

INTERVIEW WITH SENATOR PAUL TSONGAS
(DEM. - MASS.)

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Q Senator Tsongas, why do you oppose sending more U.S. aid to El Salvador?

A For one obvious reason: More arms will not solve the problem of political unrest in El Salvador. That's the real danger, and military force isn't going to resolve it.

Pouring more and more money down this particular hole is simply not an attractive option. If the U.S. wants to supply whatever military means are required to defeat the Marxist insurgents in El Salvador, then we have to ponder the ultimate U.S. commitment -- ground troops. It is obvious that the American public would not support sending soldiers into El Salvador. So the final card is not playable. We'd simply be wasting time and money, and perhaps missing an opportunity to end the civil war through negotiations.

Q Why couldn't the U.S. expand the supply of weapons to El

Salvador's forces, without committing its own troops?

A We've tried that over the past year. How can one come away feeling that we've made progress? The guerrilla raid on Ilopango airport that destroyed most of the regime's Air Force in late January is certainly dramatic evidence to the contrary. The recent massacres there plainly demonstrate that our weapons are not resolving the war. It's time to cut our losses.

Q How, then, should the U.S. act to prevent a takeover in El Salvador by Marxist guerrillas?

A Negotiations between the regime and the guerrillas -- leading to a truly popular government -- is the only real way out of this dilemma in El Salvador.

By bringing the two sides together for talks under the broad umbrella of all Latin American countries, the negotiations would become a matter of importance to other countries as well, not just Salvadorans. Then, if one party

acts in bad faith, it affects the whole area and becomes a major public-opinion defeat for that group. This is the way to neutralize extremists from left and right.

Q Why do you believe such negotiations would succeed?

A There can be no absolute assurance of success. That's obvious. But what is different today is the intent -- clearly and publicly stated by both the guerrilla military forces and by civilians in the ruling junta -- that they're willing to sit down and negotiate. We should call them on that and see what happens. At least there's a chance.

Q Wouldn't such a concession add up to a political defeat for the Reagan administration?

A Emphatically not. The one case where Reagan has done very well in the Third World -- indeed, has been praised around the world -- concerns his decision to support peaceful negotiations for the independence of Namibia. He had the option of supporting a military solution in Namibia

-- that is, backing South African attempts to impose its form of government there. He chose not to do so. He is pursuing a negotiated settlement. Everyone agrees it is working out very well, against great odds in the beginning.

Yet here we are in El Salvador, taking the alternative approach. And look at the difficulty that we're in. It's almost like two different administrations. It's hard to believe that the same people are formulating such incredibly different policies -- one approved across the globe, the other meeting almost universal condemnation.

Q What is behind this conflict -- economic injustice, social divisions, external interference by Cuba?

A It's a combination of all those elements. There are no exclusive reasons for what is happening there.

But you have to ask yourself the hard-core, inevitable question: Why do people take up arms? In El Salvador, there can only be one answer: The perception by the common man

that he's got nothing to lose. He is opting for a different system, even though that system is an unknown. The peasant believes that things are so bad now, they can't possibly get worse. And that, in essence, is where the guerrilla recruits come from. The job of a government -- any government -- is to get that person to feel that he is part of the system.

Q What form of government do you foresee in El Salvador if negotiations are successful?

A Not unlike the one in this country. Basically, the extremes on both ends would be excluded, and the political center would have the power. To the extent that you keep the die-hard Communists happy, there's no way to run the government; to the extent you keep the right-wing terrorist squads happy, again you can't run a government. You simply have to exclude those, put everybody else together and drive the extremes into impotence.

Q If negotiations fail, can the U.S. live with "another Cuba" in Central America?

A El Salvador does not equal Cuba. They are completely different countries. I might add, however, that if we worry about such an "unacceptable" result in El Salvador, then by definition that means doing whatever necessary to prevent it. In military terms, that means sending U.S. combat troops, if necessary, and keeping them there in perpetuity, if necessary. Since no one contemplates that, we have to ask ourselves how important El Salvador really is to our national security.

Q How great is the danger that the U.S. will become caught in another Vietnam-like quagmire in El Salvador?

A Happily, not very great. For one thing, this Congress certainly is different than those in the 1960s. It is filled with members of the Vietnam generation who would put a stop to such an adventure. Also, it is obvious that there

is no consensus to support the use of ground forces there.

And so a quagmire in the direct military sense -- no.

Where there is a parallel, however, is in the economic and political sense. There, we could become bogged down, and are doing so now. The lesson of Vietnam applies: When you fight a political battle, you have to use weapons that are effective politically. Military arms don't work.

(END INTERVIEW)