

REMARKS OF
THE HONORABLE JOHN JOSEPH MOAKLEY
AT THE
CLOVER CLUB
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS
JANUARY 27, 1990

My friends, tonight I would like to take a few moments to share with you my thoughts and concerns over a grave situation that faces our government, our religious, and the inhabitants of a tiny country that could fit within the borders of our great Commonwealth.

The problems facing this small country have cost its people some 70,000 lives -- lost to senseless brutality. It has cost our religious community great anguish and torment. And most recently, to our Jesuits, it has cost the lives of six of their brightest and most beloved brothers. For all this and more, the cost to the U.S. taxpayer has been approximately \$1.5 million in aid for each and every day of the last decade. That's almost 4 billion dollars.

The civil war in El Salvador, now in its eleventh year, has proven to be a difficult and controversial issue for both Democratic and Republican administrations. There are no easy answers or overnight solutions, but the path that the U.S. government has taken over the past decade most certainly has not been successful in either ending the violence or improving our nation's standing in the region.

As we all know, difficult situations are often ignored unless we are forced to deal with them. One of the most tragic elements of the crisis in El Salvador is that we in Congress, the media, and to a large extent the general public only acknowledge the Salvadoran problem when we are slapped in the face with ever increasing repugnancies.

The rape and murder of American nuns, ten years ago, captured our attention--for awhile. The unthinkable murder of a Roman Catholic Archbishop, who was shot while saying mass, shook us into debate over what we are doing in El Salvador, but quickly faded. And now, after over 10 years of military aid, U.S.-trained Salvadoran soldiers are implicated in the massacre of six Jesuit priests, their young cook and her fifteen year old daughter.

Last month the Speaker of the House, Tom Foley, asked me to head up a special congressional task force to investigate the murders of the Jesuits and other related matters. Two weeks from tonight, I leave for El Salvador, along with several members of my task force, to search for the truth surrounding these grisly killings -- which despite the recent naming of suspects, the investigation is far from complete.

Those of you who know me well know that I am basically a "bread and butter" "nuts and bolts" type of politician. Some have asked, "Hey Joe, what are you doing getting tied up in this complicated foreign policy issue?" The answer simply is that I was shocked into it. And you should be shocked as well.

The murder of six holy men -- in one savage, senseless and barbaric act -- defies our moral comprehension. I knew three of the priests who were murdered. In fact, I received an award with one of

them, Father Segundo Montes, in Washington -- two weeks before he was killed.

And it was with shock that I began to hear and read about some of the reactions by prominent Salvadorans to the murders. A leading Salvadoran businessman was quoted as saying, "They (the priests) had to be taught a lesson. They had to be punished." There are other published reports of members of the ARENA party -- which is the party currently in power -- getting together and toasting the murders with champagne.

And what kind of murders were they toasting? I've seen the photographs of the mutilated bodies. I've read the autopsy report. My friend, Segundo Montes, was face down at the moment of execution. His brain mass was totally blown from his cranium. All the other victims were shot execution style. In all, there were over 200 spent bullet shells found at the scene.

As I have prepared for the trip over the past several days, it has become increasingly clear to me that the church is a primary target of the Salvadoran military and extremist forces. Well before and after the murder of the Jesuits, the Salvadoran military and security forces have engaged in systematic harassment of churches and church personnel. Churches have actually been surrounded, searched and desecrated by the military. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, the Lutheran Bishop and virtually every major religious leader in El Salvador have received death threats.

And, El Salvador's Attorney General, Mauricio Eduardo Colorado - the man with the primary responsibility of prosecuting the soldiers responsible for the Jesuit murders -- wrote a letter to Pope John Paul II asking that Salvadoran Catholic bishops and leaders who keep alive, in his words, "the questionable ideology of the church of the poor" be removed from the country for their own personal safety.

My friends, I was born and raised a Catholic in South Boston. I am not a theologian -- and God knows I should probably spend more time in church -- but my parish priest always stressed the importance of caring for the poor and the less fortunate. To suggest, as the Salvadoran Attorney General has, that to do so is somehow subversive -- in my opinion, runs contrary to what the Church is all about.

Quite frankly, it disturbs me that the Salvadoran Attorney General, leading military commanders and leading politicians of the Salvadoran Government -- a government we support with a considerable amount of taxpayer money -- feel comfortable attacking the church.

And it disturbs me that there is so much silence here in the United States. To be blunt, there seems to be more concern out there about "saving the whales" than about "saving priests" in El Salvador.

Immediately following the recent guerrilla offensive on November 11, which I have strongly condemned, the Salvadoran military began to raid and, in some cases, ransack a number of churches throughout El Salvador. Some of us in Congress complained. But, our Ambassador to El Salvador, William Walker, refused to criticize the Salvadoran military's actions and justified the raids as "comparable to the internment of Japanese-Americans in the United States after Pearl Harbor." I am deeply troubled by our Ambassador's words -- not only because Congress and the President have gone on record as repudiating US internment of Japanese Americans -- but, also because his words seem to indicate that the United States Government is willing to look the other way in the face of church persecution.

I have talked to numerous reporters who have told me that in off-the record discussions with US embassy officials, our embassy people have characterized leading church figures and denominations as "FMLN fronts," "subversives," and "pro-Marxists." My friends, in a country like El Salvador, such careless words get people killed.

And what are we to say about the treatment by US officials of a key witness in the Jesuit case -- Lucia Barrera de Cerna? This poor woman witnessed soldiers entering the priests' residence on November 16 and heard the gunshots. This frightened woman bravely came forward to tell her story to the appropriate Salvadoran officials.

She then came to the United States for protection. What did she receive? She was questioned, interrogated and polygraphed for four long days by 2 FBI officers, a US Embassy officer and a Salvadoran colonel. She was allegedly threatened with deportation. She was not offered the opportunity to have a lawyer present or any of the Jesuits, who offered to care for her in the United States. After she changed her original account of the events that occurred on the night of the murders, in an attempt to say what she thought her interrogators wanted her to say, she was declared "worthless" as a witness.

I met with this woman, her husband and her little daughter shortly after Christmas -- and I believe she is credible. I have been told that Scotland Yard has also met with her and has concluded that she is a credible witness.

But, I remain shocked by the way this woman was mishandled and maligned by important U.S. officials. It was almost as if the U.S. government went out of its way to discredit her -- so that the focus would turn away from the military as being responsible for the murders. And what is even more shocking is that certain US officials charged that Catholic Church officials in San Salvador told Lucia Cerna to fabricate her story.

I know that the handling of this witness has caused great tensions in the relationship between the Catholic Church in El Salvador and the U.S. Embassy. What is especially troubling to me is

that there appears to be no subsequent actions by our embassy to improve relations.

As you all have read in the press, some progress has been made in naming members of the Salvadoran military who murdered the Jesuits. I view this as very positive and have publicly praised the Salvadoran President, Alfredo Cristiani, who is Georgetown University educated and whom I believe is a good man, for his courage in this matter.

But, my friends, this is not the final curtain -- it's only the first act. We cannot be satisfied with an investigation that is limited to the identification of those who actually did the killings. Those who ordered or otherwise consented to the crime must also be brought to justice. I believe that pressure from Congress and the church has resulted in the progress that has been made on this case. As late as January 2, the U.S. Ambassador was telling me that the murders could have been the work of the FMLN guerrillas -- and not the military.

But, the pressure must continue. And I will tell you, based on information that my committee has gathered, I believe there are more people involved.

As I stated at the beginning of my remarks, there are no easy answers -- the situation is extremely complicated. Both sides in the Salvadoran war have committed horrible atrocities -- and both sides will be judged accordingly by history.

But, as we gather here tonight, the violence in El Salvador continues. There is tremendous suffering -- far greater than any of us can realize. And, like it or not, the United States has a role in all of this. And that, in turn, means that each and every one of us in this room has a role to play.

At the very least, there needs to be a recognition that United States policy needs to change. We need to create the conditions which will pave the way for more tolerance in that country and we must help to create a climate that will allow both sides to engage in meaningful negotiations to end the killing.

As a Catholic, I am proud of my church and its historic role in helping the poor in El Salvador. Make no mistake about it, helping the poor to help themselves is not subversive behavior. It's the church's mission. It's God's work.

I am disgusted by the attempts of extremists to paint the church with a red brush. If we let them get away with that kind of labeling -- then more priests, more nuns and more innocent people will die.

Additional acts of violence should not be the only catalyst forcing us to take action. The problems of El Salvador need to be reexamined from a fresh perspective, free of the black and white

characterizations that have caused us to spin our wheels for more than a decade.

My friends, let us not allow these six fallen Jesuits to have died in vain. Let their passing mark the beginning of a new intolerance on the part of all of us towards such unconscionable and sickening acts.