

# Darrell G. Moen, Ph.D.

Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

---

## **School of the Americas: School of Assassins**

Maryknoll World Productions (1995: 18 minutes)

Narrated by Susan Sarandon

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

**Susan Sarandon:** In the late afternoon of December 4, 1980, an unmarked grave was found in a field in El Salvador. When it was opened in the presence of the U.S. ambassador, it revealed the bodies of four women: Maryknoll Sisters Mara Clark and Eda Ford, Ursaline Sister Dorothy Kazel, and lay missionary Jean Donovan.

Of the five officers later found responsible for the rape and murder of these women, three were graduates of the United States Army School of the Americas. According to the Pentagon, the mission of the school is to train the armed forces of Latin America, promote military professionalism, foster cooperation among multinational military forces, and to expand the trainees' knowledge of United States customs and traditions.

The School of the Americas originated in 1946 in Panama. Now, it is located on the grounds of Fort Benning, Georgia. The school teaches commando operations, sniper training, how to fire an M-16, and psychological warfare. Since no major declared war between Latin American countries has occurred in decades and the communist threat has vanished, why provide this kind of training?

**Representative Joseph Kennedy:** If you look at the course ranges that are offered to these individuals, they in fact are a dedicated way of teaching military leaders in foreign nations how to subvert their local communities.

**Susan Sarandon:** Since it opened, more than 55,000 military officials from 23 Latin American and Caribbean countries have trained at the school. About 2,000 students a year. As facts have emerged about the school and its graduates, it has drawn the attention of a growing number of human rights activists, such as Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois.

**Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois:** Just down the road here is the School of the Americas. It's a combat school. Most of the courses revolve around what they call

"counter-insurgency warfare." Who are the "insurgents?" We have to ask that question. They are the poor. They are the people in Latin America who call for reform. They are the landless peasants who are hungry. They are health care workers, human rights advocates, labor organizers. They become the insurgents. They are seen as "the enemy." They are those who become the targets of those who learn their lessons at the School of the Americas.

**Susan Sarandon:** What has been learned about the lessons taught at the school? In the 1980s, the civil war in El Salvador became a focal point for human rights activists throughout the world. Death squads operated freely, often killing 50 people a night. There were so many cases that on March 23, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero in San Salvador made a plea to the military leaders of his country.

**Archbishop Oscar Romero:** I would like to make an appeal in a special way to the men of the army. In the name of God, in the name of the suffering people whose laments rise to the heaven each day more tumultuous, I ask you, I order you in the name of God, stop the repression.

**Susan Sarandon:** While celebrating mass the next day, Archbishop Romero was assassinated. A number of years later, the National Security Archives in Washington D.C. made an important discovery when they obtained a copy of a declassified cable, Cape Dole. Woman working at the National Security Archives: These two cables are both from the American Embassy in El Salvador.

One is from Dean Hinton, who was then Ambassador to El Salvador in 1981. And it discusses a meeting during which Roberto D'Aubuisson plans the murder of Archbishop Romero. During the meeting, there is described a lottery that the people who are attending the meeting hold to see who would draw the "right" to kill Romero himself.

**Susan Sarandon:** D'Aubuisson was trained at the School of the Americas. Also trained at the school were two of the three officers directly responsible for the assassination. December 11, 1981: El Mazote, a small village in El Salvador...

**Rufina Amaya (survivor of the El Mazote massacre):** First, they forced everyone out of their houses and made us all lie face down in the street, both men and women. There were soldiers on both sides. Then, they moved away to see the women kneeling down on the ground to pray. They killed all of them. Not a single one of them survived, just me by the grace of God. I hid under a tree. When I heard the screams of the children, and I knew which ones were mine, they were crying, "Mommy, they're killing us."

**Susan Sarandon:** Over 900 men, women, and children were massacred. Virtually the entire population of the village and the area surrounding El Mazote. Out of 143 bodies

identified in the laboratory, 131 were of children under the age of 12, including three infants under the age of three months. Ten of the 12 officers cited as responsible for the El Mazote massacre were graduates of the School of the Americas.

They were members of the Atlacatl Battalion, a part of the El Salvador Army. November 16, 1989: San Salvador. Six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her 15-year-old daughter were slaughtered. To get the facts about this incident, a U.S. Congressional Investigation began, led by Representative Joseph Mokely.

**Representative Joseph Mokely:** I went down [to El Salvador]. I talked with the Embassy, talked with the military, talked with the unionists. I had meetings set up in very dingy places to talk with people who didn't want to talk to me in public. And we gathered enough information that we pushed the investigation to the degree that it was concluded and the people who perpetrated the crime were found guilty. The killing was done by the Atlacatl Battalion which is the crack [best] battalion in that country. And these are the people, some of them had just returned from the United States, where they were taught a course on "human rights" amongst other things.

**Susan Sarandon:** Nineteen of the 26 officers implicated in the Jesuit murders were graduates of the school, including Yushi Renee Mendoza, the lieutenant in charge of the squad that killed the Jesuits and the two women. He attended a commando course a year before the massacre took place.

**Representative Joseph Mokely:** The Truth Commission to the U.N. substantiated everything that I had brought forward.

**Susan Sarandon:** The United Nations Truth Commission Report released on March 15, 1993, cited specific officers for committing atrocities during the El Salvador civil war. At School of the Americas Watch just outside Fort Benning, Georgia, Vicky Imerman matched the names cited in the U.N. Report with names in a United States Government document.

**Vicky Imerman:** What I did was I took these officers, all the officers listed in the report and I looked them up in list of graduates of the School of the Americas which we received through the Freedom of Information Act. What I found were 49 of the 60-some officers listed were graduates of the School of the Americas. These officers attended the school both before and after they committed atrocities. Francisco Del Cid, right here, was on the Commandant's List a couple of years after he ordered the massacre of about 16 civilians and had their corpses burned.

**Susan Sarandon:** El Salvador is only part of the school's story. In the entry area of one of its main buildings are photographs of those the school honors, its so-called Hall of Fame. At the top of the list, Hugo Banzer, former dictator of Bolivia, a graduate of the

school. Some of the others similarly honored are the former dictators of Honduras, Ecuador, and Argentina. And generals from eight other Latin and Caribbean nations, many cited by human rights groups for involvement in human rights abuses in their own countries.

Among other graduates, Manuel Noriega, former president of Panama, currently in prison in the United States. Four of the five ranking Honduran officers who organized death squads in the 1980s as part of Battalion 316, are graduates. Half of the 250 Columbian officers cited for human rights abuses attended the school. The three highest ranking Peruvian officers convicted in February 1994 of murdering nine university students and a professor were all graduates. Also, the Peruvian army commander who brought out tanks to obstruct initial investigation of the murders.

During the dictatorship of the Somoza family [in Nicaragua], over 4,000 National Guard troops graduated from the school. Many of them later became known as the "Contras," responsible for the deaths of thousands of Nicaraguan peasants in the 1980s. The general in charge of Argentina's so-called "Dirty War" was a school graduate. During that internal conflict in the late-1970s and early-1980s, an estimated 30,000 people were tortured, disappeared, and murdered.

General Hector Gramajo of Guatemala was the featured speaker at the school's graduation ceremonies in 1991. Human rights groups claim he is the architect of strategies that legalized military atrocities in Guatemala resulting in the death of over 200,000 men, women, and children.

**Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois:** As a Catholic priest, as a U.S. citizen, I really feel a responsibility to speak out against that because of this [school]. This does not lead to healing, it leads to death and suffering. In a way, this is a death machine. And this, I want to say, is very close to home because it's in our backyard. It's not out there in El Salvador. This is not in South Africa. We're talking about a school of assassins right here in our backyard being supported and financed through our tax money. It's being done in our names.

**Susan Sarandon:** \$30 million of U.S. taxpayer money was recently spent to renovate school headquarters and these housing units for soldiers attending the school.

**Vicky Imerman:** It's an outrage. It's the use of our tax dollars, American tax dollars, for what I think your average American feels is a distinctly un-American purpose.

**Susan Sarandon:** On September 30, 1993, the School of the Americas was debated by Congress for the first time in its history. It happened when an amendment to the Defense Department budget was introduced by Congressman Joseph Kennedy.

**Congressman Joseph Kennedy:** Mr. Speaker, my amendment would reduce the Army operation and maintenance account by \$2.9 million, the amount dedicated to running the Army School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia. The intent of this amendment is to close the school.

**Representative John Lewis:** Why should we continue to fund and condone military-inspired murder? Why should we continue to train thugs to kill their own people? Vote for peace. Vote for non-violence. Vote for harmony. Vote for the Kennedy Amendment

**Susan Sarandon:** 174 voted in favor, 256 against.

**Congressman Joseph Kennedy:** We're only 30 or 40 votes short of winning. That means that if people around the country hear about this and write their congressman, we can win. This is an issue that we can win on.

**Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois:** And what's very important right now I feel is to let out voices be heard. Bishop Romero said it best before he was assassinated by someone who trained at the School of the Americas. He said, "We who have a voice, we have to speak for the voiceless." I realize that we here in this country have a voice. We can speak without having to worry about being disappeared or tortured or being picked by [by the police or military]. We can speak, and I just hope that we can speak clearly and boldly on this issue.

**Susan Sarandon:** In April 1994, a group of human rights activists from around the country began a 40-day fast on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. They were there to make their case for shutting down the School of the Americas. The day before the fast ended, Congressman Kennedy joined them in a press conference.

**Congressman Joseph Kennedy:** The so-called Hall of Fame in Georgia is nothing more than a Hall of Shame for the people of our country. We, as a nation and as a people have a right and an obligation to say what we believe in in terms of how our dollars are going to be spent. What we are saying unequivocally is that we do not want to be associated with the kinds of individuals that are torturing, maiming, and killing innocent people throughout Latin America. That's what this bill is all about and that's what your commitment is all about, and we commit to working until this bill is passed.

**Susan Sarandon:** The next day, Congressman Kennedy's second effort to shut the school was defeated by a smaller margin than his first one. 175 voted for his amendment, 217 against.

**Unidentified El Salvadoran woman:** I'm not very educated, but in my simple words I think that the only thing the School of the Americas has accomplished is the

destruction of our countries in Latin America. Don't give us any more of that military aid. It would be better to help the poor who are in need.

**Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois:** We need the voices of others, and we also need those letters to congressional leaders. To let them know that we will not allow them to use our money to run a school of assassins.