

World Tour presents: Sounds of Protest

“...or organized political activities of any type will be permitted on Fort Benning, GA. If you enter this installation, you will be in violation of title 18 United States code section 1382 and subject to fine and imprisonment.”

In Columbus GA, along the banks of the Chattahoochee River sits Ft. Benning – home of United States Army Infantry School ... home of basic training, ranger school, and the airborne school. Benning also houses the controversial School of the Americas. Since 2001, it has been called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation and is the Defense Department's principal Spanish-language training facility for Latin American military and law-enforcement personnel. Join me Andrew Reissiger as we visit the gates of Fort Benning for the 2006 School of the Americas Watch – for the sounds of protest today on World Tour.

“Irma Sanchez, daughter of Jose Sanchez and Santo Sanchez, 6 years old. Presente!  
Daughter of Emilio Clara .... 8 years old. Presente! (fades into music)

Hay una mujer desaparecida, Holly Near

On Saturday Nov 18 2006, I packed a few small bags and jumped in my car to make the 3 hour drive from my home in Athens GA to Ft. Benning along the border with Alabama. I was off to the annual School of the Americas Watch in Columbus GA where for the past 17 years, tens of thousands have marched to demand the closing of a military school they blame for human rights abuses in Latin America.

Along the way, my mind wandered from the technical and mundane tasks of radio production and music to things of the past...to family vacations growing up in the suburbs of Atlanta.

About an hour south of Atlanta I saw signs for Callaway Gardens, a 13,000-acre series of gardens founded in 1952 by Cason Callaway and his son Howard to promote and protect native azalea species. Another sign pointed me to Warm Springs, the site of the Little White House where FDR spent time receiving treatment for polio. History tells us that he was so taken by the area that he built a house – The Little White House - on nearby Pine Mountain where he died in 1945. I was reminded of the “Little Grand Canyon” as they call it – a Georgia state park just south of Columbus that holds Providence Canyon, where poor farming practices by white sharecroppers ironically gave GA one of the state’s Seven Wonders. Ditches dug in the 1850s became gullies, which eroded to as wide as one-quarter mile and as deep as 150 feet, exposing the geologic record of several million years within its walls. White clay called Kaolin stands starkly in contrast with various shades of pink, purple, red, brown, yellow, and black.

It was over a decade ago when I last considered going to an SOA watch at Ft. Benning. I was an idealist senior in high school who wanted to change the world. But my rights were squashed and my voice silenced – “I’m not going to let you go down to march in

front of the base where your uncles are stationed. What would they think?" was the response my mother gave me.

Thirteen years later, I was finally on my way to Ft. Benning to the School of the Americas with a tape recorder and a microphone. Victory Dr and Custer Rd announced that I was near, as did an increasing number of cars with magnetic yellow ribbons and American flags stuck to bumpers. I followed a tour bus with Ohio plates to a parking lot, paid my \$10, grabbed my equipment, and stepped out of the car.

"My name is Steven Wing."

"Where are you from?"

"Atlanta."

"You have some bumper stickers here."

"Yeah, quite a few. I can't stop thinking about them."

"Do you have any favorites?"

"Yeah, uh, well my favorite one is obsolete now. 'Re-elect the anti-Christ. People for a quicker apocalypse.' But, um, I also like this one: 'We're spending our children's inheritance. Save wild nature.' And, 'Sustainability: the final frontier.' And, 'Create your own reality. Turn off your TV.' And my favorite one here at the SOA has always been 'Terrorists aren't born. They have to be trained. Close the School of Assassins at Fort Benning.' I got a million of them."

"My name is Kirk Bowman and we have a whole group of students here today. We've been protesting for 8 years now. I'm from Las Vegas. Uhhh...I teach a GA Tech. We have a sign for Felix Usua. Felix Usua was a graduate student in engineering at Georgia Tech many years ago. He went back and became the rector of the University of El Salvador. And in October of 1980 he was assassinated by graduates of the School of the Americas. And we march in his name."

Chris Inserra (from the stage): "There are people who are laying their bodies down today. If you're calling from jail, the number is 7-0-6... *(cheer)* We have had almost 300 people spend collectively almost a hundred years in jail for laying their bodies down."

Joao da Silva (*from the stage*): "At SOA Watch we gather in the diverse traditions of non-violence with respect for the right to self-determination of oppressed peoples and communities. Together, we envision a day in which a culture of peace with justice and respect (*fades into crowd resitation*) ...compassion, and acceptance for the interdependence of all life. We will struggle for a world free from violence and we will use actions, words, and symbols consistent with this struggle. We will not use or instigate violence against any person. We will act with respect for the people and property of the local community. We will promote the safety of ourselves and others for our actions and interactions. We commit to recognize and to work to dismantle..."

Founded alongside the Chattahoochee River in 1828, Columbus GA was one of the south's earliest and largest mill towns. With cotton at the heart of GA's agricultural

economy, the chance to make money brought people from far and wide. Until 1836, the Creek Indians clung to a piece of land just west of the river but the Creek War and subsequent Trail of Tears forced the final removal of some 16,000 original inhabitants. The river gave Columbus a commercial advantage until the arrival of the railroads in the 1850s.

It wasn't until 1918 that Columbus became home to what would eventually be the United States most important infantry training ground. For almost half a century, American generals like Sherman and MacArthur saw the need for a strong infantry, artillery, and musketry school. Just a few short months before the end of World War I, the U.S. Congress authorized the establishment of Camp Benning in Columbus GA to "produce the world's finest combat infantrymen." Today, more than 75,000 soldiers from around the world train at Fort Benning annually. Five-star generals Omar Bradley, George Marshall, and Dwight D. Eisenhower as well as George Patton and Colin Powell have all spent time at Fort Benning.

In the late 40s, with U.S. foreign policy re-embracing the Monroe Doctrine, the United States helped to establish the Latin American Ground School in the Panama Canal Zone. Initially, the school's mission was to teach nation-building skills such as bridge-building, well-digging, food preparation, and equipment maintenance and repair. Shortly after its establishment, the name was changed to the U.S. Army Caribbean School. Side by side, Latin American military personnel as well as US army personnel took classes given in Spanish.

In 1959, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba. Reacting to the possible spread of Soviet influence in the region, the school changed its name once again in 1963 becoming the School of the Americas. It was around this time that curriculum shifted – at the request of then-president John F. Kennedy - from nation building skills to counter-insurgency...fueled by American fear of "conspiring communists in Latin American peasant villages."

The SOA was moved to Fort Benning in 1984, under the terms of the Panama Canal Treaty with then-president of Panama Jorge Illueca calling it "the biggest base for destabilization in Latin America" A major Panamanian newspaper proclaimed it " The School of Assassins."

Some of the more well known graduates include former Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega, who is now serving an extended sentence in a U.S. prison on drug charges; El Salvador's Roberto D'Aubuisson, who formed the death squads that killed Salvadorian Archbishop Oscar Romero and thousands of others during the Salvadoran civil war; former Argentine President Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, who is accused of making thousands of people "disappear" during Argentina's "dirty war" of the 1970s.

Over the years, officials at the school have insisted that it's not responsible for the actions of the few, that the training given is in line with the Geneva conventions. But the controversy deepened in 1996, with a declassified Pentagon report detailing an SOA

manual used during the 80s that seemed to advocate tactics like beatings, false imprisonments, execution and bounty payments for killed enemy. Following the release of the report, SOA curriculum expanded to include international humanitarian law, human rights, and ethical use of force. Since 2001, the SOA has been called WHINSEC, or the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

Recording from within the gates of Fort Benning: “The sole purpose of this installation is to provide for the military training of soldiers. This policy is completely consistent with the American constitutional tradition that the military must remain politically neutral and under the control of a democratically elected civilian government. Ninguna demostracion marcha con actividad politica organizada...”

Carlos Mauricio (*from the stage*): “I spent 9 nights in a chamber of torture in El Salvador being tortured by Salvadorean soldiers graduated at the School of the Americas. I know what it’s being in a chamber of torture. I know that.”

Adriana Portillo Bartow (*from the stage*): “Many many many years ago, Guatemalan security forces and by that I mean the army, the national police, the secret police, and other Guatemalan security forces came to my father’s place of work and to his home and in two separate but simultaneous operatives detained and disappeared six members of my family. That day they took my father, they took my stepmother, they took my little sister 18 months old little sister, one of my sisters-in-law, and my two oldest daughters who were 10 and 9 at the moment of their disappearance. I never saw them or heard from them ever again.

*(Buddhist monks led by Nipponzan Myohoji play drums and chant)*

Maria Guardado (*from the stage*): “Quiero decirles que solo los que hemos estado bajo la dota terrorista sabemos lo que se trata la tortura.”

“I want you to know that only those of us who have endured torture and survived it know what terrorism and torture really is.”

“Quiero contarles un poquito de mi tortura. Que me quebraron la columna. Me quebraron la cadera. Me quebraron el pecho.”

“Ok. I want to tell you something of my own torture experience. They broke my breastbone, my hip, and my spinal cord.”

“Me violaron, me quemaron, y me metieron un estaca en el recto.”

“And they put a ...uh.... wooden pole in my rectum.”

“Jugaron futbol conmigo.”

“They played football with me. And I was a football.”

“Me tenían atada y bendada.”

“They had me bound and blindfolded.”

“Me quemaron que despues de 26 anos todavia tengo senas de las quemadas.”

“They burned me in such a way that now 26 years later I still have the scars.”

“Mi delito fue nada mas trabajar con los campesinos, trabajar con un sindicato, trabajar con los maestros en huelga, y trabajar con los estudiantes.”

“And my crime had been that I worked with the campesinos, with the teachers, and with the unions that were on strike.”

Recording (*from within the gates of Fort Benning*): “If you enter this installation, you will be in violation of title 18 United States code section 1382 and subject to fine and imprisonment.”

(Los Ausentes: Roy Brown, Tito Auger, and Tao Rodriguez)

Charles Steele, Jr (*from the stage*): “I’m ready to go to jail. It’s not enough just to march and stand up and give a speech. I want to lay down at Fort Benning and go to jail so we let folks known just like we marched in the 60s, we’re willing to march and go to jail today!”

Father Roy Bourgeois (*from the stage*): “And once again we gather in the name of peace. We are here to express our love, support and solidarity with sisters and brothers of Latin America who have been the victims of a school in our country’s foreign policy that has caused them untold suffering and death and repression.”

In 1983, Vietnam veteran, winner of a Purple Heart, and priest Father Roy Bourgeois became one of the first to protest the School of the Americas. Wearing military surplus fatigues, he entered the base without challenge and climbed a tree near a barracks that was being used by Salvadorian soldiers training with the US army. When all the lights went out, he switched on an electric boom box and broadcast into the night air a recording of one of Salvadorian Archbishop Oscar Romero’s last homilies, calling on his nation’s soldiers to stop killing their countrymen:

“I’d like to make an appeal in a special way to the men in the army. Brothers, each one of you is one of us. We are the same people. The farmers and peasants that you killa re your own brothers and sisters. When you hear the words of a man telling you to kill, think instead in the words of God. ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the Law of God. In His Name and in the name of our tormented people who have suffered so much, and whose laments cry out to heaven: I implore you! I beg you! I order you! Stop the repression!”

Romero was later murdered along with 4 US churchwomen while conducting mass in San Salvador. Father Bourgeois served a 15-month prison sentence, convicted of reentering a military base after being removed from it, unlawfully wearing a military uniform, and committing assault.

Father Roy Bourgeois (*from the stage*): “As our movement began to blossom years ago, we knew it was important to root it in nonviolence. That was our way. And we drew on the wisdom and the experience of Dr. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and Mahatma Gandhi and Cesar Chavez and Dorothy Day and Monsignor Oscar Romero and many others. Their way, the way of peace is our way. This last year four of us representing our movement: Lisa Sullivan, Carlos Mauricio, Linda Panetta, and I we went to Latin America to meet with some presidents, defense ministers, university leaders, indigenous leaders. And in our conversations about this school we’re trying to shut down they said to us ‘we know this school very well. We have been on the receiving end. We know those graduates. They are household names here, some of them in prison for their crimes against humanity.’”

(Guantanamo: Pete Seeger)

Travis Lyons: “My name Travis Lyons. I stay right here in front of Fort Benning Road on Fort Benning Road here at Rosemary Apartment here. I live here about 2 years. It’s just a lot of people out here. You know it’s crowded out here ...and you know... just trying to look out for everybody. Take care of everybody.”

Andrew Reissiger: “How do the people come across to you?”

Travis Lyons: “Oh they’re very courteous, they’re very courteous and everything. They’re very friendly, courteous, friendly, and its just good to see them.”

Andrew Reissiger: “What are you guys selling here?”

Travis Lyons: “Um, we’ve got um hotdogs, hamburgers, we’ve got cookies, we’ve got uh soda, fruit punch here and um water ... cupcakes and cookies.”

Sandy Owen: “I’m Sandy Owen. I’m from the Washington DC area and this is my fifth year. We’re musicians here. And um ... I think the thing that is most beautiful to me is that they’ve been able to make something beautiful and heartfelt out of death. And it reminds me ... I was in Israel once and I went to the Holocaust museum there and there were all of these exhibits that were just beautiful and yet they were beautiful remembering this horrific thing that happens. And here at the SOA watch we create a pageant. We create music. We create speaking and a gathering that is a unification ... a unity of beauty despite what we’re talking about.”

Hector Aristizabal: “I’m Hector Aristizabal and I come from Los Angeles or I am originally from Colombia and in Colombia I was tortured by graduates of the SOA. The Puppetistas have been coming to SOA Watch for years and every year they have a street

puppet show that represents an issue that is related to the problem of oppression of the spirit and oppression of people and killing and torture etc. But the way we do it is hopefully through beauty and music and drums and inviting people...not telling people what to do but inviting people to think that we as human beings have other tools to deal with each other and to deal with the world and to create and to imagine and to dream instead of destruction and everything else that this place represents for humanity. So our story and show today was about remembering that. And remembering is not just about remembering the people that have left us but it's also about RE-membering...putting our members back together. So, uh, also tomorrow we want to end the vigil with this kind of celebration or return to life...not just the mourning. A mourning alone is an unfinished ritual. And some of us believe that, like every other culture in history, that every ritual has to end with a return to life. So that's what we're doing."

*(yelling...drumming... "I'm forgotten!" .... "Remember!" ... "Shut up!" ...)*

Hector: "So...they say that when people gather...it is important to call the ancestors... there are many ways to do that...drumming...stories...praying...coming together...and this story comes from the Apache brothers and sisters. And they say, and they say that at the beginning of time the one who created the world created people. But those people didn't like the place where they were. So they began to complain. And the one who created the world said 'If you don't like this place, find another one! Because the world is abandoned. Go ahead.' So people did that. And they found better places. And they seemed to like those places that they found and they did well there for a long time, for a short time, the story doesn't say. Until, some people began falling sick. Some people began to get into trouble. But the other people didn't know what to do. So the one who created the world said, 'Listen! Let me tell you something. The things of the world that can make you sick can also heal you.' But people still didn't do anything because they didn't know what to do. But it happened that one day the grandmothers gathered at a place called Benin' or Benning or Fort Benning or something like that. *(laughter)* They gathered there! And they gathered there and they built...they built some shrines, some alters. And they built them in the four directions. And the grandmothers knew what to do because they wanted to remember and they wanted to remember those who have gone. So as they built the alters, the people who were in the west started feeling a sun coming out of their mouths. They didn't know if it was coming from the outside or from the inside. *(slow drumming begins)* But they started singing and drumming. And then the people near the alter of the east and near the alter of the north and near the alter of the south, they also began singing and drumming and dancing. And then the light that was within... *(drumming speeds up)* And the one who created the world said, 'Go to those that are sick. Go to those who have forgotten who they are. Go to those who feel that life is about destruction. Go to those and heal them with your dancing and your praying and your beauty and your creativity!' And then they sang. Presente!

At the end of Day 1, as the performers were packing up, I talked to Jon Fromer and Tao Rodriguez, who first started coming to the SOA Watch with this grandpa Pete Seeger back in the late 90s.

Jon: "I mean it's unbelievable and people...there's this funeral procession."

Tao: "Oh man its out of (control)"

Jon: "For hours and hours they sing the names of the people. It's yeah...you know when you see the names on the crosses and the pictures and all of a sudden these people.."

Tao: "And it's not fake! It's not like all of those are made-up names. It's real names."

Jon: "Two years old."

Tao: "Yeah."

Jon: "Six months...eighty seven."

Tao: "Yeah, it's crazy."

Jon: "Jesus."

Tao: "Whole families. You read like whole families..."

As a child, going to school is a big first step in establishing autonomy from our parents. We don't know it at the time, but during those first few moments of each morning, we take part in a kind of tribal tradition ... a right of passage – the Roll Call. The tradition of roll call creates a sense of self-awareness in the individual as well as the class as a whole. "Here" or "Present" says exactly that. We have to speak up, or stand up. From the time we are 5 years old until we are young adults, this mantra-like practice firmly establishes us as individuals, responsible for our actions and inactions.

On September 25, 1973, At the funeral of Chilean poet and Nobel Prize recipient Pablo Neruda, mourners responded with "Presente" to the shouting out of Neruda's name, as well as that of Salvador Allende, the recently removed and killed president. This was also the first public act of protest against the 14-day-old regime of Augusto Pinochet. The tradition of reading names of those killed by politically repressive regimes has a long history in Latin America. Every year at the gates of Fort Benning, the names of people killed in political repression in Central and South America are recited.

Father Roy Bourgeois (*from the stage*): "Let the solemn funeral procession begin."

Call: "Oscar Romero"

Response: "Presente"

Call: "Jean Donovan"

Response: "Presente"

Call: "Maura Clarke"

Response: "Presente"

Call: "Dorothy Keyzul"

Response: "Presente"

I asked Chris Chandler of Stone Mountain GA to walk with me up to the gates of Ft. Benning to describe the scene.

Chris Chandler: "And at the front of the procession is Father Roy Bourgeois who has started this organization ... along with some puppets from our group called the Puppetistas. And these puppets were made here at the event. And immediately behind them is a sea of some 20,000 crosses, each person holding one. And as their name and age is called out, they hold up their cross and announce 'presente'. And each one will lay their cross into the fence as they make another round. By the time it is over this entire entrance to Fort Benning will be completely blockaded by a series of white crosses. Only they are unable to place them on the gates of Fort Benning because they have built not one, not two, but three sets of fences in front just for this event. And the crosses are going on the fence as we speak right by the 'U.S. Property No Trespassing.' They have placed extra barbed wire to keep these grandmothers and very conscientious peace loving people away from the fort. And they are placing the crosses on the fence. The fence is covered with signs and notes to loved ones: people who have been killed in Central America. There is 40 people in 'white face' and black shrouds carrying coffins followed by more crosses, more crosses, an endless sea of crosses. And so the American flag sits atop a greased flagpole 'US Property No Trespassing' surrounding the flag itself and handwritten signs noted and taped all around it. Barbed wire fence surrounds us. At the base of the flag it reads 'Erected in recognition of Fort Benning's contribution to Columbus GA and to our nation.' Splatters of red paint are being thrown onto the people lying on the ground, their black shrouded bodies covered with red...and white face. And of course as we speak the names continue to be sung and the crowd responds 'present.' A woman dressed in the statue of liberty climbs the fence and places a banner 30ft long containing the names of people killed in Central America. She braves the barbed wire fence as she stands on shoulders. Yet bubbles fly through the air and small children stare and they get a glimpse. Five, six, three years old standing here looking at the bodies covered in blood dressed in black lying beneath the American flag and in front of Fort Benning. Sure to leave an impression on these children.

*(presente...) (some people cross into the fort and people cheer) (helicopter overhead) ('thank you!') (drums and more cheering) ('how are they getting over there...I'm not sure...so how are they even getting over there...letting them in?') ('praise the lord!')*

At one point during the weekend, I overheard someone talking about the non-violent aspect of the SOA watch. And how thankful they were that those "pesky little

anarchists” – as they called them - weren’t around. On another occasion, someone else referred to the police saying, “oh, those guys are way cool ... it’s not them you have to worry about.” On the other side of the fences, men in uniform as well as plain clothes would occasionally lift up on scissor cranes and peer our way through binoculars, taking photographs. Once or twice I think I saw a smirk out of one of them. I can’t help but to wonder what they thought of 50ft tall puppets, the 20ft tall statue of liberty, the white-faced funeral procession, or clown skeletons playing drums on stilts. It was as Hector Aristizabal said, “that we as human beings have other tools to deal with each other” ... “to create, to imagine, and to dream”.

(Solo le Pido a Dios: Mercedes Sosa)

Neris Gonzalez: “Mi nombre es Neris Gonzalez. Soy salvadorena y tengo nueve anos de vivir en Chicago. Vine a Chicago porque...”

Translation: “My name is Neris Gonzalez. I’m Salvadorean but have lived in Chicago for nine years. I came to Chicago as a survivor of torture in Coblacenter. For five years, I’ve come to the protests against the assassins, as we call them, because the school used to be located in Panama. And there they trained the military, the generals like Carlos Vides Casanova and Jose Guillermo Garcia who were the ones directly accountable for the torturers. The National Guard tortured me and they put me in a secret prison for two weeks. They were trained in this school.”

Andrew Reissiger: “How do you feel being here today?”

Neris Gonzalez: “Bueno estas actividades para nosotros son como una terapia porque tenemos...”

Translation: “These activities are a kind of therapy for us because we have the hope that justice will prevail...that they close this school of assassins. We can’t permit them to keep training the youth to torture and massacre our communities: the innocent children, the adults, the women, the men, the elderly. We’ve had enough injustice. This shows the terrible and gross impunity. There’s nothing more unjust than having this kind of school in the world rather than a school of learning where we can create a developed and intelligent world of brothers and sisters and friends.”

Chris Chandler: “At the base of the flag it reads ‘Erected in recognition of Fort Benning’s contribution to Columbus GA and to our nation.’”

Neris Gonzalez: “Eyrected in reconotion...reconogition of Fort *Benning’s* contribuycion to Columbus Georgeea and to our naytion by Mayor Beybey...Bowby Peters, August two thousan two. Para mi esto es una ironia donde dice...”

Translation: “This is so ironic where it says ‘in recognition’ because for us it’s recognizing those who torture, the unpunished, the assassins. This a plaue that shows the real impunity, the true ability to kill an entire innocent village. For me, this plaque is

covered in the blood of the world. In the wars where they've trained children, indoctrinated, removing humanity and inserting violence in order to kill your own brother. It's just so ironic really."

From the stage: "Today we are privileged to stand in the traditions of Ghandi, Aunzanzuki, Dorothy Day, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and all of those that have gone before us in the ways of justice. We can name only some victims here but they call to memory the other hundreds of thousands who have suffered and died. May our witness honor them all."

From the stage: "SOA violence and the racist system of domination it represents are a continuation of the Trail of Tears, ravaged the indigenous people of this country. We hold up the memory of our Native American sisters and brothers who first lived on this land. We cry."

Crowd: "No mas! No more! We must stop the dirty war. Companeros, companeras we cry out 'No mas! No more!'"

From the stage: "In Guatemala, last week a court ordered the capture of the SOA graduate Angel Aliba Guevara, the former defense minister, and SOA graduate Machupina: the former head of the feared national police for their involvement in homicide, terrorism, and kidnapping during Guatemala's Civil War. The brutal School of the Americas counter-insurgency strategies that were implemented in Guatemala left over 200,000 people dead and no SOA official has ever been held accountable. We cry."

Well thanks for tuning in for this week's edition of World Tour...as we've traveled to Ft. Benning GA for the 2006 School of the Americas Watch. You can visit [www.worldtourmusic.com](http://www.worldtourmusic.com) for playlists and more information about the show, including how you can help support its continued production. Send us an email at [worldtourmusic@yahoo.com](mailto:worldtourmusic@yahoo.com) and let us know that you're listening. Until next week, same time same place my name is Andrew Reissiger and this is World Tour Radio.

Crowd: "No mas! No more! We must stop the dirty war. Companeros, companeras we cry out 'No Mas! No more!'"

Support for World Tour comes from Annandale Village - a residential community for adults with developmental disabilities in Suwanee, Georgia - providing a comprehensive continuum of services since 1969. On the web at [Annandale.org](http://Annandale.org) or by phone 770-945-8381.