

Heart of darkness

Salvador
by Joan Didion
Lester & Orpen Denny, \$14.95

Reviewed by GEORGE LOVELL

"IN THIS VAST brutalist space that was the cathedral, the unlit altar seemed to offer a single ineluctable message; at this time and in this place the light of the world could be construed as out, off, extinguished."

Depiction of the lived experience, in art and scholarship, is manifest in a variety of ways, but few writers are able to render an approximation of the lived experience that can stand, on equal footing, as both an artistic and scholarly contribution of outstanding merit. Joan Didion's *Salvador* is one such creation, and joins Jacobo Timerman's *Prisoner Without A Name, Cell Without A Number* as being among the most concise and articulate expressions of the agony, the horror, and the sorrow of contemporary Latin America.

Salvador, which gathers three long articles first published late last year in *The New York Review of Books*, is not Didion's first attempt to grapple with the tortured realities of 20th-century Central America. She first ventured into "this particular heart of darkness" in 1977 with a novel entitled *A Book of Common Prayer*. Anyone familiar with the landscape and history of Central America will recognize many parallel features in the fictionalized El Salvador Didion then called Boca Grande. If a central theme of *Common Prayer* is innocence abroad, the focus in *Salvador* may be said to be barbarism at home.

Although the events, circumstances, and historical roots of the civil war currently being waged in El Salvador are admirably synthesized, the intent of the book (which is only a little over 100 pages in length) is clearly not so much to impart facts but to provide some sense of the fear and terror that Didion claims are "the given of the place."

To achieve this end, the author employs a clinical, finely honest, staccato prose which has a devastating emotional impact. She writes:

"The dead and pieces of the dead turn up in El Salvador everywhere, every day, as taken for granted as in a nightmare, or a horror movie. Vultures of course suggest the presence of a body. A knot of children on the street suggests the presence of a body. Bodies turn up in the brush of vacant lots, in the garbage thrown down ravines in the richest districts, in public rest rooms, in bus stations. Some are dropped in Lake Ilopango, a few miles east of the city [San Salvador], and wash up near the lake-side cottages and clubs fre-



A woman in El Salvador mourns: 40,000 have died in fighting since October, 1979

quented by what remains in San Salvador of the sporting bourgeoisie."

Sometimes her words create a sickening numbness:

"There is a special kind of practical information that the visitor to El Salvador acquires immediately, the way visitors to other places acquire information about the currency rates, the hours for the museums. In El Salvador one learns that vultures first go for the soft tissue, for the eyes, the exposed genitalia, the open mouth. One learns that an open mouth can be used to make a specific point, can be stuffed with something emblematic; stuffed, say, with a penis, or, if the point has to do with land title, stuffed with some of the dirt in question."

Throughout her narrative Didion sustains this kind of bleak, chilling, crushing prose. One finishes reading with the feeling of having survived what Jean Paul Sartre would have referred to as "a dark night of the soul," a night that surely cannot be darkened further.

Alas, no. The barbarism which Didion chronicles is a barbarism she and other citizens of the United States consider to be fuelled by the support the Reagan Administration currently gives the government of El Salvador. Over the past few years, Washington has poured approxi-

mately \$1 billion into El Salvador in the form of economic and military assistance designed to maintain the status quo.

Such a massive infusion of aid has done little to counter the determination by which popular revolutionary forces in El Salvador fight to create a just society in which a sense of decency will replace the present gross violation of human rights. (An estimated 40,000 Salvadoreans, the majority of them civilian casualties, have died in the conflict since October, 1979).

The Reagan Administration myopically insists on interpreting the revolt against the status quo in El Salvador, as elsewhere in Central America, not as a natural reaction to centuries of injustice and exploitation but as part of a mythical communist conspiracy perceived as threatening the national security of the United States.

President Reagan last month sought congressional approval for an additional \$110 million in military aid to El Salvador. Such actions not only ensure but advance appalling human suffering of the kind Joan Didion's *Salvador* poignantly documents. The slaughter, sadly, is not yet over. And the thought of remorse not yet begun. □

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La violencia

Our Man Is Inside:
Outmaneuvering the Terrorists
by Diego and Nancy Asencio
Little, Brown, \$22.95

Reviewed by JOHN WALKER

POLITICAL TERRORISM is not a problem that has plagued us greatly in Canada. Apart from the FLQ activities of the late 1960s culminating in the Cross kidnapping and the murder of Pierre Laporte in 1970, we had little first-hand experience of a phenomenon that has been endemic in Latin America for the past three decades.

It is ironically appropriate that Diego Asencio's adventures in *Our Man Is Inside* should take place in Columbia, since that country's strange mixture of barbarism, banditry and civil war, rooted in the 19th century but more recently manifest in the events of 1948 (assassination of the Liberal firebrand Gaitán) should have given rise to a new phase, and a new phrase, in Latin America, *La Violencia*, which describes that nation's particular brand of political disorder.

As a continental phenomenon, urban guerrilla warfare and political terrorism were rampant throughout the 1960s and 1970s in Uruguay (Tupamaros), Argentina (Montoneros, amongst many), and reached their peak with the return of Perón (1973) and the eventual overthrow of Peronism (1976), culminating in the savage war of reprisal between the brutal military dictatorship (and its paramilitary arm) and the extremist factions of a decadent Peronista movement, now in disarray.

The danger of ongoing political terrorism is that it tends to become the norm, a way of life that one learns to live with, even accept, as I found to my horror in Argentina a few years ago. Just another shoot-out, we heard ourselves say, disbelievingly. When one walks into one of these shoot-outs and becomes caught in the cross-fire, the grim reality of naked terrorism and its concomitant reprisals intrudes on one's private life with frightening immediacy.

Terrorism does have a human face, and is more than mere ideology, as I came to learn, and as the American ambassador, Diego Asencio, demonstrates in this story. I remember wryly the American ambassador in his bullet-proofed, iron-railed, guard-secured embassy in Buenos Aires... and the quiet, soft-spoken, unassuming, polo-necked Canadian ambassador driving his own modest little Volkswagen to pay us a Sunday visit. A difference that tells us much not only about the two North American neighbors, but about their role and their impact in Latin America.

Our Man Is Inside is the story of another American ambassador, this time in Columbia, held captive with