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FEATURE

S.O.A.

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Joseph Blair in a July 20 op-ed piece written for the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, Columbus Ga.

"Such views were not openly professed in the classrooms by Latin American faculty members or students. They were, however, frequently expressed in an office environment and at social events," he continued.

In its Aug. 9, 1993 issue, *Newsweek* reported: "Sources at the school say that when Honduran and Colombian soldiers go through the urban-combat exercise with blanks in their weapons, half the time the village priest (played by a U.S. chaplain) is killed or roughed up."

Some of the school's critics go farther and maintain that SOA even teaches a course on the Catholic church in Latin America — a charge that SOA Public Affairs Officer Captain David Acevedo denied when the *Catholic Courier* contacted him by phone.

Nonetheless, in 1992, Lt. Col. J.W. Matthews, Jr., did write U.S. Sen. Paul David Wellstone, and listed "The Church in Latin America" as one of the courses offered at SOA at that time. A copy of the letter was sent by facsimile to the *Catholic Courier* by Father Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest and co-director of SOA Watch, a Columbus, Ga., group calling for the school's closure.

Acevedo also refused to be interviewed by the *Courier* for this article, even after he was informed that the article would raise questions about human-rights abuses by its graduates.

"Everyone's entitled to their opinions," Acevedo said when declining the interview request. "Father Bourgeois and all the others can exercise their First Amendment rights with impunity."

The *Courier* then contacted the Department of the Army in Washington, D.C. for a response to critics' charges. The army sent a facsimile document that included a periodical article explaining and defending counterinsurgency training at SOA and other centers.

Established in 1946 in the Panama Canal Zone, and relocated to the United States in the 1980s, the SOA has trained more than 50,000 Latin American military personnel who have gone on to serve in their native armed forces and governments.

In her 1980 book, *Cry of the People - The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America; The Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. Policy*, Penny Lernoux explained that the school nearly guaranteed that its graduates would attack church workers simply by what they were taught.

Students were encouraged to see certain types of non-violent work community or organizing work by church officials among the poor as "subversive," and possibly communistic, she wrote.

"Anyone who differs with the established order must be obeying foreign, communist influences ... Any attempt to get at the real historical, sociological or economic causes of poverty and injustice in Latin America is judged 'subversive,'" she commented.

Scores of other SOA graduates — though certainly not all — have actively persecuted Catholics who have worked with the poor or defended what they saw as their rights against military and governing elites in Latin America for decades.

Several massacres of civilians and assassinations of Catholics seen as subversive to government interests in a number of countries were also planned and carried out by the training center's alumni.

SOA graduates, for example, were among the Salvadoran officers responsible for the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in 1988, a fact cited by U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy when he called for the school's



File photo

Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador, El Salvador, pray over the bodies of three of the six Jesuit priests who were assassinated Nov. 16, 1989.

closure in 1993. The U.S. House of Representatives, nonetheless, voted to keep the SOA open.

Critics such as Kennedy often point out that SOA graduates include such brutal leaders as Panama's Manuel Noriega, now imprisoned in the United States, and El Salvador's late President Roberto D'Aubisson, reputedly behind Archbishop Oscar Romero's 1980 assassination. Indeed, dictator after dictator in Latin America has been trained by the U.S. Army for decades, and one critic charged that at least until the end of the 1980s, such tyranny apparently never bothered U.S. commanders.

"American faculty members readily accepted all forms of military dictatorship in Latin America and frequently conversed about future personal opportunities to visit their new 'friends' when they ascended to military or dictatorial power some day," Blair writes.

Defenders of the school will often point out that no institution should be judged by a few of its graduates, even if they are dictators.

Retired Lt. Col. Russell W. Ramsey, U.S. Army Reserve, set up counterinsurgency training at SOA and wrote an article enti-

tled "A Military Turn of Mind: Educating Latin American Officers," for the August, 1993 edition of *Military Review*.

"While some Latin American military personnel were guilty of human rights abuses, and some generals participated in coups d'etat, most uniformed professionals belonged to armed forces that had a constitutionally intended internal security role," Ramsey wrote.

"Further," he continued, "most of these personnel practiced a far higher level of human rights and military professionalism than their counterparts in comparable developing world regions." Ramsey also argued that at "the dawn of the 1990s, it was difficult to find ... military personnel who approved even passively of human rights abuse, and most thought of the military coup d'etat as part of the past."

In the end, the view that the SOA has tolerated or even encouraged its graduates' active persecution of Catholics in Latin America may depend on how one believes the church should react to the economic and political conditions that surround it. The growth of church work among the poor was encouraged by the Latin American bishops decision to "opt

for the poor" in the late 1960s — a policy not always popular with the church's more conservative elements.

Some conservatives charged that one man's liberation theologian defending the poor was often another man's Marxist paving the way for communist revolution. Indeed, some members of Latin America's Catholic hierarchy have made statements to that effect, especially during the Cold War.

And with the Cold War's end, such countries as El Salvador are experiencing a fledgling pluralistic democracy, although insurgency still marks such countries as Colombia and Guatemala.

Yet, critics assert, the fact remains that many church members who never claimed allegiance to Karl Marx or any other communist have died brutally at the hands of U.S.-trained military personnel throughout Latin America for decades.

In fact, the SOA apparently is proud that it graduated one of the Catholic church's most ruthless opponents in the region — General Hugo Banzer Suarez, dictator of Bolivia in the 1970s.

SOA's Hall of Fame — established in 1988 to honor graduates who had ascended to positions of military and civilian prominence — that same year inducted the general whose name graces an oft-copied plan in Latin America to disunite the Catholic church and paint it a mere front for communist subversion. The plan's implementation led to the harassment and killing of a number of foreign clergy throughout Latin America.

Developed by Bolivia's Interior Ministry with the full backing and aid of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, the Banzer Plan had "three main thrusts," according to Lernoux: sharpen internal divisions within the church; smear and harass progressive Bolivian church leaders; and arrest or expel foreign priests and women religious, who made up 85 percent of the Bolivian clergy.

One of those clergy was Father Bourgeois who lived in Bolivia for five years under the Banzer regime. The priest served on a human-rights commission in La Paz while the plan was being implemented.

"We were asked by the bishop to visit political prisoners," Bourgeois said. "We began to be seen as subversive. I had to leave *persona non grata*."

Today, through his efforts at SOA Watch, Father Bourgeois works to close the school that graduated the dictator whose government compelled him to leave.

"We feel that this school being operated with our tax money can only continue in the shadows," he said. "We try to bring it to the light."

Activist priest schedules visit to Rochester area

Father Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest, former Latin American missionary, and an outspoken critic of U.S. policy in Latin America, is scheduled to visit the Rochester area during the first week of February.

Father Bourgeois and brothers Charles Joseph Liteky, a former priest, and John Patrick Liteky, were convicted in 1991 of willfully damaging government property, stemming from their 1990 protest at Fort Benning, Ga., on the anniversary of the murders of six Jesuit priests and two staff members in El Salvador.

The three men poured blood on property at the Army's School of the Americas where thousands of Salvadoran soldiers have trained, including 26 who were later cited in the Jesuit murders by a United Nations report.

All three men have completed prison terms to which they were sentenced, but their case lives on as the U.S. Supreme Court considers

whether the judge who heard the case should have stepped down because of a perception that he might be biased. A ruling is expected before the end of the court's term in June, according to Catholic News Service.

Ordained in 1972, Father Bourgeois has been active for years in trying to close down School of the Americas. He co-directs a group known as School of the Americas Watch, located outside the fort's entrance.

The priest also produced a 1983 documentary titled *Gods of Metal*, which was nominated for an Academy Award.

Father Bourgeois can be heard during a pre-visit interview on WXXI Radio in Rochester (1370 AM, 91.5 FM) on Feb. 2, at 11 a.m.

The following is a list of events at which Father Bourgeois is scheduled to participate or speak.

A candlelight vigil march in downtown Rochester on Feb. 4 from 4-5:30 p.m. He is scheduled to speak at St. John

Fisher College, 3690 East Ave., Pittsford, on Friday, Feb. 4, at 7:30 p.m., in Basil Auditorium.

He will also give a talk at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, 402 South Ave., on Saturday, Feb. 5, from 3:30-5:30 p.m.

He is slated to preach at the 11 p.m. Mass at Corpus Christi Church, 864 E. Main St., on Sunday, Feb. 6. Also that day, he will participate in Pax Christi Rochester's monthly Mass in front of the National Guard Armory, 145 Culver Road. The Mass is scheduled for 2 p.m.

The priest's visit is sponsored by more than a dozen Rochester-area churches, organizations and groups, some of which are hosting additional speeches by Father Bourgeois. For information on his other talks in the Rochester area, call 716/624-3318 or 533-2617.

For information on School of the Americas Watch, call 706/682-5369, or write: S.O.A. Watch, P.O. Box 3330, Columbus, Ga., 31903.

— Rob Cullivan