Russell Crandall

The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xix + 698. Pb, \$39.99.

Russell Crandall is an expert on US diplomatic history. In this lengthy book of almost seven hundred pages, he intends to offer a balanced portrait of US policy in El Salvador in the years shortly before and during the 1980–92 Salvadoran civil war, fought between the government and the leftist Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN). Crandall argues that highly politicized perspectives have dominated the narrative landscape. He admits that “it is impossible to escape all of my ideological and methodological biases” but that “I nonetheless attempt to provide an unvarnished examination of this influential but poorly understood chapter in US Cold War foreign policy.” He claims to “apply a scholarly dose of skepticism to all actors’ rhetoric, knowing full well that, like us, they were capable of saying one thing and thinking or doing another” (12).

Crandall organizes the book into five parts, three of which take up most of the book and treat the United States and El Salvador during the Carter, Reagan and Bush administrations, respectively. These three parts are sandwiched between a historical background (Part I, chapters 1–6) and a short section dealing with the post war (Part v, chapters 48–49). It should be apparent, then, that the book has been chopped up into many short, digestible chapters, each of which deals with a single theme or topic: “Mass Organizations,” chapter 8, pp. 90–101; “El Mozote,” chapter 21, pp. 223–31; “Jesuit Killings,” chapter 44, pp. 442–52; and so on. Forty percent of the text (two hundred of five hundred pages and twenty of forty-nine chapters) is given over to events that transpired during the Reagan administration, which lasted from early 1981 through 1988.

The author covers a great deal, addressing virtually every aspect of El Salvador–US relations during the period under review and much more as well: the death of Archbishop Romero, the first and second “final offensives” (in January 1981 and November 1989, respectively), elections (in 1982, 1984, 1987 and 1989), US military and economic assistance, and the US role in the reconfiguration of government military strategy, negotiations that led to the conflict’s conclusion and even the post war era. The book will serve as a useful reference work for students and researchers interested in El Salvador, the civil war and US–Salvador relations.

Inevitably though, in attempting so much, Crandall gets some things wrong. For instance, his account of La Matanza, the 1932 mass killing of mostly indigenous peasants in western El Salvador, would have benefited from a reading of Jeffrey Gould and Aldo Lauria-Santiago’s seminal *To Rise in Darkness* (2008), likely to become the standard scholarly source for that period. And

his discussion of the El Mozote massacre (223–31), which generated serious problems for the Reagan administration when the site was visited by reporters from the Washington Post (Alma Guillermoprieto) and New York Times (Raymond Bonner) was pieced together from press reports, the post war Truth Commission report and Mark Danner's important but flawed New Yorker article (and subsequent book) "The Truth at El Mozote." Crandall's hyperbolic claim that the "Atlatl [special forces battalion that committed the massacre] was smelling blood and its revenge on leftist insurgents would be enacted on the villages and villagers whom they believed were abetting the enemy" (224) may make for good press but is almost impossible to demonstrate.

Crandall commits a considerable amount of space to Salvadoran and US government efforts to prevent armed conflict early on or, from 1982, to convince FMLN rebels to put down their weapons and join peaceful, political competition for power. What chance did these efforts have? Could the conflict have been resolved without the loss of seventy-five to eighty thousand persons and the disappearance of another seven thousand?

More generally, though, I question whether Crandall's goal of a relatively objective analysis of US policy and El Salvador is achievable. The United States has a dark legacy of intervening openly and not so openly in Latin America, and that legacy shapes the frame through which journalists, politicians and most academics (Crandall included) view the region. For instance, Crandall is too quick to accept the repeated US government claim that support for the Salvadoran government was necessary to prevent a Marxist victory. Yet would the Marxist threat have developed as it did or taken the route of armed insurrection had the US government pressed earlier for land reform and democratic elections (which it did not)? What transpired in El Salvador cannot be analyzed without close attention to the cumulative effect of dollar diplomacy, clandestine interference and outright invasion employed by the US government in Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere during the course of about sixty years prior to the beginning of the armed conflict in El Salvador.

Although the author's effort at balance falls flat, I nonetheless recommend *The Salvador Option* as a useful reference work that provides generally good coverage of events leading up to and unfolding during the Salvadoran Revolution.

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