

SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS WATCH

What is the School of the Americas Watch?

The School of the Americas Watch is a nonviolent advocacy organization, inspired by the life of the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero who in the midst of El Salvador's brutal civil war said, "We who have a voice must speak for the voiceless." In 1993, Roy Bourgeois and two companions, posing as military officers, crossed into the Fort Benning military base in Georgia, climbed a tree near the barracks housing Salvadoran soldiers who were being trained there at the School of the Americas, and read the final homily of Archbishop Romero through megaphones. They were arrested, and Bourgeois was sentenced to 18 months in prison for trespassing on federal property.



This was the origin of the School of the Americas Watch.

The history of the School of the Americas

The School of the Americas was established in Panama in 1946. In 1984 under the terms of the Panama Canal treaty, the school was closed and was relocated to Fort Benning, Georgia. The school's primary function was said to be the training of Latin American military officers.

Initially, this institution was marketed as a place where Latin American military might learn the proper role of the military in a democracy. It was not advertised that torture techniques were also taught within the curriculum. Whatever its alleged intention, SOA became well-known for graduating future dictators, killers and torturers.

Until 2000, the school was called the U.S. Army School of the Americas. Rather than responding to mounting nonviolent protests to close the school, the U.S. Congress simply renamed it the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). A minimum of eight hours of human rights and the principle of civilian control of the military were added to the curriculum. Whatever the name Congress prefers, throughout Latin America, it remains known as "The School of Assassins."

"Since 1946, the SOA has trained over 64,000 Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques, sniper training, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics. These graduates have consistently used their skills to wage a war against their own people. Among those targeted by SOA graduates are educators, union organizers, religious workers, student leaders, and others who work for the rights of the poor. Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured, raped, assassinated, 'disappeared,' massacred, and forced into exile by those trained at the School of Assassins." (SOA Watch Website: <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/what-is-the-soawhinsec>)

Following the November 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the Central American University in El Salvador, which involved graduates of the School of the Americas, SOA Watch organized an annual protest to be held on the anniversary of the massacre. The event has been held at the gates of Fort Benning every year since then.

Fact Sheet: SOA Watch

People from all walks of life come from across the nation and around the globe to participate in the vigil remembering the victims of the graduates of the School of the Americas, as well as others who survived human rights violations. Traditionally, the vigil concludes with a memorial service and a mock funeral procession. Using the *Presente! Litany*, people solemnly march towards the military base. Those who choose to engage in civil resistance enter the base and are arrested for trespassing on federal property.

To date, U.S. military officials remain firm in their conviction that even if graduates commit war crimes after they return to their home country, the school should not be held accountable for their actions.

The case for closing the SOA/WHINSEC

The SOA/WHINSEC trains military personnel and civilians from Latin American countries in subjects such as counter-insurgency, military intelligence and counter-narcotics operations. Under Department of Defense jurisdiction, this school is funded by U.S. taxpayers, the training is conducted in Spanish, and most the classes are taught by Latin American instructors. According to SOA/WHINSEC, more than 65,000 members of Latin American militaries have attended the SOA since its inception in 1946.

SOA/WHINSEC has a notorious history, and its continued existence has a negative impact on U.S. foreign policy. After numerous revelations of questionable tactics and associations, such as the Pentagon's public disclosure of torture manuals being used at the school and hundreds of human rights abusers participating in its programs, the school was renamed. The renaming included a public relations campaign to justify the continuation of its programs. No substantial changes have been made since Congress called for its closure in 2000, and no independent investigation has taken place.



Attempts to silence the voices of those committed to closing the SOA/WHINSEC

- After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the military ended direct access to the base by erecting a security fence at the main gate. Resisters, intent on engaging in civil resistance, then attempted to go over, under or around the fence and were arrested. Since then, several more fences have been erected and more protesters have been arrested. Many of the resisters have been sentenced to prison for their actions.
- In 2002, the city of Columbus, Ga., began requiring all attending the event to submit to a metal detector search.
- In 2004, after a drawn-out legal battle, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled unanimously that such a forced search was unconstitutional.
- The U.S. Army then added a second fence topped with razor wire and erected a third fence in 2005. Is it ironic that this institution fears peaceful protesters but opens its doors to known human rights violators?



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Reasons to close SOA/ WHINSEC:

SOA/WHINSEC is costly - The school costs U.S. taxpayers at least \$18 million a year. At this time of grave fiscal concern, funding the SOA/WHINSEC diverts much-needed funds from other programs such as job-creation, education, and humanitarian assistance.

SOA/WHINSEC lacks oversight and accountability – Previously, 58 years of graduate and instructor information was provided to human rights organizations through Freedom of Information Act requests and informal requests. This information was limited to name, rank, country of origin, and dates and classes attended. No private information was provided. Since 2004, subsequent to the school's renaming and the revelation that known human rights abusers continued to attend WHINSEC classes (based on research from the FOIA disclosures), all requests for information have been denied. SOA/WHINSEC refuses to implement a tracking mechanism of its graduates and prevents tracking from independent research by human rights groups.

SOA/WHINSEC is immoral – The school's graduates are responsible for the assassinations and torture of tens of thousands of people in Latin America. Its alumni include dictators such as Manuel Noriega of Panama and Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala. Alumni have participated in mass murder, including the 1981 El Mozote massacre of 900 civilians in El Salvador; the 2005 San Jose de Apartado massacre in Colombia; the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and the 1989 massacre of 14-year-old Celina Ramos, her mother, Elba Ramos, and six Jesuit priests in El Salvador. Alumni also have been involved in hundreds of incidents of torture and hundreds of other human rights abuses. Recent graduates and instructors continue to be implicated in serious crimes, and independent research has confirmed that known human rights abusers have attended the school.



SOA/WHINSEC damages U.S. credibility – Latin America is walking away from SOA/WHINSEC and the United States. Uruguay, Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua have all made public announcements they will no longer send soldiers to the school. In visits with presidents and defense ministers, they specifically cited the SOA/WHINSEC as sending a negative human rights message to Latin America and they no longer wished to associate with the U.S. military training program.

SOA/WHINSEC is opposed by major U.S.-based organizations – Numerous organizations actively oppose the school, have passed resolutions calling for its closure, and continue to lobby Congress to defund, investigate, and close the school. This includes the Lutheran Church, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, Unitarian Universalist Church, United Auto Workers (UAW), the AFL-CIO, AFSCME, the United Steelworkers, the NAACP, the United Electrical Workers and hundreds of human rights organizations.

SOA/WHINSEC is unnecessary – The United States operates more than 210 facilities that train foreign soldiers. In addition, 60 percent of all training of foreign soldiers is done by deployed U.S. Special Forces. Closing the school will not affect U.S. military training. As long as the SOA/WHINSEC remains open, countries will view our relations with them as not based on humanitarian or development assistance, but linked to an institution that subverts human rights.

It's time for a change

Source: School of the Americas Watch (www.soaw.org) permission granted.

Fact Sheet: SOA Watch

Prayer:

O God, we need your wisdom and love.

O God, you are the source of all help and hope, of all wisdom and love. Accept these, our prayers.

For the hundreds of thousands of people all over Latin America who have been tortured, raped, assassinated, disappeared, massacred, or forced into refuge by those trained at the School of the Americas. We cry...

O God, you are the source of all help and hope, of all wisdom and love. Accept these, our prayers.

For conversion of heart and commitment to actions that will bring about the closing of the U.S. Army School of the Americas. We cry...

For the memory our sisters and brothers who first lived on these lands. We pray for an end to the SOA violence and arrogance that continues to ravage indigenous peoples. We cry...

O God, you are the source of all help and hope, of all wisdom and love. Accept these, our prayers.

For ways of working together to create a world where people of all religions, races, ethnicities, genders, abilities, classes, and beliefs will live together free from fear and oppression. We cry...

Prayer adapted by Kathleen Coll, SSJ, from that written by Patricia Joseph Corkery, RSM.



Resources:

SOA Manuals: <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/soa-manuals?layout=default>

SOA Courses: <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/history/3696-soa-courses>

Names of the Victims: <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/victims-and-survivors?layout=default>

Reports Citing the SOA/WHINSEC: <http://www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/history/reports-citing>

On the Line documentary that follows the people behind one of the largest nonviolent movements in America today: the movement to close the School of the Americas/WHINSEC. In a world where politics, passion, and Constitutional rights collide, protesters discuss their activism, the dark side of U.S. foreign policy, and the challenges of protesting since Sept. 11, 2001. https://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/727/t/10867/shop/item.jsp?storefront_KEY=777&t=&store_item_KEY=2919

SOA and SOA Watch Timeline: <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/653>