INTRODUCTION

In 1932, security forces commanded by General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez killed roughly twenty-five thousand peasants and workers in two rural provinces and a few towns in the western part of El Salvador. Five decades later, between 1978 and 1991, agents and allies of the Salvadoran government killed an additional fifty thousand civilians, from a population of roughly five million.[1] Victims included labor organizers, members of opposition political parties, priests and Catholic lay activists, teachers, and members of nascent guerrilla cells. Most of the victims were either poor people or people who worked with the poor.

Some were killed openly by the internal security forces, including the National Guard, the Treasury Police, and the National Police, during raids on communities that were suspected of harboring "subversives." More often, the killers were "heavily armed men in civilian clothes," usually driving unmarked vehicles. Such "death squads" removed people from their homes, usually at night, and took them away. Sometimes victims were killed summarily, but often they were tortured first. Bodies were then dumped along the highways or in well-known dumping grounds, such as "El Playon," a lava field northwest of San Salvador.[2]

The security forces embellished their killings to heighten fear. Victims were often beheaded. The names or initials of various death squads were carved into bodies, and the killers left hand-written notes warning that the same fate awaited other "subversives." Torture left unmistakable marks on cadavers: limbs, teeth, fingernails, eyes, tongues, breasts, and genitals were removed or lacerated; bodies were burned with fire or with acids that literally removed the features of victims' faces. In the capital city of San Salvador, morning commuters would find severed limbs, and even heads, at bus stops and on board buses. Lest anyone doubt the national scope of the death squads, families of victims sometimes found that their loved ones' heads and bodies had been dumped in separate departments of the country. Women victims were often raped; so, less frequently, were men.

As state violence escalated between 1977 and 1979, leftist popular organizations mobilized large numbers of new supporters to demand a stop to the killing and the release of leaders and members who were in prison or had disappeared. Guerrilla organizations of the left responded with an intensified campaign of assassinations and kidnappings. The state struck back, leading to a spiral of eye-for-an-eye retaliation by both sides.

Violence intensified in late 1979 and 1980. By the later months of 1980, government forces were killing civilians at a rate of a thousand per month (Socorro Jurídico Cristiano 1984). Uniformed troops carried out most of the killing at this point, eclipsing the work of clandestine death squads. Particular violence was directed against political leaders who advocated reform or moderation, or who negotiated solutions to the growing political crisis. The security forces, or death squads operating in close cooperation with government forces, killed the attorney general, the archbishop of San Salvador, and several reformist military officers. In November 1980, security forces killed the entire top leadership of the non-guerrilla left just hours before a scheduled press conference at which they were to present a proposal for a negotiated solution. Hundreds of other moderate, reform-minded citizens were killed. An army colonel who had been chosen to represent a reformist movement of junior army officers narrowly escaped two attacks on his life in 1980. Three of the reformist junior officers were themselves killed by hardline colleagues, and other military officers who favored reforms or had resisted orders to kill civilians were attacked or threatened.

The response to this onslaught was to some extent predictable. Mass popular organizations, which had been the primary form of organization by the left, broke up during the course of 1980. Many of their members either went into hiding or joined the armed struggle against the government. Moderate political opponents of the military who had been advocating reforms within the existing institutional framework began to align themselves with the revolutionaries. Meanwhile, the guerrilla organizations carried out a campaign to assassinate members of pro-government paramilitary organizations, killing over a thousand of them during the year. By late 1980, the opposition had committed itself to civil war. The disparate guerrilla groups unified to become the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which waged an increasingly successful military campaign against the government, nearly defeating official forces in the field by late 1983.

During 1981, government killing hit its peak. Government forces committed a number of massacres in which hundreds of civilians died. The military turned to indiscriminate violence against civilians in areas of the countryside in which the FMLN enjoyed support. In many communities no one was spared, as army commanders treated even children—born or unborn—as threats to the state.

During lulls in the combat, or in areas where the FMLN was less effective, government forces continued targeted repression against civilians suspected of favoring the guerrillas. Such killings were particularly intense in the western part of the country, where the National Police used the facilities of a meat packing plant to behead victims (as many as 34 per week were found beheaded in Santa Ana province alone), and in some cases to grind up their bodies so they could be washed down the drain.[3] Around sixteen thousand civilians died

in 1981, the vast majority at the hands of the military (Socorro Jurídico Cristiano 1984).

Government violence gradually ebbed during 1982 and 1983, to roughly half the levels of 1980 and 1981. Thereafter, the killing declined dramatically, but to some extent killing was replaced by imprisonment and torture: horrible, elaborate tortures of civilians continued to be reported throughout the late 1980s. Moreover, government killing was never eliminated, despite intense international pressures. The bombings of a labor union and a human rights organization and the assassinations of six Jesuits and their housekeepers in late 1989 demonstrated that forces of the state were still inclined to murder, despite the international and domestic political costs of doing so.

In per capita terms, Salvadoran state terror was among the most severe in the hemisphere. The 42,171 killed by government forces during the six peak years of violence from 1978 through 1983 (Socorro Jurídico Cristiano 1984) constituted close to 1 percent of the population. The impact of the violence is even greater than this 1 percent figure suggests because deaths were concentrated among young people, especially men, increasing the likelihood that any given family has experienced a political killing or knows a family that has. In addition to those who were murdered, thousands more were "disappeared."[4] The only Latin American nation that may have matched El Salvador in the number of state murders per capita is Guatemala, where death squads and rural counterinsurgency sweeps killed between 50,000 and 75,000 between 1978 and 1985, and where the total death toll from thirty years of civil war has been estimated at 100,000 dead and 38,000 disappeared (Bowen 1987, 42; Brockett 1991, 59; Krueger and Enge 1985, 2; Simon 1987, 14).[5]

How can we account for mass murder by the Salvadoran state? Most readers will find it difficult to conceive of the mentality and spirit that enable individual soldiers to torture, slaughter, and mutilate defenseless civilians, whatever the ideological justification. Viewing the violence analytically, as collective behavior, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that it was irrational. Though state terrorism clearly intimidated and suppressed some kinds of opposition at some points along the way, it just as clearly motivated many people to raise arms against the state, filling them with grim determination to take revenge. As David Mason and Dale Krane (1989) have shown, when state violence becomes sufficiently intense and random, it becomes entirely rational for individuals to take arms to defend themselves.[6] The state can create its own enemies, and by late 1983, the government of El Salvador had created so many that it faced serious risk of military defeat. Only massive U.S. assistance allowed the Armed Forces of El Salvador (FAES) to turn the tide and achieve a stalemate against the FMLN.

The conventional view in the social sciences is that state violence is a rational response to opposition. When social demands upon the state exceed the

state's resources, or when opposition takes the form of violence and begins to threaten the state's control of society, then the state will logically respond with violence (Gurr 1986; Hibbs 1973; Jackson et al. 1978; O'Donnell 1978). This view has much in common with "realist" theories of international relations that focus on how and when states use force against one another: the challenge for the state lies in correctly calibrating its preparations for and use of violence to deter its enemies without goading them into making even more dangerous threats. By analogy to international relations theory, the domestic security dilemma facing the state is that failure to respond adequately to a threat may encourage its enemies; yet overreaction may produce more numerous and more radicalized internal enemies in the future (Hibbs 1973; Jackson et al. 1978; Mason and Krane 1989).

This analysis certainly fits well with some aspects of violence in El Salvador. State violence clearly increased in response to greater popular opposition. Moreover, it appears that in some ways, repression had the effect of deterring social opposition: when the opposition FMLN tried to trigger a mass insurrection in January 1981, after more than a year of intense state terror, they found that most of the urban population was too frightened to take part. Yet, just as clearly, state violence had the effect of intensifying opposition to the state in many rural areas, generating a popular base for the FMLN guerrillas, which kept them supplied with food, shelter, intelligence, and recruits, resources that, combined with international assistance from various sources, enabled them to fight the FAES to a draw in a prolonged war of attrition. Though successful at certain points, state repression in El Salvador was on the whole counterproductive.

One problem with applying a rational actor, opposition/reaction model to state violence in the domestic political setting is that this approach assumes a priori that the state has enemies it must deter with force. Why assume this? How would such a situation develop, and what measures could a state take along the way to prevent it from developing? States, even military or authoritarian ones, have choices between coercive and noncoercive responses to opposition, as illustrated by the Mexican state's alternatingly coercive and ameliorative response to the Zapatista uprising of January 1994. The Salvadoran military-led state of the 1930s through the early 1980s could have appeased the opposition, made concessions, allowed moderate opposition elements to take power, or at least attempted to channel popular mobilization into state-controlled (corporatist) organizations in which the popular sectors would exchange political freedom for socioeconomic benefits. Why was it so consistently coercive instead?

This question becomes especially salient with respect to El Salvador because state violence intensified most rapidly after October 1979, when a reformist coup organized by junior army officers removed the military president from office, brought reformist civilians into the government, and attempted to placate

the popular opposition through major redistributive and political reforms. The junior officer corps, led by captains, strongly supported reformist measures, rejected the corruption and brutality of the past, and sought to bring change-oriented civilians into power. Their selection of junta members after the coup and the policies outlined in their "Proclama" were shaped by the Jesuit scholars from the University of Central America. Despite their reformist goals, despite their control of virtually all the barracks in the country at the time of the coup, and despite initially positive steps by the new government to implement reforms and regain popular legitimacy for the state, other state affiliates (the security forces and intelligence units) continued to torture, assassinate, and mutilate thousands of citizens, ensuring that a significant minority of the population viewed the state as so illegitimate that they would wage war against it.

This combination of policies was, to put it mildly, contradictory, and provides clear evidence that we need to avoid thinking of the state as a single, rational entity. Different elements of the Salvadoran state were working at cross purposes, and the elements that favored violence won the day. Moreover, state violence, directed against reformist officials within the state as well as against the population at large, played an important role in driving reformists from office and vetoing their strategy. The targeting of violence against civilian and military reformist leaders, against relatively moderate opponents who were seeking a nonviolent solution, and against beneficiaries of the socioeconomic reforms that were carried out in March 1980 all suggest that state violence was not only a response to opposition but also a means of competition for state power, a way of blocking reformist impulses and reformist leaders. All of this suggests that to understand why El Salvador suffered such atrocious violence, we need to look closely at the politics *within* the state, to understand why moderation died and how coercion became the state's predominant strategy.

One explanation for this bias toward coercion has to do with the economic and social structure of the country. A number of scholars have noted an elective affinity between economies based on export agriculture and internal repression. Repression is particularly likely to occur where modern export agriculture was established through expropriation of communal or municipal lands. Peasants displaced from their lands have little alternative but to work for low wages, helping to make production of export crops highly profitable for large landowners. The result is a highly stratified society in which rural workers are extremely poor and agrarian elites are extremely wealthy. Such elites have vested interests in continuing to repress and exploit rural workers and accumulate sufficient economic and political power to demand that the state continue to deliver the needed levels of repression while eschewing economic reforms (Brockett 1991; Carleton 1989; McClintock 1985a).

This structural explanation for state repression fits the El Salvador experience pretty well. Nonetheless, it is not fully satisfying for two reasons. First,

this argument fails to examine *how* conservative economic elites impose their preferences on the state. There were, in fact, many junctures during the 1932 to 1979 period during which strategic elites within the military seemed poised to carry out major reforms in an effort to gain greater popular legitimacy and move away from coercion as a basis for governance. Yet these efforts failed every time, and reversals of reformism were accompanied by greater repression. Clearly the military state achieved little autonomy from social elites. The question is, why? How did social elites succeed in suppressing alternative models of governance favored by strategic elites within the state, especially when they held themselves apart from overt political participation?

Understanding the relationship between social elites and the military becomes all the more central when we consider the peace accords signed in El Salvador in January 1992, in which the civilian government of the National Republican Alliance (ARENA), representing the country's conservative elites, committed itself to radically reduce the legal powers and independence of the military, purge the military of violent and corrupt officers, dismantle the existing military-controlled internal security forces, exclude the army from responsibility for maintaining internal order, create a completely new civilian police force designed to safeguard the rights and safety of citizens, and incorporate the erstwhile guerrillas into the political life of the country as a legal party. These major reforms were accompanied by the creation of a new State Council for Human Rights (Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos) and modifications to the judicial system to make it more professional and less subject to political (and military) control. Taken all together, the agreements, whose implementation was supervised by an observer mission of the United Nations, greatly reduced the state's freedom to use coercion.

The decision to abandon coercion is all the more remarkable when we consider that the ARENA party originated in a conservative political movement that organized death squads and advocated a hardline response to leftist and reformist opposition. Why would a government of this party, funded by members of the conservative social elite who had resisted military reform for decades, sign away many of the coercive powers of the state? To reconcile this event with structuralist explanations of state violence, we must either show that the structure of the Salvadoran economy changed in some fundamental ways during the 1980s or consider the possibility that it was not so much the interests of social elites but rather the nature of their relationship to the state that generated the propensity for state violence.

To account for all of these anomalies, I find it helpful to disassemble the state analytically, examining state factions and their relationships with each other and with different components of civil society. A central theme of this book is the notion that the Salvadoran military state was essentially a protection racket: the military earned the concession to govern the country (and pil-

lage the state) in exchange for its willingness to use violence against class enemies of the country's relatively small but powerful economic elite. To put it another way, state violence was a *currency of relations* between state and nonstate elites. In the pages that follow, I trace how military leaders used conspicuous violence against civilians from the popular sectors in order to manipulate economic elites and preempt them from challenging the authority of the military. For almost five decades this strategy proved successful in maintaining civilian elite acquiescence to military rule. This strategy had costs, however. The mercenary relationship of some state agencies to economic elites and the use of violence for political manipulation cut both ways: private elites retained enough allies within the state to mobilize increased state violence at crucial moments, vetoing socioeconomic concessions by reformist military or civilian state elites. The state as a whole proved unable to break out of the protection racket model of state/society relations at the elite level because the leaders and agencies that were most involved in the violence developed vested interests in continuing a repressive strategy. This was to prove the military's undoing: by failing to achieve broader legitimacy and by using extreme and provocative violence against regime opponents, the military helped create an enemy that it could not defeat. In the end, the military forfeited its privileges, even those it had enjoyed within the nominally civilian-controlled governments of the 1980s, because it failed to defeat the FMLN.

This analysis points to a cautiously optimistic prognosis for Salvadoran politics in the short and long terms: the failure of military coercion, the development of the private sector elite into a political class (through the formation and electoral success of ARENA), and the institutional reforms achieved under the peace accords appear, in combination, to have broken the military's protection racket. Thus the inter-elite dynamic that helped fuel state violence and suppress economic compromise has been dampened, and the civilian economic elite has agreed to institutional reforms that compel it, at least for the time being, to rely on legitimacy rather than coercion to maintain power.

Many observers sympathetic to the FMLN have been puzzled that after a decade of civil war and thousands sacrificed to a revolutionary cause, the leadership of the strongest guerrilla insurgency in the Western Hemisphere would lay down their guns at the peak of their military power in exchange for institutional reforms—and relatively little else. Indeed, during the negotiations the FMLN placed greater emphasis on such reforms than on socioeconomic restructuring, a strategy seemingly at odds with the Front's historically Marxist ideology. Though the future remains uncertain, I suggest that the FMLN's strategy, whatever analysis and motivations were behind it, and whatever human and economic costs it imposed, may have achieved precisely the political changes the country most needed, breaking the protection racket through force of arms, then securing lasting change in elite civil–military

relations through negotiated institutional reform. Ironically, the leftist FMLN has forced the creation of a liberal democracy more advanced in its political institutions than El Salvador's overall poverty and maldistribution of capital, land, and income would normally allow (Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Seligson and Malloy 1987).

Any case study runs the risk of generating an elaborate argument that explains only a single, probably unique, case. Moreover, single-case analysis can focus too much on process and agency while overlooking structural constraints that would be more clear in a comparative analysis (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 32–33). In this book, I attempt to compensate for these drawbacks by maintaining "comparative awareness" and by examining a long time period, which helps make structural factors and sequences of events more visible. Moreover, my broader goal in writing this book is relatively immune to the risks of being too specific, since I am not attempting to generalize from El Salvador to the world. My goal is to illustrate, through the particularities of one case, a general proposition: that to understand state violence in most settings, we need to treat institutions of the state as actors with at least some degree of autonomy of interest and action; acknowledge that the state is not a unitary actor but a collection of competing groups, institutions, and factions, with different interests, perceptions, missions, and preferences; and recognize that under certain patterns of civilian–state and civil–military relations, the use of violence against civilians can serve the interests of military/state elites, quite apart from whether mass civilian opposition actually represents an urgent threat to the state. Rather than simplifying our understanding of state violence, I am trying to make it more complex, more nuanced, more sensitive to political and institutional context. I believe El Salvador provides an example of a set of factors that should inform theory and policy more generally.

The story of intra-elite politics and state violence in El Salvador is also a story of actively harmful measures by the United States. At several points the United States carried out institutional development projects that strengthened the agencies and factions of the Salvadoran military who were most invested in the protection racket. At crucial moments, U.S. policy makers, even those putatively motivated by concerns for human rights, acted as if they did not understand that different elements of the state were acting in contradictory ways, ignoring the violent actions of hardline agencies as long as structural and formal political reforms were under way. Part of the motivation for this book, then, is to urge international actors who involve themselves in helping poor countries develop state institutions, or who want to intervene against human rights violations, to operate from a finer-grained analysis of state institutions and politics, taking into account the role of violence as a currency of political competition among elites and state agencies.

The book opens with a theoretical chapter that examines existing literature on state violence and points to the importance of a state-centered approach. It proceeds with a historical narrative, a retelling of twentieth-century Salvadoran history with an emphasis on state politics and state violence. These historical chapters demonstrate that important characteristics of state violence, such as its intensity, targeting, and timing, cannot be understood without reference to intra-state and state–civil society relations at the elite level. In the process, the chapters make a series of specific arguments about the institutional characteristics of the Salvadoran military, about the role of repressive violence as a currency of relations among state and nonstate elites, and about the barriers to reform from within a protection racket state. Chapter Two examines the consolidation of military rule in El Salvador by means of the infamous massacre of 1932, then explores the features of the military regime that followed. Chapter Three traces the failure of the military to establish a reformist/inclusionary corporatist regime between 1948 and 1976, the ongoing use of violence against the public to legitimize military rule in the eyes of landed elites, and the failure of the military either to open the political system or to carry out substantive reforms that might have helped legitimize the regime even in the absence of free elections. Chapter Four traces the dynamics of violence and intra-elite politics during the government of Carlos Romero, whose provocative but inconsistent use of violence accelerated polarization and mass opposition to his regime. Chapter Five looks in detail at the reformist coup of October 1979 through the collapse of the first junta, showing how hardline elements of the military outmaneuvered reformists, in part by using massive violence against the popular movement to undercut the credibility of reformist elites. Chapter Six continues the work of Chapter Five, tracing the dismantling of the reformist movement in the military and the intensification of the hardline project during 1980. This chapter pays particular attention to role of the high command in operating a protection racket against members of the military themselves, the civilian right, and the United States. Chapter Seven examines how the FMLN's ability to resist defeat, combined with economic and political changes brought about by the war, helped undermine the military's protection racket and create conditions for antimilitary reforms built into the peace accords.

Chapters Four through Seven are based largely on primary sources, including interviews with dozens of Salvadoran military officers—among them most of the key participants in the 1979 coup and the majority of junta members—as well as civilian officials, party politicians, former guerrilla leaders, and United States officials. I also draw on hundreds of U.S. government documents released under the Freedom of Information Act, as well as two collections comprising thousands of State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense, and National Security Council documents declassified by the Clinton administration in 1993 and 1994.[7]

This book focuses on the actions and political strategies of the Salvadoran military. In the process, it says uncharitable things about many of its members and, most especially, its leadership, whose actions were in many cases despicable. The emphasis on the state's actions may strike some readers as inequitable in light of the fact that the FMLN killed thousands of people during the 1970s and 1980s. The emphasis on state violence is not motivated by a desire to ignore or apologize for the violence of the FMLN, which was in many instances pointless and inexcusable and under all circumstances regrettable. There is a need for a critical study of the FMLN and its use of violence. This is not that study. Rather, my goal is to provide a small initial step toward correcting the bias in political science scholarship toward studying rebellion and away from studying the violence of states. States command far greater resources than do rebels, particularly for killing. As Chapter One illustrates, states have killed far more people than have rebellions, yet we know little about the factors that influence state violence. I hope this book contributes to a better understanding of why states kill, rather than defend, their own citizens.