Bring the War Home

The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America

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The paramilitary turn, in both popular culture and foreign policy, built upon decades of counterinsurgency strategy and crystallized around the loss of the Vietnam War. The public at large hesitated to engage in new wars, and members of Congress elected by the antiwar and leftist social movements of the 1960s and 1970s sought to limit presidential power to send troops into action. The War Powers Resolution, passed over President Richard Nixon's veto in 1973, set strict limits on when, how, and for how long the executive branch could send American soldiers to war. Advocates of intervention believed that waging new wars that could redeem the loss in Vietnam could stop the spread of communism. However, they faced a major obstacle in the public and legislators' reluctance to commit the country to new conflicts. Antiwar attitudes from the defeat in Vietnam softened in the 1980s, but the public remained resolutely opposed to a draft and to any tax increases needed to pay for large-scale military operations. Instead of big war, the United States increasingly fought communism through covert interventions and the support and use of U.S.-trained local counterinsurgent units.[21]

A fundamental contradiction of the Cold War was that the United States frequently allied with antidemocratic governments to carry out a foreign policy that purported to protect freedom and democracy. Containment under Presidents Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter sought to stop the spread of communism. President Ronald Reagan adopted a more aggressive roll-back policy that sought to unseat communist and leftist governments where they already held power. In practice, this meant opposing anticolonial revolutions and struggles for self-determination that swelled through the Third World in the 1970s and 1980s. Increasingly, America's attempt to protect democracy at home by preventing communism from approaching its borders resulted in the violent suppression of democratic and popular political change abroad.[22]

This contradiction employed a definition of democracy that broke a long bond between the notions of liberty and social responsibility. Instead, liberty was linked with free enterprise. Revolutions for self-determination were often deemed communist, and thus threats to be contained. Not only did this occlude a long American intellectual tradition joining democracy with social welfare—an idea codified during the New Deal, refined by the emergent discourse of human rights after World War II, and embraced in the social movements of the 1960s—but it further aligned U.S. democracy with aspirations to global dominance.[23]

Indeed, Nicaragua became a stark example of the contradiction between U.S. intervention in the name of preserving democracy and opposition to popular revolutionary movements. President Anastasio Somoza Debayle was a U.S.-supported dictator notorious for the kidnapping, torture, and assassination of his political opponents, although he was friendly to U.S. business and political interests in the region. The Somoza family had ruled Nicaragua since 1934 with U.S. military and economic support (though the Carter administration stopped aid to Somoza because of his human rights record), and many Nicaraguans suffered from poverty, illiteracy, and high infant mortality even as the Somozas amassed a fortune—as well as control of Nicaragua's banks, airline, television stations, industries, and one-third of its land. A people's movement dedicated to a leftist state and named after Augusto César Sandino, the popular leader who had opposed a U.S. occupation of Nicaragua in the 1930s, sought Somoza's overthrow. The Sandinistas hoped to free Nicaragua from the influence of U.S. government and businesses, renegotiate foreign debt, and address social inequality by

providing health care, creating jobs, instituting land reform, providing food subsidies, and supporting education. Rather than being simply communists, the Sandinistas represented a political coalition of Marxists, socialists, Catholics, and progressive capitalists.[24]

American mercenaries in Nicaragua who worked to prop up the Somoza regime arrived there through the School of the Americas, a military training institution run by the U.S. Army. Founded in the Panama Canal Zone in 1946 and later relocated to Fort Benning, Georgia, the School of the Americas worked to circulate U.S. military tactics, training, and weapons to Latin American allies, building military and police institutions through which the United States could exercise absentee regional influence.[25]

Somoza sent his son Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero to the United States in 1977 for college and military training. Somoza Portocarrero spent time at West Point and Harvard University, and then trained at Fort Leavenworth and Fort Benning. At the U.S. Army Special Forces training school in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, he met Michael Echanis, who became a mercenary soldier for the regime.[26] Echanis, a twenty-seven-year-old decorated Vietnam veteran, had a marketable skill set, according to a lengthy *Soldier of Fortune* profile. He had served in the infantry, suffering major injuries that hospitalized him for eight months; after his recovery he became an accomplished hand-to-hand fighter and prolific writer of martial arts manuals. Besides training SEALs, Army Rangers, and Special Forces units at Fort Bragg, Echanis was also a member of the *Soldier of Fortune* editorial board and was frequently pictured in its pages wearing camouflage fatigues, often in action shots.[27]

Somoza Portocarrero recruited Echanis—and another veteran, Charles Sanders—specifically to teach the skills they had learned in the Vietnam War. In 1977, Somoza Portocarrero took command of the Basic Training Infantry School (EEBI) within the elite Nicaraguan National Guard. U.S. advisors had formed the National Guard to quell the nationalist insurrection led by Sandino in the 1930s; by 1972, the U.S.-trained unit had claimed the lives of more than 30,000 of Somoza's political opponents.[28] Indeed, Somoza kept control of the National Guard even during his brief ouster as president, thus retaining control of Nicaragua itself. In a 1978 series of candid interviews given on the condition that they could be published only posthumously, Echanis told the *Los Angeles Times* that he had risen to a position of leadership within the National Guard and the EEBI. "I run all unconventional warfare training for the guard," Echanis told the reporter. "I run all operations and intelligence on counter-operations against the Sandinistas. I have a $5 million budget and I just got another $1 million and six colonels to set up a special antiterrorist intelligence division." Echanis also described his long personal war against communism. "I hate Communists for what they did to my people in Vietnam," he said. "I've got six AK-47 holes in my body."[29]

Memoirs by Nicaraguan National Guard members verify Echanis's involvement but argue that he exaggerated his position and influence.[30] One National Guard member, Henry Briceño, wrote that the guardsmen referred to Echanis as a "trainer" rather than by a military title, but added that he was still considered a high-ranking man and accompanied Somoza Portocarrero wherever he went. Briceño described Echanis as "a hero of the Viet Nam war" and the best instructor of "a mountain of methods to kill, kill, and kill some more."[31]

Echanis played a crucial role in guiding the implementation of American methods and weapons on Nicaraguan soil. He claimed approval from the U.S. government and cited a letter from the secretary of state asking him not to violate human rights or kill noncombatants. He "interpreted this to mean that it was all right to kill combatants."[32] In September 1978, Echanis died when his private plane, belonging to the commander of the National Guard, crashed into Lake Nicaragua. In a *Los Angeles Times* article about his death, State Department officials were quoted as saying that the government knew mercenaries were fighting to support the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, but could do little to stop them.[33] Indeed, the American state's reaction to mercenary combat in the 1970s and 1980s ranged from inconsistent prosecution to tacit non-action to overt approval.

The government also failed to take seriously the links between American mercenaries and the white power movement. One example of this is the story of Operation Red Dog. On April 27, 1981, FBI and ATF agents arrested a group of ten men on their way out of New Orleans. Authorities seized their cache of weapons and supplies: eight Bushmaster automatic rifles, ten shotguns, five rifles, ten handguns, ten pounds of dynamite, 5,246 rounds of ammunition, Nazi and Confederate flags, the neo-Nazi newspaper *National Vanguard,* and various military manuals. Investigation eventually revealed that the men were participants in a plan to send mercenaries by boat to the small Caribbean island of Dominica to overthrow the government there and

set up a puppet regime that would funnel millions of dollars to the Klan in the United States.[34]

The would-be invaders of Dominica included Don Black, a high-ranking Klan leader of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the organization with chapters led elsewhere by Louis Beam and Tom Metzger that had militarized on a national scale. The leader of the mercenaries, Michael Perdue, was, as one follower said, "obsessed with the league of Aryan Nations thing"—a reference to the unifying white power movement and specifically to Aryan Nations in Idaho, where Louis Beam had relocated after an injunction barred him from running paramilitary camps in Texas.[35] Five of the mercenaries had military training, and all but one had affiliations with U.S. or Canadian Klan and neo-Nazi groups. One of them, Bob "Mad Merc" Prichard, would later be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder from his harrowing tour in Vietnam, where he was shot twice and wounded a third time by the shrapnel of a rocket-propelled grenade. Prichard had trained at a paramilitary camp run by Glenn Miller's Carolina KKKK—soon to be renamed the White Patriot Party—that was associated with the Klan and neo-Nazi shooting of communist protestors in Greensboro, North Carolina, in November 1979 and later with the large-scale theft of military weapons.[36]

Though their end goal was to funnel money to the Klan, likely to facilitate the race war for which Klansmen had started to prepare, the Dominica mercenaries framed their actions as a defense of the United States from communism. Even though they sought the overthrow of a Dominican prime minister who opposed communism, they saw the island as ripe for takeover by either American or Soviet communist interests, and claimed they were working to forestall a Soviet victory. When they rented the boat for their mission they claimed to be CIA operatives, and perhaps some even believed this to be the case.[37]

The first iteration of their plan revealed that the Operation Red Dog mercenaries saw themselves as acting in service of the state. Though they quickly abandoned this plan for lack of manpower, they had hopes of invading Grenada. The Reagan administration itself would invade Grenada just two years later under more official auspices, but using a notably similar anticommunist ideology.[38] Black frequently spoke of the similarity in rhetoric and objectives that he thought connected the Klan with the Reagan administration, always claiming that he had acted patriotically even when he broke the law. "We were military advisors, and our purpose was to stabilize and

secure the island against communists," Black later told a reporter. "Had we been successful, it would have been in the best interests of the United States."[39] Black's comment about Dominica echoed Reagan's talk of stabilizing and securing Grenada when referencing successful U.S. interventions.[40] In other words, white power mercenaries positioned themselves within a state ideology of covert action that itself constituted a form of paramilitarism.[41]

Reagan would later describe the Grenada invasion as the beginning of the end of American "self-doubt and national confusion" in the wake of the Vietnam War.[42] Indeed, while the Dominica mercenaries came from a variety of political, economic, and cultural backgrounds, they shared both intense anticommunism and deep identification with the Vietnam War story. Some had served in Vietnam, while others fashioned their identity around their participation in paramilitary combat. Group leader Michael Perdue falsely claimed Green Beret experience in Vietnam—he was convicted of petty theft and thrown out of the Marines before he could be deployed overseas—and boasted of a long and fabricated record of mercenary combat in Uruguay, Rhodesia, and Nicaragua.[43]

Charged with violating the Neutrality Act, which prohibited American citizens from engaging in combat in countries with which the United States had not declared war, most of the ten would-be Dominica mercenaries pleaded guilty. Of three who did not, only one walked free, twenty-one-year-old Alabaman Michael Norris. Although Norris had been affiliated with both the KKKK and the neo-Nazi group National Alliance prior to the Dominica attempt, his defense was gullibility: he claimed he didn't know any better and stumbled into mercenary action by accident.[44]

Norris's acquittal revealed a legal system unprepared to understand or curb the white power movement's paramilitary violence. The plot looked unrealistic and badly managed—a *Los Angeles Times* headline, for instance, called it "A Tragicomedy of Errors," and ATF agents jokingly referred to it as "the Bayou of Pigs"—but its significance should not be minimized. The plot revealed a rapidly militarizing white power movement. And in the case of Norris, who was effectively acquitted on the basis of his claim that he hadn't known any better, the U.S. court system underestimated the risk he posed: in the two years following his acquittal, Norris—and another Dominica mercenary, Wolfgang Droege—would work with the Order, a terrorist group that carried out counterfeiting, armed robbery, and assassinations in attempts to wage race war.[45]

The invasion attempt also demonstrated that Dominica was just one of several countries in the Western Hemisphere that these activists understood as the front lines of a global war against communism. Two longtime mercenaries who had been enlisted for the Dominica plot, Frank Camper and Robert Lisenby, had run multi-week mercenary camps for years, recruiting trainees through *Soldier of Fortune*. In March 1981, the month before the planned Dominica invasion, they were arrested with a dozen mercenaries-in-training when they conducted paramilitary training exercises that ventured too close to a Central Florida nuclear reactor for the comfort of the local police. They were carrying military-style identification in Spanish when they were arrested, and Lisenby told a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* that they were preparing for "deep jungle" warfare. Seeking out combat was "a holdover from Vietnam, I guess," said Lisenby. "We are soldiers. It's in our blood."[46]

Released after the Central Florida incident, Lisenby and Camper began preparing for Operation Red Dog, but they never made it to the embarkation point. Two weeks before the other participants were arrested in New Orleans, Lisenby and Camper were arrested in Miami. They had illegal weapons and explosives in their car—including a bomb—and a map marking the location of the Miami consulate of the Dominican Republic. Officials released Camper, later revealed to be an FBI informant, but detained Lisenby on explosives and weapons charges. Initially, the press and police called the connection between the failed Dominica invasion and the apparent attempt to bomb the Dominican Republic consulate a product of ignorance at best and lunacy or stupidity at worst; apparently the assumption was that Lisenby had intended to bomb the embassy for the island of Dominica and didn't know the difference between that country and the Dominican Republic.[47]

The incident yields more insight if taken seriously. An anonymous source told one reporter that the mercenaries did know the difference, and that anticommunism connected the two sites. In each case, mercenaries hoped to send the message that they would not tolerate communism in the Caribbean. In other words, the Operation Red Dog mercenaries saw Grenada, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and El Salvador as the front lines in a war against communism.[48]

The specter of the Vietnam War appeared regularly in characterizations of Central America, and not just among those on the right. The Sandinista

newspaper *La Barricada* published an uncaptioned, stand-alone front-page photo of street graffiti reading "Yankee, we will bring you hell, just like in Vietnam." A Workers' Front pamphlet in Nicaragua echoed the same language, opposing what the party saw as an "imperialist campaign" for "the Vietnamization of Central America." An American journalist wrote of El Salvador: "For both opponents and proponents of the Reagan administration's policy towards Salvador, Vietnam provides the emotional kindling, the passion, as well as the frame of reference." Neoconservative William F. Buckley printed a column titled "Nicaragua, Another Vietnam" in the *National Review*. As the administration received thousands of letters against intervention in Central America, some opponents distributed a popular bumper sticker that read, "El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam."[49]

By the 1970s, with multiple guerrilla groups in El Salvador opposing an increasingly militarized, corrupt, and ultraconservative government,[50] U.S. militarists saw another opportunity to relaunch, redeem, and hone Vietnam War methods. American military advisors, largely from Special Forces, guided the Salvadoran army in implementing counterrevolutionary tactics. Congress imposed a limit of fifty-five advisors, but the actual number reached as many as twice that at any given time, augmented by more than a hundred CIA agents. The war in El Salvador would rage for twelve years.[51]

It was this El Salvador, torn by low-intensity and civilian-targeted warfare, which *Soldier of Fortune*–affiliated mercenaries entered in 1983. Small teams of ten to twelve men—largely composed of the magazine's editorial staff—worked to train the Salvadoran army in "everything from counter-ambush to field medicine," according to one report. They brought with them the technologies, uniforms, and language of the Vietnam War and, although they claimed neutrality, by February 1983 they were close enough to combat to receive fire.[52]

Like Posey—who participated in at least one *Soldier of Fortune* trip to El Salvador—the magazine's founder and his compatriots saw themselves as doing the work the U.S. government should do, but was unable or unwilling to carry out. "I keep saying, the only reason we're down there [in Central America] is because the Congress won't let anyone else do the job," Brown said. "If Washington would get its act together we wouldn't have to do it for them." Brown claimed that the cap on advisors set by Congress necessitated the intervention of private mercenaries. By 1984, the *Soldier of Fortune* teams

were regularly teaching small-unit tactics, including marksmanship with small arms and mortars, to Salvadoran troops.[53]

Mercenaries involved in El Salvador sometimes acted as state agents by meeting with official U.S. military advisors to report on Salvadoran performance in the field. In this way, U.S. military advisors barred by their superiors or by congressional restraints from traveling into combat areas could still judge the Salvadoran performance in battle by the reports of experienced Americans. Roberto D'Aubuisson, ultraright leader, death squad commander, and School of the Americas alumnus, went so far as to say that he preferred mercenaries to the official deployment of more advisors.[54]

The presence of mercenaries in Central America often correlated with violence against civilians. In El Salvador, *Soldier of Fortune* teams worked most closely with the Atlacatl Battalion.[55] Between its official U.S. military training and the arrival of the *Soldier of Fortune* teams, the battalion had massacred nearly 1,000 civilians, more than half of them children, in the village of El Mozote. Battalion members stabbed and decapitated some victims, and shot others with bullets manufactured for the U.S. Army and stamped "Lake City, Missouri."[56] The Salvadoran military encouraged these abuses with its own anticommunist training, but the presence of American mercenary trainers correlated with civilian-targeted violence. In 1983, a story in the *Washington Post* anticipated the impact of the kind of dehumanizing rhetoric espoused by the mercenaries. The reporter recounted a *Soldier of Fortune* issue documenting the El Salvador trips.

> One picture . . . showed a smiling Salvadoran soldier draped in sashes of machine-gun bullets. The caption read, "Airborne gunner after he blew away two Gs." In the magazine's parlance, "Gs" are enemy guerrillas. Another picture on the same page showed a Salvadoran soldier and two members of the magazine group crouching in the brush around the bodies of two dead "Gs." The picture clearly resembled photographs that hunters take after they have bagged a deer.[57]

Far from decrying such practices, some mercenaries boasted about their association with brutal regimes and units. At a 1985 *Soldier of Fortune* convention, firearms editor Peter Kokalis proudly introduced himself as a member of the Atlacatl Battalion to roars of approval from the crowd.

Kokalis alluded to killing communists as target practice. "Remember, when it comes to police brutality, that's the fun part of police work!" Kokalis joked. Then he brandished a short-barreled assault rifle: "I'm going to take it down to El Salvador to try it out on a variety of targets."[58] Kokalis and his contemporaries spoke of guerilla insurgents as targets, gooks, and animals rather than human beings, recycling the body count rhetoric of the Vietnam War in a renewed anticommunist mission.[59]

After the Sandinista revolution of 1979 and Reagan's inauguration in 1981, the United States continued to provide advice and supplies in El Salvador but increasingly adopted more direct strategies in Nicaragua. Mercenary activity adapted to this change. In September 1984, a Huey helicopter carrying American mercenaries crashed in Nicaragua after receiving fire. Four CMA mercenaries escaped, and two died on the scene: Dana Parker and James Powell were both thirty-six-year-old Vietnam veterans on what CMA called a "rescue operation," soon revealed to be an attack on a Nicaraguan military school that killed three young girls and an old man.[60] Parker and Powell were typical CMA members: Powell had served as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, where he was shot down in combat three times. Parker had served as a Green Beret.[61] He was also on leave from the Special Forces unit of the Alabama National Guard, deployed at the time of his death to Panama to "plan and conduct unconventional war operations" there.[62] The Reagan era fostered a rise in special-operations-style units in all branches of the military as well as civilian police forces, and CMA actions showed the easy slide from Special-Forces-style units to paramilitary CIA missions to rogue mercenary involvement in the Third World.[63]

The helicopter crash was a precipitating event in the public's discovery of the Iran-Contra scandal. The Reagan administration sought to unseat the Sandinistas as part of a new rollback policy that committed the United States not only to containment, or stemming the tide of communism and leftist governments to new countries, but also to violently removing them from territories already won. In the legislative branch, however, Congress attempted to stop the Reagan administration from waging war on the Sandinistas. Congressional limits and public reluctance drove the administration to increasingly covert methods. Through the CIA, the executive supported the Contras even as Congress passed a series of laws restricting U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua. Three Boland Amendments, passed between 1982 and 1984, prohibited direct attempts to overthrow the Nicaraguan

government, in particular limiting CIA covert action. They restricted and then prohibited funding for the Contras. Significantly, Congress only set partial limitations, allowing a continuation of "humanitarian" aid even though it prohibited direct military support.[64] To circumvent congressional limitations on intervention, Reagan administration officials funneled the proceeds from arms sales to Iran to illegally fund the Contras. Iran-Contra, as this deal became known, became a widely reported public scandal in 1986, with trials of high-placed Reagan administration officials stretching through the years that followed. Although the systematic destruction of documents occluded a full accounting of the deal and those who approved it, several officials were indicted. George H. W. Bush later pardoned several of those convicted in the final years of his presidency.[65]

The Iran Contra scandal revealed rising paramilitarism in the nation itself. Hawks in the Reagan administration saw the executive as the head of a Cold War military chain of command rather than as one branch of a three-part government limited by checks and balances. The CIA, newly incorporated into Reagan's cabinet, now functioned as part of the executive. The administration also further expanded army Special Forces and navy SEAL units, and militarized SWAT teams and other civilian police units as well as the National Guard by providing these agencies with military weapons and training.[66]

Cell warfare without direction from movement leadership depended upon commonly held cultural narratives and values, and shared texts and symbols, to motivate and coordinate activity. In this new climate, movement texts that had already captured the imagination of white power activists came to play a major role in shaping action. The racist utopian novel *The Turner Diaries,* perhaps the most prominent white power text, was one that served this function. It first appeared in serial form in *Attack!,* the newspaper of the neo-Nazi group National Alliance, in 1974. Group leader and author William Pierce published it in paperback under the pseudonym of Andrew Macdonald in 1978.[37] Over the next twenty years, *The Turner Diaries* sold some 500,000 copies, gaining tremendous popularity both in the white power movement and around the mercenary soldier circuit. It was advertised in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine and sold in bookstores as far away as South Africa. That *The Turner Diaries* popped up over and over again in the hands of key movement actors, particularly in moments of violence, reveals its utility in coordinating acts of underground resistance. Louis Beam would use "Turner" as one of his many aliases. Glenn Miller would later say he handed out some 800 free copies of the book while leading the White Patriot Party, and an undercover informant verified that he received the book during his induction to that group. Order member Bruce Pierce would be arrested carrying a copy, and Order member Randall Rader would say the group kept a stack of twenty to thirty copies in the bunkhouse at Bob Mathews's farm. Timothy McVeigh would sell the novel on the gun show circuit prior to his bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building.[38]

The Turner Diaries worked as a foundational how-to manual for the movement, outlining a detailed plan for race war. Presented as a diary found and published after a white racist revolution has overthrown the U.S. government, it describes an all-white utopia. It recounts a series of terrorist attacks leading up to the partitioning of a white homeland in California and the use of nuclear weapons to clear first the United States and then the world of nonwhite populations. In the future world, in which the diary serves as a historical artifact of the revolution, the white supremacist army, called the Organization, has abolished the dollar, started a new calendar at year zero, and made women subservient. At various moments, the novel describes the forced migration of all people of color out of California, the genocide of Jews, the nuclear bombing of high-density black populations in the South, and the public lynching of all people in interracial relationships.

The book drew heavily on the idea of veterans as white power soldiers and on the utility of paramilitary violence. The protagonist, Earl Turner, implies that many Organization members were military men. Turner says, "We have decades of guerrilla warfare in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to instruct us," and he warns that the white supremacist movement will force the public "into the front lines, where they must choose sides and participate, whether they like it or not."[39]

In the novel, set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Earl Turner works as a soldier in the racist movement attempting to overthrow the government, which he calls the System. An engineer handy with weaponry, Turner advances quickly through the ranks; after he blows up FBI headquarters, the Organization inducts him into the Order, a secret society of key soldiers. He then performs the Test of the Word, proving his knowledge of movement ideals, and the Test of the Deed, proving himself through violent action. He vows to kill himself before giving away the group's secrets. The Order, he writes, "will remain secret, even within the Organization, until the successful completion of the first phase of our task: the destruction of the System." When Turner is arrested, he breaks his vows by failing to kill himself with a cyanide capsule prior to interrogation. Although the group breaks him out of prison, they decide to punish him for his failure by assigning him a suicide mission. The diary ends as Turner prepares to fly a small plane—loaded with a sixty-kiloton nuclear warhead—into the Pentagon. A small afterword, in the voice of someone who has found Turner's diary, describes the ensuing revolution and white victory after his death. This narrative, outlining a strategy that is dependent on secrecy, loyalty, and violence, would become the sustaining myth of a real-life Order dedicated to a violent war on the state, and a guidebook for decades of white power terrorist violence.[40]