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You must go home again

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LETTER FROM EL SALVADOR

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One day in late September 1983, I stood in the blinding white light of midmorning on the ravaged town square of Tenancingo in central El Salvador, gagging on the stench of rotting corpses. Three nights earlier, hundreds of rebels from the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, who were fighting the U.S.-supported government for a share of their country's political power, swept down from the nearby Guazapa volcano to overwhelm the army garrison in Tenancingo. Barricaded inside the colonial church on the square, the army's desperate commander ordered an air strike on the town in a futile attempt to stave off the rebels. As the FMLN guerrillas captured the captain and seventy other soldiers and fled into the mountains, U.S. supplied aircraft laid waste to entire blocks of the town, killing scores of villagers and leaving survivors staggering through the wreckage with dazed, vacant stares.

After the army retook Tenancingo, soldiers in surgical masks picked their way through dust and rubble, aided in their search for bodies by emaciated mongrels scrounging for a meal. The warplanes had vanished, ceding the pale-blue sky to squadrons of circling vultures. Despite the humiliation government forces had suffered, an army colonel convoked the townsfolk with a victorious flourish after his troops unearthed a bloated rebel carcass from a heap of adobe. Holding aloft a shattered M-16 stripped from the dead guerrilla, the colonel cried, "This is proof the terrorists are getting their weapons from Nicaragua." His claim was lifted straight out of the script written by the Reagan Administration to justify U.S. intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua. As I jotted down the colonel's comments, I wondered if he-and American officials, for that matter-really believed in the lines they were parroting. After all, the United States was furnishing the Salvadoran army with tens of thousands of M-16s, which the rebels were seizing in

routine skirmishes and coordinated assaults on government garrisons and armories. In the attack on Tenancingo alone, the rebels were said to have captured ninety-seven rifles.

Standing amid shattered buildings, hastily dug mass graves, scorched family portraits framed in shards of broken glass, the villagers listened to the colonel's words in silence. But his speech was really for a distant, far more influential audience, whom he would reach through us, the foreign journalists, there to record the spectacle with our notepads, microphones, and cameras. We knew, of course, that the United States was the single largest supplier of lethal materiel to both sides of the Salvadoran civil war, but few reporters dared to deviate too far from the official line; our credibility would have been called into question. So the colonel's statements-and a cascade of similar claims emanating from Washington-went largely unchallenged, and the American public was cushioned from some of the uncomfortable truths about El Salvador.

Some sixteen years after the rebel attack on Tenancingo and seven years after peace treaties ending the war were signed, I'm sitting in the back of a police pickup as we hurtle past the outskirts of the town and wind our way up a dirt track toward the mossy green peaks of Guazapa. The rebels have long since departed, and the land mines that once blocked access to their mountain base have been removed. Gone, too, are the legions of foreign journalists who documented the carnage of the 1980s in meticulous detail. But the events set in motion years ago have not yet run their course, and America has exported a new form of violence to El Salvador. The police agents aboard the Toyota 4x4 chamber a round and train their rifles on the dense underbrush on our flanks as we rush to resupply beleaguered government patrols with warm bottled water and tin cans of chicken fricassee.

El Salvador's troops are on the move again. In cities and towns across the country, the police are battling two L.A.-imported gangs whose members fled to the United States in the 1980s as children only to be deported back to El Salvador in the 1990s as full-fledged gangbangers. Here in the Guazapa area, police are pursuing one of a dozen criminal bands made up of ex-soldiers and former guerrillas who now use the volcanic massif as a base to wage a campaign of terror and banditry across central El Salvador.

In the 1980s the fugitives roving Guazapa were Marxist rebels fighting for social change, and the names, like the Revolutionary Army of the People and the Popular Liberation Front, succinctly captured their ideals.¹ But the triumph of capitalism has spawned a breed of outlaws who have more immediate imperatives and a whole new nomenclature befitting their current sources of inspiration: Los Millonarios, The Fat Ones, The Power Rangers, and Hatchet Face. Only a few days before, a small army of masked gunmen calling themselves the Armed Social Group forced a farmer to flee his property on the volcano's northern slopes. They shot up his home, wounding a laborer, and delivered a note directing the owner to hand over his twelve-year-old daughter-evidently she was to serve as collateral against a yet to be articulated demand for ransom. Scrawled in a pathetic chicken scratch and laced with misspelled words, the letter warned the landowner that his entire family faced a "massacre" if

he refused to give up the girl.

Such threats are not to be taken lightly. On the other side of the volcano, another group of bandits recently executed a nineteen-year-old university student they had kidnapped from the town of Aguilares when his mother failed to come up with the 5 million colones-about \$600,000-they demanded for his release. Even after they murdered the student, the kidnappers continued to torment his mother, calling her several times a day to deliver new threats. The mayor of Aguilares also received death threats, and extortionists were driving farmers from the slopes of Guazapa with promises to put their crops to the torch if they refused to pay for protection.

A cluster of six separate peaks, Guazapa was created thousands of years ago when a powerful eruption blew the entire top off the massive volcano. That distant geological event left behind an intricate labyrinth of jagged ridgelines and densely vegetated hollows that radiate outward for miles. Nahuatl warriors took to these hills to wage a hit-and-run war against Spanish conquistadores, and in the 1980s, Guazapa's rugged folds afforded FMLN guerrillas a virtually impenetrable fortress only fifteen miles north of the capital of San Salvador. Back then, when I used to lie in bed at night and listen to the bombing of Guazapa roll in like thunder on the wind, Salvadoran officers and their U.S. advisers jokingly referred to Guazapa as Asshole Hill, because they were always trying to "wipe it clean." U.S.-supplied Dragonfly jets and hovering gunships that flew round-the-clock sorties made Guazapa the most heavily bombed piece of real estate in the history of the Western Hemisphere. The gullies of Guazapa fell within the confines of the FMLN's "liberated zone," where peasants collectively cultivated corn and beans, elected their own leaders, and organized their self-defense. Surrounding towns and hamlets, in turn, were ruled by national guardsmen in Prussian jackboots and steely-eyed paramilitaries who saw the Communist virus lurking inside anyone who wasn't one of their own. Death-squad killings were more highly concentrated around Guazapa than anywhere else in the country. It is probably no accident that today the same area hosts the largest collection of kidnapping rings in El Salvador.

At the crest of a steep incline, where spectacular sugarcane fields sprawl below us to the horizon, we come upon an exhausted eight-man patrol. It is a strange sort of deja vu, seeing soldiers once again combing Guazapa in search of an elusive enemy. "It's difficult to track them down," says police agent Jose Rigoberto Ramirez, as he wipes his sweat-drenched face with a sleeve. "They know the terrain, and they know how to operate. They all have armas de guerra and military knowledge. These are people who participated directly in the war."

Lasting a dozen years, the Salvadoran civil war left some 75,000 dead-most killed by right-wing death squads or their allies in the military and police-and forced more than 20 percent of El Salvador's 5 million people to flee the country or seek shelter in USAID-funded resettlement centers. For all its Cold War trappings, the Salvadoran conflict was essentially a textbook case of class warfare-pitting the interests of the U.S.-supported business elite against those of the poor. Armed opposition grew out of a broad-based struggle for social reform that was greeted with bullets and a succession of stolen elections throughout the better part of the

twentieth century. By 1980, the year the conflict boiled over into full-scale civil war, government troops were slaughtering street demonstrators by the hundreds; anyone who opposed the regime became a potential target for abduction and assassination. The Sandinistas had just toppled the Somoza family dynasty (a longtime U.S. ally) in nearby Nicaragua, and American hawks saw El Salvador as the next "domino" poised to fall to Marxist revolutionaries. When Ronald Reagan assumed office in January 1981, he immediately proclaimed he was "drawing the line" in El Salvador against "Communist expansion" in the hemisphere.

By the mid-1980s, El Salvador had become the third-largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, after Egypt and Israel, with economic aid alone topping \$430 million in 1985. Armed and advised by the Pentagon, the Salvadoran army racked up a growing list of battlefield atrocities, but no massacre or abuse of human rights proved sufficient to derail America's commitment to bring "democracy" to El Salvador. Aided in turn by Cuba and Nicaragua, the rebels proved a resilient foe, enduring each escalation with new tactics of their own. As the civilian body count mounted, combatants on both sides became increasingly adept in the dark arts of espionage, abduction, extortion, and murder.

Then the Soviet Union fell, and, with support from their respective Cold War allies drying up, the antagonists signed peace accords in 1992. In exchange for laying down their arms, the guerrillas managed to wring some concessions from the government: commanders suspected of links with the death squads were dismissed, the army's ranks were dramatically scaled back, and the FMLN emerged as a political party that is a true rival to the conservative National Republican Alliance, a crucial development for a country in which the democratic aspirations of the populace had been thwarted for decades. But those responsible for atrocities on both sides were never brought to trial, and the big questions-like how to overhaul El Salvador's highly skewed distribution of wealth-were left largely unresolved. Now the violence has taken on a distinctly commercial character, and the range of potential victims has expanded to include just about anyone. "It's like it was at the beginning of the war," Officer Ramirez said, as he pointed to a palm-shaded adobe house recently vacated by its owners at the base of Guazapa. "They're pulling people from their beds at night. Only now it's a business."

The war may have ended eight years ago, but permutations of it continue to surface every day in the "New El Salvador," the preferred term among government officials eager to attract new investors and tourists. El Salvador remains the most violent country in the hemisphere, with a murder rate 40 percent higher than that of Colombia. The World Bank now ranks San Salvador as Latin America's most crime-ridden city; one of every three of its citizens has been a victim of crime. El Salvador's 6,000-plus homicides in 1998 matched the country's annual body count at the height of the war in 1983, the year I arrived in El Salvador fresh out of journalism school to cover what appeared to be America's inexorable slide toward our "next Vietnam."

I left Central America in 1990 something of a war junkie, but while my colleagues pushed off for new conflicts in Somalia, Iraq, and Bosnia, I found myself drawn toward the reporting of crime. I covered Mafia stories in the former Soviet Union,

land theft in the Amazon, home-invasion robberies in Arizona. And somewhere along the way, I came to realize that my Salvadoran experience lay at the root of my subsequent fascination with crime and its variable responses from law enforcement. We may not have understood it at the time, but the journalists who covered El Salvador in the 1980s were as much crime reporters as war correspondents. On any given day, we looked at death and contemplated its authorship, often showing up on the scene of a killing, or multiple killings, before the authorities did, if they came at all. We were like criminal investigators in a place where official inquests were a pro forma undertaking, designed to cover up rather than reveal. So I went back to El Salvador last year a seasoned police reporter returning to the scene-of both the crime and the war. I found that la post-guerra, the term first coined at the end of the war to define the period of anticipated reconstruction, has come to signify the new, more bewildering, and seemingly more intractable turmoil that has unfolded instead.

At first glance, El Salvador's postwar mayhem seems similar to that of other countries emerging from years of conflict, such as South Africa, where unemployment, family disintegration, the dismantling of repressive security forces, and the ready availability of combat weapons have conspired to fuel astronomical crime rates. But another unforeseen factor has entered into the Salvadoran equation: the rise and proliferation of Las maras-street gangs. Shortly after the civil war ended, our Immigration and Naturalization Service ended the special refugee status for Salvadorans who had come to America seeking asylum from the violence. So began the mass deportation of undocumented Salvadorans from the United States, thousands of whom returned to implant gang rule, block by block, throughout every city and town of their home country.

Officials estimate that there are more than 20,000 full-fledged gang members in San Salvador alone-four times the number of guerrillas that three successive Republican administrations spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to vanquish. Washington force-fed El Salvador with a steady diet of infantry weapons: tens of thousands of automatic rifles, bazookas, land mines, hand grenades. And then, just as U.S. aid began to slow to a trickle, we began to export hardened veterans of our inner cities and federal pens. In 1998, INS deportations to El Salvador topped 5,300, and Salvadoran church officials estimate that 16 percent of the deportados arrive with what they call "grave antecedents" for criminal behavior-the rough equivalent of dumping 1,300 violent felons onto the streets of Chicago each year.²

"Maras control the entire city," San Salvador's police chief, Eduardo Linares, said when I dropped by his office. "They come with specialized knowledge from the States. They've brought with them new types of crime that didn't exist here before." Linares-a former FMLN commander with a drooping mustache and unruly brown hair-steered me to a large wall map of the city. During the war, police forces used the same map to plot assaults on suspected rebel safe houses and infiltration routes: Now the multicolored grease-pencil smears on Linares's map indicate zones of prostitution, drug trafficking, and black-market activity.

"I apply the theory of the broken window," Linares said, referring to the doctrine

of former New York City police commissioner William Bratton in the early 1990s, which targets building-code violations and other petty offenses as a strategy to preempt more serious Crime. We: close down the brothels, round up the dope dealers. It helps prevent delinquency."

It was curious to hear Linares who spent twenty-one of his fortyeight years as a guerrilla in the FMLN, including nine as an urban commando in San Salvador's underground extol the virtues of New York's Finest. But even during the war, Linares earned a reputation as a free-thinking strategist, granting spontaneous interviews at the front, speaking his mind, and not merely repeating the orthodoxies laid down by the supreme comandantes. True to his old self, Linares now acknowledges that neither his 500-man municipal force nor the 20,000 national police officers early combat what he calls the "deeper causes" fueling El Salvador's surging crime: "At the bottom, it's a problem of structural poverty," he said. "The neoliberal economic model is too exclusive. The same problems that gave rise to the war have not been addressed."

Now, Linares said; on top of the explosive conditions of gross social inequity, abusive authority, and widespread corruption that predated the civil war, El Salvador has become a refuge for powerful criminal syndicates who use the maras as a convenient smoke screen to deflect attention from their activities. "Organized crime enjoys almost total impunity," he lamented, while street gangs offer the criminal syndicates, largely composed of former death squad members, a vast market for illegal narcotics and weapons as well as a recruiting base for mid-level pushers and cheap triggermen:

The old lines of conflict have blurred almost beyond recognition; but their vestiges can be vaguely discerned in the criminal elements each of the vetting parties has spawned in la post-guerre: Urban slums, where the rebels once held sway, are now home to a tribal culture of violent gangs; while former army officers have vanished into shadowy quasilegitimate enterprises in which the old military chain of command is faithfully replicated as the corporate hierarchy: One private security agency alone employs 6,000 laid-off soldiers and cops---including specialfists in electronic surveillance, abduction, interrogation, and summary execution: And in places like Guazapa, ex-combatants from both sides have banded together to form a hybrid collection of social misfits ready to prey on any target, large or small.

The one bright spot in an otherwise dismal picture, Linares allowed, was the peace accords' provision that created the new civilian police authority--the Policia Nacional Civil--its ranks filled with former guerrillas like himself, many of whom are now trying to build a professional, competent force without the ideological baggage that made El Salvador's old security forces the backbone of political repression. Unfortunately, PNC officers are poorly trained, underfunded, and lacking in the most rudimentary investigative know-how. "They solve one case out of every thousand," he said as he shrugged. It's unclear whether the PNC has the will to pursue El Salvador's organized crime groups. While former guerrillas now account for 20 percent of the PNC's officer corps, the detective division is riddled with fascistic elements, thus ensuring both an enduring cover-up of atrocities and a

whole new genre of collaboration between state intelligence and the criminal underworld. And inadequate screening of recruits allowed dozens-if not hundreds-of delinquents to penetrate the new force, undermining efforts to win the public's trust. "Criminality springs from the very same police force," Linares said. "They take off their uniforms and stage assaults with the same weapons they're issued to enforce the law."

During the war, foreign reporters would pile in our vehicles, the letters "TV" taped to our windshields, and head off to the front in search of the "Boys" or the "G's" mode words we favored, since the word "guerrillas" could be too easily recognized by eavesdroppers lurking in San Salvador's restaurants and hotel lobbies. As far as the army was concerned, journalists talking to rebels were often considered collaborators and subject to ambush. On the other hand, the highly disciplined, media-savvy rebels were almost always nonthreatening. If you were really lucky, you'd run across a straight talker like Linares in the plaza of some abandoned town, where red revolutionary graffiti exhorted government soldiers to desert the "army of the rich." It was getting there-and getting out-that presented the greatest challenge.

But a whole new dynamic exists in the New El Salvador, and I wasn't sure what to expect as I rode out to the colonial city of Quetzaltepeque, just west of Guazapa, to look for the maras. Once a frequent dumping ground for the death squads, the city remains one of El Salvador's most dangerous, the scene of ongoing turf battles between local clickas, or cliques, of Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18, gangs born on the streets of L.A.'s MacArthur Park area in the 1980s. The walls along Calle Urrutia, the city's main drag, are smothered in gang graffiti, which include several memorials to slain homies. I directed my driver to follow the rutted back streets along the city's eastern edge, 18th Street territory, but drug dealers greeted us with icy stares at every corner, and it looked too dicey to attempt a conversation.

So we headed instead to the Las Palmas neighborhood, a stronghold of the Mara Salvatrucha on the south side of town, where the paved streets turned to dirt and single-story homes abutted a coffee grove. There, we came upon a thin man with a goatee in his mid-twenties dressed in a sleeveless white T-shirt, his black hair slicked back to a ducktail. To my surprise, he introduced himself in perfect L.A. Spanglish. "Hey man, soy Giovanni Castro," he said, extending a hand attached to a sinewy, tattooed arm. "But you can call me Wito. That's what the homies call me here."

Wito fled the country at the age of twelve, he said, after death squads dragged his mother from a local movie theater and murdered her. "They cut her hands and arms off," he said. Wito eventually found his way to Los Angeles, traveling alone by freight train through Tapachula, Mexico, and on to the border town of Nogales. Once in L.A., Wito hooked up with a Latin pandilla-or gang-called White Fence and made a living selling drugs on the corners of West Hollywood. He was arrested for shooting a rival dealer who had shaken him down, stripping him of twenty-six hits of angel dust. "The guy put a gun to my head and took my drugs. So I went around the corner, got my piece, and shot him." I listened with studied nonchalance, as though Wito

were telling me about a movie he'd just seen. Wito was deported after serving five years in prison, including a stint at Folsom. With seven siblings and two daughters still living in the L.A. area, Wito hoped to find his way back there. "I just need 400 bucks to get to T.J.," he said with an expectant air, as if I might be willing-or able-to. help him out. "I got friends there who can get me across."

Wito's story is typical of the thousands of Salvadoran gang members who learned the ropes on American city streets. They were refugees who fled right-wing violence in the 1980s or children of those refugees. While the wealthy packed their kids off to condos and private schools in Miami or San Francisco to wait out the war, children of the poor who stole across the border were often left with a single working parent or sometimes no parent at all, largely abandoned to the streets once they reached the States. They learned gang rites at a young age, inhabiting a world within our borders that is almost completely hidden from our view. As anti-immigrant sentiments reached a fever pitch in the mid1990s, Congress broadened the range of criminal acts that could result in expulsion, producing a surge in deportations to El Salvador. Salvadoran jails are overflowing, and local authorities have no choice but to give the deportados a fresh chance once they return home, since they have no criminal record in El Salvador. Often speaking little Spanish and with few hopes of finding gainful employment, the deportees quickly find themselves immersed in a culture of drugs and gangs remarkably similar to the one they left behind in the States.

Wito had hoped to leave gang life when he returned to El Salvador in 1997, but he was forced to join forces with the Mara Salvatrucha-or M.S.-after local 18th Street cliques decided his L.A. affiliation with White Fence made him a de facto enemy. "They'll kill me if they find me in 18th territory," he said. As we spoke, a number of young M.S.'ers gathered round to take in the curious spectacle of Wito speaking broken English to a gringo reporter. Carlos Alejandro, a husky eighteen-year-old wearing a White Sox cap and baggy, calflength jeans, pulled down his sweat sock to reveal a nasty, purplish welt above his right ankle-a gunshot wound inflicted by 18th Street maras two weeks earlier. "They ambushed us from behind that tree," Carlos said, pointing to a tall locust just over Wito's shoulder. "They infiltrate through the cafetal (coffee grove) and attack us."

Tit-for-tat warfare among the maras undoubtedly accounts for the preponderance of gang casualties. But resurgent death squads-with names like the Voice of the People and the New White Hand-have claimed credit for a number of executions of gang leaders in the past few years. The anonymous communiques issued by the grupos de exterminio, as the new "social cleansing" squadrons have come to be called, bear a remarkable resemblance in their patriotic discourse to those that followed right-wing death squad slayings during the war. Then, victims were dragged from their homes in the dead of night by hooded gunmen, their disfigured bodies reappearing days later bearing unmistakable signs of cruel interrogations. Today's groups have little use for intelligence gathering; they forgo the torture sessions and proceed directly to the tiro de gracia-a clean shot delivered to the back of the head. Some of the most recent victims had been spearheading efforts to steer their cliques away from drugs and violence, suggesting that organized crime may be attempting to keep the gangs isolated and dependent on their profitable network for weapons and narcotics.

Even when no communiques follow the mysterious shootings, the careful selection of targets-and the efficiency with which the victims are dispatched-have fueled fears that criminal elements within the police or private security companies may be moonlighting as contract killers. "You live with the fear that la Sombra Negra (death squads; literally, the Black Shadow) can come to get you at any moment," Wito said. "The police put the hoods on and come out to kill. It's the police who enter here; they are the death squads."

It's not only the pandilleros who fear the reactivation of the death squads. Progressive priests and other intellectuals who were targeted in the 1980s worry that the organized killing could once again be turned in their direction. "Now they are latent," one Jesuit activist told me, referring to politically motivated death squads. "But that which is latent could become active."

Street gangs were a feature of El Salvador's urban landscape for some years prior to the war's end. But armed only with knives and machetes, and with little access to illegal drugs, these gangs were scattered, small-time outfits with limited appeal and less power. During the FMLN's offensive on San Salvador in 1989, gangs in the tough working-class slums of the capital got their first taste of full-fledged combat when they joined the rebels' ill-fated call for a broad insurrection. "The maras saw the Front as a rebel group that stood up against the repression," said Rocko, a softspoken former gang member and ex-guerrilla with a wispy mustache and emaciated frame. Now thirty years old, Rocko has set up a small foundation to channel funds from foreign NGOs into work programs for gang members seeking to escape the violence. I spent an afternoon talking with him in an overgrown garden behind the temporary quarters of his organization. Already a gang veteran back in the mid-1980s, Rocko was tapped by the FMLN to identify and recruit potential guerrillas from among the capital's street toughs. "We knew the territory and could serve as guides at any given moment. We identified with the rebellion. After all, we were all rebels."

That sense of identification may help account for the vast proliferation of gangs in La post-guerra. Just about everything having to do with Salvadoran gang culture-from the graffiti maras scrawl on city walls and tattoo on their faces to the guns and violence that underlie their rituals-suggests the lurking presence of sublimated revolution. But when the guerrilla leaders laid down their weapons and joined the political process, their new role as loyal opposition obliged them to forsake the country's youth-one of their core constituencies and nearly 50 percent of El Salvador's population. Under the free-market policies urged by international lending agencies and adopted by the National Republican Alliance, plans to create ample educational, recreational, and employment opportunities for teens have largely evaporated. Youngsters have been left to fend for themselves in a new world without signposts, where local traditions are rapidly succumbing to an entire zeitgeist of imported food, music, and fashion.

More and more, Salvadorans are finding their daily nourishment at gleaming new convenience stores that appear to have been uprooted from Anywhere, U.S.A., and magically plunked down amid the wild elephant grass of El Salvador's tropical

squalor. The shops come replete with piped-in hip-hop, Bunn-omatic serve-yourself coffee, and Subway sandwich counters (with step-by-step hints to help bewildered first-timers select their combination of meat, cheese, bread, and garnishes). The bustling Esso Tiger-marts do offer features that distinguish them from their North American cousins: prominent displays of vodka, aguardiente, and rum, and shotgun-toting security guards, who are often called upon to engage bandits and gangs in pitched parking-lot battles.

The guerrillas' goal of recarving El Salvador's pie to include a greater cut for the masses now seems like a distant, naive dream. The old landed oligarchy has mutated into a new cabal of wealthy bankers and industrialists, with the usual suspects jumping on the country's highly profitable postwar wave of privatization. Meanwhile, 30 percent of the country's workforce is underemployed, and nearly 25 percent of the population live in "absolute" poverty. Young Salvadorans who find themselves on the outside looking in have been primed by MTV culture to embrace that other big U.S. export: street gangs. "The majority of those deported were maras who had been hardened in American jails," Rocko said. "Those who came from the States brought with them their organization-and the same dress and mannerin the movies. They attracted the attention of kids who were hanging out, looking for someone they could look up to."

As the Mara Salvatrucha and the Calle 18 came to El Salvador, they quickly grew into national organizations, with "branch offices" across the country. Since many of the deportees returned to the same remote war zones their parents had fled in the 1980s, they spread U.S. urban gang culture deep into rural communities, creating satellite cells dependent on the larger city-based outfits for drugs, weapons, and directives. Like a series of corporate mergers, the old homegrown neighborhood gangs-with names like The Roosters, Mao Mao, and Baby Gangwere forced into clickas affiliated with either the M.S. or the 18th Street. Today, nearly every city and town in El Salvador is carved up into an intricate patchwork of rival cliques, nearly all pertaining to, or otherwise dependent on, the two archrivals from L.A.

"What has us really worried now is the flood of drugs flowing into the country," said Rocko. "Since 1995, the country's been awash in crack." That year, according to police sources, the Colombian cartels began to insist on paying "in trade" rather than with cash for rights to refuel their northbound aircraft on the dirt strips that service large plantations strung out along Central America's highlands and coastal plains. To convert the drugs to cash, hacienda owners, corrupt customs agents, and others linked to the Colombian trade were obliged to increase sharply local demand for cocaine. "El crack has accelerated the violence among the maras tremendously," said Rocko. "But on the national level, no one seems to care."

Drug trafficking is not on the agenda."

Along with scattered private efforts like Rocko's, progressive elements within the Catholic Church have been spearheading efforts to channel the gangs' raw energy in a more positive direction. To diffuse tensions, clergy and lay workers have brought leaders from rival cliques together, offering workshops in car mechanics, furniture

making, and word processing.

One night in San Salvador's working-class district of Ilopango, parish lay workers arranged for me to meet with an articulate gang leader named Murra. At twenty-two, Murra was already a nine-year veteran of the hundred-strong Trident clique-an 18th Street ally that controls a square mile of urban turf surrounded by hostile chapters of the Mara Salvatrucha. Murra sported none of the wild graffiti usually tattooed across the foreheads, chins, and forearms of Salvadoran gangbangers. Such tattoos serve to bind gang members together and distinguish them from rivals, creating a kind of artificial tribalism in the absence of the ethnic differences that have fueled conflicts in places like the Balkans or Central Africa. Evidently, Murra had staked out a more thoughtful position than most of his peers on the use of tattoos. "It's an immediate giveaway to los perros (the dogs)," he said, referring to the police. Murra pointed to his single tattoo: a small, three-dotted triangular formation etched just above the knuckle on one finger. "It's the Trident-drugs, sex, and rock and roll," he clarified. "Only now it's hip-hop. You know, la vida loca."

We sat on a bench in the pale glow of a barren light bulb under the tin-roof eaves of the parish house. The sky thundered and a torrential rain broke loose, soaking our boots while puddles the size of small lakes spread across the dirt courtyard. Murra's darting eyes kept a close watch on the street from beneath the visor of a Philadelphia Eagles cap. "We're in enemy territory here," he explained. The last time Murra came to the church, about a month earlier, his presence was detected by M.S. lookouts. They closed off the quadrant of single-story cementblock houses and fired shots into the church grounds. Murra scrambled into the parish office and phoned his comrades, who arrived within fifteen minutes in two separate caravans to extricate him.

The enforcement of gang turf in San Salvador is ferocious, leaving the maras virtual prisoners within their own neighborhoods. To move beyond his own clique's zone of control, which lay twenty blocks away, Murra said he had to either hop a bus or assemble a posse of at least two dozen armed comrades, deployed military-style along both sides of the street. Even taking the bus presupposed a certain risk. I met several pandilleros who had been seriously wounded-or who themselves had inflicted serious wounds-in the kind of shoot-outs that erupt weekly aboard city buses. In fact, Murra committed his first murder at the age of thirteen while riding a bus, when he knifed a huanaco-a member of the Mara Salvatrucha.

"I felt joy and sadness," Murra told me. "I had killed my first. But then I knew I was no longer safe walking on the street. You live with the fear they're going to do the same thing to you." I casually asked how many he had killed in his nine years with Trident. "Probably ten," he said, between gang rivals and local street dealers who failed to pay their "taxes." Murra paused for a moment, then added: "That's not counting the ones I left agonizing on the ground." Murra's stature in the clique grew with each murder, until he emerged a few years ago as its undisputed leader.

Trident members pooled their money, gradually acquiring an arsenal of increasingly potent weapons: pistols, hand grenades, shotguns, Uzi submachine guns. "In this

country, it's easy to buy guns," he said. "You see the news every night-the deaths inflicted each day by heavy caliber weapons. These are the guns that remained here after the war. First we had la guerra. Now it's la post-guerra."

Lately, as the father of two young children, Murra had begun to wish for a chance to start over. "If someone had been there when I was younger to offer advice, I wouldn't have gotten involved," he sighed. After he began meeting with Ilopango's evangelizing laity, he had tried to keep a low profile with the gang, counseling his underlings to forswear violence. He was waking up early to get to his minimum-wage job on the assembly line of a foreign-run maquila. But Murra knew he had traveled too far down a certain road to be able to retrace his steps; like the Mafia and the CIA, gang life is forever. "If someone wants to leave and he knows too much about the gang, we kill him." Murra shrugged, implicitly acknowledging his own predicament. "When he leaves he'll start to talk. We can't let him out alive."

When the time came to evacuate Murra from the barrio, a lay worker in his early twenties named Noe went out into the rain to look for a taxi. The cab's windshield wipers slapped back and forth as we drove through the damp, deserted streets, past high cement walls topped with razor wire and shards of broken glass. Someone had painted an enormous English slogan-WELCOME HOMEBOY-which ran along one wall for nearly an entire block. "It's only because of guys like Murra that we can walk the streets here," said Noe smiling and giving Murra an affectionate pat on the knee. "They provide protection for us." We left Murra under a street lamp at a corner where a dirt road lined by walled-in houses branched off and receded into deep shadows thrown by swaying palms and locust trees. Before he got out of the car, Murra asked if I might send him a Spanish language copy of Bound by Honor, a kiss-and-tell Mob testimonial he had heard about, when I got back to the States. I told him I would do my best. "Good luck," he said, offering a firm handshake. He turned and vanished into the night.

"He's got to be careful," Noe whispered. "He's a marked man." The body of another gang leader from Ilopango had recently turned up one morning with his thumbs bound behind his back and a single bullet delivered to the head. "The squads investigate their targets thoroughly," Noe said. "You see them cruise the streets in new cars with polarized windows. They're from the private security companies. They know where they're going to find their cliente." The same people-high ranking officers," Noe called them had also taken a dim view of Murra's work evangelizing among the gangs. Anonymous death threats had been mailed to the parish, and on a recent night Noe was intercepted on a dark street by a surly man with a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. "You dogs better watch out," the man snarled. "We know who you are. We're keeping tabs on you." Such encounters had convinced Noe that elements of the old guard were operating to keep El Salvador's youth steeped in gang violence. "They don't want the gangs to disappear," Noe said. "It's a distraction, a big screen to hide the huge theft they're committing from the eyes of the people."

It stands to reason that reactionary forces might see the perpetuation of gang warfare as a useful mechanism for blunting whatever danger of revolution might remain. In a single generation, El Salvador's urban youth, who formed the backbone

of one of the most powerful revolutionary movements in the history of Latin America, have lowered their sights from molding a socialist utopia to enforcing gang rule within the circumscribed perimeters of their respective barrios. The far right, in contrast, has remained largely intact, using both legal and extralegal means to pound fresh nails into the coffin of reform.⁴

Although it was only nine o'clock, Noe deemed my own exit from Ilopango too risky. After sunset, bandas of former rebels and soldiers emerge to kidnap and loot along the lonely two-lane highway that separates the barrio from the center of San Salvador; it was best to stay put until morning. Through the course of a sweaty, sleepless night, I lay in bed with my ears straining at every creaking branch and passing footstep, cursing myself for letting the cab driver know exactly where I would be staying. In the new El Salvador, you never know who might be willing to trade such information for a few extra pesos.

Perhaps no single person better embodies El Salvador's long slide into twilight than a seventeen-year-old gang leader and hired assassin named Gustavo Adolfo, better known by his suggestive gang name, El Directo "The Direct One." Since his arrest in January 1999, El Directo has emerged as a dark celebrity, the subject of lurid hip-hop verse and sensational tabloid headlines. According to court officials, El Directo was the prime orchestrator of a two-year wave of terror that swept across the overgrown lots and graffiti-smothered blocks of the eastern city of San Miguel. He is said to have hacked apart street urchins with machetes and pickaxes, disposing of their bodies in a communal well. And he allegedly lured a series of schoolgirls behind a gleaming new Miami-style shopping mall, where he led his Mara Salvatrucha comrades in ceremonial gang rapes that ended with the execution of the victims.

El Directo's penchant for murder put him out on that murky, ill-defined frontier of Salvadoran crime where gang violence intersects with the more calculated business of terror for profit and pandilleros graduate from street toughs to foot soldiers for organized crime. El Directo was getting money from somewhere; neighborhood kids said he never lacked for drugs or weapons. And police say that on a number of occasions, Gustavo served as a sicario—a hired gun—for an unidentified clientele. Authorities suspect El Directo of at least seventeen grisly murders—one for each year of his short life.

While covering the war back in the 1980s, I met plenty of reputed killers who justified con gusto the wholesale ideological cleansing then under way in El Salvador, even if they disavowed any direct participation in it. But when my eyes met the flat lifeless ones of Gustavo Adolfo, I sensed I was in the presence of a new sort of animal, for whom killing was a matter of simple expedience, with no more need for explanation than the imperative of eating breakfast in the morning.

"I don't mess with anyone who doesn't mess with me," El Directo said in a bored monotone barely audible over the raucous banter of other juvenile offenders wrestling outside in the prison courtyard. "Because, quite simply, those that did . . . I made them disappear."

Gustavo came to gang life the way many kids do in El Salvador. Raised by a

stepfather who sexually abused him and a suspicious mother who kept him in isolation from the rest of the household, Gustavo finally found a family when he joined the local clique of the Mara Salvatrucha at the age of eleven. He became an eager student of weapons of every sort-from assault rifles to homemade bombs-and displayed a startling disposition to put them to use, rising higher in the ranks with each successive rubout. "The weapon I used depended on where I happened to be," he said matter-of-factly, when I asked about his firearm of choice. "We stashed guns in different parts of the neighborhood." Gustavo displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of the various infantry weapons left behind from the war and the price each could fetch on the black market. "We'd buy our guns from a police agent," he said, declining to be more specific. "He would take the guns off other maras in San Miguel and sell them to us."

I was grateful to be meeting El Directo in circumstances that stripped him of the kind of power he exercised over his quarry on the streets of San Miguel. I studied the bewildering array of spiderwebs, clown faces, and gang symbols tattooed on his face, neck, and arms. A cellmate had just added a fresh addition to El Directo's body art, etching an M and an S in large Gothic letters on the back of each hand. The raw and pussy grooves hurt just to look at, and I redirected my gaze toward a distant point on the puke-green prison wall.

Attempting to explain Gustavo's ferocious behavior, a court psychologist told me this story: When his mother went to the hospital in an advanced state of labor seventeen years earlier, she rode in an ambulance bay filled with the disfigured victims of a suicidal soldier who had just pulled the pin on a grenade inside a crowded saloon. Curiously, when police arrested El Directo at his home last year, he lunged for a similar fragmentation grenade he kept on a shelf in his room, perhaps intending to depart this world the same way he had entered it. "This is the fruit of a generation who grew up with the war," the psychologist said.

That war is in the past, and the United States has taken a considerably lower profile than back in the 1980s, when we were pumping \$1 million a day into El Salvador, when every utterance of our ambassador was quoted prominently in the local press and the State Department drew up plans to move the old earthquakedamaged embassy to a vastly expanded new facility on San Salvador's western outskirts. The U.S. mission occupied the sprawling new compound in 1992, just as the war was ending. Built to wartime specifications and intended to house a legion of bureaucrats, spooks, and military advisers, much of the complex would now sit empty were it not for USAID's decision to warehouse many of its regional functionaries in the new embajada.

I passed through a series of security checks and air-locked doors into the silent, climate-controlled sterility of the embassy. On the fifth floor I met with Marjorie Coffin, a cheery State Department spokeswoman, who gushed over San Salvador's prodigious road and building construction projects and the wonderful changes under way in postwar El Salvador. To get a look at the new face of American aid to El Salvador, Coffin urged me to check out "New Horizons '99"-the ongoing civic action exercises out east in Chilanguera, where two-week rotations from the U.S. Army

Reserves were putting up a new school and rechanneling the river in the town hardest hit by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. I decided to follow up on Coffin's suggestion.

With the Chaparrastique volcano looming in the distance in a perfect Fujiesque cone, giant earthmovers painted in green-and-black camouflage lumbered across the mudflats, scooping monstrous rocks from the bed of the Chilanguera River. A cluster of African-American engineers in yellow hard hats and olive fatigues-"Bravo Company, sir. 467th Engineering Battalion, Greenville, Mississippi. What can we do for you?"-huddled around a topographical map, trying to square its obsolete representation of the meandering river with the hilly terrain of scrub and blooming jacarandas that Mitch had rearranged around them. Everything was going fine; no incidents to report, and the locals were friendly. "Wish we could understand them though," said one as he pointed over his shoulder at a group of women standing knee-deep in the river, scrubbing away at laundry on the rocks. The soldiers' de facto translator, a reservist from Puerto Rico, had gone home with the last rotation, leaving the Americans clueless as they went about their good works. "We wave and smile, and they wave and smile."

I waded across the waterway to a mud-and-stick hut perched on the opposite bank. Barefoot children chased baby chicks around the clearing amid peals of laughter. An emaciated man dressed in rags put down a bucket of water he had just hauled up from the well and sauntered over to introduce himself. "It's good, what they're doing," said Perfecto Ramos, nodding across the way at the Mississippians. "Only thing, they don't understand anything we say. Maybe you could ask if they'd push the bank up a little more on this side? I'm afraid the ground is too low here and it will flood again."

Ramos said he and his family had survived Mitch by climbing to higher ground as the Chilanguera overflowed its banks and swept over the town. But he wasn't so lucky fourteen years before, when a U.S.-supplied Cessna spotter plane rocketed his singleroom dwelling. "We lived up on that hill over there." Ramos pointed to a distant ridgeline. Five members of his family were killed that day, including a daughter and three nephews. The date rolled straight off his tongue: April 18, 1985.

"We thank God things have changed," Ramos said. Then his face darkened. "But now we have a new problem-los delincuentes." Armed cattle rustlers roam the hills now, hauling away farm animals with impunity. "We don't know who they are, because the police never come here to investigate." Ramos said he had begun tethering his goats and pigs at night to the poles on his open-air porch, hoping to save his animals from the bandits.

On Guazapa three weeks before, I had heard similar tales of cuatreros rounding up animals from pastures at night, loading them on large flatbeds, taking them off to blackmarket buyers and clandestine slaughterhouses. It seemed cattle rustling was rapidly developing into a national industry. Fearing the rustlers would kidnap their animals in the dead of night, farmers were beginning to share their living quarters with chickens, pigs, and cows. But even then, masked gunmen were kicking in doors, using the occasion to take away not only the animals but their owners as well. "No

one opposes them," one peasant had told me, "because they have the guns."

I slogged back over the river and communicated Ramos's message to the Greenville engineers. They cheerfully agreed to rework the bank. "So that's what he was trying to tell us." I chose not to mention the bandits lurking in the hills around them; I didn't want to give them any thoughts about oiling up their M-16s. But despite the indubitable service the reservists were performing for the people of Chilanguera, I found something vaguely disturbing about their presence. Or perhaps what bothered me more was the timing of their presence. I had the feeling the C-5 Galaxy time machines that dropped them from the sky had overshot by twenty years. I wondered what might have been if we had come here with the tractors and backhoes two decades back, when it really could have counted. And if we had left the guns at home. Maybe then there could have been a New El Salvador after all.

Photographs by Donna DeCesare. Her ten-year project on gang deportees will be on exhibit in September 2000 at the Visa Pour L'Image Photojournalism festival in Perpignan, France.

1 During the civil war, five rebel armies espousing a range of leftist philosophies and distinct military doctrines joined under the umbrella of the FMLN.

2 Recent revelations in the unfolding LAPD scandal indicate that officers in the Rampart Division may have planted evidence on Salvadoran gang members to bring about their deportation. Rampart officers are also under investigation for improperly turning over suspects to the INS in order to remove them as possible witnesses to police wrongdoing.

3 In March, the FMLN won a congressional plurality, but only 38 percent of public voted to vote. Such a low turnout indicates a widespread lack of faith in any party's ability to break the country's vicious cycle of poverty and rising crime.

4 In fact, the FMLN-disillusioned with the slow pace of reform and the ongoing rightwing violence-is rumored to have counseled the Irish Republican Army to hold on to its weapons for as long as possible, lest its adversaries renege on peace-deal promises, as has happened in El Salvador.

Scott Wallace covered the wars in Central America throughout the 1980s as a correspondent for CBS News Radio, Newsweek, the London Independent, and the Guardian. He is now a producer for CNN's newsmagazine show, CNN & Time.

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