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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Dept. of State, RPS/IPS, Margaret P. Grafeld, Dir.

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July 19, 1983

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MEMORANDUM

TO: L/LEI - Jeffrey H. Smith
FROM: Carl Gettinger *[Signature]*
SUBJECT: The Secret Colindres Confession

DENY
El Salvador: Human Rights
Special Project (1993)

This memorandum is an effort to come to grips with some of the questions posed by a piece of information which is at once highly significant, enormously useful, potentially explosive and conceivably very damaging -- the April 1981 secretly taped Sgt. Colindres confession.

I. BACKGROUND

On December 2, 1980 four U.S. churchwomen were murdered in a rural part of El Salvador. In February 1981 I asked a member of the Salvadoran National Guard whom I knew to help us in discovering the identities of the perpetrators of that crime. He agreed and obtained the requested information in April. During April I gave the source a miniature tape recorder which he used to surreptitiously tape a conversation with the National Guardsman chiefly responsible for the crime, Sub-sgt. Luis Antonio Colindres Aleman. The quality of the recording was uneven, with some portions readily understandable and others unintelligible. Nevertheless, on the tape Colindres clearly and willingly admits to the murder of the U.S. women four months before. The tape played a key role in Ambassador Chapin's decision to take Colindres' name and those of other Guardsmen implicated by him to the then Minister of Defense, Colonel Garcia.

Extraordinary secrecy surrounded the tape, the life of the source depending on it. No cable traffic between the Embassy and the Department referred to it and unusual precautions were followed in transporting it to FBI Headquarters in May. Thus, after only limited success in enhancing its quality, the FBI returned the recording to the Embassy with very few, it now seems that particularly few in the Department of State, becoming aware of its existence. The tape's sensitivity, its poor quality and frequent gaps, its unsubstantiated and uncorroborated allegations and doubts about Colindres' honesty combined to limit its usefulness. It came back from the FBI to a safe in the Embassy where it sat and from where it was roused infrequently.

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II. DIALOGUE

In addition to the information contained on the tape on the circumstances of the crime itself there is also a window into Colindres' thinking on several critical questions. Among these are: his attitude toward the churchwomen and the entire question of motive; his statements touching on the question of superior orders, if any, to carry out the crime; and, suggestions of his participation in an organized effort to cover up the crime. However, although the tape helps in answering some questions, it also raises others which, in part because of the poor quality of the recording, we are currently unable to answer.

A. The Crime

On the tape Colindres describes the murder of the four women in the following manner: "So then I did the little job . . . (unintelligible) . . . we lit their wicks over by Santiago." (The unintelligible word in the passage is very likely "decidi," that is "I decided.") The events leading up to that crime are not explicitly described but, if Colindres is to be believed, they include a conversation between himself and police agents at the airport about the women. It may be that those agents fueled suspicions about the Americans' activities which provoked Colindres to act against them. That is not clear but what happens subsequently is less mysterious: accompanied by five accomplices, Colindres stops the four women, finds what he considers subversive propaganda, finds also a moderate to large amount of cash and three substantial checks, takes them to a remote area a few miles distant and then, after they are raped, has them all shot. On the tape Colindres admits to all of these actions except rape, which he ignores. He also admits to ruining the engine of his own vehicle during the course of the operation by mistaking diesel for gasoline, burning the women's van at a site different from where the killings took place and destroying the checks.

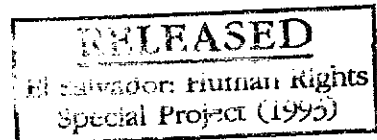
B. The Motive

The brutal animosity which Colindres displays toward the U.S. women on the tape goes a long way toward explaining why he killed them. A listener who understands the context of the conversation and the nuances of the trash heap language employed throughout the recording can comprehend the motive for the murders. A remarkably savage human being, Colindres acted in response to information which -- falsely-- made these women out to be guerrilla sympathizers, gun runners, carriers

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of subversive propaganda and participants in the following day's (December 3) funeral of the murdered leftist FDR leaders. For the first two accusations he had suspicions generated by Guardsman Perez Nieto and information probably provided by low level police agents in the area of the airport; unfortunately, very significant portions of the tape which might identify the latter sources are currently unintelligible. For the second pair of accusations Colindres had his own determinations based on what he saw in the women's van after they were stopped. To Colindres, therefore, the women were acting in ways which made them the enemy and he decided to deal with them as he was accustomed to dealing with the enemy -- by killing them. The considerations about their nationality which had protected them up to that time seem to have occurred to him but his reaction was merely a crude attempt to cover his tracks. Additionally, the victims presented a target for robbery and rape. The inescapable conclusion, in my view, is that Colindres acted out of what for him was a persuasive combination of political, financial and sexual interests.

C. Orders

The confessional tape very strongly supports the conclusion that direct responsibility for the murders of the Americans rests with Colindres. Throughout his conversation with the source there is an understood presumption of his responsibility for the crime which he makes no effort to dispel. At no point does he indicate that he received orders to carry out the killings.

However, Colindres does indicate that he received a tip from "a few police," also at the airport, who he claims had detained them on some unspecified prior date. Colindres may or may not have been telling the truth; whichever the case, his allegations point up important unanswered questions on how and why the crime was initiated. Among these questions:

-- Were there other security force personnel at the airport who knew the churchwomen or knew of their alleged subversive political involvement?

-- If there were such personnel did they pass on information about the women to Colindres?

-- What, if any, action did they suggest be taken against the Americans?

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-- How did the role of these other security force personnel, if they existed, mesh with that of guardsman Perez Nieto who admits to notifying Colindres of the churchwomen's activities at the airport?

Whatever the responses to these questions it is highly unlikely that they will alter a fundamental fact of this case: that the decision to kill the American churchwomen was made by Colindres and by no one else.

D. Coverup

If Colindres is to be believed, there are clear indications of an organized cover up of the crime beginning soon after it was committed. The sub-sergeant admits to telling three people about his responsibility for the crime, his immediate superior Sgt. Martinez, the in-house investigating officer, Major Zepeda, and the source. The admission which indicates a cover up is, of course, that to Major Zepeda. Colindres states that in December, the same month as the murders, he informed Zepeda of what he had done. The major reportedly told Colindres that he and the others involved could expect transfers but not immediately in order to avoid generating suspicions. In addition, Zepeda took declarations from at least some of those involved which indicated that they knew nothing of the crime. Zepeda included these in his January report knowing that they were false. Colindres also states that the major reappeared on the scene in April (the day before the recording was made) and ordered that rifles belonging to some of those involved be exchanged for others in order, says Colindres quoting Zepeda, to prevent any problems for them. Thus, if Colindres is truthful, within the National Guard there was a concerted effort from very early on to block the investigation into the murder of the Americans. Direction of that effort appears to have reached at least the level of Major Zepeda.

COMMENT: A recent second effort to improve the quality of the subject tape recording has ended in failure. We have, thus, exhausted the possibilities of technical improvement which would allow us to understand the unintelligible portions of the tape. The only option left open to us if we are to understand the entire conversation is to locate the source and depend on his memory for an explanation.

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What is the point of going through the effort and expense of reestablishing contact with the source if all that will come of it is an understanding of a tape which is not usable in the prosecution of the case? Are the risks which would be run in such an operation worth the expected result?

My view is that it is clearly very important for us to understand this tape in its entirety. The principal point is to fill in those incomplete passages which will help us in understanding the relationship between Colindres and those who he claims were aware of the Americans' presence at the airport. Should the existence of this recording--or, worse, its contents--become public knowledge, we must be able to explain that relationship if we are to successfully defend our longstanding--and correct--belief that Colindres was the decision-maker in the events of December 2, 1980. The current condition of the recording, with its numerous windows of unintelligibility, means that our understanding of it, and thus our explanation of it in the event one is required, is unacceptably weak.

Every effort should be made to see that this recording remains secret. However, every effort should also be made to see that we are prepared in the event that the effort to ensure secrecy fails.

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