this topic is Micheal Desch’s book, When the Third World Matters: Latin America and United States Grand Strategy which argues that the United States has used Third World countries as proxies to indirectly take action against opposing world powers. Desch also makes the point that these countries have been used as distractions to divert foreign entities’ attention.

Aiming now at Cal Poly connections, Jennifer Freilach argues in her article “Cal Poly: Liberal, Not Radical” that, despite the modern view that this is a conservative campus, the school has had a past of taking a liberal stance on geopolitical events, more comparable to that of the better known examples at UC Berkeley and UCSB. The difference, as highlighted by Freilach, is that Cal Poly did not engage in radical protests like the mentioned contemporaries, but rather, opted to use more passive tactics. Alex Butruce writes in his paper “Cal Poly Activism: The Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant” about the history of Cal Poly student protests against the construction of the local nuclear power plant. Butruce argues that student activism found its base...

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4 Greg Grandin, Empire's Workshop.
5 Micheal Desch, When the Third World matters: Latin America and United States Grand Strategy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
in the initial opposition brought by the Cal Poly faculty and they operated hand-in-hand as the movement picked up steam.\textsuperscript{8}

This paper will take the path left untraversed by previous writers: Cal Poly’s connection and reactions to American imperialist actions in Latin America during the 1980s. As was similarly argued by Freilach, the physicality of these reactions remained disciplined, however the stances towards this conflict were more intellectually radical, in many cases. While this paper will focus on El Salvador during the Reagan administration, the themes of opposition showed throughout the various events of the decade. My work will argue that Cal Poly students and faculty took a liberal stance in opposing United States involvement in Latin America despite the normally conservative image of the school.

\textbf{Student Reactions}

The student body of Cal Poly was far from silent about the events occurring between the United States and Latin America. The student run newspaper \textit{Mustang Daily} provided a valuable vantage point into the campus’ political atmosphere during the 1980s. The modern consensus of Cal Poly is one shaped by an expectation for conversative viewpoints being the norm.\textsuperscript{9} However, through analyzing student sources, it is clear that the students of this era drifted far from their stereotypical shackles.

In November of 1981, Cal Poly hosted Mauricio Duarte, who was sponsored by the Central American Study and Solidarity Association (CASAS) a student organization on campus.


\textsuperscript{9} Freilach, “Cal Poly: Liberal, Not Radical,” 18.
Duarte was a medical student from El Salvador before government forces closed his school the year prior.¹⁰ The talk explained the situation in El Salvador in a clear pro-rebel leaning through Duarte’s interpreter, Dennis Lazoff, a member of CASAS. The speaker stated that “the entire country is under our political control,” and all that was left was to secure the country from the government’s military.¹¹ Condemnation of the Salvadoran government’s stalling of the majority’s desire for a Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) victory fell upon the Reagan administration, which had been giving considerable amounts of foreign aid to the small Central American nation.¹² Duarte was not soft on the former Cal Poly colleague, Ronald Regan, and the administration allowed not only the speaker, but the Mustang Daily to further publicize his anti-Reagan views.

While students did not engage in protests equitable to those during the Vietnam War, they were far from close-lipped during the early 1980s. Numerous entries in the Mustang Daily support this, both from staff writers and from students writing in. In February of 1982, President Regan addressed the Organization of American States regarding a $350 million aid package to Central America, with El Salvador as one of the main recipients.¹³ The Mustang Daily responded to this decision by stating that:

Reagan’s intentions, while honorable, will be easily invalidated if he allows future U.S. economic investment in Latin America to follow its past course. The grip American and European multinational conditions have on the economies of such

¹¹ Winters, “Salvadoran talks of civil strife.”
¹² Grandin, Empire’s Workshop, 149.
nations is the root of the problem Reagan is now trying to solve with military aid to El Salvador.\textsuperscript{14} This shows that students were well informed about the socio-political systems that had been operating throughout the entirety of the Latin American sphere since the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The disciplined yet direct resistance of US foreign policy encompasses the style that was commonly used by Cal Poly students to oppose this conflict and the Regean administration.

As the Salvadoran Civil War dragged on through the decade, so did the United States’ role in the conflict. Student opposition followed suit. As reported by the \textit{Mustang Daily}, Raymond Bonner, one of the first American journalists to get a view behind FMLN lines in El Salvador, gave a talk at Chumash Auditorium in April of 1985.\textsuperscript{15} Bonner made the case that the United States’ involvement in El Salvador was “based on ideology,” and that “we have no national reasons to go into El Salvador.”\textsuperscript{16} Bonner’s employed terminology described that there was little economic opportunity in El Salvador, like there may have been in Nicaragua or other Central American nations, so the only motivation was to prevent another “domino” from falling. Most telling of how students felt presented itself in the student newspaper in purposefully emboldened text: “Our policy in Central America is illegal, inconsistent, and ill-advised. In Central America we stand naked and ashamed before the nations of the world.”\textsuperscript{17}

Not all students were fervent opponents of the United States’ involvement in Central America; there were a few students who were supportive of certain actions. Some students

\textsuperscript{14} “New Cubas?”
\textsuperscript{17} Reher, “U.S. policy in Central America inconsistent.”
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responded to the Mustang Daily with anti-communist support of the Reagan administration’s intervention in the region. However, these negative replies were not resisting the oppositional standpoint to the United States’ actions in the region, but were resisting an opinion piece that was in the Mustang Daily a few days before. The piece was written in response to the American invasion of Grenada and included a political cartoon (Fig. 1) which incited considerable backlash. Thirteen letters were included, all of which disagreed to some extent with the cartoon’s bias; one letter even contained a list of eight people who supported the letter’s thoughts. Even with all the letters sent to the Mustang Daily, none of them deemed unconditional support of American imperialism in Latin America an acceptable act. It was also a crucial moment for freedom of speech on campus, as stated by the Mustang Daily editors in response to the backlash:

Fig. 1: Political cartoon that was depicted in the Mustang Daily article.

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That is why the Mustang Daily encourages letters to the editor. No one opinion is more right than another. Every opinion is valid, and deserves to be expressed. In a nutshell... We’re pissing everybody off. That’s good because this is the sign of a healthy and successful opinion page. If we didn’t provoke opinions, we’d be doing something wrong. Keep writing.\textsuperscript{21}

This response preceded the multitude of response letters in the newspaper as mentioned before and encompasses the student body’s emphasis on the importance of freedom of speech. In fact, backlash and civil discourse was the aim and was heavily encouraged as shown by the Mustang Daily’s response. Civil discourse, while not physical, was very much active at Cal Poly in regards to the liberal opposition of American imperialism in the 1980s.

**Faculty Skepticism**

Inquistory eyes were not only cast upon the United States’ actions in El Salvador by students on campus, but by professors as well. A notable example is Reginald Gooden, a political science instructor at the time. Gooden was quick to shed light upon his doubts of the so-called “defeat of the terrorist forces in El Salvador,” through democratic process, as was stated by the heads of the American government at the time.\textsuperscript{22} Many faculty members expressed similarly unconvinced attitudes towards the dissemination of information from Washington. Gooden explained the media coverage of the 1982 Salvadoran elections by writing that:


[The media] showed these lines of concerned voters flocking to the polls, exposed to the weapon fire of guerillas. It portrayed these people as pushing forth with their ideal of democracy… The parties opposing the ruling Christian Democrats have their own views on the election.23

Political science professors challenged the media portrayal of the elections, stating that it was less of a heroic drive towards “their ideal of democracy” and instead a required response to newly implemented policy.24

Faculty opposition manifested itself in challenging any blind acceptance of potential domestic propaganda and a desire to enhance truthful education on the subject. One available avenue of opposition for faculty was to sponsor speakers. The speakers were normally experts across various fields of Latin American politics, economics, or culture.25 In January of 1985, Mustang Daily informed students of one of these discussions to take place that evening,

The forum is being presented by the Latin American Students Association of San Luis Obispo and features guest speakers Fernando Alegria and Francisco Tomic of Stanford University, Ignacio Walker of Princeton University and Arnoldo Gonzalez Reyna, director of the Mexican Association of Animal Production26

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23 Hutcherson, “Prof calls Salvador election results inconclusive.”
24 The government had recently reduced the number of voting precincts by 66% (from 24 precincts to 8) and voting was made mandatory for all citizens, shown in Hutcherson, “Prof calls Salvador election results inconclusive.”
26 Alegria was a specialist on the cultures and literature of Latin America; Tomic was an economics professor and a specialist on the external debts of Latin America; Walker specialized in social change and democracy in Latin America; Reyna specialized in food production. Information from: Meredyth, “Latin America topic of forum.”
The event was to be moderated by the previously mentioned Reginald Gooden and followed by a panel discussion made up of the above speakers. William Little, head of the foreign language department, and Oscar Ramirez, an assistant language professor, were also on the panel.²⁷ Five campus organizations sponsored the event which allowed free attendance for students.²⁸ Making this event financially accessible clearly shows that faculty not only found this to be a valuable viewpoint, but also that they found it important for students to attend. Faculty helped kindle students’ opposition by leading them to gain a deeper, factual understanding of the situations that were affecting Latin America. It was through these actions that faculty showed both their distrust in the information spread by the United States government and their opposition to its foreign policy in the region.

**Administrative Response**

The Cal Poly administration did not show any clear stances regarding United States involvement in Latin America. They did take a mostly supportive stance of free speech on the topic as has been shown by the amount of student correspondence, faculty actions, and invited speakers. However, their noteworthy support of free speech was put to the test just a few months after the visit by the aforementioned CASAS-sponsored speaker, Mauricio Duarte. In May of 1982, during a Cinco de Mayo celebration, Dennis Lazoff, a member of the student organization that sponsored Duarte, was giving a speech describing CASAS opposition to United States involvement in El Salvador. Lazoff was cut short after having the microphone taken from him.

²⁷ Meredyth, “Latin America topic of forum.”
²⁸ For a complete list of the sponsoring organizations see Meredyth, “Latin America topic of forum.”
mid-speech due to it being too political in nature to be amplified. Section 700 of the Campus Administration Manual (CAM) only allowed amplified speech on two locations on campus and only during one hour each week. This section of the CAM was designed years prior to control student protests over the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, but it seems to have been forgotten as the years passed. “[M]any students are unaware that there are only certain areas where speeches can be made,” stated the Mustang Daily. CAM 700 also limited leaflet handouts, the free market, and free speech during Poly Royal, according to Matthew Greenwald, a math professor at the time.

Cal Poly’s administration deserves praise for their next choice of action; the Free Speech Task Force held an open meeting less than a week after the Lazoff incident. Students were invited to have an open discussion with the six-person task force (made up of two students, two faculty members, and two administrators) to update the “control-oriented” CAM 700. Professor Greenwald was supportive of this movement, stating, “It may be the only chance that students have to tell the administration how they feel about the restrictions being placed on them,” even giving students who couldn't attend the meeting an option to call him. Roughly 15 months later, the Task Force had amended the Campus Administration Manual across multiple areas which was a major step towards campus freedom of speech at the time. This revised manual would be

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31 Horizon, “Free speech task force to meet.”
33 Horizon, “Free speech task force to meet.”
34 For a more complete list of changes made to the Campus Administration Manual by the free speech task force see: Hennesy, “Task force asks for freer speech.” See also Mark Hennesy, “Senate discusses
the backbone allowing the freely spoken opinions that would question the validity of the imperialist actions undertaken by the United States in Latin America during the 1980s.

**Conclusion**

“El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam.” The Spanish dictionary will still disagree, but when looking at Cal Poly’s student and faculty opposition to the United States’ role in the conflict and region, they are more analogous than previously thought. Student opposition to imperial activities during the 1980s closely mirrored liberal stances apparent during the Vietnam War. Like argued by Freilach, student antagonism towards foreign involvement was prevalent and while it never got physical, there were many dissonant reactions that were intellectually radical. Despite the modern conservative reputation, our campus’s opinions from this time challenged that stereotype and could not be ignored. While the events discussed in this paper are in the past, the freedom to speak one’s opinions still reigns paramount to the Cal Poly student body. If the students, faculty, and administration did not take a liberal stance, as argued in opposing American Imperialism, it is unlikely that the fervent defense of free speech that defied American Imperialism would have occurred. Had it not been for the sanctified position of the First Amendment the widespread disapproval, inflammatory opinions, and subsequent discourse would have been stifled. Emphasis on free speech is now one of Cal Poly’s defining characteristics, which not only advocated the demonstrated opposition to American Empire, but was somewhat legitimized by it.

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