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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

SOA: Guns and Greed

Maryknoll World Productions

Narrated by Stephen De Mott, MM (2000: 20 minutes)

Transcribed by Darrell Moen

Narrator: In November 1989, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her 15-year-old daughter were assassinated. Of the 26 men found responsible, 19 were graduates of SOA, United States School of the Americas. SOA has trained more than 60,000 soldiers from Latin America in commando tactics, psychological warfare, and military intelligence.

March 1980 in San Salvador, while celebrating mass, Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down. SOA trained two of the three identified as his killers. December 1980: Four churchwomen from the United States were raped and murdered in El Salvador. Of the five found responsible, three were trained at SOA. December 1981: [More than] 900 men, women, and children, virtually the entire village and area surrounding El Mazote, were massacred.

Unidentified villager: There were soldiers on both sides. 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!"

Narrator: Out of 143 bodies identified in the laboratory, 130 were of children under the age of 10, including three infants under the age of three months. Ten of the twelve officers later found responsible were SOA graduates. Death follows the school's graduates wherever they go.

In November 1999, 12,000 people from all over the United States gathered at the gates of Ft. Benning, Georgia, where SOA is headquartered.

Unidentified participant: I think everyday another young person is deciding that they can't, like, participate anymore in the, like, death machine.

Unidentified participant: It's really horrible.

Narrator: They were there to demand that SOA be shut down.

Unidentified participant: It's the thought of a critical mass of people coming together to effect change, and we all feel that we'll accomplish something.

Unidentified participant: [This cross represents] a human being who was tortured and/or killed by one of the graduates of the school. [crying] It's beyond words.

Unidentified participant: I think that the most important part of the march is that we're not here for ourselves, you know, we're not here for our personal motive, we're here for others.

Unidentified participant: This robe and mask are a symbol to memorialize all the victims of the graduates of the SOA.

Narrator: And for the name of each victim, thousand respond: "Present." I am here.

Unidentified participant: Everyone behind the line, please.

Narrator: Any protester crossing the Ft. Benning boundary line can jailed up to six months and fined \$5,000. Despite the risk, these ordinary Americans decided to cross the line.

Unidentified participant: I want my words to be heard. And the only way I'm going to be heard is if I defy [the law]. So I'm going to go across.

Unidentified participant: Well, they say we should prepare for jail time. I don't anticipate that happening, but I'm ready for that.

Unidentified participant: I want to share with you my story. My father, Adrian, kidnapped and disappeared in 1981 by Guatemalan security forces. My daughter, Rosella, who was ten-years-old when Guatemalan security forces kidnapped and disappeared her. This is my daughter Glenda, who was nine-years-old at the moment of her disappearance. And my eighteen-month-old baby sister, kidnapped and disappeared by Guatemalan security forces.

Narrator: In 1996, the Pentagon admitted that SOA training manuals instructed students to use blackmail, torture, and execution [as interrogation techniques].

Unidentified participant: My husband was tortured in Guatemala, and the people who tortured him were trained here at the School of the Americas.

Narrator: Bishop Juan Guiardi, who headed an investigation of human rights in Guatemala, was assassinated in 1998, two days after his report was issued. A key suspect in jail is an SOA graduate. The Bishop's Report cited SOA graduates in Guatemala for many human rights abuses.

Unidentified participant: I've heard the stories of people who were victimized by men who were trained here at the School of the Americas. And I come to the School of the Americas to bring their memories here, and to say to the people who run the school that it can't go on.

Narrator: In Columbia, 250 military were cited for human rights atrocities, one half of them SOA graduates. Following SOA counter insurgency training, they kidnapped, murdered, massacred, and set up paramilitary death squads.

Unidentified participant: We're going as a family this year. You know, the family that gets arrested together stays together. It is important that we teach our children some important values. And I want my children to know that sometimes to make changes in this country, it takes a risk. You have to take risks for the things you believe in, and I want them to learn that.

Narrator: In Chiapas, Mexico unarmed, indigenous people have stood up to the military occupying their land. Until uprisings like these began in 1994, very few Mexican soldiers had been trained at SOA. But once the people stood their ground, the Mexican army sent thousands of their officers to SOA for special training. So far, 18 Mexican SOA graduates from Mexico have played key roles in warfare targeting civilians in Chiapas.

Narrator: In the 16th century, the conquistadors arrived in Latin America from Spain and Portugal. They exploited the people and the resources, and became very wealthy. Today, the sweatshops, the World Bank, and the IMF exploit Latin America's people and resources. They enrich corporations and government officials. They are the new conquistadors. These new conquistadors need the military, the men with the guns, to protect their wealth and power. That's where the School of the Americas comes in.

United Students Against Sweatshops speaker: After they graduate, these newly trained military officers will go back to their Latin American countries, and they'll be used as union busters in the most extreme sense of the phrase. Thousands of unionists in Latin America have been disappeared, tortured, and murdered for trying to improve the conditions of their fellow workers.

National Labor Committee spokesperson: If you try to think of the worst nightmare of the major corporations, it's that young people will start to ask serious questions about

where their stuff is produced. Are the workers' rights respected? And that's exactly what's happening across the country.

Narrator: Women in Central American sweatshops produce much of the clothing worn in the United States, clothing made for U.S. corporations. Sweatshops use child labor, fire pregnant women, force workers to put in overtime at starvation wages. Women who try to organize unions meet harsh retaliation.

Unidentified participant: The School of the Americas currently trains the militaries that are repressing the unionization of the workers in these sweatshop factories. That repression will not end until the School of the Americas stops legitimizing that process.

Unidentified participant: As a union organizer for the Service Employees' Union and a labor leader, I feel that it's important for us to help protect the rights of workers in Latin America. The School specifically identified in their training manuals union organizers as subversives. Basically, what I do here in the United States in helping people organize unions, if I was doing that in Latin America I could very well be killed. for what I do to help people here.

United Students Against Sweatshops speaker: There's no excuse for the continuation of the School of the Americas, used to enforce this cycle of oppression against the workers making our clothes.

Unidentified participant: This is being done in our names by our government in order to continue to further the high material standard of living we Americans enjoy. [Or at least] we're told that we enjoy it. That's on the back of many hidden costs [such as] high environmental costs that we don't pay for, high social costs, and high human costs. We're all part of that. We all live that lifestyle, and by being silent, that's a sign of omission.

Catholic Bishop: People in this country don't want to hear that; that my ,lifestyle is really the cause of people in other parts of the world starving to death; that I have more than I have a right to. No one has a right to anything beyond their need when others lack the barest necessities. There are people who are just devastated by poverty, in huge numbers, hundreds of millions of people. And so when the poor demand some of these things from us, they're demanding what belongs to them.

Unidentified participant: As a concerned citizen of conscience, I do hereby declare my intention to follow the spirit wherever it may lead me this day, to help give a voice to the voiceless victims who continue to suffer even today.

Narrator: As the many crimes of SOA graduates have come to light, a movement to shut down SOA began. The earliest actions [1990] were by a handful of people taking

part in hunger strikes at the gate of Ft. Benning and in small groups [1994] protesting in Washington D.C. By 1998, over 7,000 [protesters] gathered at Ft. Benning's gate. Over 2,000 protesters risked arrest by crossing the line.

Unidentified participant: Never before did we expect this number [of people crossing the line]. We were hoping for 1,000 and we got 2,319.

Narrator: 1999 brought new approaches to shut the school. Several thousand marched in front of the Pentagon [in May 1999]. Sixty of the protesters put their bodies on the line and were arrested. Reinforcing the public protests, others repeatedly lobbied their representatives and senators, asking them to stop spending taxpayer funds for the school.

Unidentified participant: Our position is that we want our senators out their fighting to get it closed.

Narrator: Every vote in Congress to shut SOA has gotten closer to success.

Narrator: Among the thousands of World Bank/IMF protesters in Washington DC in April 2000 were a group who linked these financial giants to with the School of the Americas.

Unidentified participant: I sort of consider it the military arm of the IMF and World Bank. The Structural Adjustment Program that the IMF forces Third World countries to endure in accepting loans have to be implemented by the governments of those countries. And with US military aid and the School of the Americas, that's the military arm that's allowing the economic policies of the IMF and the World Bank to be implemented in the countries that are accepting debts.

Narrator: Structural adjustment is the way the IMF and the World Bank force poor countries to repay loans by cutting back on human services like schools and health care, and raising the price of basic needs. When poor people are hurt by this, many protest. And the military, often led by SOA graduates, squelch these popular uprisings.

Unidentified participant: As we have put on our banner, they're "one big happy family" [IMF, World Bank, WTO, SOA]. These programs that in fact ruin the environment, cause more poverty, move people into a spiral downward, are kept in place by these repressive militaries.

Narrator: The list of SOA abuses is so long that 100 of the protesters took part in a risk-filled action, passive resistance to arrest, increasing the likelihood of prison time.

Unidentified participant: I don't know how one prepares for prison. I'm prepared in my soul, and that's where I had to discern this, to know in my heart that this was right.

Narrator: The high risk group of 100 led women, men, and children who crossed the line; over 4,000 altogether, taking part in the largest act of civil disobedience in the United States since the Vietnam War.

Unidentified participant: I believe in non-violence in everyday life and in protests. So, being part of this movement is a part of my life and it's very important to me for that reason. I wouldn't be involved in it if it weren't non-violent.

Unidentified participant: Well, it's peaceful resistance and we feel that what the SOA is doing is wrong, and we're showing them so but non-violently.

Unidentified participant: This is a tribute to those who have already died. And we want to work to ensure that no more people in Latin America have to die as a result of the graduates of this school.

Unidentified participant: I'm a little scared because I believe the military has every power at their disposal.

Unidentified participant: Those people in Central America, I mean, they put their lives on the line when they do something like this. I'm lucky to be in a place where I only risk jail time.

Caption insert: Those who hate injustice must fight it with every ounce of their strength. They must work for a new world in which greed and selfishness are finally overcome (Ignazio Ellacuria, S.J., assassinated by SOA graduates).

Unidentified participant: They got arrested. They will force the issue. They'll be in court and the thing will be exposed before the American public.

Narrator: More than 50 women and men in the SOA Watch movement have served a total of 30 years for their non-violent protests.

Unidentified police officer: I think this is by the far the largest crowd they've had, the most diversified crowd. I think they've made their point. It'll be up to Congress now to decide what Congress wants to do.

Unidentified participant: It's a wonderful, spiritual experience. Really powerful. It's been hot, my feet are tired, but I'm uplifted.

Unidentified participant: They just can't control us, there's so many of us. And we're all peaceful, ordinary, prayerful people. What do you do when you have so many

ordinary Americans come in to this place of death in such a peaceful, joyful spirit? They just have to let us go. But we'll just keep coming back. If ordinary Americans knew what was happening here, that we're training death squads throughout Latin America, they'd be outraged. They wouldn't want it to happen, and they'd close it down. And that's what's happening. It's really historic. It's a really historic event here. It's like the Selma March [for civil rights]. So we're all filled with hope.

Caption insert: The Pentagon recently changed the name of SOA. But whatever they call SOA it will always be a School of Assassins. New name – same shame. The struggle continues!

[For more information:

www.soaw.org or telephone (202) 234-3440]
