

Protesting the School of Assassins - Again

By Mark M. Mattison

Once again, the annual peace vigil to close the U.S. Army School of the Americas (a.k.a. School of Assassins) exceeded all expectations. Held a week after the ninth anniversary of the Salvadoran priest massacre by U.S.-trained officers, the rally was intended to express, once again, the outrage of U.S. citizens over human rights abuses linked to the infamous academy for Latin American soldiers.

One congressional study found, among other atrocities, that ten graduates from the school had seized control of Latin American countries through undemocratic coups.

Under extensive public and congressional pressure, the Pentagon in 1996 released seven Spanish training manuals which were used by the school between 1987 and 1991. The manuals reveal disturbing anti-democratic techniques for controlling civilian populations, including restricting free movement and repressing free speech, among other things.

Two additional CIA manuals were released in 1997 after the Baltimore Sun threatened a lawsuit. The more recent of the two manuals, "Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual - 1983," was used in training throughout Latin America until 1988. This manual contains detailed instructions on torture techniques. An embarrassed Pentagon attributed this objectionable material to a series of poor decisions and mistakes, but punished no one.

In the face of mounting criticism, the School of the Americas claims it has reformed. Even if that were true, its tarnished reputation throughout Latin America should surely be reason enough to close it down, if only as a symbolic gesture. But ongoing atrocities belie the school's claim that it helps the people of Latin America. At this time, Mexico has the largest number of soldiers in the school's program. The Mexican military, of course, is involved in a brutal war against the poor and indigenous people of its southern states, including Chiapas. At least 13 of Mexico's top ranking officers involved in the conflict are graduates of the school. The list of human rights abuses goes on and on.

Which is why thousands of outraged citizens gathered this year at the front gate of Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, where the school has been located since it was kicked out of Panama in 1984.

Protestors' Numbers Soar

Last year, approximately 25 people from the Ann Arbor area attended the rally, as did a group of six from Grand Rapids. This year, those numbers multiplied. People from Holland, Kalamazoo, Lansing, Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, Detroit, and elsewhere in Michigan made the journey. Members of local peace organizations - the Institute for Global Education, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Michigan Faith and Resistance Peace Team, and others - joined students from many Michigan colleges, and others.

The growing crowd at the protest on Saturday revealed that activists from other states had multiplied as well. Two thousand protestors had arrived by Saturday - as many as had

attended the rally on Sunday the previous year. This year, organizers were expecting five thousand protestors, with one thousand entering Fort Benning in an act of civil disobedience. Beforehand, I dreamed big, suggesting six thousand protestors with two thousand participating in the civil disobedience. Remarkably, I hadn't dreamed big enough.

Initial Presentations

The opening presentations Saturday morning were impressive. Pastor Tim McDonald of the First Iconium Baptist Church and the President of Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta ascended onto the podium and gave a rousing address. He inspired and excited us, drawing thunderous applause and affirmation from the crowds. He spoke of the Israelites sending the 12 spies into the Promised Land, and how the spies reported that there were giants in the land - people so large and frightening that the Israelites looked like grasshoppers by comparison. McDonald went on to talk about how easy it is to capture one or two grasshoppers and put them in a jar. "But if a whole bunch of grasshoppers get together - watch out!"

Singly, each of us is but a small witness, but together in solidarity, our voices are heard. One of the songs we sang that morning made that point powerfully: "Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won. Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none. Then by union what we will, can be accomplished still. Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none." While rejoicing in this truth, however, I had no idea how quickly I was about to see this principle demonstrated.

Another of the speakers was Major Joseph Blair, a retired U.S. Army officer who had at one time been an instructor at the School of the Americas. In response to criticism of the civil disobedience planned for Sunday, Major Blair told us some of the many illegal things he had witnessed personally at the SOA - though no one was ever charged or prosecuted. In fact it is telling that stern Judge Robert Elliott, who sends elderly nuns to federal prison with hefty fines for trespassing, exonerated Lt. William Calley for his role in the My Lai massacre in Viet Nam where 500 died. Cecilia Zarate-Laun, co-founder of the Colombia Support Network, was one of the speakers as well. (Cecilia spoke in Ann Arbor last month at the University of Michigan.) She spoke of the war against the poor in her country, and U.S. military complicity.

Training for Nonviolence

At 2:00 we crowded into the South Columbus United Methodist Church for the first Nonviolence Training session. People filled the large building beyond capacity, filling all the pews, the balcony, and the choir loft, spilling over onto the floors and pressed up against the walls, with hundreds more waiting outside. It was incredible. Father Roy Bourgeois and the church's pastor opened the session, then a lawyer answered questions and gave legal counsel for those contemplating civil disobedience.

He explained that first-time "offenders" who refused the order to keep out of the military reservation would be banned from the base. Second-time "offenders" who broke that ban would be arrested, tried, and then sentenced by Judge Elliott to the maximum extent allowed by law - six months in federal prison and a \$5,000 fine, though the same

transgression elsewhere is often punished by a \$50 fine and some community service.

The training session continued with basic principles of nonviolent techniques and a recitation of a Commitment to Nonviolence: As participants today, we will reflect upon and abide by these commitments:

- We will harbor no anger, but suffer the anger of the opponent.
- We will refuse to return the assaults, verbal or physical of the opponent.
- We will refrain from insults and swearing.
- We will protect opponents from insults or attack.
- If arrested, we will behave in an exemplary manner. We will not evade the legal consequences of our actions.
- As members of a nonviolent demonstration, we will follow the directions of the designated coordinators. In the event of a serious disagreement, we will remove ourselves from the action.
- Our attitude as conveyed through words, symbols and actions will be one of openness, friendliness, and respect toward all people we encounter, including police officers and workers.
- We will not damage property.
- We will not bring or use any drugs or alcohol.
- We will not run or use threatening motions.
- We will carry no weapons.

At 4:00 we proceeded to the Peace Keeper Training session at the Days Inn motel. (I prefer the term "Peace Maker" myself.) Peace Keepers at the rally wore yellow armbands that read "SOA Watch." Among other things, our role was to mingle with the crowd, seeking out and discouraging potentially violent situations. This is pretty much the same thing that the Michigan Faith and Resistance Peace Team does on a regular basis at rallies and controversial events all through Michigan, and in troubled regions overseas. Sometimes misunderstood as "community policing," this sort of nonviolent confrontation is not about maintaining law and order (which is not always on the side of justice), but about creatively seeking nonviolent solutions mutually beneficial to all.

Civil Disobedience

Sunday was, of course, simply incredible. Traffic to the front gate of the base was heavily congested. Scores of people poured in from all over. The median in front of the podium was packed, as were the sides of the street. People crowded onto the small hill to the east, spilling over onto rooftops. By the time the crowd had finally congealed, we numbered seven thousand, exceeding all expectations. Colorful banners and protest signs were prominently displayed all through the crowd.

After some opening music, Roy Bourgeois welcomed the crowds. Then actor and activist Martin Sheen opened with a prayer based on the commissioning of Isaiah and shared some other devotional thoughts. As a crowd we reaffirmed our Commitment to Nonviolence, and after some additional ceremony commissioned those who had committed to cross the line demarcating Fort Benning's territory.

The previous year, everyone was given a wooden cross with the name of a victim of SOA graduates. This year, only line-crossers were given crosses. Over 70 protestors who had been arrested the previous year joined them, including Abigail Schlaff, a nurse's aide from Ann Arbor. These brave men and women were facing potential jail time and

hefty fines for their act.

Strong emotions gripped us as the mock funeral procession began. As in the previous November demonstrations, wooden coffins were carried at the front of the line. Protestors solemnly followed four abreast, carrying their crosses, while speakers at the podium read the names of other Latin American victims. Many of them were women and children.

After each name was read, the audience responded by chanting "Presente," giving voices to those whose voices have been silenced. (This last phrase is based on a statement by Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran bishop assassinated by SOA graduates after publicly exhorting the military to stop killing people.) The crowds pouring onto the base seemed to go on and on. After the last of the protestors had crossed, a delegation from the Lakota tribe beat drums and sang. Shortly thereafter, protestors at the gate completed tallying the numbers of those who had crossed. When the initial figure was announced, the entire assembly broke into celebration. The final figure was impressive: 2,347 people had defied the military by proceeding onto the base with a political message, risking arrest.

Nonviolent Victory

At about mid-afternoon news of a remarkable announcement rippled in. The protestors who had crossed the line were not being arrested! Everyone was floored. We anticipated many potential outcomes, but no one had expected this. We hurried down to the protest site to find out what was going on. All the little "grasshoppers," as Pastor McDonald had put it, had indeed overpowered the giants. There were simply too many protestors. The base was prepared to arrest a thousand protestors, but not 2,300. They didn't even have enough MPs to take the names of all the protestors, much less search, process, and photograph them. Instead, the protestors were given generalized copies of ban and bar letters expiring at midnight and were bused to a city park a couple of miles away. From there they paraded back to the protest site, where they received a hero's welcome.

The Peace Keepers were called to the front of the podium area to help clear a path through the crowd for the returning heroes. We formed a human corridor which wildly applauded each returning protestor while joyfully singing "Bright Mornin' Star Arisin'" about ten thousand times. It was beautiful to see so many friends, old and new, proceed through the crowd with handshakes and hugs. When all seven thousand of us were finally reunited, we celebrated again. The solidarity and "people power" was palpable.

But a successful rally is only a start. If the school is still open next November, many more concerned citizens will converge on Fort Benning. In 1996, 500 protested, with 60 crossing the line and getting arrested. In 1997, 2,000 protested, with 601 crossing the line and getting arrested. In 1998, 7,000 protested, with 2,347 crossing. In 1999, those numbers will soar. There is also a rally planned for Washington, D.C., May 1-4 which will include demonstrations, lobbying members of Congress, and more civil disobedience at the Pentagon. More information can be obtained from SOA Watch, P.O. Box 4566, Washington, D.C., 20017, (202) 234-3440, www.soaw.org.