

Frente Sandalista: the Relationship between U.S. Activists and the Revolutionary Vanguard in El Salvador, 1979-1989

In 1982, four U.S. filmmakers trekked down to Honduras and moved covertly across the border into eastern El Salvador. There, in the mountains, they spent six weeks with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), filming a documentary about the new society the guerrillas were trying to build.¹ During that time, they traversed the Salvadoran countryside, went into battle in the streets of San Salvador, and interviewed FMLN members from the highest leadership to the youngest tag-along. These filmmakers, no matter how intrepid or unique their actions may seem, were not the only U.S. Americans to have entered El Salvador covertly to ally themselves with a guerrilla movement the U.S. government was spending millions of dollars to defeat. They were only four of possibly hundreds of committed activists, the so-called “sandalistas,” who put their lives at stake to become a part of another nation’s revolutionary war.² Indeed, during their time in El Salvador, the filmmakers crossed paths with several other U.S. sandalistas working with the FMLN in other capacities. Collectively, their presence is illustrative of the social, ideological, and political complexity of the revolution in El Salvador, as well as U.S. popular opinion, public debate, and policy formation.

¹ The FMLN is the acronym for the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, or the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

² P.J. O’Rourke, *Holidays in Hell: In Which Our Intrepid Reporter Travels to the World’s Worst Places and Asks, “What’s Funny About This?”* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988).

For this study, I have appropriated the name “sandalista,” a term coined by (or at least first published by) political satirist and humorist P.J. O’Rourke in his book, *Holidays in Hell*, as a useful umbrella term to describe all American citizens (activists, church workers, and the leftist media) who worked against U.S. foreign policy goals in social revolutions in Central America. O’Rourke intended the term as a pejorative nickname that would connote both ‘hippie’ footwear (i.e., sandals) and the leftists’ anti-U.S., pro-Sandinista political activism. According to oral history interviews I have conducted, many sandalistas often found the sobriquet amusing, rather than insulting. I appropriate it here as a simple way to discuss a complex and varied group of individuals who do not fit simply under any commonly used umbrella term.

This paper is the first part of a longer study that examines the actions and rhetoric of sandalistas in Central American civil wars of the 1980s. During this decade, hundreds of committed activists went to El Salvador to participate in or provide services for the social revolution there, in direct opposition to U.S. foreign policy. Thus, sandalistas' actions, in light of their U.S. citizenship, constituted a counter-hegemonic impulse. These activists, whether politically, ideologically, or religiously motivated, used their physical presence and outspoken voices to create opposition to a U.S. foreign policy they wanted to end.

“Frente Sandalista” seeks to challenge the common wisdom and re-conceptualize the way we imagine transnational and community histories by exploring concepts like imperialism, hegemony, dissent, cooperation, and identity formation. Specifically, this essay considers the way sandalistas acted, individually and collectively, to disrupt U.S. foreign policy, often putting their lives on the line to protest U.S. military intervention in El Salvador. My research also interrogates the way Salvadoran revolutionaries engaged sandalista networks to meet their practical and political needs. Thus, “Frente Sandalista” explores the formation of informal, transnational networks that sandalistas created with the FMLN guerrilla army in El Salvador in an attempt to end U.S. intervention.

The Civil War in El Salvador gained momentum in the late 1970s; international resistance to the U.S. role in this revolution soon followed. In 1980, many competing guerrilla bands united under the FMLN banner to topple a 50-year alliance between the military and the wealthy oligarchy that had kept the vast majority of Salvadorans landless and impoverished. The Salvadoran military regime became increasingly repressive as its grip on power weakened. By the end of the war, the military and paramilitary forces were responsible for the kidnapping, torture, and death of over 75,000 people.³ The

³ Leigh Binford, *The Massacre at El Mozote: Anthropology and Human Rights* (Tucson: University of

Reagan administration, having taken a strong position against the spread of Communism in the western hemisphere, feared Cuban and Soviet influence on the socialist-leaning FMLN, and spent hundreds of millions of dollars on military and economic support to prevent an FMLN victory. Led by the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), and propped up by the U.S., military juntas continued to 'govern' in El Salvador until peace accords were signed in 1992.⁴ The U.S. intervention, many have argued, served to prolong the civil war and interfered with a people's right to self-determination.⁵

Many U.S. citizens disagreed with the official government policy on El Salvador, and actively opposed its implementation. Activist networks sprang up throughout the United States and Latin America that publicized atrocities, exposed illegalities, and galvanized international public outcry. In so doing, these networks exerted political pressure on the Reagan administration to cease military sponsorship of Salvadoran military rule. These collaborative efforts were key to raising public political awareness in the United States, which in turn led the Reagan administration to implement its military strategies in secretive, convoluted, and even illegal ways.⁶ Thus, the sandalista networks' efforts were an effective means of opposing U.S. foreign policy. Eventually, the pressure they brought to bear on the Reagan, and later, the first Bush administration, contributed to a complex transnational process of protest, political engagement, and cooperation that ultimately helped bring about an end to U.S. military engagement in Central America and led to negotiated peace settlements in El Salvador.⁷ Although participants in this

Arizona Press, 1996), 7.

⁴ In Spanish, ARENA is an acronym for *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*.

⁵ William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

⁶ Robert Busby, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair: The Politics of Presidential Recovery*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

⁷ For more information, see Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy*

solidarity movement were in the minority among U.S. Americans, the activists who worked to stop U.S. intervention in El Salvador had a significant impact upon the course of events, both in El Salvador and the United States.

This essay will focus on the presence of individual U.S. citizens who chose to incorporate themselves into the FMLN struggle, thus leaving behind their country, connections, and easy access to power. These sandalistas demonstrated an extreme degree of commitment to their cause, and often came to think of themselves as part of the Salvadoran revolution, rather than as U.S. citizens. Although they did not act in coordination with any of the transnational advocacy networks mentioned above, their experiences were an integral component of advocacy networks' publicity and consciousness-raising efforts. Additionally, they were the only U.S. Americans that imbedded themselves within the FMLN, thus constituting a critical bridge between transnational advocacy networks and the revolutionary vanguard in El Salvador. The manner in which these individuals approached solidarity and resistance expands traditional ideas of citizenship and identity, complicates the idea of U.S. imperial hegemony, and reveals a more nuanced view of this history.

Theoretical Interventions

Interrogating the existence and impact of these sandalistas will change the way historians have thought and written about the U.S. presence in El Salvador. Although academic literature has repeatedly noted the presence of activists, church workers, journalists, and even curiosity-seekers in El Salvador, scholars have paid scant attention to the collective influence they wielded during this period. Current studies often discuss

Networks in International Politics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

U.S. intervention in El Salvador in terms of imperialism and hegemony.⁸ Historians of Latin America have tended to present the United States government as a monolithic dominating force, with Central American nations acting as more or less passive receptors of U.S. aid, business investments, and foreign policy decisions.⁹

My project complicates such simplified and dichotomized ideas by exploring the transnational nature of the organizations and individuals that opposed U.S. foreign policy from within, and the manner in which this opposition impeded imperialism and hegemony. As Micol Seigel argues, “the core of transnational history is the challenge it poses to the hermeneutic preeminence of nations.”¹⁰ The nation, she accurately asserts, is merely one among many methodological approaches toward historical inquiry. Transnational history, then, explores, “the units that spill over and seep through national borders, units both greater and smaller than the nation-state.”¹¹ Approaching history in this way enables us to step away from reified concepts of hegemon and oppressor, and a binary world-view that sees all interactions as intrinsically oppositional in nature. Thus, transnationalism lends itself to studying a world characterized by globalization and neo-colonialism.

To execute a transnational study effectively, I follow Gilbert Joseph’s call to carefully address the three major challenges of this methodology. First, we must “locate discrete encounters within a broader historical context,” second, we must “trace out the broader patternings of power,” and third, we must “connect these ‘cultural imperatives’

⁸ Peter Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Dynamics of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹ Greg Grandin *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

¹⁰ Micol Seigel, “Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn,” *Radical History Review* 91, (Winter 2005): 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

with the process of social conflict generated by foreign-local encounters.”¹² This essay addresses these challenges by examining specific sandalista cases within the context of resistance to U.S. intervention in Latin America, examining the structures of power within the world sandalistas inhabited in El Salvador, and by tying this instance of internal counter-hegemonic action to greater questions about imperialism, citizenship, and identity.

Other historians who have worked with Latin American-based transnational networks provide guidance for conceptualizing this project. Susan Bibler Coutin’s study *The Culture of Protest* addresses the issue of the Sanctuary Movement in the U.S., a movement that provided aid and refuge for Central American refugees. Her argument revolves around a theoretical hypothesis about how culture is produced in middle class U.S. society.¹³ Because she focuses almost entirely on the U.S. narrative of events to the exclusion of Central American participants, Coutin’s project does not address the questions explored in this project, nor does she effectively address the transnational aspect of these solidarity movements.

Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s monograph, *Activists Beyond Borders*, focuses on the nature of “transnational advocacy networks,” a concept the authors developed to address the nature and meaning of the dense interpersonal and inter-organizational structures that grow up around common concerns, such as human rights or disarmament.¹⁴ This study is useful for exploring the transnational mechanisms by which individuals from different countries cohere around a cause, and the effect that these

¹² Gilbert Joseph, “Close Encounters: Toward a New Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations,” in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherin C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvadore, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

¹³ See Susan Bibler Coutin, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993)

¹⁴ Keck and Sikkink.

networks have on international and domestic politics and culture.

Another model for “Frente Sandalista” is James A. Miller’s, Susan D. Pennybacker’s, and Eve Rosenhaft’s article about the international Communist organization’s response to the highly publicized rape trial of nine young black men in Scottsboro, Tennessee.¹⁵ Although the subject matter is unrelated, the authors accurately characterize the international reaction to the Scottsboro case as an example of a transnational network mobilizing international resistance to a national event. Thus, their study illustrates the way transnationalism can be a useful tool for interrogating histories that cross borders and languages, but are bonded by and ideological networks.

This paper uses many of these meta-narrative and theoretical works on transnational networking as a foundation, but then interrogates the case histories analyzed in the next section to understand how operating as part of a transnational network impacts an individual’s sense of identity and citizenship. Moreover, “Frente Sandalista” uniquely problematizes concepts like hegemony and imperialism in the case of U.S. intervention in El Salvador.

Sources and Organization

The primary sources I will use in this section are two published memoirs, one unpublished journal, and two oral history interviews. Each of these documents is the testimony of a U.S. American who went to El Salvador as a sandalista. Charles Clements and Wendy Shaull wrote the two published memoirs. Clements, a doctor, Quaker, and Vietnam veteran, joined the FMLN to offer his medical services to civilian populations

¹⁵ James A. Miller; Susan D. Pennybacker; Eve Rosenhaft. “Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934.” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (Apr, 2001): 387-430.

within guerrilla-controlled territory.¹⁶ Shaull, a photojournalist whose parents raised her largely in Latin America, spent a year with the FMLN to create a comprehensive understanding of their struggle, and to combat the Reagan administration's contention that they were battling "terrorists."¹⁷ The diary belongs to Joseph Sanderson, a peripatetic U.S. American adventurer and ex-serviceman, who enlisted in the FMLN as a combatant, determined to fight injustice and violent repression in U.S. sponsored regimes around the world. He eventually died in combat, but left behind a detailed record of his thoughts and experiences in El Salvador.¹⁸ The two oral history interviews are with Joseph Berra, a Jesuit priest who worked in the most dangerous neighborhood in San Salvador, and Frank Christopher, a filmmaker who went into El Salvador for six weeks to film a documentary about what the guerrillas hoped to achieve.¹⁹

This section partitions these sandalistas' stories into analytical categories, rather than discussing each story individually. In the first segment, I explore the ways in which being a sandalista was a transnational experience that complicated ideas about citizenship and nationality. Then, I explore the ways in which the presence of sandalistas within the rebel army compromised U.S. hegemony both in El Salvador and in the United States.

Transnationalism, Citizenship, and Identity

In January 1982, when *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner and photographer Susan Meiselas finished their arduous two-day journey across the Honduran border into El Salvador, the first person they saw in the guerrilla camp they

¹⁶ Charles Clements, *Witness to War: An American Doctor in El Salvador* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

¹⁷ Wendy Shaull, *Tortillas, Beans, and M-16s: A Year With the Guerrillas in El Salvador* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), x.

¹⁸ Joseph David Sanderson, personal diary. Museo de la Palabra y el Imagen (MUPI), San Salvador.

¹⁹ Joseph Berra, interview with Cheasty Miller, April 6, 2006; Frank Christopher, interview with Cheasty Miller, April 24, 2006.

walked into was a tall blond man, cleaning his rifle. “Hey, that’s a gringo!” Bonner cried out in amazement. It was Joe Sanderson, *nom de guerre* Lucas, an FMLN combatant who had joined the revolution out of a desire to “‘put up or shut up’ about the injustices of [U.S.] American policy toward the Third World, where he had spent much of his life.”²⁰ Thus, U.S. Americans who had decided to go alone into El Salvador found themselves unexpectedly in the company of like-minded individuals.

This encounter, while surprising to Bonner upon his arrival behind the FMLN front lines, was actually quite mundane, as sandalistas routinely encountered one another in FMLN-controlled territory. Wendy Shaull and Charles Clements met Mexican, French, Spanish, German, and Belgian doctors in their travels with the FMLN. Clements crossed paths with, Frank Christopher, the film director, and even allowed Christopher to interview him. Christopher, in turn, worked with John Chapman, a U.S. filmmaker and journalist who had met Raymond Bonner on an earlier assignment in San Salvador. When Joe Sanderson wrote in his journal about the arrival of a U.S. filmmaker, a “certain Mr. Hitchcock,” to his guerrilla camp, he commented that the man was evidently “an old friend of Gus, St. Pete, Ray [Bonner], Alma [Guillermoprieto]... practically everybody.”²¹ Although each of these individuals originally conceived of themselves as being alone in going underground with the FMLN, in reality, they created a network that helped circulate information and resources both within El Salvador and in the United States. The information that Sanderson had acquired in his months with the FMLN could thus end up on the front page of the *New York Times*. What’s more, the information that circulated in the outside world could work its way back to sandalistas with the FMLN. “[Hitchcock] said NYT ran front page series of Ray’s stories... with emphasis that

²⁰ Peter Canby and Jay Dean, “Soldier of Misfortune: Why Joe Sanderson Fought and Died in El Salvador,” *Mother Jones*, July 1984, 13.

²¹ Sanderson, 78.

Morazán had no Cubans and Soviets, only a ‘Belgian padre, a few Mexican doctors, and a North American combatant named Lucas.’ But apparently I’ve been well weeded out of photos.”²² The information exchanged between Bonner and the sandalistas he met in the FMLN-controlled province of Morazán contributed to international arguments against the Reagan administration’s claim that the FMLN was a lackey of international Communism. Thus, the sandalistas who incorporated within the FMLN formed the lynchpin for much broader, international activist networks that raised awareness and mobilized resources on a global scale.

Joseph Berra, a Jesuit priest who worked in El Salvador in the 1980s, explained that his work as a Jesuit helped him step outside of ideas about citizenship and nationality. He spoke about consciously shedding his identity as a U.S. citizen and becoming part of a transnational network of priests who were not tied to a national boundaries or policy, but to a revolutionary cause in Central America. “I enjoyed the work [in El Salvador] because I got to work with peasants, and also the Jesuits there were incorporating into the Central American province. There was a mixture of Jesuits from America, from Spain, and from Central America, but we were all working together.”²³ These priests thus actively shed their national identities and instead embraced a transnational ideology that fulfilled their need for positive action in the world.

Sandalistas, even when they were not themselves a part of large-scale activist networking, depended upon those political and religious networks in order to join the FMLN in the first place. When Clements decided to go down to El Salvador to volunteer his medical services, he had to go through a substantial and trying approval process that involved moving to Mexico, taking Spanish classes, working with Catholic liberation

²² Ibid., 79.

²³ Berra interview.

theology networks, and attempting to make contacts with FMLN organizers in Mexico. In his memoir, *Witness to War*, Clements describes approaching agencies like the Peace Corps and Catholic Relief Services, only to be discouraged from his plan to work among civilians in El Salvador's FMLN-controlled zones. Then, he met "a journalist who told [him] about a French doctor who was working in one of the ones controlled by guerrillas."²⁴ Knowing his plan was possible, Clements moved to Mexico where he began volunteering among radical Catholic organizing groups in Cuernavaca in an attempt to contact the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), the FMLN's political wing. Finally, after many months and repeated rejections, the FDR contacted Clements to begin planning his incorporation, a process that sent him through networks established in various Central American countries. It took him six months, he passed through three different countries, and he depended upon individuals of five different nationalities, but Clements arrived in El Salvador as a doctor for the FMLN in 1982. This story, though convoluted, illustrates the nature of the transnational networks that even the most isolated individuals worked through in order to become part of the Salvadoran opposition to U.S. intervention. Clements, Shaull, Sanderson, and Christopher all went through similar processes in their efforts to enter El Salvador.

Doctors, journalists, and filmmakers from the United States joined or sided with the FMLN for reasons of personal conviction that challenged their concepts of identity and citizenship. In El Salvador, many sandalistas confronted these ideas in a very frank and personal manner. Many of them were in the country illegally, and, no matter their legal status, their actions in support of the FMLN were not only physically dangerous, but also potentially treasonous. Nonetheless, sandalistas affiliated with ideological and political groups that the U.S. government was committed to defeating. Moreover, they

²⁴ Clements, 10.

did so in a vocal manner, engaging the U.S. media, publishing memoirs, keeping journals, sending home newsletters, or making movies. In moments of introspection, sandalistas often pondered what their activities said about who they were as individuals, as U.S. citizens, and as part of the Salvadoran civil war.

Becoming a sandalista often entailed re-thinking ideas of citizenship and national identity. Wendy Shaull introduces herself as a U.S. citizen in her memoir, *Tortillas, Beans, and M-16s*, but puts tremendous emphasis on her experiences growing up in Latin America as the daughter of a U.S. theologian and a teacher. “Many people have asked me why I did such a crazy thing; why I spent a year with the guerrillas in the mountains of El Salvador,” she writes. “It did not seem crazy to me; it seemed a necessity.”²⁵ She writes about her conviction that U.S. Americans must stay informed, stating that “a responsible government, in our democratic system, can only be possible when we Americans take the time to learn and to care.” Shaull thus inscribes herself as a U.S. citizen, but then goes on to reveal a conflicted side of this identity. Because of her extensive life experience in Latin America, she felt equally responsible to the people of her generation that she’d left behind when her family moved to the States in the 1960s.

I left behind friends, and... a whole generation of kids who would shortly confront violent military dictatorships. While my generation in America was trying to believe it could love everybody... my generation down south... was being indiscriminately tortured, killed, or simply ‘disappeared’ because they didn’t believe in military dictatorships, or because they didn’t believe the majority should be poor, or because they believed in a variety of definitions for the word freedom.²⁶

Although Shaull clearly identified as a U.S. American, a childhood spent in Latin America enabled her to think flexibly about not just which country she belonged to, but which ideological struggles she chose to adopt as her own. She never surrendered her

²⁵ Shaull, ix.

²⁶ Ibid., x.

identity as a U.S. citizen, but she chose to ally herself against her government's self-proclaimed national interests, and thus redefined for herself what it meant to be a U.S. citizen.

Other sandalistas echoed these concerns, and took it as part of their responsibility as U.S. citizens to counteract U.S. foreign policy when it failed to use power judiciously. Frank Christopher, director of the award-winning documentary film *In the Name of the People*, spoke at length about wanting to understand the FMLN and tell their story because he felt that “the mainstream news wasn’t explaining the motivation of the revolution to America. You know, because Reagan drew his ‘line in the sand’ and wanted to blame this popular movement on Cuba and the Soviet Union. We wanted to tell the true story to as wide an audience as possible.”²⁷ Christopher and his colleagues took the drastic action of risking their lives in a war zone in order to oppose their government’s foreign policy. By distinguishing “Reagan” from “America,” he drew a semantic division between the nation and its leadership, a division that other sandalistas also enacted. Christopher did not reject his citizenship, but he did act out his belief about what a responsible citizen of the United States must do. Thus, for Frank Christopher, his self-identification as a U.S. citizen demanded conscientious, deliberate and vocal protest against what he believed to be unjust action on the part of his elected government.

Charles Clements echoed Christopher’s convictions, but his process was more complex. As an Air Force Academy graduate and patriotic U.S. citizen, Clements’ experiences in Vietnam caused him to re-evaluate his convictions about what it meant to be a “good American,” and, as the depth of U.S. deception about conditions in Vietnam became obvious to him, he began to feel betrayed by his government.²⁸ When Clements

²⁷ Christopher interview.

²⁸ Clements, 71.

requested to be relieved from active duty, the Air Force confined him to a psychiatric hospital for the duration of his tour. Upon returning to the States, he became a Quaker and a doctor. Thus, he already felt alienated from his identity as a U.S. citizen. He was, however, committed to his role as a proponent of non-violence and as a medical professional.

As a doctor with the FMLN, Clements found that working with Salvadorans began to challenge his identity in ways he had not anticipated. He attempted to maintain “medical neutrality” but found that to be nearly impossible in the face of his experiences on the front lines. The Salvadoran government called everybody living behind FMLN territory ‘subversives,’ and attacked indiscriminately. When peasants were wounded by 500-pound bombs or strafing, Clements had to abandon ‘neutrality’ to care for the injured, subversive or not. As he saw daily the extent of the repression, the honor with which the guerrillas behaved, and the violence with which the U.S.-funded Salvadoran army attacked small hamlets, towns, and camps, Clements came to identify himself as part of this struggle in a way he had not thought he would. Increasingly, he noted, “I found myself no longer referring to ‘the guerrillas’ and ‘the Americans,’ or ‘the Armed Forces.’ Instead, I found myself writing about ‘us’ and ‘them.’”²⁹ After one particularly brutal attack, and the grueling march back into safe territory, Clements had a moment of personal catharsis. “All the walls around my emotions were suddenly breached. My eyes began to fill. Tears, real tears such as I had not been able to shed for ten years after Vietnam, poured down into my matted beard.”³⁰ Although he maintained his struggle to stay medically neutral, he found himself embracing, and being embraced by the people in a way he had not planned. “Many hailed me as I passed. I didn’t know their names yet,

²⁹ Clements, 90.

³⁰ Ibid., 91.

but I found they'd given me one. Because of my limp, and gray hairs... they had nicknamed me *abuelito* (little grandfather)."³¹ By becoming the 'grandfather' of these Salvadoran peasants and FMLN combatants, Clements was thus symbolically related to their communities as a father figure, making him, in a way, Salvadoran himself. Clements' story illustrates the ways in which participation as a sandalista challenged individuals' senses of identity and citizenship in unexpected ways.

Living within guerrilla-controlled territory led many sandalistas to feel not just outrage on behalf of Salvadoran peasants, which many activists felt, but also personal rage and indignation at being attacked by the U.S. funded Armed Forces. This anger forced sandalistas to confront their ideas of citizenship in a more dramatic fashion than they otherwise might have. Shaull relates stories about being repeatedly bombed and strafed; in her case, rage manifested itself in defiance. She tells about a time when the 500-pound bombs began to fall while she was bathing. Furious at having to continuously duck and cover, she stood there, glaring at the helicopters and planes, and refused to take shelter until her bath was finished. For Shaull, this experience was key to her understanding what it is about fighting with the FMLN that keeps Salvadorans, and herself, motivated in spite of being outnumbered and outgunned by the U.S.-supported Armed Forces. "Being a guerrilla is having power, power to act, to react to... impotence," she wrote.³² It was her choice to take cover, or to stand and defy the bombers' right to kill her. No matter how suicidal her actions might seem, she was, just as the guerrillas she lived with were, taking back power from a repressive enemy. She was not alone in appropriating the anger that helped the guerrillas keep fighting for more than a decade.

³¹ Ibid., 95.

³² Shaull, 43.

Following Clements' cathartic moment after his near-death experience in battle, he frequently expressed outrage at the attacks he witnessed. The first time U.S.-made helicopters strafed his field hospital, he remembers looking up with astonishment that his country would turn on him like that. "'So this is what it's like,' [he] thought. 'We're in a free-fire zone and here comes a Top Gun.'"³³ However, it was the medical deprivations that truly angered him. "Watching [David] die both angered and saddened me... for perhaps five dollars worth of digitalis, I could have [kept him alive]. Hundreds of thousands of elderly citizens in the United States are maintained in this way."³⁴ The personal deprivations and first-hand experience with the violence of the U.S. funded Salvadoran counter-insurgency forced sandalistas to confront their anger at, and isolation from, their identities as U.S. citizens.

Sandalistas integrated with the FMLN for a variety of ideological reasons, but at the core of each individual's story lay the conviction that it was his or her personal responsibility to stand in opposition to U.S. intervention in El Salvador. As illustrated by these case histories, being a sandalista was truly a transnational endeavor. Sandalistas depended on international activist networks, while simultaneously contributing to the flow of information and resources on a global scale. Their experiences were also transnational on a personal level, as each sandalista carefully considered their responsibilities as a U.S. citizen, and decided whether their loyalties lay with a government, a mission, or an ideological position. The next section will discuss the way these transnational actors complicated U.S. attempts to assert imperial power through hemispheric hegemony.

³³ Clements, 105

³⁴ Ibid., 227.

Complicating U.S. Imperialism and Hegemony

The literature on U.S.-Latin American relations, as discussed earlier, has typically viewed these relationships as being one-sided, where the imperialist United States imposes her will on the passive receiving states in Latin America. This section complicates that analytical framework by arguing that this traditional power dynamic was inverted in El Salvador, as U.S. citizens had to give up all power and autonomy in order to participate in an anti-U.S. insurgency. It also proposes that the Salvadoran FMLN provided a space for dissident U.S. citizens to aid in rejecting U.S. imperialist projects, thus reducing U.S. hegemony both from within and outside of U.S. borders.

The FMLN made use of the U.S. citizens who sought to join their revolution, but the guerrillas always made sure that this relationship took place on their own terms. If a sandalista tried to dictate their role, their location, or their contribution to the FMLN, the leadership quickly shut them down. The revolutionary leadership allowed U.S. citizens to incorporate in the FMLN, but only in ways that benefited the FMLN. To ensure this balance of power, the FMLN made prospective sandalistas go through a rigorous vetting process, and surrender all autonomy to their guerrilla contacts. As illustrated earlier, Charles Clements waited months in Mexico and in Honduras before being allowed to enter El Salvador. Likewise, Wendy Shaul lived a year of her life in New York City, unable to commit to any plans more than two days in advance because her FMLN contact might call at any moment with orders to pack up and fly out. Frank Christopher and his film crew followed convoluted instructions that directed them to spend several days each in Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica before being allowed to enter El Salvador. These measures were largely instituted as safety precautions against CIA infiltration, but the effect they had was to remove any doubt a U.S. citizen might have about who was in

charge in El Salvador. Thus, when U.S. citizens arrived in El Salvador they were already accustomed to asking no questions, obeying orders, and requesting permission to do anything other than normal daily functions.

Sandalistas' writings repeatedly reflect this lack of autonomy. Joe Sanderson spoke about the lack of control he had over his own fate. "I'll just have to remain satisfied with watching my chip fall where it gets tossed and embedded. At the very least, as long as my protective custody remains in effect, [I] believe it's unlikely that my future as [a] combat-photographer will get terminated."³⁵ Sanderson's use of the passive voice indicates that not only does he have no control over where he is stationed or to what task he is assigned, but furthermore, he has no real idea who, exactly, is making these decisions.

In issues such as stationing and task assignment, his voice sounds rather unconcerned, but there are other instances in his journal where Sanderson becomes quite anxious about what is being asked of him, but feels powerless to ask questions or raise protest. During one late night patrol in FMLN-controlled territory, he and several *compas* (diminutive for *compañero*, or comrade) arrest an accused thief. Sanderson relates the story in dramatic detail, repeatedly referencing his fear that he would be party to an execution. As he stood guard over the prisoner, whose was hooded and tied up, he says, "[I] found my stomach grinding away, heart pounding like combat never produces. This was different, though I didn't know yet what it was."³⁶ Sanderson never asks any questions. He simply follows instructions, but eventually the situation becomes clearer. As more accusations pile up against the captive, Sanderson begins to fear that the crowd would turn into a lynch mob, and doubts the *compas*' ability, or desire, to control such an

³⁵ Sanderson, 79.

³⁶ Ibid., 163.

outcome. “I, though an armed *compa* myself, not understanding exactly what was going on, or why... I felt it too. Terror, sheer terror... The law was now in the *compas*’ hands, the abstract pueblo which they represented, and justice was up to them.”³⁷ This instance illustrates that, in spite of how integrated a sandalista became within a guerrilla battalion, and no matter the extent to which he or she foreswore their U.S. identity to become incorporated in the FMLN, the sandalista was compelled to operate as the FMLN dictated. Sanderson, as a combatant and photographer who fought, and eventually died, for the FMLN, was arguably one of the most fully incorporated sandalistas in El Salvador, yet even he was unable to dictate, or even influence, the course of events in a war zone.

Sanderson’s story is uniquely dramatic, but the lack of power with which he contends is a common theme in sandalistas’ memoirs. Charles Clements, as a Quaker, and thus a pacifist, struggled constantly with his determination not to bear arms in El Salvador, and to tend only to civilian populations. Over time, he found that there was often a fluid line between civilian and guerrilla in El Salvador, and the distinction he wished to draw often did not exist in the minds of the people he treated. He asked not to be assigned to a military unit, and was sent into battle to tend to the wounded. He refused to carry a gun and found himself sitting guard duty with a semi-automatic in his hands. After a few near-death experiences, his supervisor told him to carry a pistol to defend himself. When Clements refused, she asked him to do it anyway, due to “concern among my patients that their doctor might get killed.” To appease their anxieties, he did carry a gun, though he felt “like a hypocrite.”³⁸ The challenges to his neutrality and commitment to non-violence were incessant because the FMLN did not recognize his autonomy. He

³⁷ Sanderson, 165.

³⁸ Clements, 105, 106.

was there to serve them, and he could not do so were he to die.

Similarly, the FMLN often pressed Wendy Shaull into service in ways that violated her sense of autonomy. One night, after joining up with an under-staffed battalion, a comrade pressed her into late-night guard service, despite her protests. “I sat there throughout the night holding the rifle in my hands, wondering what in the world I would do if I did happen to see something out of the ordinary.”³⁹ The guerrillas were dealing with life and death, and often had no patience for, or understanding of, a sandalista who preferred not to hold a gun, or stand guard throughout the night over a guerrilla encampment. Sandalistas joined the FMLN to offer services, and were often compelled to serve in ways that conflicted with their personal beliefs and ambitions. Thus, the guerrillas inverted the traditional power dynamic, as citizens of the United States, the imperial hegemon, subjected themselves voluntarily to the Salvadoran *campesino* revolutionary, thus complicating ideas of hegemony and imperial control.

Conclusion

Sandalistas who went to El Salvador in the 1980s to protest the United States government’s intervention in the revolution there constituted a key cohort of activists whose behavior, in light of their U.S. citizenship, compromised U.S. hemispheric hegemony. This paper examined the case histories of five U.S. sandalistas who joined the FMLN to provide medical care, make a documentary, minister to the people, complete a journalistic study of revolution, and volunteer as a combatant. Although each of these individuals integrated themselves in the FMLN for deeply varied reasons, their stories shed light upon some of the common experiences they all shared.

³⁹ Shaull, 60.

Transnationalism is a productive historical tool for studying the phenomenon of U.S. citizens fighting against U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador. Through this lens, we can see how the presence of sandalistas in El Salvador complicates traditional academic discussions of U.S. imperialism and hegemony, as sandalistas submitted themselves to the authority of the FMLN, not the U.S. government, during their time with the guerrilla army. A transnational analysis also establishes that concepts like national identity and citizenship are insufficient frameworks for examining individual actions in a globalized, neo-colonial world. In instances where a U.S. citizen sheds his or her citizenship, as did Sanderson and Berra, to fully incorporate in an ideological movement, that person's nationality ceases to be the strongest part of their identity. Likewise, when sandalistas like Shaull, Christopher, and Clements define for themselves what the responsibilities and limitations of citizenship are, the concept becomes more complex than simply owning a passport. Ideas like fealty and obedience are removed from the equation, and citizenship becomes a fluid idea.

This essay was the first part of a longer project that examines the transnational history of U.S. activism in Central American civil wars during the late 20th century. Even this specific study, however, provides guidance for future study. Although I focus here on U.S. sandalistas, there were also many activist volunteers in El Salvador from Spain, France, Germany, Belgium, Mexico, Chile, and other countries. Another paper might examine the truly transnational world of activist *internacionalistas*. A public health study could explore the world of medical practice behind the front lines. As Clements' memoir shows, ingenuity, a reliance on traditional folk medicine, and a reliance on foreign volunteers constituted the nature of medical practice in FMLN-controlled El Salvador during the Civil War, a topic that might yield intriguing results. Regardless of the topic,

the general theme of international, transnational involvement in the Salvadoran Civil War is vastly understudied, and thus provides many opportunities for original research.

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