
Backyard Terrorism

Washington has been training terrorists at a Georgia base for years, and is still at it.

BY GEORGE MONBIOT

“If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents,” George Bush announced on the day he began bombing Afghanistan, “they have become outlaws and murderers themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril.”

I’m glad he said “any government” as there’s one which, though it has yet to be identified as a sponsor of terrorism, requires his urgent attention. For the past 55 years it has been running a terrorist training camp, whose victims massively outnumber the people killed by the attack on New York, the Embassy bombings, and the other atrocities laid, rightly or wrongly, at Al Qaeda’s door.

The camp is called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, or Whisc. It is based in Fort Benning, GA, and it is funded by Mr. Bush’s government.

Until January this year, Whisc was called the “School of the Americas,” or SOA. Since 1946, SOA has trained more than 60,000 Latin-American soldiers and policemen. Among its graduates are many of the continent’s most notorious torturers, mass murderers, dictators, and state terrorists. As hundreds of pages of documentation compiled by the pressure group SOA Watch show, Latin America has been ripped apart by its alumni.

In June this year, Colonel Byron Lima Estrada, once a student at the school, was convicted in Guatemala City of murdering Bishop Juan Gerardi in 1998. Gerardi was killed because he had helped to write a report on the atrocities committed by Guatemala’s D-2, the military intelligence agency run by Lima Estrada with the help of two other SOA graduates. D-2 coordinated the “anti-insurgency” campaign which obliterated 448 Mayan Indian villages, and murdered tens of thousands of their people. Forty percent of the cabinet ministers who served the genocidal regimes of Lucas Garcia, Rios

Montt and Mejia Victores studied at the School of the Americas.

In 1993, the United Nations truth commission on El Salvador named the army officers who had committed the worst atrocities of the civil war. Two-thirds of them had been trained at the School of the Americas. Among them were Roberto D’Aubuisson, the leader of El Salvador’s death squads; the men who killed Archbishop Oscar Romero; and 19 of the 26 soldiers who murdered the Jesuit priests in 1989. In Chile, the school’s graduates ran both Augusto Pinochet’s secret police and his three principal concentration camps. One of them helped to murder Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffit in Washington DC in 1976.

Argentina’s dictators Roberto Viola and Leopoldo Galtieri, Panama’s Manuel Noriega and Omar Torrijos, Peru’s Juan Velasco Alvarado and Ecuador’s Guillermo Rodriguez all benefited from the school’s instruction. So did the leader of the Grupo Colina death squad in Fujimori’s Peru; four of the five officers who ran the infamous Battalion 3-16 in Honduras (which controlled the death squads there in the 1980s), and the commander responsible for the 1994 Ocosingo massacre in Mexico.

All this, the school’s defenders insist, is ancient history. But SOA graduates are also involved in the dirty war now being waged, with US support, in Colombia. In 1999 the US State Department’s report on human rights named two SOA graduates as the murderers of the peace commissioner, Alex Lopera. Last year, Human Rights Watch revealed that seven former pupils are running paramilitary groups there and have commissioned kidnappings, disappearances, murders, and massacres. In February this year an SOA graduate in Colombia was convicted of complicity in the torture and killing of 30 peasants by paramilitaries. The school is now drawing more of its students from Colombia than from any other country.

The FBI defines terrorism as “violent acts... intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a government, or affect the conduct of a government,” which is a precise description of the activities of SOA’s graduates. But how can we be sure that their alma mater has had any part in this? Well, in 1996, the US government was forced to release seven of the school’s training manuals. Among other top tips for terrorists, they recommended blackmail, torture, execution, and the arrest of witnesses’ relatives.

Last year, partly as a result of the campaign run by SOA Watch, several U.S. congressmen tried to shut the school down. They were defeated by 10 votes. Instead, the House of Representatives voted to close it and then immediately reopened it under a different name.

We can’t expect this terrorist training camp to reform itself: after all, it refuses even to acknowledge that it has a past, let alone to learn from it. What should we do about the “evil-doers” in Fort, Benning, GA? ■

*George Monbiot is a weekly columnist for The Guardian and author of **Captive State: the corporate takeover of Britain**. The above is condensed from the Oct. 30th Guardian. A complete text of the article is available at www.monbiot.com. Reprinted with permission of author and The Guardian. ©George Monbiot*

Teaching Ideas

George Monbiot closes his article with the question, “What should we do about the ‘evil-doers’ in Fort Benning, GA?” Ask students how they would answer that question.

Also ask students to compare the evidence linking the School of the Americas to terrorist atrocities to evidence linking Al Qaeda training camps to the attack on New York. Have students list the evidence against the former School of the Americas in one column and list evidence against Al Qaeda in another. Which evidence is stronger?

Watch the award-winning video, *School of the Assassins*, available at <http://www.soaw.org/resources.html#videos>.

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