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**Andrea Oñate. "The Red Affairs: FMLN– Cuban relations during the Salvadoran Civil War, 1981-1992." *Cold War History* 11:2 (May 2011): 133-154. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2010.545566. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2010.545566> .\***

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Review by **William M. LeoGrande**, American University

Through her interviews with *comandantes* of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), Andrea Oñate sheds new and important light on the relations between Cuba and the Salvadoran revolutionary movement during the decade of war in the 1980s. That Cuba supported the FMLN, both overtly and covertly, is not a revelation, of course. Even at the time, Cuban officials acknowledged that they provided material assistance to the Salvadoran revolution. In 1981, for example, Fidel Castro said as much to some representatives attending the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Havana, and Vice-President Carlos Rafael Rodríguez confirmed it to a visiting delegation of U.S. foreign policy specialists in 1982.<sup>1</sup>

Oñate sets up something of a straw man when she argues that “many intellectuals...denied or completely ignored Cuban involvement” (p. 134). The real debate at the time was over whether the revolutionary upsurge in El Salvador was fundamentally the result of internal political and economic dynamics (authoritarian politics plus gross social inequality, as Salvadoran Social Democrat Guillermo Ungo neatly summarized it), or an artificial product of Havana and Moscow exporting revolution (as Ronald Reagan so

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\* This article is the recipient of the the journal *Cold War History*'s Best Paper Award, which it received at the journal's April 2010 Graduate Conference on the Cold War.

1. Castro's candid conversations at the Inter-Parliamentary Union and elsewhere are described in “Text of a U.S. Report on Cuban and Nicaraguan Role in Salvador Rebellion,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1982. The author was a member of the delegation that met with Rodríguez. Published accounts of the interview are in Seweryn Bialer and Alfred Stepan, “Cuba, the United States, and the Central American Mess,” *New York Review of Books*, May 27, 1982; and Leslie H. Gelb, “Cuban Calls for Talks With the U.S. and Accepts Part Blame for Strains,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1982.

often claimed). The diagnosis that prevailed in this debate largely determined Washington's policy prescription: faults in the political and economic foundation of Salvadoran society called for political and economic reform; Cuban-Soviet aggression called for military aid. Nevertheless, Oñate is probably right when she concludes that the FMLN would have had a hard time surviving the flood of U.S. military assistance to the Salvadoran armed forces had it not been for Havana's help, and that the Salvadoran military would likely have gone down to defeat without Washington's largesse.

From the *comandantes*, Oñate gets an insider's view of how the FMLN and Cuban leaders interacted: how the Cubans enticed the fractious Salvadorans to unify by dangling the carrot of military aid; how they acted as advocate for the Salvadoran revolutionaries with the Soviet Union and other members of the socialist bloc; how they facilitated the FMLN's diplomacy in the West; and how Fidel brow beat Cayetano Carpio into endorsing negotiations. Although the young guerrilla leaders looked up to the Cubans, Fidel in particular, for having made a successful revolution and survived the wrath of the United States, they also chafed under Cuba's ideological pressure. The Cubans had their favorites among the five constituent organizations of the FMLN, and the others were wary of Cuba's influence. Oñate's account of meetings in which Cuba's assistance was arranged, and in which these tensions played out, is a fascinating historical narrative and an important addition to our knowledge on the subject.

Where Oñate goes astray, in my view, is in her portrayal of the Cuban side of this partnership. Perhaps because she interprets the Cuban position through the eyes of the FMLN *comandantes*, she misses important nuances in Havana's support, which varied considerably over the course of the war. She recounts how Cuba went all-out to help the FMLN prepare for its "final offensive" in January 1981 (pp. 140-141), but does not follow through by discussing how Havana reacted to the FMLN's abject failure. Within weeks, Cuba suspended the flow of military aid and began pressing for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. As the Reagan administration threatened both Nicaragua and Cuba with military reprisals, Havana seemed ready to settle for something less than victory in El Salvador in exchange for preserving the revolutionary government in Nicaragua and averting a U.S. attack on Cuba itself. Cuba's later support for the Contadora peace process embodied a similar willingness to sue for peace in El Salvador in order to preserve a Sandinista government in Nicaragua. When Washington spurned these diplomatic feelers, Havana resumed the flow of aid to the FMLN.

In discussing Cuba's motives for supporting the FMLN, Oñate correctly identifies ideological commitment (she calls it "altruism") as a critical component in the equation. International solidarity has been a consistent theme in Cuban foreign policy not only in Latin America but in Africa as well, as Piero Gleijeses argues so persuasively in his account of Cuban policy there.<sup>2</sup> But when Oñate tries to distill Cuba's security stake in

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2. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

the Salvadoran revolution, she concludes that Havana hoped the revolutions in Central America would so worry the United States that it would focus its attention there and leave Cuba alone. In fact, the opposite was true, and the Cubans knew it. Revolutionary turmoil in Central America did, indeed, capture U.S. attention, but from the outset, the Cubans understood that they would be blamed for it and that Washington's reaction would put their own security at greater risk. When the Sandinistas inspired young Nicaraguans to rise against the Somoza dictatorship, the Cubans limited their direct assistance until the last six months of the revolution, explicitly to avoid provoking U.S. intervention.

When Ronald Reagan entered the White House, Secretary of State Alexander Haig publicly and repeatedly blamed Havana for Central America's revolutions and advocated "going to the source," by which he meant taking military action against Cuba. He threatened the Cubans directly in his secret meeting with Carlos Rafael Rodríguez in Mexico November 1981.<sup>3</sup> Based on tips from their friends in Europe and Latin America, the Cubans knew that Washington was making active military plans to attack the island, and they appealed to the Soviet Union to warn Washington to desist— which Moscow refused to do.<sup>4</sup> So the Cubans understood full well that the war in El Salvador posed a serious threat to Cuba's own security, not a diversion that would make them safer. Perhaps in the long run, the Cubans hoped that a revolutionary victory in El Salvador along with a consolidated Sandinista government in Nicaragua would make it impossible for the United States to continue to harbor hopes of rolling back the revolution in Cuba. But in the short run, the risk to Cuba was grave indeed.

Oñate concludes from her interviews that Cuba lost interest in the Salvadoran revolution as the cold war came to an end, perhaps because they regarded it as a lost cause in the changing international milieu. In fact, although the FMLN may not have known it, the Cubans put themselves at risk again by arguing fiercely with Mikhail Gorbachev and the Sandinistas not to abandon the Salvadorans, even though that advocacy aggravated the growing rift between Havana and Moscow. The Soviet Foreign Ministry concluded, according to its top Latin America diplomat Yuri Pavlov, that because Cuban policy in Central America was damaging U.S.-Soviet relations, the Soviet alliance with Cuba no longer served Soviet national interests.<sup>5</sup> Gorbachev rejected that conclusion, but his successor, Boris Yeltsin, embraced it and cut off Cuba's economic lifeline.

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3. "Transcript of Meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr., and Cuban Vice Premier Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, Mexico City, 23 November 1981," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 8-9 (winter 1996-97):207-215.

4. "URSS nos Abandonó en 1980: Raúl Castro," *El Sol de Mexico*, April 22, 1993.

5. Yuri Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance: 1959-1991* (Piscataway NJ: Transaction, 1994):126-127, 138.

The great strength of this article– the new material Oñate gleans from her interviews with the FMLN *comandantes*– is also its weakness, because it leads her to lean too heavily on the interviews alone rather than supplementing (and sometimes correcting) them with the extant historiography on the subject, which is more extensive than Oñate lets on. Despite these missteps, Oñate has given us an important and fascinating window into the inner workings of the relationship between Cuba and the FMLN during the Salvadoran insurrection, and I look forward to reading more from her in the future.

**William M. LeoGrande** is Dean of the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington, DC. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University and has written extensively about Latin American politics and U.S.-Latin American relations. He is the author of *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, and co-editor of *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. He is currently working on a history of U.S.-Cuban diplomatic negotiations since 1959.

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