

Backyard terrorism

The US has been training terrorists at a camp in Georgia for years - and it's still at it

“If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents,” George Bush announced on the day he began bombing Afghanistan, “they have become outlaws and murderers themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril.” I’m glad he said “any government”, as there’s one which, though it has yet to be identified as a sponsor of terrorism, requires his urgent attention.

For the past 55 years it has been running a terrorist training camp, whose victims massively outnumber the people killed by the attack on New York, the embassy bombings and the other atrocities laid, rightly or wrongly, at al-Qaida’s door. The camp is called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, or Whisc. It is based in Fort Benning, Georgia, and it is funded by Mr Bush’s government.

Until January this year, Whisc was called the “School of the Americas”, or SOA. Since 1946, SOA has trained more than 60,000 Latin American soldiers and policemen. Among its graduates are many of the continent’s most notorious torturers, mass murderers, dictators and state terrorists. As hundreds of pages of documentation compiled by the pressure group SOA Watch show, Latin America has been ripped apart by its alumni.

In June this year, Colonel Byron Lima Estrada, once a student at the school, was convicted in Guatemala City of murdering Bishop Juan Gerardi in 1998. Gerardi was killed because he had helped to write a report on the atrocities committed by Guatemala’s D-2, the military intelligence agency run by Lima Estrada with the help of two other SOA graduates. D-2 coordinated the “anti-insurgency” campaign which

obliterated 448 Mayan Indian villages, and murdered tens of thousands of their people. Forty per cent of the cabinet ministers who served the genocidal regimes of Lucas Garcia, Rios Montt and Mejia Victores studied at the School of the Americas.

In 1993, the United Nations truth commission on El Salvador named the army officers who had committed the worst atrocities of the civil war. Two-thirds of them had been trained at the School of the Americas. Among them were Roberto D'Aubuisson, the leader of El Salvador's death squads; the men who killed Archbishop Oscar Romero; and 19 of the 26 soldiers who murdered the Jesuit priests in 1989. In Chile, the school's graduates ran both Augusto Pinochet's secret police and his three principal concentration camps. One of them helped to murder Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffit in Washington DC in 1976.

Argentina's dictators Roberto Viola and Leopoldo Galtieri, Panama's Manuel Noriega and Omar Torrijos, Peru's Juan Velasco Alvarado and Ecuador's Guillermo Rodriguez all benefited from the school's instruction. So did the leader of the Grupo Colina death squad in Fujimori's Peru; four of the five officers who ran the infamous Battalion 3-16 in Honduras (which controlled the death squads there in the 1980s) and the commander responsible for the 1994 Ocosingo massacre in Mexico.

All this, the school's defenders insist, is ancient history. But SOA graduates are also involved in the dirty war now being waged, with US support, in Colombia. In 1999 the US State Department's report on human rights named two SOA graduates as the murderers of the peace commissioner, Alex Lopera. Last year, Human Rights Watch revealed that seven former pupils are running paramilitary groups there and have commissioned kidnappings, disappearances, murders and massacres. In February this year an SOA graduate in Colombia was convicted of complicity in the torture and killing of 30 peasants by paramilitaries. The school is now drawing more of its students from Colombia than from any other country.

The FBI defines terrorism as "violent acts... intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a government, or affect the conduct of a government", which is a precise description of the activities of SOA's graduates. But how can we be sure that their alma mater has had any part in this? Well, in 1996, the US government was forced to release seven of the school's training manuals. Among other top tips for terrorists, they recommended blackmail, torture, execution and the arrest of witnesses' relatives.

Last year, partly as a result of the campaign run by SOA Watch, several US congressmen tried to shut the school down. They were defeated by 10 votes. Instead, the House of Representatives voted to close it and then immediately reopen it under a different name. So, just as Windscale turned into Sellafield in the hope of parrying

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public memory, the School of the Americas washed its hands of the past by renaming itself Whisc. As the school's Colonel Mark Morgan informed the Department of Defense just before the vote in Congress: "Some of your bosses have told us that they can't support anything with the name 'School of the Americas' on it. Our proposal addresses this concern. It changes the name." Paul Coverdell, the Georgia senator who had fought to save the school, told the papers that the changes were "basically cosmetic".

But visit Whisc's website and you'll see that the School of the Americas has been all but excised from the record. Even the page marked "History" fails to mention it. Whisc's courses, it tells us, "cover a broad spectrum of relevant areas, such as operational planning for peace operations; disaster relief; civil-military operations; tactical planning and execution of counter drug operations".

Several pages describe its human rights initiatives. But, though they account for almost the entire training programme, combat and commando techniques, counter-insurgency and interrogation aren't mentioned. Nor is the fact that Whisc's "peace" and "human rights" options were also offered by SOA in the hope of appeasing Congress and preserving its budget: but hardly any of the students chose to take them.

We can't expect this terrorist training camp to reform itself: after all, it refuses even to acknowledge that it has a past, let alone to learn from it. So, given that the evidence linking the school to continuing atrocities in Latin America is rather stronger than the evidence linking the al-Qaida training camps to the attack on New York, what should we do about the "evil-doers" in Fort Benning, Georgia?

Well, we could urge our governments to apply full diplomatic pressure, and to seek the extradition of the school's commanders for trial on charges of complicity in crimes against humanity. Alternatively, we could demand that our governments attack the United States, bombing its military installations, cities and airports in the hope of overthrowing its unelected government and replacing it with a new administration overseen by the UN. In case this proposal proves unpopular with the American people, we could win their hearts and minds by dropping naan bread and dried curry in plastic bags stamped with the Afghan flag.

You object that this prescription is ridiculous, and I agree. But try as I might, I cannot see the moral difference between this course of action and the war now being waged in Afghanistan. #