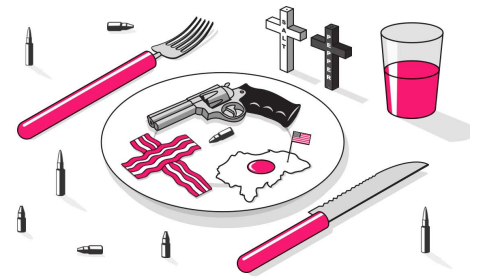


# Gospel Crusade, Inc. and Friends

BY

ADRIENNE PINE



With help from US churches, the evangelical right has won a foothold in Central America.

In March, Vice President Mike Pence had a friendly meeting with far-right Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. It wasn't just a sign of right-wing advance in a growing number of countries, but also another chapter in an often-obscured history of evangelical Christian influence in Latin American politics.

Last year, Hernández had gathered Honduras's leading televangelists for a day of prayer at the presidential palace to help solve the country's multiple crises. Despite the fact that these crises are directly linked to US militarization, neoliberal restructuring, and the chaotic fallout of the 2009 Washington-backed coup, the event was directly modeled on previous national days of prayer led by an Hernandez ally, the U.S.-based evangelical NGO Association for a More Just Society (AJS).

AJS is the US State Department's most faithful proxy in Honduras. Like Pence, Hillary Clinton (who has ties to a different far-right evangelical group called the Family), and Hernández, AJS enthusiastically supported the June 28 coup that overthrew democratically-elected Honduran president Manuel Zelaya.

The coup was a disaster. It rapidly turned the small Central American nation into the most murderous narco-state in the world, and opened the door to an increased role for the evangelical right in Honduran politics. Less than a month after Zelaya's ouster, School of the Americas-trained evangelical General and Armed Forces Chief Romeo Vasquez Velasquez gave a recorded speech to the faithful gathered at the Kingdom Government Conference in Miami Beach. He deemed the coup both an act of law and order and the will of Christ. AJS echoes this sentiment, defining its members as "Brave Christians dedicated to making Honduras's system of laws and government work properly to Do Justice for the poor and inspiring other Christians to Do Justice (Micah 6:8)."

The nefarious influence of US- based evangelicals in the region is nothing new — it goes back decades, even before the 1949 publication of the young adult classic *Patty Lou in the Wilds of Central America*. For these groups, the goals of crushing “communism” and converting historically Catholic Central American populations to a radically individualistic brand of Christianity are complementary. In the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, while Liberation Theology–inspired revolutionary movements challenged Washington-supported regimes in the region, the US Christian right took the lead in crafting and implementing counterrevolutionary projects — like CIA-sponsored death squads — as part and parcel of its missionizing work.

### South America for breakfast

Clinton’s favored group of zealots, the Family, has hosted the annual National Prayer Breakfast since 1953 at the Washington Hilton; presidents and Congress members mingle over eggs and orange juice with religious allies from around the world. In 1984, special invitees included Salvadoran General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova and Honduran General Gustavo Álvarez Martínez, both associated with the infamous School of the Americas (SOA).

In 2002, a Florida jury found Vides Casanova liable for the torture of civilians, including the widely publicized 1980 rape and murder of four American women — three Catholic nuns and a lay missionary. After a sixteen-year legal battle, he was finally extradited to El Salvador in 2015; however, to date he has only been held accountable for the torture and/or murder of seven people. Experts say between sixty and eighty thousand civilians died at the hands of the military during El Salvador’s dirty war — the vast majority between the years of 1980–1983, while Vides Casanova was head of the National Guard.

Álvarez Martínez, to whom Reagan awarded the Legion of Merit medal for “encouraging the success of democratic processes in Honduras” in 1983, was the head of the Honduran armed forces (1982–84), directly overseeing Battalion 3-16 — the CIA-trained death squad operating with the blessing of then US Ambassador John Negroponte. Battalion 3-16 disappeared or murdered at least 184 Hondurans during the 1980s, mostly under Álvarez’s command. A month after attending the Family’s Washington prayer breakfast, Álvarez was deposed and moved to Miami, where he became a fervent evangelical Christian. Claiming his bible as the only protection he needed, Álvarez returned to Honduras in 1989 as a street preacher; he was promptly gunned down.

Beyond celebrating mass murderers at prayer breakfasts, the Christian right provided significant material support for 1980s counter-revolutionary projects. Evangelical organizations like Gospel Crusade, Inc. and the Christian Emergency Relief Teams provided economic and logistical

support for the Contra forces in Nicaragua seeking to overthrow the revolutionary Sandinista government. These groups also received extensive logistical help from born-again Christian Ollie North, who famously channeled profits from pushing cocaine onto black communities and selling weapons to Iran to the Contras, after the US Congress refused to allocate funding to them.

Evangelical mogul Pat Robertson was also a major fundraiser for the Contras. Denouncing the “craven submission of our leaders and Congress to the demands of communism,” Robertson traveled to a Contra camp in Nicaragua to preach the gospel and lend his support. At the height of the dirty war, Robertson’s 700 Club transmitted television programs on El Salvador’s Channel 4 (affiliated with the country’s right-wing ARENA party), subjecting viewers to lengthy diatribes about Jesus and the glories of the region’s military dictatorships.

El Salvador’s butchers (who, at the height of the dirty war, received over a million dollars a day from the Reagan administration) enjoyed the backing of numerous other Christian organizations, including Paralife Ministries. Paralife’s emissary John Stern infamously told thousands of Salvadoran government troops, “killing for the joy of it was wrong, but killing because it was necessary to fight against an anti-Christ system, communism, was not only right but a duty of every Christian.”

In a 1988 article titled “The Contra’s Chaplains,” sociologist Sarah Diamond noted that Paralife president Dr Cubie Ward “boasts of his close relationship with the Salvadoran military and President José Napoleón Duarte, claiming that Duarte was having dinner with him on the December 1980 night when four U.S. churchwomen were murdered by a death squad.”

And let’s not forget right-wing televangelist Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority movement. North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, a champion of Falwell’s group, was a firm supporter of SOA grad, death squad leader, and ARENA Party founder Roberto D’Aubuisson. D’Aubuisson — far more extreme in his methods than his 1984 presidential opponent, Duarte — ordered the murder of the recently beatified Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980.

Horrors like these can’t be quantified, but perhaps the most atrocious example of the Christian right’s influence in 1980s Central America was its close alliance with evangelical general and former president (1982–1983) of Guatemala Efraín Ríos Montt. Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013, though the charges were overturned three weeks later following an intensive lobbying campaign by Guatemala’s most powerful business association.

Ríos Montt — yet another SOA graduate — was an ordained minister of the neo-Pentecostalist Eureka, California-based Church of the Word. During his genocidal “*frijoles y fusiles*” campaign —

in which roughly 86,000 Guatemalan civilians, mostly Mayans, were murdered — he had strong allies in Robertson and Falwell. Rios Montt also received millions of dollars and a God’s army of hundreds of North American missionaries from Robertson’s Operation International Love Lift program, a “counterinsurgency program that guised itself as a relief effort.” And like Honduran General Álvarez Martínez, Rios Montt counted Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church among his numerous other evangelical patrons.

The evangelical right has succeeded to a large degree in its goals of crushing the collectivist, anti-imperialist dreams of Central Americans; it has also won millions of Protestant converts in the process. But it’s not omni-potent. While the converted may share a religion and a common discourse with powerful US missionary organizations and wealthy national right-wing televangelists, they don’t blindly support the right-wing policies of the region’s evangelicals. Their memories are not so short.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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