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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Arming Dictators

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Center for Defense Information

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Allan Nairn: Indonesia is a prime military and political client of the United States as well as being a dictatorship and one of the most repressive regimes on earth. The regime is responsible for two of the greatest bloodbaths of the twentieth century - the 1965-66 massacre of the communists and others and the killing of the 200,000 East Timorese.

Admiral Gene La Rocque (Ret.): Those of us who are fortunate enough to live in a democracy know what it's all about. It means freedom and liberty for individuals. We Americans are proud of our democracy, but many Americans are now beginning to ask, "If we're so proud of our democracy, why in the world are we selling weapons to dictators around the world, weapons which will be used by those dictators to oppress their own people and to attack their neighbors?"

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): In 1975, Indonesia invaded East Timor following Timor's independence from Portugal. The Indonesian military led by military dictator General Suharto has, according to independent estimates, wiped out 1/3 of the Timorese population either through massacre or forced starvation. The United Nations has repeatedly condemned Indonesia for its brutal acts in East Timor. The United States continues to furnish the Indonesian military with weapons. This is Dili, the capital city of East Timor. On November 12, 1991, thousands of Timorese gathered to visit the grave of a young man who had been killed when the army stormed a church two weeks earlier.

The footage you will see was taken just inside the cemetery where people ran to escape the shooting in the street. Two American journalists, Alan Nairn, a correspondent for the New Yorker magazine and Amy Goodman of Pacifica Radio, survived the massacre. Alan Nairn describes what happened just outside the cemetery beyond the camera's view.

Allan Nairn: As the people gathered outside the cemetery after holding up banners protesting the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, a large group of soldiers came marching up in formation. I went and stood between the soldiers and the crowd together with Amy Goodman from Pacifica Radio. And as the soldiers marched up in formation, they just kept coming and then all at once, in unison, the soldiers opened fire on the crowd. There were several thousand people standing outside the cemetery and the soldiers were just gunning people down. And as they were doing this, they started beating me with their rifle butts, their M16s [U.S. semi-automatic rifles]. The street was full of bodies, people were falling everywhere.

The street was running with blood and the soldiers just kept on shooting for from five to ten minutes. They kept on beating me and beating Amy, and at one point they held the M16s to our heads and were screaming "Politik! Politik!" which means politics, which is prohibited in East Timor. We said back to them, "America. We're from America!" I think that's the thing that kept them from executing us because it seemed to impress them. I think they realized that there might be a political price to pay if they killed Americans even though at that very moment they were killing dozens of Timorese all around us. Eventually, probably something from 100 to 200 Timorese were killed in that massacre. I received a fractured skull.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): The United States has armed and continues to arm dictators who use U.S. weapons against their own and neighboring people. These dictatorships don't have free elections and are often controlled by the military. In the 1980s, the United States and its military contractors sold or gave [as aid] weapons and training valued at \$175 billion (\$175,000,000,000) to 3/4 of the nations of the world, 40% of this, \$70 billion, went to arm 50 dictators. In fiscal year 1991 alone, the United States agreed to sell \$63 billion worth of weapons to 142 nations, and 38% of this, \$24 billion, went to arm 42 dictators. The president still plans to arm dictators in the coming year.

This book contains President Bush's proposal for military assistance to foreign countries. The White House submits one of these to Congress every year. For 1993, the president is asking that weapons and training valued at \$33 billion be provided to 154 nations. Again, 38% of this, \$12.7 billion, is slated for 58 dictators. Joshua Muravchik is a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and a prominent writer. We asked him why America provides military assistance to so many countries around the world.

Joshua Muravchik (American Enterprise Institute): Well, the reason why we ought to do it is where there are countries that have genuine threats to their security, we want to help them deal with these threats. Sometimes there are other reasons which are less worthy ones which are just to encourage or to buy some goodwill.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): The United States has armed dictators for a mixture of Cold War and economic reasons. George Smiley, the fascinating main character in John LeCarre novel *The Secret Pilgrim* describes his view of the behavior of the West during the Cold War: "We protected the strong against the weak, and we perfected the art of the public lie. We made enemies of decent reformers and friends of the most disgusting potentates." During the Cold War, the United States supported dictators as long as they were anti-communist. We shipped arms to dictators like the Shah of Iran, Marcos in the Philippines, Noriega in Panama.

Joshua Muravchik (American Enterprise Institute): Oh, I think the threats were much greater, in general, during the Cold War. There was a sense of competition between the two superpowers which led to a feeling that the advance of one country as against its neighbor in this or that corner of the world or one of various competing forces within a country might reverberate somehow in the overall balance of power.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Today, that Cold War rationale is gone. Then, why are we still arming dictators? The United States continues to arm dictators for economic reasons: access to oil and minerals, U.S. business investments, and profits for weapons manufacturers. In addition, arms exports help keep production lines open, decreasing the cost of weapons for the United States military. American military contractors, facing a shrinking market at home, are increasingly selling their wares to the Third World with the help of the U.S. government. However, arming the world, especially dictators, could cost us in the long run. Providing arms can aggravate tensions between rival neighbors and spur arms races. It increases the deadliness of conflicts when they erupt.

Through the practice of arming dictators, the United States has supported a host of unsavory characters who openly abuse the human rights of their citizens. James Phillips is a specialist in Middle East politics at The Heritage Foundation [a conservative think tank]. He believes that human rights should not be used as a standard to determine who gets our weapons.

James Phillips (The Heritage Foundation): I just think that the focus of the discussion on U.S. arms exports should be on U.S. national security interests rather than on human rights or the economic situation in the country or the state of political reforms. We're not using arms to change the internal situation of these countries. We're sending arms to protect these countries from external attack. I think that should be the number one consideration.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): However, arming dictators can harm the United States in very practical ways. If American arms are used to keep unpopular or murderous dictators in power, anti-Americanism is likely to grow. And if "our man" is overthrown, someone hostile to the United States is likely to attain power. Look at Iran.

The United States considered the Shah to be its pillar [of strength] in the Middle East. Iran was our number one arms customer during the 1970s, just as Saudi Arabia is now. When the Iranian people overthrew the Shah in 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini gained power on a wave of anti-Americanism. Our pillar had crumbled. For over a decade, Iran has been anti-American and anti-Western, and is only now beginning to show signs that it might emerge from its isolation.

With this background in mind, let's return to the situation in Indonesia. Since General Suharto became the military dictator of Indonesia, the United States has provided him [in aid] with weapons and training valued at \$1.7 billion even though Indonesia is a country which has faced no external threats. We've provided the Indonesian military with modern weapons of war such as fighters, helicopters, M16 rifles, and a variety of missiles. President Bush has no plans to curtail this flow of arms. For fiscal 1993, the president has requested \$86 million worth of weapons and training [in aid] for Indonesia. Why are we "aiding" the Indonesian military?

We aided them in the past because of the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Both of these wars are now over. Then, why are we still arming the Indonesian military? Let's see what President Bush has to say. In his administration's request for foreign aid it states that while Indonesia is a poor nation, "... its economic potential is great. The archipelago contains vast reserves of oil, gas, and strategic raw materials." Located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia is a major oil producing nation and a member of OPEC. In addition, the president points to Indonesia's status as the world's largest Moslem nation with a population of over 180 million people. The president makes special mention of U.S. business interests in Indonesia, with annual trade of over \$5 billion.

Allan Nairn believes that these economic relations are the overriding U.S. reasons for continuing to arm Indonesia.

Allan Nairn (The New Yorker): When I spoke to U.S. State Department people after visiting East Timor initially, and asked them about what Indonesia was doing in East Timor, their response was to say, well, East Timor is not important. What's really important is the U.S. business relationship with Indonesia. And that's the way they look at it. After the massacre on November 12th, a massacre which was witnessed and survived by American journalists, the U.S. State Department condemned the massacre but then said in the next breath that they were going to continue U.S. military aid to Indonesia.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): State Department officials declined to appear on this program to present the administration's views on this subject. The United States has known about and condoned the atrocities committed by the Indonesian military, led by General Suharto, since the beginning of his rule in 1967. In fact, the U.S. Central

Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped bring General Suharto to power by providing the Indonesian military with the names of communists and political activists who were subsequently executed. In the process, between 300,000 and a half a million people were killed.

Allan Nairn (The New Yorker): This is a case where the U.S. was part of the crime. The U.S. was providing the weapons. The U.S. knew what was going on and they continued to provide the weapons, and hundreds of thousands of people were murdered.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Indonesia is not the only example of a U.S.-supported dictatorship. Consider Zaire, located in the heart of Africa. Since military dictator Mobutu Sese Seko came to power in 1965, also with the assistance of the CIA, we have supplied the Zairian military with weapons and training [as aid] valued at \$664 million. Mobutu has one of the worst human rights records in the world. He, like Suharto, uses his U.S.-trained military forces to repress his political opposition.

In addition, the United States has provided Zaire with over \$1 billion in economic assistance, much of which Mobutu has pocketed. Mobutu's estimated wealth is in the billions of dollars, while the average Zairian makes only \$180 a year. His thievery has cast Zaire into turmoil, prompting France and Belgium to send troops to evacuate their citizens.

Stephen Davis is a senior analyst at the *Investor Responsibility Research Center* and a respected authority on Africa:

Stephan Davis (Investor Responsibility Research Center): Well, Mobutu's government is, by far, the most autocratic in Africa. It's really one-man rule. He derives his legitimacy in the country from two sources. One is power, the use of the armed forces. The other is his legitimacy by virtue of his closeness to the United States and in particular to President Bush.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Why are we so friendly with this dictator and why are we giving him weapons? After all, Zaire has faced no external threats. Slightly more than one-quarter the size of the United States, Zaire has an abundance of natural resources including minerals used by U.S. weapons manufacturers. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, gives some other answers:

Herman Cohen (Asst. Secretary of State for African Affairs): For many years Zaire has been a loyal ally in international fora. Most recently, Zaire provided us valuable support as a member of the U.N. Security Council during the Gulf Crisis. Zaire supported our policy on Angola, and Mobutu was responsible for initiating the long process that led to the end of civil war in that country.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Stephan Davis asserts that Mobutu helped the U.S. military supply Angolan rebels with weapons, and skimmed off a good portion of the covert aid for himself.

Stephan Davis (Investor Responsibility Research Center): The CIA, in the 1980s under the Reagan administration, funded the development of a secret [military] base known as Kamina. And with that base, the United States, in a covert program, was able to funnel military assistance to rebels in Angola who were attempting at that time to rebel against a Soviet-supported government in Angola.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Although Congress has cut off aid to Zaire for 1992 and 1993, or until free and fair elections are held, the Bush administration continues to lend legitimacy to Mobutu. The administration has called on him to share power until elections are held.

Stephan Davis (Investor Responsibility Research Center): We've used Mobutu in a similar way that we used Noriega in Panama. We sort of turned our eyes away from the human rights abuses and thievery that that administration has been involved with in return for Mobutu serving as our agent in Angola and other parts of Africa. It's only a matter of time before Mobutu falls and the United States will have seemed to been on the wrong side.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): While Indonesia and Zaire are clear examples of dictatorships, many other nations are not so neatly defined. For instance, we usually don't think of Saudi Arabia as a dictatorship, but what else do you call a country in which there are no elections and one man controls it all? F. Lee Bailey, the well-known American lawyer, recently wrote an open letter to President Bush asking for help in the case of Muhammad al-Fasi, whose life is in danger because he advocated democratic reforms in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, Mr. Bailey cannot help his client because "... In Saudi Arabia, there are no real courts, no lawyers are allowed, and no rights are permitted.

No charges need be filed, no access by anyone to the accused need be granted, and no accountability for the most brutal torture and bestial treatment is ever required" (letter to President Bush from F. Lee Bailey). Amnesty International confirmed Mr. Bailey's story and has urged its members to work for Muhammad al-Fasi's safety. Saudi Arabia is our number one arms customer. Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia has purchased from the United States and its military contractors weapons and military construction valued at \$30 billion. The United States has trained the 77,000 man Saudi military and armed them with modern weapons of war: fighters, tanks, transport planes, helicopters, and a variety of missiles and launchers. In 1991, Saudi Arabia agreed to purchase \$16 billion from the United States and its military contractors. In 1992, the Saudis asked to

buy \$9 billion worth of F-15 fighters and related equipment. Why are we arming the Saudi military?

The close relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has long revolved around oil. It is now estimated that Saudi Arabia sits atop 29% of the world's proven oil reserves and 45% of Persian Gulf reserves. Nevertheless, only 10% of U.S. oil needs are supplied by Saudi Arabia. Dr. Mark Katz is a political science professor at George Mason University and the author of *Russia and Arabia*. He believes that U.S. arms sales to the small Saudi military are used to symbolize our support for the king and his ruling family.

Mark Katz (George Mason University): Saudi Arabia, for example, can buy tens of billions of dollars worth of arms, but it really has a very small armed forces establishment. It's not clear what it can actually do. It's not clear that they can really handle the weapons that they already have. I think that their arms purchases are, in a sense, made for symbolic purposes. In other words, that the fact that America is willing to sell arms as a message that America is willing to defend Saudi Arabia.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): James Phillips wants to see Saudis build themselves up militarily.

James Phillips (The Heritage Foundation): I think I would rather see us sell arms to the Saudis and let them defend themselves, than have to deploy U.S. troops on a permanent basis to Saudi Arabia. I don't think that would be acceptable to the Saudis or to the American people.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): This continuing Saudi military buildup makes the Israelis uneasy and may complicate efforts for Middle East peace. In addition, our military support for the Saudi regime may well encourage anti-Americanism in the long run. The Saudi regime faces internal opposition which it has effectively stifled so far. Mark Katz believes that revolution in Saudi Arabia is very unlikely today, but he adds the United States may someday relive its Iranian experience in Saudi Arabia.

Mark Katz (George Mason University): If the Saudi monarchy is ousted, the most likely successor will be a Suni-Islamic fundamentalist government, one that is highly anti-American because of American support for the monarchy for all those years. And that's going to be a problem.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Now, let's turn our attention to Latin America where the United States has frequently supported and armed military regimes. El Salvador is a prime example. A peace agreement ending El Salvador's 12 year civil war was finally signed in January 1992. The United States Congress played an important role in ending this war - it stopped funding it. After supplying [as aid] the Salvadoran military over

the past decade with over \$1.7 billion worth of weapons and training, Congress massively reduced U.S. aid.

This reduction in military assistance gave the needed push to the Salvadoran government to end the war by compromise, but it remains unclear if the Salvadoran military which the United States restructured, trained, and armed, will adapt to this new-found peace. Robert White is the knowledgeable and outspoken former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador. He believes that peace could have come to El Salvador over ten years ago had the Reagan Administration not funded the repressive Salvadoran military.

Robert White (U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, 1979-1981): The Salvadoran military is basically sort of mercenaries of the United States government. That army couldn't exist unless your tax money and mine paid for them every day.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Despite the cover of elections, El Salvador is no democracy. Ambassador White claims that President Christiani has limited power, and that at least until the peace agreement, the military made the important political decisions.

Robert White: There's a grave problem and that is that the military still acts as the final arbiter of who can and who cannot participate in the political system. And they decide that issue with deadly force. So you take your life in your hands [if you take a stand on human rights abuses by the military].

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): The United States armed El Salvador for Cold War reasons. President Reagan supported the Salvadoran military, claiming that FMLN rebels were armed by the Soviets, Sandinistas, and Cubans. U.S. taxpayers picked up the tab for the training of Salvadoran military, and armed them with transport planes, helicopters, armored vehicles, counter-insurgency fighters, and artillery. Joshua Muravchik agrees with the Reagan rationale for providing aid.

Joshua Muravchik (American Enterprise Institute): I think that it was a correct judgement by the United States, that arming the government and allowing it to hold up its side of the civil war, was a lesser evil than allowing the communists to take over in that country. But in any situation where we get involved in that way, we take over a measure of responsibility for what goes on there.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): Over 70,000 Salvadorans have been killed and over one million have been made refugees, that's one-third of the population, as a result of this 12 year civil war. Ambassador White estimates that the U.S.-supported Salvadoran military is responsible for 90%-95% of these deaths.

Robert White: Think of the famous cases: the killing of Archbishop Romero; the killing of the American church women; the killing of the Jesuits, these were all done by the military. Even though the Bush White House tried to blame the killing of the Jesuits on the revolutionaries, it simply was not true. It's our tolerance of military abuses that is in good part responsible for the reign of terror that's been inflicted on El Salvador over the last decade.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): While El Salvador may now be on the mend, the United States continues to arm dictators elsewhere.

Allan Nairn: The government will invoke human rights and will talk about crimes against people when those crimes are committed by official enemies of the United States. But when the United States itself is party to the crimes, as in Indonesia or Central America or elsewhere, it denies them or does not talk about them.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): It's not in the long-term interest of the United States to arm dictators. They will eventually fall, leaving bitterness and anger in their wake.

Stephen Davis: In the long run, dictators cannot count on the support of their own people. Ultimately they will fail, and when they fail, the United States fails because it's seen that we're on the wrong side.

Sanford Gottlieb (narrator): With the Cold War over and a more cooperative era in international relations upon us, it's long past time to stop arming dictators.

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