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## H-Diplo Article Review 831- Field Jr. on D'Haeseleer. "American Civic Action: The National Campaign Plan and the Failure to Win 'Hearts and Minds' in El Salvador."

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**Brian D’Haeseleer. “American Civic Action: The National Campaign Plan and the Failure to Win ‘Hearts and Minds’ in El Salvador.”** *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 26:3 (2015): 494-513. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2015.1067527>.

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Review by **Thomas C. Field Jr.**, Embry-Riddle College of Security and Intelligence

**I**n this timely study of U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) programs in El Salvador between 1979 and 1991, Brian D’Haeseleer argues that ground-level applications of military civic action are frequently less about ‘hearts and minds’ nation-building than they are a means to effectively search and destroy. Implicitly exploring the mismatch between COIN’s liberal developmentalist underpinnings and the brutality of its real-time implementation, D’Haeseleer’s explicit critique employs the more instrumental, policy-friendly language of costs and benefits. Taking stock of the relatively small geographic footprint of Washington’s twelve-year, \$4 billion COIN effort, D’Haeseleer concludes, “If a massive and unsustainable investment of resources by Washington into a very small country was still inadequate to accomplish its mission, was it ever achievable?” (505)

From the article’s outset, D’Haeseleer frames his study as a direct challenge to the decades-long insistence of Pentagon intellectuals that the U.S. COIN effort in El Salvador was a model of success. Citing a host of sanguine articles published in the echo chamber of Defense Department journals such as *Joint Forces Quarterly*, *Marine Corps Gazette*, *Parameters*, and *Military Review*, D’Haeseleer counters that billions of COIN dollars in fact resulted in a decidedly non-victorious stalemate followed by democratic elections that had long been anathema to Salvadoran elites.<sup>[1]</sup> More fundamentally, D’Haeseleer’s research suggests that the Salvadoran government’s tenuous ability to withstand the twelve-year uprising owed to brute force repression and the horrific employment of state terror, not to COIN’s liberal developmentalism or its limited appeals to *campesino* dignity and desires.<sup>[2]</sup>

The main strength of this article lies in its discussion of the high cost and limited impact of U.S.-funded COIN projects in El Salvador. D'Haeseleer finds, for example, that officers in the El Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF) only "begrudgingly accepted" the developmentalist advice from U.S. COIN experts, and that they usually did so merely as a *quid pro quo* for more advanced materiel with which to "focus on pursuing and killing the guerrillas" (508). Salvadoran elites, for their part, tended to oppose any COIN-driven attempt "to improve economic and health conditions in the *campo*...and viewed these efforts as associated with communism" (502). More telling still, U.S. President Ronald Reagan himself undercut his own military officers' COIN mantra by arguing in the early 1980s, "You do not try to fight a civil war and institute reforms at the same time...Get rid of the war. Then go forward with the reforms" (497). Reactionary COIN critics notwithstanding, the Pentagon pumped billions into what eventually resulted in the largest U.S.-backed nation-building project between the fall of South Vietnam and the 2001 War in Afghanistan (495).

Most of D'Haeseleer's article is spent cataloging how little the Pentagon achieved. He accomplishes this by detailing the underwhelming impact of the Salvadoran military's U.S.-funded National Campaign Plan (NCP), a series of "military uplift" programs that brought agrarian reform, *marichi* bands, "skimpily clad dancers," and free army haircuts to a pair of strategically located provinces: San Vicente and Usulután (503-504). Modeled after the Pentagon's Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program in South Vietnam, the NCP was based on the late colonial 'oil spot' theory of pacification and social development. Once consolidated in a key area, the theory went, state control wicks naturally outward across colonized social space. For their part, Salvadoran rebel leaders recognized the massive cost of these pilot projects, and they encouraged their followers to accept aid programs and simply ask for more. By making escalating claims on the imperial center, insurgent populations strained local military resources and forced San Salvador to increasingly rely on funding streams from a relatively ambivalent U.S. Congress. The reasons for lagging domestic U.S. support for the Pentagon's COIN effort are actually underexplored here, although they are presumably dealt with in D'Haeseleer's broader body of work. As he suggests, Congress had little patience for the war, and civilian U.S. agencies such as USAID refused to participate in nation-building projects with a local army force that was deeply implicated in rapes and murders of priests, nuns, trade union leaders, and rural populations at large (507).

D'Haeseleer's decision to evaluate COIN's success and failure on the Pentagon's own terms, rather than on domestic U.S. moral considerations, thus begs the rather Whiggish question of whether it might have

worked in El Salvador had it enjoyed a broader basis of support and financing within the United States. This minor criticism suggests a related limitation of this case study: it addresses only military civic action and not the broader buffet of civilian nation-building programs that have typically accompanied COIN-style developmentalism elsewhere in the American imperium. Nonetheless, by implicitly breaking down the presumed dichotomy between traditional warfare and liberal COIN nation-building, D’Haeseleer’s study serves as an important and timely corrective to the evolving scholarly treatment of Washington’s long and checkered history of counterinsurgency in the Global South.<sup>[3]</sup>

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