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Three Found Guilty Of Damaging Property During Protest Against Training Of Salvadoran Soldiers At Ft. Benning

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 26 in Columbus, Georgia, a jury found Vietnam veterans Roy Bourgeois, and Charles and Patrick Liteky guilty of damaging federal property during a Nov. 16, 1990 protest action in which the three splattered human blood on the walls and floor of the US Army's School of the Americas (SOA) headquarters building at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Bourgeois is a Maryknoll priest; Patrick Liteky trained at Ft. Benning's Officer Infantry School, and Charles Liteky is a former Ft. Benning chaplain and recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. The protest last year took place on the first anniversary of the massacre of six Jesuit priests and two women at the Central American University in San Salvador. According to Bourgeois and the Litekys, their actions were focused on the headquarters building as a symbol of the SOA's complicity in the Jesuit massacre, and the suffering and death of thousands of Salvadorans. The three men were charged with criminal trespass and damage to government property, a felony which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. The jury spent 30 minutes deliberating following two days of testimony. Bourgeois told the Spanish news service EFE that their intent was not to damage public property, but to call attention to the injustice of providing Salvadoran troops with training when they return to their country to kill civilians. He said the soldiers responsible for the murders were trained at the SOA. (Basic data from EFE, 03/26/91) [Hundreds of Salvadoran soldiers are currently being trained at the School of the Americas. According to documentation provided to Rep. Joseph Moakley's Task Force by the office of the US Assistant Secretary of Defense, five of the nine soldiers arrested for the Jesuit massacre were graduates of Ft. Benning. The Moakley report also reveals that the entire battalion involved in the killings underwent training by US Special Operations Forces in El Salvador just days before the massacre. SOA Commandant Col. William de Palo and his public relations staff maintain that human rights and "American values" are taught at the School of the Americas. But when asked how soldiers are instructed in human rights issues, they refuse to respond. One unmistakable indication of the school's curriculum is a large sign outside of one of the SOA classroom buildings. It reads, in Spanish, "Classroom for Low Intensity Conflict." The strategy known as Low Intensity Conflict targets anyone advocating change in El Salvador as a "subversive" or "communist." Priests, teachers, health care workers, union leaders, cooperative members, human rights advocates and catechists are among the targets. According to international human rights organizations, since 1980 most killings outside combat between soldiers and rebels are committed by government-related death squads and the armed forces, and go unreported in the foreign press. The School of the Americas was established in 1946 in Panama to train Latin American officers and foster anti- communism. As part of the 1977 Panama Canal treaties, the Panamanian government demanded the removal of the SOA, and in 1984, the School was moved to Ft. Benning. Salvadorans comprise the largest contingent of the estimated 1,600 Latin American soldiers currently receiving instruction at the SOA. According to reporter Bryna Brennan in a February 1988 Associated Press wire story, "it became known as the School of the Coups for the instruction it provided to thousands of rightist officers from Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, El Salvador, Nicaragua and other countries." In *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford Press,

1990, p. 132), Walter LeFeber writes: "Some of the School's Latin American graduates returned home to torture and jail political opponents...[When] the US House of Representatives outlawed urban counterinsurgency courses at the School...the School abolished the courses, then continued teaching similar subjects under new names." Previous acts of resistance at the SOA: In 1983, a year before the SOA was moved from Panama, 525 Salvadoran soldiers were sent to Ft. Benning for training. In protest, Linda Ventimiglia, Fr. Larry Rosebaugh, and Fr. Roy Bourgeois dressed as high ranking military officers and entered Ft. Benning at night. They climbed a tree near the barracks of the Salvadoran soldiers, and with a high-powered cassette tape player, broadcast loudly into the soldiers' barracks the last speech of Archbishop Oscar Romero, in which he orders soldiers to lay down their arms and stop killing. The three were arrested and given 18 month prison sentences. The Atlanta Committee on Latin America and other regional peace and justice organizations have held several major demonstrations at the School of the Americas in recent years. On Nov. 17, 1990 a large rally was held at the main entrance of Ft. Benning and seven local peace advocates were arrested for "crossing the line." In the fall of 1990, 10 people, including Vietnam veterans, Salvadorans, a teacher and priests, held a water- only hunger strike at the main entrance calling for an end to the training of Salvadoran troops at the SOA and end to US military aid to El Salvador. The hunger strike lasted 35 days. (From SOA Watch, Fort Benning Road, #1, Columbus, GA 31903)]

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