
El Salvador: A High-Risk Mission For Political Reform

by Eric Anderson

In the spring of 1984, at the time of the March and May Presidential elections in El Salvador, the name of John Kelley appeared in front-page stories in the New York Times, Washington Post, and other newspapers, as well as on the ABC and NBC television networks. Kelley had gained notice because he was the representative of the U.S. State Department to the El Salvador Election Council.

John Kelley is a Seventh-day Adventist who grew up in Mexico as the son of Adventist missionaries. He did not leave Mexico until he was 15. Andrews University was his first English-speaking school. There he became president of the student association and in 1967 earned a B.A. in biology and religion. After attending the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary for a year, Kelley was youth pastor for a year at the Broadway Seventh-day Adventist Church, a Spanish-speaking congregation in Manhattan. He then enrolled at Columbia University, earning a doctorate, summa cum laude, in anthropology. His dissertation topic studied the politics of agrarian reform in Mexico. After teaching for three years at Columbia University and the City University of New York, he joined the Agency for International Development (AID), became a foreign service officer in the State Department, and worked for six years in Honduras as an expert in land reform. In 1982 he and his family had to leave the country within 24 hours because of a threat against their lives.

Kelley was interviewed by Eric Anderson, a professor of history at Pacific Union College, and a frequent contributor to Spectrum. (See "The Bishops and Peace, Or is it Necessarily

a Sin to Build Nuclear Weapons?" Vol. 14, No. 2.)

—The Editors

Anderson: John, you were a member of the *Big Chill* generation. You were a student activist at Andrews University (at least in a mild Adventist sense). What are you doing working at the State Department in 1984?

Kelley: I was one of those who organized the teach-ins at Andrews against the Vietnam War in 1967. People who see some parallel between Vietnam and Central America would say that I have done an about-face. In fact, I don't think I have.

Anderson: Why?

Kelley: We had no interest in Southeast Asia which justified our massive involvement. At that time, and still now, I believe that we do have a legitimate interest in the Western Hemisphere, specifically in Central and South America.

Anderson: What is your current assignment?

Kelley: Well, for the last year I have been working on elections in El Salvador. I may be working on elections in Honduras and Guatemala. I provide technical advice on the organizing of clean, honest, and fair elections.

Anderson: How did you become an elections expert?

Kelley: Sort of by accident. I was involved in the agrarian reform program in El Salvador on and off between 1980 and 1983. That happens to be my professional spe-

cialty—I did my dissertation on agrarian reform.

Anderson: So you came into the foreign service from academic life?

Kelley: Yes. After pastoring an Adventist Spanish church and teaching anthropology at the City University of New York, I became an anthropologist for the Agency for International Development (AID) in 1976. AID is a branch of the State Department. As an anthropologist, I analyzed the social impact of our aid programs in Honduras. In 1982, I began working in the computer division of AID, pursuing my hobby rather than my profession, and in 1983, I was the only Spanish-speaking computer expert in AID.

When I say I got the elections assignment by accident, I mean that I was asked to go to El Salvador because I knew computers, I knew AID, and I knew Central America. The last chapter of my dissertation ("Political Structure and Political Conflict in Mexico") was entitled "How to Win an Election." I was looking at the whole relationship between agrarian reform politics and electoral politics in Mexico at the local level—how the Mexican one-party system maintains its stability by managing elections, by continuing agrarian reform, and continuing other reform programs that were started years ago.

Anderson: The *Washington Post* reported that you were the target of a personal death threat in the recent Salvadoran presidential election. Is that accurate?

Kelley: Yes. Keep in mind, however, that the elections were organized in two rounds. The first round was a qualifying round. In the absence of a clear majority, there would be a run-off between the two parties getting the highest vote in the first round. My whole involvement in the election process was not really questioned by any of the parties before the first round of elections. I was viewed as a neutral person involved in the voter registration system making sure that U.S. assistance for voter registration was carried out effectively and efficiently. The first round was won with a plurality of 44 percent by

the Christian Democratic Party, on a platform that called for continued reforms, improvement in human rights, and social justice.

After the first round, the voter registration system came under heavy attack from the party that came in second place—ARENA, the right wing party headed by Roberto D'Aubisson and widely viewed as a defender of the landed elite. They blamed the low percentage of the vote that ARENA received (29 percent) on the registration system and they insisted from day one after the first round of elections that the voter registration system should be removed. The Election Coun-

Two days after ARENA condemned the voter registry, a death threat came through—the caller was a member of the best-known and most violent of the deathsquads.

cil held a meeting with the two parties and asked me to participate and talk about the voter registration system that I had worked on for a year. They wanted me to spell out the weaknesses of this system and how we were going to correct them for the second round. When it became clear to ARENA that I was going to vociferously (at least in private) defend the registry system, it also became clear to them that they would probably have to get me out of the country if they were going to get rid of the system. The reason for that is that my co-workers at the U.S. Embassy were always very lukewarm about the voter registration.

Anderson: Why?

Kelley: They believed that the voter turnout might be reduced by the extra effort involved in a registration system. In the view of the embassy the important thing was size of the turnout—not really who won but how many people turned out.

Anderson: But it did make a difference to the Embassy who won, didn't it?

Kelley: To most people in the Embassy it did not. There were people in the Embassy who privately favored ARENA and others who personally favored the Christian Democrats.

Anderson: Back to the death threat—

Kelley: Yes. The chain of events that led up to this threat against me was very clear. Within two days after ARENA decided to condemn the voter registry, a phone threat came to the house where I was staying—the caller identified himself as a member of the Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez Brigade. This group, named after a Salvadoran leader of the 1930s, is probably the best-known and most violent of the “death squads.” You don’t mess around with them.

It’s hard to tell when you get a phone threat whether the caller is really who he says he is; but in any case you take it seriously, since there is no way of knowing. I was expecting a threat because two members of the Election Council had already been threatened, and—given the circumstances—I could predict there was going to be a threat against me. So I had already thought through what I would do.

Anderson: You ignored the threat?

Kelley: I was committed to the election. I didn’t just want to turn around and run. I knew that most of the assassinations usually take place without a warning. Threats are usually a way to coerce or frighten you—if there is a group that is serious about killing you they usually shoot and take credit for it later.

I had decided that the best strategy for dealing with a threat was to go into hiding—seclusion, basically—and work, sleep, and eat at the same place. Ninety percent of the political killings take place on the street when you are getting into or out of your car, or as you are driving along. So I went into seclusion. I stayed on the sixth floor of the Sheraton Hotel with some other people who were also handling elections—those who also felt the general pressure of threats. We stayed in seclusion for a month between the

first and second round of elections. I worked with some of the technical experts who were working on the elections, living on the sixth floor of a hotel that was sealed off—only one entrance, guards at the entrance. I left for America three weeks before the second round of elections. A day later the local security officer of the Embassy, who was the supervisor of our bodyguards was shot and killed. Two weeks later, I was called on Saturday night and asked to return to El Salvador because preparations for the election were coming unglued.

People who see some parallel between Vietnam and Central America would say that I have done an about-face. In fact, I don’t think I have.

I left Washington, D.C. within 10 hours and spent the week before the elections in El Salvador writing, again in seclusion, on the logistical preparations for election day. While I was meeting in my hotel room with members of the Election Council, ARENA’S vice presidential candidate called a press conference and accused the American ambassador of rigging the election for the Christian Democrats and accused me of threatening the life of his party’s representative on the Election Council. That really took chutzpah!

Anderson: Who were the guards?

Kelley: Salvadoran guards from the Embassy. Not the best in the country, but probably as good as you could get. The best in the country are with the ambassador. There’s one factor: as a reporter friend in Salvador pointed out, the cost of shooting an American far exceeds the benefit derived from it.

The real intent of the threats and accusations was to make me leave the country again because I was working day and night to eliminate the logistics problems from the final round of elections. I wanted to stay

because, at this point, I thought I knew more about the election process than anybody else. I was able to talk in my hotel room or over the phone to all the actors involved—people who weren't talking to each other would talk to me.

Disorder in the second round could lead to accusations of fraud—more importantly open up the possibility of actual fraud. And real fraud is what I still believe ARENA had in mind in their attacks on the voter registration system.

So, despite ARENA'S accusations—and the heightened risk to my staying in El Salvador—I decided to stay on. A good clean, orderly second round could decide the whole future of El Salvador.

Anderson: I'd like to ask you about the broader implications of that election. Historian Barbara Tuchman recently declared that she longed for the day when the United States would *somewhere* be on the popular side. Are we on the popular side in El Salvador?

Kelley: I think we very clearly are. We are on the popular side because we have supported the main populist—and popular—issue: land reform. We are on the side not only of land reform but also a number of other reforms that have already taken place—banking reform, for example. We are doing the things that the majority of Salvadorans want to do. And there has been a consistency in our policy since 1979, when the Carter administration supported the group of young reformist military officers.

Anderson: Are you saying the Carter and Reagan administrations have had the same basic policy in El Salvador?

Kelley: In El Salvador, yes. The Carter administration started the military build-up. There was a strong linkage under the Carter administration between military strategy and economic reform strategy and that's what has happened under Reagan.

Anderson: It's a fascinating situation, isn't it? A conservative administration supporting measures like the nationalization of banks and expropriation of agricultural

property. How many guerrillas are we talking about?

Kelley: There are between 8,000 and 12,000 belonging to an umbrella organization with five different groups ranging from Maoist to Marxist-Leninist.

Anderson: How much of the population sympathizes with them?

Liberation theology in its purest theoretical form is valid; unfortunately, when implemented it becomes watered-down, baptized Marxism of the most naive sort.

Kelley: If you look at the results of the vote—and take the ballots that were crossed out, where the voter put a big X through the whole ballot, you get 4 percent. Let's assume that all of those who abstained from voting (12 percent) were for the guerrillas. You have a maximum of 16 percent of the voting population who support the guerrillas.

Anderson: Why is the impression so widespread in the United States that our government is "fighting against history" in El Salvador, that the ordinary folk of El Salvador favor some sort of Marxist revolution?

Kelley: I think most people who believe that way are people who do not understand Latin America and its history. Foremost, they don't understand that the United States government by supporting agrarian reform, by supporting banking reform, by supporting a number of other reforms, has in essence pulled the platform out from under any revolutionary movement. You don't need a revolution to have reform.

Anderson: One of the most influential religious critics of American policy in Central America is the magazine *Sojourners*, published by evangelical Protestants. How do you respond to their view of Central America?

Kelley: Viscerally!

Anderson: Can you give us a cerebral response as well?

Kelley: Their reporting is shoddy, sloppy

reporting of the worst kind—they wear cultural blinders. When we see those cultural blinders on somebody who is right-wing, then we criticize the biases of the writer. When a vaguely leftist person writes articles with these great cultural blinders on he is still an ugly American, writing on Central America without understanding it.

I will give you a case in point. In a recent *Sojourners* article about refugee camps in Honduras the entire tone of the article was that all these refugees were people fleeing from the Salvadoran army. In fact, everybody who has worked in the refugee camps knows that the refugees are simply tired of being caught in the middle. That's why they flee El Salvador—why they go to Honduras and into refugee camps. If you read *Sojourners*, you get the idea that all these refugees are refugees from the bloodthirsty army.

Anderson: Do you see any validity to "liberation theology" which emphasizes the church's responsibility to fight oppression?

Kelley: It's our responsibility as Christians to help people who are oppressed. I don't have any quibble with that. Where I differ from liberation theology is in the implementation of its goals and objectives. In most cases, unfortunately, liberation theology becomes watered-down, baptized Marxism—and Marxism of the most naive sort.

The Christian Democrats are engaged in reforming Salvadoran society, in a day-to-day living out of Christian principles in the transformation of Salvadoran society into a more just society. And yet these are precisely the people who are most criticized by the liberation theologians, who accuse them of having sold out to "imperialism."

Anderson: But isn't there some value to a Marxist analysis—a class-conflict analysis—of the turmoil in Central America?

Kelley: Back in graduate school days, when I was becoming a Marxian anthropologist, the one thing I did learn was that Marx never understood peasants. He wrote that the peasants are like a sack of potatoes—they can't organize, they can't get together. The transition from an agrarian feudal soci-

ety to an emerging industrial society is something Marxist analysis can't handle. Salvador is pre-industrial, barely emerging from feudalism. The reforms that are taking place right now are taking it out of feudalism.

Anderson: So you make your criticism of liberation theology as a former Marxian anthropologist?

The only way the guerilla problem has impinged on the consciousness of the Adventist educators was that they were glad the violence had not disrupted school operations and programs.

Kelley: Yes, as a disillusioned disciple. (Marxian, by the way, is a term that was used when I was in graduate school to distinguish Marxist *analysis* from Marxist political dogma.)

Let me say one more thing about *Sojourners*. The frame of mind of the typical *Sojourner* writer is no different from the frame of mind of all missionaries that I grew up with who were conservative politically—except that the *Sojourners* people are not conservative. They vary from liberal to radical. The frame of mind is that everything is black and white—there are good guys and bad guys. The good guys are the guerrillas and the bad guys are the government and the army, and anybody who works with the government and the army.

Anderson: Does President Reagan just reverse that?

Kelley: Reagan does a very good job of dividing the world into good guys and bad guys and appearing to sharply define things like that. Yet he has an administration that is very good at strategically maneuvering between various shades of gray. The Reagan administration, I think, did a very good job in Salvador in distinguishing between the various gradations of black and white.

Anderson: You've talked about the Chris-

tian Democrats, who are Catholics involved in democratic reform. What are Seventh-day Adventists doing in El Salvador?

Kelley: I tried to find out by talking at length with an educational administrator and with a couple of union conference officials. In essence, they aren't doing anything because they don't even understand the problem. The only way in which the guerilla problem has impinged on the consciousness of the Adventist educator was that he was glad that guerilla violence had not disrupted the school's operations, the school's program.

Anderson: So Adventists are politically apathetic?

Kelley: I tried to set up an interview with members of the union conference, but ended up only talking to them over the phone. I wanted to find out what their position was in relation to all the social upheaval. I learned that it is very much that "those are the concerns of the world."

Anderson: Could you say that both liberation theology on one side and Adventist practice on the other are irresponsible extremes?

Kelley: I wouldn't say that it is an extreme on the Seventh-day Adventist part because there are a lot of other fundamentalists that are similarly removed from reality. At least Seventh-day Adventists are not preaching magic political solutions in the name of Christ. That's my problem with liberation theology—its advocates are using Christ's name to preach what I consider an irresponsible political solution.

Anderson: What about individual Adventists? Are individual Adventist laypeople involved in politics? They vote, don't they? Are you required to vote in El Salvador?

Kelley: Citizens are required to vote, but if you don't vote there is only a symbolic \$1 fine. It has never been imposed on anyone. So in effect you're not required to vote.

Anderson: We've talked mostly about El Salvador. What's going to happen in Nicaragua? Will it become a police state, a Soviet client like Cuba?

Kelley: It's going in that direction. But Nicaraguan exiles—former Sandinistas—have told me that Nicaragua could never go the way Cuba did because the "fun-loving" Nicaraguans would never stand the kind of repression that goes on in Cuba. Also there are many natural escape routes from Nicaragua. These exiles feel that Cuba can be a prison only because it is an island.

I used every ounce of knowledge that I have ever gained to bring a democratic process to successful completion. I felt that was a mission worth risking everything for.

On the other hand, you see the Sandinista minister of the interior getting lots of advice from Bulgarians and East Germans. For example, the Ministry brought an Eastern European who is an expert in subverting the church from within. We have seen the results over the last two years—a religious opposition to the institutional Catholic Church, always out there on the street demonstrating, harrassing the bishops, demonstrating against the pope, and so on. They are "religious" shock troops.

Anderson: Some people suggest that Costa Rica and Nicaragua are the contrasting developmental models for the rest of Central America: democratic capitalism or militarized socialism.

Kelley: If you know Costa Rican history—in 1947 Figueres took over the country and he disbanded the army. The country has had uninterrupted democracy since the standing army was abolished.

To me that is the model. As long as you have a strong military in any country then you are going to have the same problem you have now. The Costa Rican model of democracy presupposes the muzzling of the military.

Anderson: Will they be able to maintain that posture in the face of the Nicaraguan build-up?

Kelley: Yes, they are doing a good job. They are also resisting the hawks within our government who are trying to get them to change their minds.

Anderson: What will they do if—

Kelley: It only works because they know that the United States will intervene if the Nicaraguans invade. You can afford to be a Switzerland if you know there are strong allies.

Anderson: Would it be fair to describe what you are doing as a kind of secularized missionary work? You are willing to put up with a lot of discomfort and trouble—risk your life even—because you believe in a cause. Can I take your cause to be democracy? How is all this related to your Adventist background?

Kelley: Yes, I approach my work with a sense of mission, a strong sense of commitment. Several reporters have seen an Adventist connection, writing that I was committed to democracy in a very personal way and relating this to my background as a Seventh-day Adventist missionary. It was evident to them that I was not working in this whole process as a typical government bureaucrat.

You might understand why I felt so committed if you met Rosario, a 23-year old telephone repair technician in Sal Salvador. In 1979, she left El Salvador to ‘El Norte’ with a legitimate work visa. On her way to San Diego she was called off the bus and assaulted by Mexican border guards. In Los Angeles she worked as a maid for slave wages in the home of a wealthy businessman. She went back to El Salvador in 1980 after she learned that her younger brother and his girl-friend were gunned down in the crossfire as they waited for a school bus. A year later her father was robbed and killed as he was carrying a payroll to the rural school district where he taught. She told me in El Salvador that she was going to vote because she wanted peace more than anything else.

I felt that the election assignment in Salvador was probably my culminating mission—when I used every ounce of knowledge that I ever gained to bring a democratic process to successful completion, and tried to stop the killing. As a person trying to be moral—as an Adventist Christian—I felt that was a mission worth risking everything for.