Chronology of Events*

1821—Central America follows the example of Agustín Iturbide in Mexico and declares independence from Spain.

1822—Central America joins Iturbide's Mexican Empire.

1823—Iturbide is overthrown and Central America declares itself independent as the United Provinces of Central America.

1823—President James Monroe, fearing an attempt by Spain to restore its authority over its rebellious New World colonies, declares that the United States will tolerate no further European intervention in the affairs of the nations of Central and South America.

1833—The first major peasant rebellion in El Salvador occurs. It is led by the Indian Anastasio Aquino.

1838—The United Provinces of Central America collapses, and conservative caudillos come to power.

1846—California is seized by the United States, starting talk of an inter-oceanic passageway through Nicaragua as a way to shorten the journey from New York to the West Coast.

1848—Cornelius Vanderbilt establishes the Atlantic and Pacific Steam Co., which transports passengers across Nicaragua.

1854—The U.S. military destroys the Nicaraguan city of San Juan del Norte in retaliation for an insult to the American Minister to Nicaragua.

1855—North American adventurer William Walker invades Nicaragua, with the aim of establishing a slave state there, and declares himself President.

1857—The U.S. military, with help from Vanderbilt, invades Nicaragua in an attempt to overthrow Walker. Walker is ultimately defeated by a force of Costa Ricans at Rivas.

1880-1910—The feudal hacienda system of El Salvador usurps large tracts of communal peasant land for coffee-growing. Peasants evicted from these lands are forced to become sharecroppers and bondservants.

*Sources from which this chronology was taken include the following: El Salvador: Background to the Crisis (Central American Information Office, 1982); Arnon Hadar, The United States and El Salvador: Political and Military Involvement (U.S.-El Salvador Research and Information Center, 1981); San Francisco Examiner, "The Tortured Land: Key Dates in the History of Central America," July 25, 1982; and the articles appearing in this volume.
1899—Minor Keith, a North American, founds the United Fruit Company in Honduras.
1903—U.S. military intervention in Honduras to protect U.S. interests.
1903—The United States sponsors a revolt in Panama resulting in Panama’s independence from Colombia, which clears the way for the construction of the Panama Canal.
1903-04—A series of U.S. military interventions in Panama during and following the revolt against Colombia.
1904—President Theodore Roosevelt adds the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Under the Corollary, the U.S. takes on the role of an “international police force” in Central America.
1907—U.S. military intervention in Honduras during a war between Honduras and Nicaragua.
1909—Conservative revolt supported by U.S. marines in Nicaragua overthrows Liberal government of José Santos Zelaya.
1914—Panama Canal opens.
1912-25—Presence of U.S. Marines maintains Conservatives in power in face of continued Liberal rebellion in Nicaragua.
1920—U.S. military intervention in Guatemala during a period of fighting between trade unionists and the government.
1921—Unrest in San Salvador. Women strikers are killed and a shoemakers’ strike is brutally crushed.
1924—Regional Federation of Workers of El Salvador is established with 80,000 members; it affiliates with the Central American Workers Federation.
1925—Strikes and rent riots in Panama lead to the landing of about 600 U.S. troops.
1928-34—Augusto Sandino leads a guerrilla war against U.S. forces in Nicaragua. The U.S. forces leave in 1934, but Sandino is killed by the U.S.-trained National Guard of Anastasio Somoza García after having been tricked into disbanding his guerrilla army. Somoza initiates a dynasty which rules Nicaragua for the next 45 years.
1931—The Communist Party of El Salvador wins a number of municipal elections. General Martínez, the military dictator, refuses to accept the electoral results.
1931-44—Martínez rules El Salvador for 13 years, his policies preventing industrialization.
1932—Brutal suppression of a peasant uprising in El Salvador results in the massacre of up to 30,000 men, women and children. The vast majority of the victims are killed after the uprising has been stamped out. Indians are the target of especially brutal repression, and the massacre has the effect of wiping out indigenous culture. The massacre has become known as *la*
matanza, the slaughter. Agustín Farabundo Martí, a leader of the peasants, was arrested by the government a few days before the massacre.

1944—Nervous about popular unrest in El Salvador, the United States advises General Martínez to resign. Military rule continues.

1948—The Partido Revolucionario de Unificación Democrática (Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification—PRUD) is founded in El Salvador. Its leader, Óscar Osorio, is president from 1950 to 1956. This is the beginning of a period of industrialization.

1954—The democratically elected, progressive government of President Arbenz in Guatemala is overthrown in a U.S.-sponsored coup carried out by the CIA, initiating a string of military governments that has continued up to the present.

1961—The Central American Common Market is formed.


1977—Carter Administration cuts off military aid to Guatemala because of continuing human rights violations there.

Jan. 10, 1978—Managua newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, leading critic of the Somoza regime, is assassinated, presumably at the orders of dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. The death of the widely respected editor sparks rioting and serves as a catalyst in bringing together anti-Somoza forces.

Aug. 22, 1978—A group of 25 Sandinistas led by Commander Zero—Edén Pastora—takes the National Palace in Managua, holding 1,500 hostages, including 49 deputies of the national assembly. The two-day occupation focuses world attention on Nicaragua and the Sandinistas.

May 19, 1979—Sandinista forces begin their final offensive from Costa Rica.

June 20, 1979—ABC correspondent Bill Stewart is murdered by a National Guardsman in Managua in full view of U.S. television cameras.

July 17, 1979—Somoza resigns and goes into exile in Miami. His National Guard surrenders to the Sandinistas two days later.

Oct. 15, 1979—Reform-minded officers in El Salvador overthrow the dictatorship of General Carlos Humberto Romero.

Jan. 3, 1980—Mass resignations from the Salvadorean government, including the three civilians in the junta.
Jan. 10, 1980—A second junta is formed in El Salvador; two prominent Christian Democrats fill vacancies in the junta.

March 6, 1980—The Salvadorean junta announces plans for agrarian reform. This is followed by an upsurge in government repression.

March 9, 1980—A third Salvadorean junta is formed. José Napoleón Duarte of the PDC joins the junta. Mass PDC defections by members unwilling to be associated with the government follow.

March 24, 1980—Salvadorean Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, an outspoken opponent of government repression and spokesman for the needs of the poor of El Salvador, is assassinated by a sniper while celebrating mass.

March 27, 1980—USAID grants 13 million dollars in aid to El Salvador.

April 1, 1980—U.S. House of Representatives Appropriations Committee approves $5.7 million in military aid to El Salvador.

April 18, 1980—The Frente Democrático Revolucionario (Democratic Revolutionary Front—FDR) is formed in El Salvador.

May 14, 1980—Massacre of Salvadorean peasants trying to flee into Honduras at the Rio Sumpul. Six hundred killed by Salvadorean troops acting in unison with Honduran forces.

Oct. 4, 1980—The Salvadorean Army begins a military offensive in Morazán, resulting in 3000 peasants killed and over 20,000 refugees.

Nov. 27, 1980—Six leaders of the FDR are kidnapped in San Salvador with the assistance of the military; later their tortured bodies are found.

Dec. 2, 1980—Four religious workers from the U.S. are killed after returning to El Salvador from a short trip. Their bodies are found in shallow graves near the airport. Members of El Salvador’s National Guard are blamed for their deaths. Three days later President Carter suspends all aid to El Salvador. The women’s murderers have yet to be brought to justice.

Dec. 13, 1980—José Napoleón Duarte, a member of the junta since March, is named president.


Jan. 5, 1981—North Americans Michael Hammer and Mark Pearlman, working as advisers to El Salvador’s agrarian reform program, together with José Viera, head of the Salvadorean agrarian reform agency, are gunned down in San Salvador.


Feb. 23, 1981—State Department releases a white paper showing what it calls “definitive evidence” that leftist rebels of El Salvador are receiving arms and training from communist countries, especially Cuba, with the help of Nicaragua.
March 3, 1981—Reagan administration announces that 20 more U.S. military advisers will be sent to El Salvador, bringing the total number to more than 50. It also announces $25 million in additional military aid to El Salvador.

June 1981—Credibility of State Department’s white paper destroyed by several articles in the U.S. press which refute it on every point.

Aug. 28, 1981—Mexico and France issue a joint communique recognizing the FDR-FMLN, the umbrella organization of the Salvadorean opposition, as a “representative political force.”

Nov. 29, 1981—Roberto Suazo Cordova elected president of Honduras.

March 15, 1982—Amid growing tension with the United States, the Sandinista government declares a state of emergency in Nicaragua.


March 28, 1982—In the midst of civil war and government repression, and under a state of siege, elections are held in El Salvador. They result in a victory by right-wing parties which threaten to squeeze the Christian Democrats remaining in the government out of power. Roberto D’Aubuisson, former death-squad leader, becomes head of the new Constituent Assembly.

May 19, 1982—The Salvadorean Constituent Assembly, now dominated by parties to the right of the Christian Democrats, calls a halt to the agrarian reform.

June 9, 1982—Ríos Montt drops the other members of the junta and takes over as sole leader of Guatemala.

June 30, 1982—Montt announces a state of siege in Guatemala and declares war on leftist guerrillas, whom he says will be executed upon conviction.

July 27, 1982—Reagan certifies that the human rights situation is improving in El Salvador and that reforms are proceeding there, contrary to evidence from international human rights monitoring agencies and other groups. In the period immediately following the certification, government killings of civilians soar.