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EL SALVADOR AND THE VIETNAM SYNDROME

The debate over U.S. policy toward El Salvador should be concerned with the morality of American resistance to Communist takeover and the danger from the "falling dominoes." Instead, certain elements in the national media have fabricated a strained parallel with the Vietnam War and forced the El Salvador debate to fit that mold.

The Vietnam syndrome is a psychological umbrella that is smothering a realistic appraisal of the situation. It is a symbolic umbrella that may carry us into appeasement of Communism totalitarianism like Neville Chamberlain's umbrella at Munich in 1938.

The Vietnam syndrome, the tender spot of the American psyche, is caused by a combination of guilt and embarrassment about losing the war plus fear of making the same mistake again. It is easy for determined propagandists to reopen old wounds by orchestrating a chorus of chants: "Do X and we will have another Vietnam."

Egypt's President Anwar Sadat recently warned that the security of the Free World will be in constant danger unless the United States gets over its Vietnam syndrome. It is, indeed, a potent weapon against us. It was a key tactic in forcing the giveaway of our Panama Canal over the opposition of the overwhelming majority of Americans ("if we don't give the Canal to Torrijos, he will take it by force and we'll have another Vietnam").

The campaign to scuttle President Reagan's efforts to prevent a Communist-Castro takeover in El Salvador began on January 22 when the U.S. Public Broadcasting System aired a film called "El Salvador: Another Vietnam?" The idea that El Salvador poses a threat of another Vietnam was picked up by Walter Cronkite when he interviewed Ronald Reagan on CBS. The theme has been rattling around ever since.

The second level of this propaganda campaign is to convince the American people that the present ruling regime in El Salvador is a nasty dictatorship responsible for killing thousands of people and violating "human rights." How many people is the regime alleged to have killed? Just pick any number and it will do. ABC's "20/20" said

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12,000; UPI said 11,000; a New York Times columnist 6,000; another New York Times writer 13,194; Mary McGrory 9,000.

One gets an ominous sense of deja vu in watching the orchestrated attack. Do you remember the anti-Vietnam War chants of "stop the killings!"? It should be clear by now to even the dullest that, once the Americans pulled out, the real killings started in Southeast Asia on a systematic basis. Communist takeover always brings killings on a massive scale unmatched by non-Communist dictators or even by war itself.

The same media propagandists who broadcast the extravagant figures cited above failed to mention our State Department's estimate that the total deaths in El Salvador come to 10,000 -- and the Communist-armed guerrillas claim to have killed nearly 6,000 persons including noncombatants and government personnel. No one knows who killed the four Catholic women who received so much publicity, but it would be completely in harmony with Communist tactics to make martyrs of their own friends in order to create a cause celebre.

The front-line battle for El Salvador is in the American media rather than in that terrorist-torn country. Castro was able to take over Cuba only after he was first portrayed in the news columns of the New York Times as the Abraham Lincoln of Cuba. The Communist Sandinistas were able to defeat and expel Somoza only after the American press knocked him down for the count.

Part of the strategy, of course, is to convince the American public that we must throw the anti-Communist rascals out and replace them with a truly democratic government. The defect in that argument is that the "democratic" replacement always turns out to be Communist, virulently anti-American, and depressingly more destructive of human rights.

Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick correctly sized up the situation in a recent speech in Washington. It is supremely moral for America to help any country avoid a Communist takeover because historical evidence proves that people are infinitely worse off under Communism than under any other current brand of dictatorship.

Furthermore, if we let El Salvador join the Moscow-Havana axis, the falling dominoes will fall all the way to our doorstep on the Rio Grande. We can't afford that -- morally or militarily.

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