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School of the Americas Morphs Into US Training Industrial Complex

By JP Sottile, Truthout
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In a long, 200-year history of US interventionism, covert action and troubling support for repressive regimes, the story of the US Army School of the Americas (SOA) at Ft. Benning, Georgia, stands out as a grotesque example of militarism run amok.

Since its inception in 1946, the SOA - or as critics often referred to it, "the School of Assassins" - has epitomized America's peculiar brand of "outsourced imperialism." The list of leaders dispatched by the SOA, the catalogue of criminal indictments and the not-insignificant death tolls tallied in SOA-linked civil wars and so-called "counter-insurgencies" is, for lack of a better word, impressive.

For the last 25 years, the school's critics - ranging from religious activists to members of Congress to indigenous rights' leaders - have regarded its programs, and the infamous training manuals made public in 1996, as uniquely responsible for the terrible consequences - unintended or otherwise - of America's long-standing policy of arming, training and dispatching generations of military leaders around Central and South America.

Simply put, the School of the Americas exemplifies everything wrong with US foreign policy after World War II. All too often, that policy favored vested interests in client states, assisted corporations coveting resources in so-called Banana Republics or simply allowed knee-jerk,

anticommunism to trump the rights and democratic choices of those who invariably ended up on the receiving end of SOA training in places like Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile and Colombia.

According to a Congressional Research Service report from 2001, between 1946 (when the first iteration of the school was established in the Panama Canal Zone) and 2001 (when the Ft. Benning version was officially "closed"), the US Military instructed "over 60,000 officers, cadets, and noncommissioned officers from both Latin America and the United States."

With at least 1,000 "students" per year attending the School to learn the latest in counter-insurgency techniques, psychological warfare and US military doctrine, the SOA transformed two generations of Latin American soldiers into anticommunist "shock troops" manning the front lines of US "national interests" around Latin America. This growing cohort of graduates effectively became Washington's outsourced army deployed throughout the Western Hemisphere.

But it was the Cold War. That was then. And this is now.

Now the Cold War has given way to wars on both drugs and terror. Now the School of the Americas has been rebranded as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). And now the United States has shifted away from the centralized models of the Cold War and the SOA by, in essence, opening up a vast satellite campus system of military training and client state development around the world.

Instead of training a hemispheric cohort of anticommunist armies and paramilitaries, the US increasingly trains a growing network of "counterterrorism" forces, drug warriors and security forces in pro-US regimes around the world: from the Philippines to the Horn of Africa, across the continent to West Africa and, of course, back in Central America. Ironically, troops on "training missions" have been rotating *out* of Ft. Benning to train forces *inside* Honduras - one of the deadliest nations on earth.

Although students still come to Ft. Benning in notable numbers - with 389 students from 19 countries attending WHINSEC during the first week of November 2014 - this "new" model of training relies on a heavy dose of "in country" training of local military and security forces. Not coincidentally, this takes the spotlight off of Ft. Benning's high-profile past and the political implications of fostering counter-insurgent forces deep in the heart of Dixie. As far as officials are concerned, the SOA was DOA over a decade ago. Now, insurgents are rebranded as "terrorists," drug traffickers and criminal gangs are rebranded as "narco-terrorists" and the catchphrase du jour is "democracy building."

This full re-boot of the School of the Americas' model deploys troops globally on "training" missions and, increasingly, US Special Forces work in concert with the post-Clinton State Department and its Conflict Bureau to establish forward operating bases in a new system of pro-US client states under the rubric of the War on Terror, and, if approved, it will be partially paid for by President Obama's recently-proposed Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF).

The administration requested \$4 billion for the CTPF in FY2015, which includes "Direct Partner Support," including "near-term training, equipping, advising, operational support, and long-term,

capacity-building efforts in coordination with the Department of State." The CTPF notwithstanding, the State Department's budget for this type of "outreach" has grown every year since 9/11.

It is not that policymakers want to shut down training inside the United States. Students will still attend WHINSEC, SOCOM (US Special Operations Command's Joint Special Operations) University and a vast, mostly-overlooked network of training facilities around the United States. In fact, one of the rationales given for preserving the SOA when Congress considered pulling support in 2001 was a sort of "democracy-building through osmosis" as students from around the world were guided by "exposure" to the glowing light of American democracy simply by spending some time at Ft. Benning.

Rather, this shift to a broader overseas training and "cooperation" presence represents a telling "win-win" for the National Security State. It allows US Special Forces and military personnel unique access through the pass-key of "cooperation" and "crisis response activities" under the rubric of State Department diplomacy, *and* it minimizes the exposure and public scrutiny that made the School of the Americas so infamous that it finally had to be officially ended in name, if not in deed.

Ultimately, it illustrates how deftly the Cold War has been slowly but surely cajoled and rebranded by an entrenched, seemingly-perpetual National Security State that relies on "pivoting" to new missions with new jargon whenever the current mission becomes untenable or, in the case of the School of the Americas, as the atrocities pile up.

Old School Ties

Since 1946, Uncle Sam has taken a lot of anticommunist nephews under his eagle-feathered wing, giving flight to the ominously-named "Operation Condor" and spawning a spy novel-sounding intelligence program called Project X. Around South and Central America these programs and other "techniques" often translated into brutal crackdowns, political repression and massacres linked directly to SOA graduates. Many of the notorious grads are profiled by SOA Watch:

- **Guatemala:** General Efraín Ríos Montt, Class of 1950. He seized power in a 1982 coup. Target of two Truth Commissions that "documented widespread human rights abuses by his regime including rape, torture, executions and acts of genocide against the populace, including indigenous population." The former dictator was much-admired by then-President Ronald Reagan. His genocide conviction was overturned in 2013.
- **Honduras:** Policarpo Paz García, Class of 1956 and 1959. A member of the SOA "Hall of Fame" (no joke, the US Army has a SOA Hall of Fame) and leader of a regime from 1980-1982 "marked by brutal military repression and the formation of Battalion 3-16, a military death squad that worked closely with the CIA in targeting suspected leftists in the '80s."
- **Colombia:** First Lieutenant Luis Enrique Andrade Ortiz, Class of 1983. Ortiz is just one of a long list of Colombians who attended or were invited to speak at the School. SOA Watch

links Ortiz with numerous assassinations and two massacres, and details the other 12 Colombian officers in a staggering litany of human rights abuses and crimes.

- **El Salvador:** Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano, Class of 1970. Like Ortiz in Colombia, One of the planners of a 1989 Jesuit Massacre, Montano's position in the government gave him a unique opportunity to implement his training. He is currently serving time in North Carolina prison for immigration fraud and Spain is seeking his extradition in the case of the massacre. Twenty-five years later, the massacre remains indelible and was a catalyst mobilizing opposition to the School.

The 2001 Congressional Research Service report - titled "US Army School of the Americas: Background and Congressional Concerns" - states bluntly that "school alumni included 48 out of 69 Salvadoran military members cited in the UN Truth Commission's report on El Salvador for involvement in human rights violations," another "100 Colombian military officers" linked in 1992 to various human rights abuses, several Peruvian military officers "linked" to a 1992 mass killing of university students and Honduran grads participated in the "clandestine military force known as Battalion 316."

However, the highest-profile alum is the poster-boy for narco-state corruption - the infamous General Manuel Noriega. A five-time graduate of the School of the Americas, Noriega's case is fascinating insofar as the extra-constitutional invasion of Panama by G.H.W. Bush in 1989 highlighted the type of "leader" the SOA repeatedly cultivated, and it kicked-off a new, post-Cold War pivot for the School.

After being recruited by the CIA, the future "burr in the side" of G.H.W. Bush attended the SOA in 1967 when it was still located in Panama. He rose to prominence as the head of military intelligence under General Omar Torrijos when Torrijos seized power in 1968. Gen. Torrijos, like Noriega, was a SOA graduate and "part-time spy" for the CIA.

Over time, however, Gen. Torrijos drifted away from Washington's influence and famously, or infamously in the mind of future President Ronald Reagan, Torrijos negotiated the handover of the Panama Canal with then-President Jimmy Carter in 1977. As part of the deal, the SOA alumnus demanded the relocation of the School out of Panama. Ironically, an SOA graduate was directly responsible for the SOA moving to Ft. Benning in 1984.

After Torrijos refused to renegotiate the Canal treaty with the newly-minted Reagan Administration, the increasingly hard-to-control leader died in a 1981 plane crash. Many - particularly self-described economic hit-man John Perkins - believe Torrijos was assassinated because of his growing intransigence in the face of a new, Central America-obsessed administration in Washington. What the crash *did* do is put the country in the hands of his fellow SOA alumnus - Manuel Noriega.

And here is where the story gets almost comical.

Noriega played ball with the Reagan Administration during its ever-widening counter-insurgent/anti-Communist war around Panama's neighborhood. Like any good SOA grad, he arranged for the training of Reagan's beloved Contras. He worked closely with Col. Oliver North

to assist the Contras. And during this "Contra interlude," Panama "just so happened" to become a key cocaine transit point and drug money laundromat. It was the 1980s, after all.

But then Iran-Contra broke open like a rotten egg in 1986.

As the scandal unfurled, the drug-trafficking aspects of the scandal remained mostly out of the headlines even as it was being uncovered by reporters and investigated by then-Senator John Kerry. By the time G.H.W. Bush transitioned from veep to president in 1988, Noriega became more and more vocal and more and more of an embarrassment. His powder-covered hands had been shaken by key people attached to the Iran-Contra affair. Like others before him, Noriega became expendable.

The Bush Administration indicted him on various charges - racketeering, trafficking, money laundering - in 1988. Noriega remained defiant. And then he was targeted by a 1989 coup led by . . . wait for it . . . yet another SOA graduate - Major Moisés Giroldi! In fact, the failed coup was populated by a host of former SOA graduates. With the failed coup came new problems for the foundering Bush Administration. In December of 1989, Bush finally decided to tidy-up the troublesome loose end. Bush cited many reasons for the undeclared war, including a specious assertion that Noriega declared war on his former master. Of course, the far more likely reason was the still-developing, drug-dealing angle of the Iran-Contra story and Noriega's defiant tone even has the Bush team tried to maintain a firewall around the scandal.

After Noriega was deposed and the most famous graduate of the SOA spirited off to a Miami jail as part of a "counter-narcotics" mission, the SOA began in earnest to pivot away from anticommunism onto so-called counter-narcotics efforts. And that's when activists began to turn their attention to the gates leading to the School of the Americas. The very next year - 1990 - was the first "vigil" held outside Ft. Benning, a sprawling military base located in Columbus, Georgia.

With the Cold War was winding down, the atrocities were piling up - including a highly visible massacre of six Jesuits on November 16, 1989, linked to yet more SOA graduates in the capital of El Salvador - the vigil brought a new attention and increased scrutiny to Ft. Benning. Over each succeeding year, the vigil highlighted the notable excesses, human rights abuses and, it seems, governmental indifference toward the real impact SOA "grads" had on the people who felt that impact first-hand.

From SOA to WHINSEC

By the end of the Clinton Administration a growing number in Congress felt increased pressure of supporting what seemed to be a relic of anticommunist zealotry. The growing unwillingness of House members to run the SOA through the yearly gauntlet of the defense budget politics led to a search of a solution, particularly after a series of Congressional efforts and votes cut off funding beginning in 1993. By 1998, the House passed a law requiring stricter training standards at the SOA. Still, the SOA became an annual issue and ugly political football. However, there just weren't enough votes to shut it down.

But that all changed in 2000. Or so it seemed.

That year the School of the Americas was "closed" by Congress because many deemed the School too toxic to support. In a telling moment, Colonel Mark Morgan informed the Department of Defense just before the vote in Congress: "Some of your bosses have told us that they can't support anything with the name 'School of the Americas' on it. Our proposal addresses this concern. It changes the name."

So, Congress pulled the plug on the controversial "School" in its FY2001 National Defense Authorization bill. But it wasn't gone. It was simply re-christened the following year as The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC).

The pivot from SOA to WHINSEC generated false and misleading headlines touting the closure of the School. Much like accounting giant Arthur Andersen changing the name of its troubled consulting business to Accenture after its shady involvement with Enron, the re-branding of SOA to WHINSEC seemed more like a PR-move designed to wipe the slate clean with the public rather than an honest attempt to clean up a notorious incubator for dirty wars in Latin America.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the rebranding of both Andersen Consulting and SOA emphasized the upside of forgetfulness. The scandal-addled consultants at Andersen thought the name "Accenture" implied an "accent on the future" and, they hoped, put the past behind them. Similarly, the newly-christened WHINSEC was by touted by Defense Department officials as an institution suddenly committed to looking to "the future" of the Western hemisphere. As the Clinton administration's then-Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera wrote in 2000, the name change was intended to end the "acrimonious debate" about the controversial training facility.

Not surprisingly, the re-branding effort did little to allay the fears or dampen the commitment of WHINSEC's critics. At the time of the faux closure, Fr. Roy L. Bourgeois - Vietnam Vet, founder of SOA Watch and then-Catholic priest who organized the first vigil at Ft. Benning in 1990 - wrote a response to Secretary Caldera's desire to move on.

"The Pentagon claims that human rights abuses by SOA graduates are in the past. Unfortunately, they are not. They are a grave and significant part of the present." As he told the NY Times, "For us, this is the same old school doing what it's always been doing."

What is new is what's going on in one of the school's "other campuses."

Honduras: The Satellite Campus

Honduras is in trouble.

Over the last few years the embattled nation of 8 million people has become "the Murder Capital of the World," the subject of Congressional hearings and the target of many Americans' anger because of "waves" of "child refugees" fleeing the bloody front-lines of America's War on Drugs in Latin America.

Yet, unbeknownst to many, the United States has sent, in the words of the Atlanta Journal Constitution, "waves of Georgia National Guardsmen" in the other direction. In fact, Honduras occupies a unique place at the intersection of US policy and efforts at "training" forces - in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism - around the world. Not only does Honduras still cycle

students through the SOA/WHINSEC system at a disproportionate rate, but it also stands out as a prime example of the pivot to "in-country training" of security forces.

In this case, it is deep into the heart of Central America where US forces "are training Honduran soldiers how to combat the drug smuggling plaguing their country." The first "wave" from Georgia's 48th Brigade Combat Team traveled to Honduras in May of 2014, and more "waves" cycled into the nation throughout the summer. A similar program was vetoed by some governors back in 1986 when the Reagan administration sent guardsmen on training missions to Honduras.

Unlike then, however, these missions now garner little attention and no real scrutiny.

While detention centers in the United States remain a hot-button, few know that United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) is operating an air-base in Honduras - Soto Cano Air Base - and is fully active inside the country with senior US military leaders working directly with Honduran military officials. It does, of course, make sense considering the nexus of "cooperation" and "training" between the two nations - both in Honduras and at SOA/WHINSEC.

Unfortunately, media attention has not focused on the annual catalogue of human rights abuses at the hands of those the United States has trained both historically and recently, although 108 members of Congress requested a State Department review of support for Honduras in light of a litany of human rights abuses including "targeted killings of journalists and advocates of human and land rights." As outlined in the New York Times, the State Department's own assessment detailed "corruption, intimidation, and institutional weakness of the justice system leading to widespread impunity" and "unlawful and arbitrary killings by security forces, organized criminal elements, and others."

So far, the main action taken by the State Department has been to issue travel warnings to American tourists wishing to visit Honduras. Little has been done to revisit or reform an all-too-predictable policy that elevates expediency over stated ideals. Perhaps that's why the Obama Administration did little when Honduras' democratically elected President - Manuel Zelaya - was toppled in a 2009 military coup that was led by SOA/WHISEC alum Gen. Romeo Vasquez. SOA Watch found that four of the six generals involved in the coup received training at SOA/WHINSEC.

Alas, the more names change, the more the outcomes remain the same. And it is sadly truer than ever in the case of the 2009 coup. Why? Because the bottom line about the overthrow of Zelaya is the bottom line for corporate interests. Writing in Ricochet, Sarah Cuffe details the vested Canadian gold-mining interests at play in Honduras and the tricky problem Zelaya presented prior to his ouster.

According to Cuffe, the Zelaya administration "renewed a moratorium on mining concessions initiated by his predecessor Ricardo Maduro amid demands for mining legislation reform from affected communities, environmental movements and other organizations."

And, as Cuffe points out, it opened the door to a Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement in 2014.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a US-based company - Vanguard Mining Corporation - recently acquired 4,000 hectares of gold concessions inside the "cooperative" nation of Honduras. It also seems that the United States and Canada are quite "cooperative" regarding their interests in the Western hemisphere. And to bring the story full circle, the rebranded heir to the United Fruit Company - perhaps the most notorious US company to ever operate in Latin America - also had a vested interest in the toppling of Zelaya after Zelaya proposed raising the minimum wage by 60 percent, according to PR Watch.

Chiquita Bananas got into a bit of trouble during US expansion of the Drug War to Columbia at the start of 2000. While the US government spent \$5 billion to fight narco-terrorism, Chiquita hired paramilitaries to murder labor leaders, activists and political opponents fighting for land and labor rights. Just as the Cold War often provided ideological cover for repression of reformers, activists and inconvenient obstacles to "development," so too have the wars on Drugs and Terror allowed the America's infrastructure of cooperation and training to pivot forces around the world - and particularly to the new frontier in Africa.

University of AFRICOM

It's a rare day when Burkina Faso - a tiny, landlocked West African nation - takes center-stage as a notable actor in America's global power play. But that's exactly what happened on October 31, 2014, when long-time President Blaise Compaore resigned in the face of protests. The reason this wasn't just another day in African turmoil? Because the man who took control of the small nation - Lt. Col. Isaac Zida - was an attendee of another American "school." The transitional leader of Burkina Faso (he's handing over power to a career diplomat on an interim basis) is an alumnus of US Special Operations Command's Joint Special Operations University (SOCOM).

Yes, SOCOM - the home of US Special Operations and Forces - has its own "University" with an impressive list of courses. The school is conveniently located in Tampa, Florida, alongside US Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM is the Pentagon command division responsible for the Middle East, which put Lt. Col. Zida in proximity to a lot of power - and firepower - when he attended courses in 2012. The importance and impact of Zida's training and the coup he led is that his little land-locked nation is, according to a report in the Washington Post, a "key hub" in the US military's expanding intelligence operations in Africa. And now the United States has yet another military leader from yet another "school" positioned in yet another region.

In the case of Burkina Faso, the Washington Post reported in 2012 that the United States has been running "a classified surveillance program code-named Creek Sand" and sending "dozens of US personnel and contractors" to the nation's capital - Ouagadougou - in an effort to "establish a small air base on the military side of the international airport."

What's more, the State Department regards Burkina Faso as a "strong US security and defense partner in the region." Although ABC News reporter Lee Ferran speculated at the time that the loss of President Compaore may mean the loss of a "strategic partner," the fact is that the fix was in all along. The United States had a well-trained client ready to go and be placed in Burkina Faso's military. It represents another step toward the establishment of a "University of AFRICOM" around the continent through a variety of programs:

- The Regionally Aligned Force Program which uses training, assistance and treats obligations as a pass-key to create a network of small deployments, particularly around the bailiwick of US Africa Command (AFRICOM).
- The State Department's long-time International Military Education and Training (IMET) designed to "further the goal of regional stability through effective, mutually beneficial military-to-military relations that culminate in increased understanding and defense cooperation between the US and foreign countries."
- The Global Security Contingency Fund developed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Bill Gates to "incentivize joint planning and to pool the resources of the Departments of State and Defense, along with the expertise of other departments, to provide security sector assistance for partner countries so they can address emergent challenges and opportunities important to US national security."
- The Counterterrorism Partnership Fund proposed by President Obama to "fulfill different missions" such as "training security forces in Yemen who have gone on the offensive against al Qaeda; supporting a multinational force to keep the peace in Somalia; working with European allies to train a functioning security force and border patrol in Libya; and facilitating French operations in Mali."
- And a "secretive Africa plan" first reported by the New York Times that is "financed in part with millions of dollars in classified Pentagon spending and carried out by trainers, including members of the Army's Green Berets and Delta Force, that was begun last year to instruct and equip hundreds of handpicked commandos in Libya, Niger, Mauritania and Mali."

The common thread through all of these initiatives is the use of training to establish "cooperative" or client relationships that place key military personnel in crucial positions in nations around the globe. To wit, Foreign Policy reported in 2012 that "the United States delivered bilateral security assistance to 134 countries - meaning that every country on Earth had about a 75 percent chance of receiving US military aid."

This "satellite campus" system of the "New" School of the America is expanding at the same time the traditional model is drawing tens of thousands of soldiers and police to "275 known military school and installations." Amnesty International estimates that the United States "trains at least 100,000 foreign soldiers and police from more than 150 countries each year at a cost of tens of millions of dollars" and thereby seems to have created a Training-Industrial Complex.

At home and abroad the "New" School of the Americas is now in open enrollment.

25 Years and Counting . . .

Activists will return once again to the gates of Ft. Benning this November 21. They will hold the twenty-fifth consecutive "vigil" over the course of the weekend and demand yet again that the mission of the SOA be ended once and for all. Along the way there have been victories, including a recent decision by a Federal District Court forcing the Obama Administration to eventually release the names of officers who learned their "craft" at the SOA. Sunlight may be the ultimate disinfectant, but the infection has been spreading.

In many ways the pivots and rebranding efforts over the years reflect the efficacy and impact of the protests, the vigils and the hard work of those who've catalogued the litany of crimes committed by SOA graduates. But unlike any time over the last two and a half decades, this time they will be standing outside a mere outpost in a much larger network of US military influence that is growing wider with each passing day.