

**Op-Ed page...****The media's muddle in Central America**

By Alfred G. Cuzán

Anyone who will care to examine carefully how the media in this country report and comment on Central America will have no problem detecting a leftist bias in most of the "prestige press." A graphic example is an article on El Salvador by Lydia Chavez, published in *The New York Times Magazine* on September 2. Chavez, the *Times*' bureau chief in El Salvador for 20 months, presents a distorted image of that country, giving a false explanation of the war that has wracked it for at least a decade and offering only utopian solutions to Salvadoran problems.

To begin with, Chavez attributes only noble aims to the left: "to correct the vast social injustices and lawless abuses of the past half-century." Words like "terror," "violence" and "abuses" are only used to describe the behavior of the right, never of the left.

A condemnation of American support for the government by a woman interviewee in a rebel zone is dutifully reported. But Castro-Soviet activities in organizing, supplying, and directing leftist terror is not mentioned. Neither does the article report that in a recent Gallup poll a majority of respondents not only in El Salvador but also in Honduras and Costa Rica, expressed the desire for American aid and named Cuba and the Soviet Union as the aggressors in Central America.

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Chavez describes in chilling detail several atrocities allegedly committed by the right, but she spares the reader any description of equivalent barbarities for which the left takes credit. In fact, she assigns no responsibility for any of the killing to the left. She mentions a few acts of sabotage but leaves out the most damaging, such as the blowing up of bridges and electric pylons, and the burning of crops. On the leftist assassinations of several conservative assemblymen during the last year, Chavez is inexplicably silent.

Chavez matter-of-factly reports that guerrillas bragged to her about their military "victories" and predicted more "successes" but does not explain that guerrilla triumphs have consisted of massacres of army and civil defense units surprised on patrol or in their barracks. Many soldiers have died not in battle but murdered in cold blood after being captured. Between 1980 and 1983 these encounters cost the army something like half of its membership. Those killed have been, for the most part, young

men of humble peasant origin.

Like most western reporters in search of a simple explanation for what is going on in El Salvador, Chavéz resorts to a Marxist vision wherein a "military-landowner" alliance has oppressed and exploited the people for many years, finally provoking them to "rebel." This myth has been recently debunked by Virginia Prewett with telling statistics on ownership, economic growth, income distribution, public spending on education and health, and government taxation and regulation of the capitalist sector (*The Wall Street Journal*, September 7, 1984).

By trying to see El Salvador through a Marxist filter, Chavez completely misinterprets the country's history. For example, she is apparently unaware of the real extent of the "reforms" initiated by the military in the wake of the 1979 coup. Over 400 of the country's largest agricultural properties were expropriated; thousands of smaller parcels were transferred from their owners to their tillers by fiat; all banks were

nationalized; controls were placed on prices, wages, and exports. All these measures amounted to a radical assault on El Salvador's capitalist sector.

Chavez seemingly does not see any connection between those military-socialist policies, which Duarte implemented as unelected provisional president between 1980 and 1982, and the painful fall in living standards experienced by all Salvadorans—not just the rich—since then. While part of this loss is due to the leftists' destruction of property, the inefficiencies and corruption introduced by bureaucratic regulations and administration have taken their toll on the economy too.

Neither does Chavez appear to perceive any relation between the economic costs of the reforms and public indignation with the left, on one hand, and the political successes scored by the right in 1982—when they won a majority of seats to the constituent assembly, which they used to prevent any more expropriation—and in this year's presidential elections, when they won a majority of the votes in two-thirds of El Salvador's departments.

So resistant is Chavez to the undeniable popularity of the right—particularly in the countryside, where the people most affected by the expropriations and the leftist terror live and work—that she underreports its share of the vote in

the presidential run-off election held last May. She gives D'Aubuisson 40 percent whereas in actuality he received 46 percent, which made the race a lot closer than she apparently would like to think it was.

Chavez concludes with an ambivalent evaluation of Duarte's first 100 days as elected president, grudgingly granting him respect for pragmatism: seeking accommodation with the right, encouraging the capitalist sector to expand, strengthening the military, and improving the country's image abroad. Altogether, these policies reflect a change in Duarte's political strategy. Ever the utopian, Chavez chides him for not reviving the land distribution program.

Chavez's article illustrates everything that is wrong with media treatment of Central America today: a simplistic, Marxist interpretation of history; a double-standard that excuses the left but condemns the right for political violence; failure to describe and understand the Castro-Soviet role in the conflict; disapproval of U.S. policies to prevent communists from taking power by force; and a utopian anti-capitalism.

Unfortunately, much academic writing—which influences and is influenced by the media in a symbiotic relation—suffers from these same deficiencies. It is no wonder that the public and policy makers are often confused about Central America—they have been badly informed and advised!