



## Targeting the Assassins School of the Americas faces its toughest test

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AP/wide worldIt took five attempts over six years, but on July 29 congressional opponents of the Army School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, won a House of Representatives vote of 230-197 to cut funding to the institution, known in Latin America as the School of the Assassins.

Initially established in Panama in 1946 with the mission of combating communism in Latin America, the School of the Americas (SOA) is notorious in South America, Central America and the Caribbean for turning out such violent luminaries as Salvadoran death-squad organizer Roberto D'Aubuisson and Argentine dictator Leopoldo Galtieri, involved in the "disappearance" and murder of 30,000 civilians in the "dirty war" during the 1970s.

The successful measure, sponsored by Congressman Joe Moakley (D-Mass.), would cut an estimated \$2 million from the school's estimated \$3.6 million training budget, and will ultimately be approved or shot down in the next few weeks during the House-Senate discussion and vote on the Foreign Operations bill.

The recent House vote is a culmination of efforts to close the SOA, efforts begun in the early 1990s after a United Nations Truth Commission report on El Salvador revealed that 19 of 26 military men involved in planning the murder of six Jesuits in 1989 were SOA graduates. A 1993 bill amendment to close the school, sponsored by Congressman Joe Kennedy (D-Mass.), was defeated, as were others in 1994, 1997 and 1998, but grassroots and congressional opposition mounted and spiked sharply in 1996 after the *Washington Post* reported that SOA training manuals used from 1982 to 1991 advocated the use of terror, truth serum, kidnappings and executions to recruit informants.

An investigation by the Office of the Secretary of Defense had concluded that the inclusion of the gruesome methods was due to "bureaucratic oversight," but also noted that the manual was distributed during the 1980s to thousands of military officers in 11 Latin American countries, including those where the U.S. government was deeply enmeshed in counterinsurgency — Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Panama.



Historical reviews of the SOA's record annoy the school's defenders, who regard the most notorious graduates as bad apples from past decades.

"At what point does what has been occurring now come into determining what happens to the school?" asks Selby McCash, a spokesman for Congressman Sanford Bishop, an SOA proponent whose district includes the school. McCash points out that the SOA has produced almost 60,000 graduates — even if, as SOA opponents say, hundreds or thousands have been involved in atrocities, it's "still a small percentage" of SOA alumni. "If the school is going to be closed because some graduates are involved in right-wing activities, it should never have been in existence."

Ambler Moss, a former U.S. ambassador to Panama and a member of the SOA Board of Visitors, scoffs in an opinion piece posted on the school's Web site that attacking the SOA because of a percentage of murderous graduates is "like vilifying Harvard because [graduate] Ted Kaczynski went on to become the Unabomber."

It's an argument that Heather Dean, legislative and research coordinator for the Washington office of SOA Watch, calls "silly." Harvard doesn't teach bomb-making and hasn't produced thousands of Kaczynskis, while the SOA teaches psychological operations and counterinsurgency, she says, "and then acts surprised when human-rights abuses occur.

"SOA graduates have held top positions — being trained in the U.S. by the School of the Americas lends a legitimacy that helps these officers move up in the ranks," says Dean, pointing to a pattern that has found SOA graduates in the top ranks of some extremely brutal regimes — school alumni made up the majority of top-level Guatemalan military during the 1980s, a regime whose campaign against indigenous insurgents led to an estimated 100,000 deaths. Moakley's bill also lists a litany of abuses committed by SOA graduates, gleaned, says a spokeswoman for his office, from information compiled by the Congressional Research Service and the U.N. Committee on Refugees.

Dean also notes that the number of SOA graduates linked to human-rights abuses is actually quite high, given the difficulty of investigating human-rights abuses in countries where the military keeps a tight grip on civic affairs.

McCash calls the connection between SOA graduates and human-rights abuses "pure propaganda."

Critics, he says, "are pointing out some graduates that had committed atrocities — I haven't seen a direct link between the school and those incidents," and adds that the SOA is a military school and naturally offers a military-type curriculum, but now also teaches courses in human rights.

Karin Walser, of Moakley's office, doesn't buy it. "Mr. Moakley has yet to see significant reform on the part of the SOA — the school has caused far too much pain to be kept open," she says.

The school's role in training Latin American military officers has not diminished in the 1990s — the SOA now trains some 600 students per year, offering 55 courses, from innocuous helicopter-repair classes to the more obviously military — and disquieting — combat training, and psychological and intelligence operations. The size of the school's budget, like much about the

SOA, is subject to debate. SOA spokesman Nicolas Britto insists that it is no more than \$4.5 million per year; congressional opponents say that only covers the training, and that salaries and other infrastructure costs mount up to around \$19 million. The exact figure is unclear because the information has been gleaned from a variety of sources.

Now SOA opponents are concerned again — about the record of SOA graduates from Colombia, where there is a growing U.S. presence that officials claim is related to a war on drugs. Critics worry about U.S. intervention against the guerrilla movement there.

Half of the 247 Colombian army officers cited for human-rights abuses by an international consortium of rights organizations are SOA alumni.

There's a long way to go before those who would like to see the SOA closed down get their way. Walser says that the House vote sends a strong message to the Senate, so the September vote on the Foreign Operations bill could cut training funds. That doesn't mean, though, that the Pentagon couldn't find the money elsewhere. And the training money is only a fraction of the SOA's total budget. But Walser sees the recent vote as redefining the debate.