

MINORITY REPORT.

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San Salvador

The following exchange took place at President José Napoleón Duarte's press conference here on October 29, three days after the murder of Herbert Ernesto Anaya, who headed the unofficial Salvadoran Human Rights Commission:

DOUGLAS FARAH (United Press International): Mr. President, I would like to know why you think you will be able to investigate the killing of Mr. Anaya when there are tens of thousands of political murders in the past years you have been unable to resolve.

DUARTE: The question is irrelevant. It seems to me rather to be an insinuation. I came to power three years ago and since that time I have been trying to reduce to a minimum the process of criminality that had opened in the country. You cannot demand of me investigations in a state which all Salvadorans recognize as a time of gigantic tension, as in the U.S. you cannot demand—I do not know if you are North American, but tell me who killed Kennedy or who killed Lincoln? And I could mention many other cases of people who were killed and the case never solved.

One could make a number of observations about this reply. First, of course, we do know who killed Abraham Lincoln. And though many in the United States do go missing every year, it is rare to find that they have been kidnapped and murdered by the Highway Patrol or by an auxiliary police force attached to the I.R.S. Then one has to notice the uncharacteristic modesty of the third sentence. Duarte has been President for only three and a half years, but before that he was the leading civilian member of the ruling junta. His time in office coincided with the death of no fewer than 30,000 of his fellow citizens. All these crimes, except for the murder of Archbishop Romero, have now been amnestied.

If Duarte were anywhere near as popular in El Salvador as he is in the United States, he would be a very successful politician indeed. What is striking about him is the extent to which he believes in his own image: an image reflected in the covers of *Time* rather than in the hearts and minds of Salvadorans. On his latest visit to Washington, in October, he embarrassed even his fulsome hosts by stooping and kissing the American flag. There is hardly a wall in downtown San Salvador that does not bear an ironic tribute, in poster or graffiti form, to this abject gesture.

Duarte is suffering from an advanced case of the Sadat syndrome, an affliction for which there is no known cure. Typically, the victim begins to count political success in terms of the number of foreign celebrities visited or received. Cravings for U.S. military aid are experienced and become tragically harder to assuage even when the dosage is increased to life-threatening levels. One dinner at the White House is imagined to equal fifty meetings with domestic political groups. A dinner at the White House with wife equals a hundred such humdrum encounters. The sufferer begins to fetishize editorials in U.S. newspapers while ignoring the humbler indigenous prints (an admittedly easy task in San Salvador, where *El Independiente* and *La Cronica del Pueblo* have been bombed and closed, and the latter's editor

butchered). In the final stages of the syndrome the patient starts to make excuses for the U.S. Administration that even the Administration is too shy to offer.

Before the flag-kissing photo opportunity Duarte had accused the Sandinista government of being responsible for the civil war in El Salvador, a claim that no Washington hawk has had the face to make. He has stated publicly that he was quite unaware of the use of Ilopango Air Force Base for the illegal supply of *contra* forces. Ilopango is about twenty minutes by car from the center of San Salvador and is the headquarters of the Salvadoran Air Force. If Duarte did not know that it was being used to attack Nicaragua, then he has effectively ceded power to an arrogant foreign patron. If he did know, while affirming the contrary and while arguing that the flow of arms was in the other direction, then he has effectively ceded power to an arrogant foreign patron.

In true Sadat style, Duarte has also "written" a book, titled *Duarte: My Story*. This volume was co-authored by Diana Page and published only in English. It is dedicated to, among others, the Boy Scout movement (a large statue to Baden-Powell is one of the unexpected delights of the capital's bourgeois district) and is not available in El Salvador. When Sadat produced a similar book in the aftermath of his Nobel Prize, he was careful to excise most of the shady political past he had described in an earlier volume. Duarte, who is jealous of President Oscar Arias's Nobel Prize and who claims credit for the Arias "peace process," chiefly imputes shadiness to others. He contrives to imply that many of the death squad killings have been the work of the guerrillas, who seek to magnify the contradictions. Experience and investigation have shown that there is no need to simulate rightist atrocities in El Salvador. I had the opportunity to ask Maria Julia Hernández, the tireless head of the human rights office Tutela Legal at the archbishopric, if she thought that the left had indeed been shooting the civilian opposition as a provocation. Her pretended merriment did not mask contempt for the suggestion.

On November 15, the last Sunday of my stay, Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas preached a homily in which he warned that the death squads were back in business. He gave details of several cases, including the murder of a church worker. Common to all the slayings, according to Tutela Legal, is the involvement of army and police personnel. President Duarte is forced to describe complaints of this type as "irrelevant." He has taken the side of the armed forces, and the armed forces have a short way with politicians who are halfhearted about them. When U.S. Ambassador Edwin Corr, speaking from his bunker in the center of the city, said that he saw his job in El Salvador as "making sure the cattle get to Cheyenne," he had hit on more than a phrase with which to offend all Salvadorans. He was trying to say that there would be no military coup on his watch. In a way, there hasn't been one. The armed forces have annexed the Christian Democrats without the trouble or awkwardness of a seizure of the Presidential Palace.

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