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William R. Meara. *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1980*. Annapolis, Maryland : Naval Institute Press, 2006. ISBN 1-59114-518-X. 16 photos. 2 maps. Notes. Index. xiv + 168 pages.

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As the Global War on Terrorism lengthens into a protracted struggle, most navies around the globe seek to grow their special operations and counter-insurgency capabilities. These types of activities are often foreign to the conventional orientation of modern military establishments. Unconventional warfare depends more on language and cultural skills than brute force or technology, an unusual skill set for the American services. While the U.S. military have a long history of fighting these types of wars, its success has been mixed. *Contra Cross* evaluates the American performance during recent insurgency wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 1980s.

The book is part memoir, part analysis. It begins with a chapter on the author's experiences working at a Catholic missionary school in Huehuetenango, Guatemala in the summer of 1979. It was here that Meara began to gain a "grunt's eye" view of Latin American culture and the deep, underlying social, political, and economic problems confronted in many of the countries. Two weeks after he departed, a right wing death squad assassinated one of the school's teachers, Brother Jim Miller. This event partially

radicalized Meara and made him deeply suspicious of the government in Guatemala at the time. It also spurred him to visit Nicaragua , which had just witnessed the victory of the Sandinistas. Meara traveled to Managua with romantic visions of the revolution and left there disillusioned by the totalitarianism he experienced. Nicaragua transformed him from a left-leaning college student to a more center-oriented future military advisor and diplomat.

Meara's career with the U.S. Army began at the age of 17, when he joined the National Guard. In college, he attended Officer Candidate School , and decided to become a full-time Special Forces officer soon after returning from Nicaragua . The Special Forces "impressed him" with its combination of adventure and foreign culture immersion. After completing the "Q" course and the Foreign Area Officer training program at Fort Bragg , Captain Meara began his first real-world assignment as a psychological warfare instructor for the El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF).

In 1986, El Salvador was mired in civil war with the Faribundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), an umbrella group of five Marxist organizations trying to overthrow the government. Meara's job entailed training his Salvadoran counterparts in Communist ideology, tactics, and strategies. This role put him in close touch with several FMLN defectors, whom he invited to his class as guest instructors. Through these courses, Meara gained a complex understanding of the institutional culture of ESAF. For example, he learned that it was just as preoccupied with Honduras , an historic enemy, as the FMLN. Furthermore, the Salvadoran officer corps resembled a social club more than a traditional military hierarchy. This club-like system fostered tolerance for officers who failed to perform and bred paranoia within the corps. It also made it extremely difficult for the U.S. Military Group (MILGRP) to convince the Salvadoran military to punish human rights violations. In the end, however, U.S. influence did convince the Salvadorans to clean up their act and in 1992, the FMLN laid down its arms in

part because of assurances from the United States that it would “keep the Salvadoran military in line.”

The second half of the book covers Meara’s work as a State Department Liaison Officer to the Contras in 1988 and 1989. In that role, he oversaw United States Agency for International Development aid to the Honduras-based Contras and served as a de-facto ambassador to the insurgency during the waning days of the struggle. Meara shuttled between the Contra base area at Yamales and the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa , trying to secure adequate humanitarian assistance for the insurgency, and bridge the cultural gap between the troops in the field and their foreign benefactors.

As a fluent Spanish speaker with extensive experience in Latin America , Meara developed a close rapport with the Contras, but struggled to maintain emotional distance from the insurgency. This became particularly challenging towards the end of his tour when the U.S. began to cut off support to the fighters. In the end, Meara saw the Contras as *embattled farmers* similar in some respects to the colonial militia of the American Revolution—poor farmers whose way of life was threatened by the economic policies of the prevailing government. Meara had profound respect for the difficult odds under which they struggled but in the end never forgot that his primary loyalty lay to the U.S. and its policies. Meara’s description of the isolated situation at Yamales reveals how easy it is for special operations types to succumb to Joseph Conrad-like influences of the field and become advocates of the insurgents as opposed to mere advisors. It takes a very special type of person to keep these impulses in check.

The main lesson of his book is that only people well-versed in foreign languages and cultures have any hope of successfully waging insurgency or counter-insurgency wars in the third world. In order to be effective in special operations, you need to be able to “curse like a Contra,” and in this regard

America is still woefully unprepared, not just in the U.S. Armed Forces but government-wide. The strength of Meara's work is its first-hand look at insurgency and counter-insurgency, and the author's nuanced understanding of the local cultures in El Salvador and Nicaragua . *Contra Cross* also stands out as one of the few published accounts of America 's struggle against Communism in Latin America in the 1980s, and for this reason is important.



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