

Advising War: Limited Intervention in Conflict

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All of this splendid [counterinsurgency] effort, its organization, its training, its equipment, are working towards having what it takes to win at the point of decision on the insurgent battlefield. It boils down to a pretty lonely spot. At some place, on the insurgent battlefield, it comes to a unit of an allied military force, with an American military advisor, right up against the enemy. That American had better know his stuff. One day, that American might be you.

You'll be key man, on the spot.

- Brigadier General E.G. Lansdale, USAF, 1962.²

Military advisors are conducting US foreign policy at the very tip of the spear.

- US military advisor to El Salvador.³

Abstract

Great powers expend significant blood and treasure intervening in conflict abroad. Sometimes they intervene directly with ground combat troops, but more often rely on a local proxy to fight in exchange for support. In order to gain from proxy war, great powers must exercise some degree of control over their proxies despite the problems of adverse selection and moral hazard. Existing literature argues that interveners address these problems through material incentives for the proxy. I argue that intervening states frequently rely on a different, overlooked tool to manage proxies: sending military advisors to interact face-to-face with their militaries. Military advisors are usually thought of as mere technical experts that build military capacity, but they do much more. I argue that interveners send advisors to *gather information* about a proxy military that cannot be collected without people on the ground. Furthermore, drawing on literature from sociology, I argue that over time advisors can leverage personal relationships with their counterparts to *influence* them, shaping their counterparts' approach to political issues such as human rights and civil-military relations. The paper evaluates the theory via a case study of US intervention in El Salvador under the Carter and Reagan administrations. Drawing on archival evidence and a unique set of interviews with military advisors, the case study shows that foreign policy decisionmakers considered the information gathering and influencing roles of advisors when evaluating intervention options and advisors knew their role. It also illustrates some of the circumstances that determine when advisors are successful at these tasks. More broadly, the paper shows that great power can influence partners or allies not only through carrots or sticks but through personal relationships on the ground.

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² Lansdale, Edward G., "The Insurgent Battlefield," 1962 May 25. Henry A. Kissinger Papers, Part II (MS 1981). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/digcoll/560110>

³ Interview with US advisor in El Salvador (Interviewee 15).

1. Intro

Great powers frequently send military advisors to assist local partners during civil war. According to data on intervention in civil wars,⁴ China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States -- all powerful states accounting for around 68 percent of interventions in civil wars between 1949 and 2000 -- send advisors in around half of their interventions. Sending military advisors, however, presents a puzzle. It leaves the intervening state half-in and half-out; advisors do not alter the balance of forces in the conflict, yet their lives are often on the line. Military advisors expose the intervener to escalation pressures if they are killed or the conflict deteriorates.

Why do states send military advisors to intervene in conflict? What do military advisors do? The existing literature has focused on military advisors as a means to remedy serious problems of low military capacity and the conditions when advisors succeed or fail at this task. It argues that advisors can assist local militaries with “technical, training, planning, and operational advice” to prevent the intervener from having to commit its own combat troops, which are costly and can lead to escalation.⁵ The goal of sending military advisors, as described in the literature, is to make the local partner’s military competent enough that it can defeat its opponent on the battlefield or force it toward a political settlement.

The military capacity building role of advisors is important and there is a reason why the existing literature has focused on it. I argue, however, that advisors have another, overlooked political role. This role should not be overlooked because it is intertwined with the advisor’s role as capacity builders – there is not one without the other. As capacity builders, advisors gain access to the military of the local partner required to play a political role. In turn, the political role of military advisors helps powerful states address a key problem in fighting war with local partners: disagreement over important military and political issues.

⁴ Patrick M. Regan, “Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 55–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002702046001004>.

⁵ Brian P. O’Lavin, “War on the Cheap: U.S. Military Advisors in Greece, Korea, The Philippines, and Vietnam:” (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, December 1, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.21236/AD1009181>.

Recent scholarship outlines how the local partner, or proxy, often disagrees with the intervener on vital issues that affect the conflict.⁶ These issues include political, economic, and military reform and military strategy; the use of military and economic aid; the target of the intervention; and human rights.⁷ Reaching a workable compromise between intervener and proxy is made difficult by two problems from principal-agent theory: moral hazard and adverse selection. Moral hazard results when an agent knows more about its behavior than the principal does, which makes it difficult for the principal to condition rewards and punishments on the agent's behavior. Adverse selection results from the constraints that great powers face when choosing an intervention. They will work with far-from-ideal proxies when sending in combat troops is off the table because of political opposition, legal constraints, high risk of escalation, or lack of plausible deniability.⁸ When proxies understand these constraints, they have an incentive to bargain hard.

In order to gain from proxy war, great powers must exercise some degree of control over their proxies despite the problems of adverse selection and moral hazard. Recent scholarship adopts a principal-agent framework to explain how powerful states can incentivize local partners by consistently rewarding them with material incentives for good behavior and punishing them for bad behavior.⁹ I argue that interveners frequently rely on another, overlooked tool to manage the local proxy: sending military advisors to monitor it and transform the institutions and behavior of its military. By performing this political role alongside their capacity building role, advisors help ensure that the increase in capacity they provide serves the intervener's goals. Otherwise, there is little point in

⁶ Vladimir Rauta, "Framers, Founders, and Reformers: Three Generations of Proxy War Research," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 113–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2020.1800240>.

⁷ Barbara Elias, "The Big Problem of Small Allies: New Data and Theory on Defiant Local Counterinsurgency Partners in Afghanistan and Iraq," *Security Studies* 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 233–62, <https://doi.org/10/ggqg4m>. Stephen Biddle, "Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency," *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (September 21, 2017): 126–38, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00464; Andrew Boutton, "US Foreign Aid, Interstate Rivalry, and Incentives for Counterterrorism Cooperation," *Journal of Peace Research*, September 8, 2014, 0022343314543144, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343314543144>. Daniel L. Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 2 (October 1, 2006): 79–115, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.2.79>.

⁸ Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012). Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare, War and Conflict in the Modern World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013). Daniel Byman, "Why States Are Turning to Proxy War," Text, *The National Interest*, August 26, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-states-are-turning-proxy-war-29677>. Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* (Georgetown University Press, 2019).

⁹ Eli Berman and David A. Lake, *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Cornell University Press, 2019); Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316756805>.

building capacity. Military advisors thus complement other forms of strategic incentives used by interveners to manage proxies.

I outline the roles of military advisors as a tool of information gathering to address the intervener's lack of information about the proxy and the operational environment, and as a tool of influencing to address differing goals between the intervener and proxy. Military advisors gain *access* to the local military through their role as capacity-builders. The local military is willing to accept advisors because they increase military effectiveness.¹⁰ After gaining access, military advisors build personal relationships with their local counterparts, making them a powerful source of information about their counterparts' behavior and attitudes which they then pass up their chain of command. Thus, military advisors provide information needed to monitor the local military, mitigating the moral hazard problem. But they also provide a richer array of information through their embeddedness in the proxy military, such as information about conditions on the ground. After working with their local counterparts for an extended period of time, advisors gain their trust. This allows advisors to *influence* their counterparts through a myriad of informal and personal interactions taking place over a meal, a drink, or in the thick of battle. Over time, the preferences and behavior of the local military can begin to shift, bringing the intervener and proxy closer together.

I provide three main contributions to the literature on military advising and intervention. First, I show that military advisors can play a role that is deeply political, using their access to the proxy military to reveal information and influence their counterparts' approach to politics, military strategy, and the conduct of war. I explore in great detail this overlooked political role of advisors and the mechanisms by which it works. My research shows how great powers can influence a proxy not only through carrots or sticks, but through personal relationships on the ground.

Second, I show that there is great variation in what advisors are tasked, permitted, and required by the intervening state to do. In particular, there are striking differences in the extent of involvement, the level at which advisors work, local embeddedness, and the size of the advising force. This variation, in turn, determines how effective advisors will be at both information gathering and influencing. I

¹⁰ In Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, US advisors were necessary for local counterparts to gain access to US air power and intelligence, which greatly enhanced their capabilities. Interview with US advisor in Iraq (Interviewee 9).

provide some suggestive results about when military advisors can actually deliver on the tasks that interveners set for them.

Finally, in addition to theoretical contributions, my work provides untapped empirical evidence to debates on the efficacy of advisors. I do that using a unique set of interviews with 28 US military advisors who served in conflicts from Vietnam to Afghanistan (1970-2018) and 1 civilian policymaker (**Appendix**), and archival documents on military advisors during US intervention in El Salvador collected from the Reagan and Carter Presidential Libraries and the National Security Archive. My work evaluates both policymaker intentions and what advisors experience on the ground. Knowing how advisors perceive their role is crucial to understanding their role and whether it corresponds with the reasons why states send military advisors in the first place.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I define military advisors and outline what we know about them from the existing literature. Next, I theorize the roles of advisors as tools of information gathering and influencing, as well as discuss limitations to both roles. I then discuss political barriers to sending military advisors, showing why interveners will sometimes choose not to send them. In the next section, I apply the theory to the case of US intervention in El Salvador under the Carter and Reagan administrations. The final section concludes.

2. The Political Role of Military Advisors

Great powers “try to organize, shape, and direct armed forces in foreign countries... to constitute armed force for local, regional, and global projects of order-making.”¹¹ To shape other militaries, great powers frequently rely on military-to-military relations: sending members of their military to work with other militaries. In peacetime, military advisors are part of the toolbox of defense diplomacy, such as military aid, military training, and providing arms or entering military alliances.¹² The roles of

¹¹ Tarak Barkawi, “‘Defence Diplomacy’ in North-South Relations,” *International Journal* 66, no. 3 (2011): 597–612.

¹² Patricia L. Sullivan, Brock F. Tessman, and Xiaojun Li, “US Military Aid and Recipient State Cooperation,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 275–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00138.x>; Carla Martinez Machain, “Exporting Influence: U.S. Military Training as Soft Power,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, September 16, 2020, 0022002720957713, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720957713>; Keren Yarhi-Milo, Alexander Lanoszka, and Zack Cooper, “To Arm or to Ally? The Patron’s Dilemma and the Strategic Logic of Arms Transfers and Alliances,” *International Security* 41, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 90–139, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00250; Donald Stoker, *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization, 1815–2007* (Routledge, 2007).

advisors during peacetime include modernizing another military, nation building, forging closer economic ties with another state, or building ideological ties.¹³ I focus instead on the use of military advisors by great powers to intervene in conflict, either to support an existing order by providing aid to a government engaged in counterinsurgency or to undermine an order by supporting the rebels. I focus on great powers because they have global interests that lead them to frequently intervene in conflict abroad, flexibility to choose among a menu of options for intervention, and are more powerful than the armed actors that they advise.¹⁴

Military advisors are military personnel sent to work with the military of a state or armed group, sometimes as individuals or as part of a larger advising mission by the sending state.¹⁵ They can be sent overtly in uniform, covertly out of uniform, or, the sending state can publicly acknowledge them but intentionally limit publicity surrounding their deployment.¹⁶ Advisors are distinct from combat troops or special operations forces because they do not have an independent combat role. They may be permitted to accompany local units on extensive, in-field training when the local unit will run a significant risk of engaging with enemy forces, as well as accompany local forces into combat to direct and assist.¹⁷ But advisors cannot add to the combat capacity of the proxy unit except through the advice they provide. In many cases, advisors will be restricted from accompanying proxy forces into combat, be deployed only to “safe” areas of the country, and be given strict orders about self-preservation.

Existing literature conceptualizes the role of advisors in three ways: (1) as technocrats, who build military capacity using their expertise as professionals, (2) as intelligence gatherers, (3) and as warrior-

¹³ Stoker, *Military Advising and Assistance*.

¹⁴ Great powers also make up the majority of interventions with military advisors, as data from Regan (2002) shows. Smaller states do advising, too, but the reasons can be different. Australia, for example, frequently intervenes abroad when the United States does, but the motivation is to be a good alliance partner to the United States. Many states that send military advisors tend to be the neighbors of states involved in conflict and/or regional powers. They intervene either to support the government or to undermine it by supporting the rebels.

¹⁵ Stoker, *Military Advising and Assistance*.

¹⁶ The current US advisors in Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of full publicity about the intervention. Contemporary US deployments to Africa are an example of limited publicity, while US intervention in Laos was an example of covert intervention. Interveners can have both domestic political reasons to limit publicity as well as a desire to control perceptions in the host state. Harry H. Kendall, “Vietnamese Perceptions of the Soviet Presence,” *Asian Survey* 23, no. 9 (1983): 1052–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644106>.

¹⁷ Alice Hunt Friend, “The Accompany They Keep: What Niger Tells Us about Accompany Missions, Combat, and Operations Other than War,” *War on the Rocks*, May 11, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/the-accompany-they-keep-what-niger-tells-us-about-accompany-missions-combat-and-operations-other-than-war/>.

diplomats. The first model of military advisors argues that they build proxy military capacity so that the intervener's troops can stay out of or withdraw from a conflict.¹⁸ Advisors may also be sent to weak states to prevent conflict and influence it if it does develop.¹⁹ As capacity-builders, advisors transfer their knowledge as highly-skilled professionals to their less-skilled counterparts.²⁰ In this conceptualization of military advisors, they are focused solely on building military capacity and are thus distinct from other military actors engaged in defense diplomacy.²¹

In their roles as capacity builders, military advisors train, provide technical assistance, lead war planning, and build defense institutions. Training can encompass anything from basic training for new recruits to leadership development and tactical decision-making training for non-commissioned officers. When providing technical assistance, advisors teach the local military how to use new weapons systems;²² substitute for technical specialists when local forces lack the skills to coordinate with airpower or use advanced weapons systems; and provide “soft” skills or capability that a local military might not have. Advisors also assist proxies with war planning at the strategic and operational levels. Typically, advisors assigned at the operational level work directly with local commanders in the planning and execution of major operations, sitting in when commanders brief the brigade staff on the mission and participating in the after-action review of the mission once completed. At the strategic level, advisors can design military strategy and in “developing a plan for victory”, like British advisors did when advising the Sultanate of Oman about how to fight a counterinsurgency.²³ When deployed with a more extensive mandate, advisors can also build the proxy's defense institutions: the set of sub-organizations within the military, and the established practices they use, for managing human

¹⁸ O'Lavin, “War on the Cheap.” Similarly, Barkawi notes that enabling withdrawal of foreign troops is the prime motivation for military capacity building efforts during civil conflict.

¹⁹ Jan Bachmann, “Policing Africa: The US Military and Visions of Crafting ‘Good Order,’” *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 119–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614521267>.

²⁰ Brian Tyrone Crumley, “Attachés, MAAGs, and MACs,” in *A Companion to American Military History* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2009), 604–16, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444315066.ch39>.

²¹ See the following way that advisors are often depicted: “The traditional (and still valid) custom of sending military advisors—or financial military assistance—to foreign armies also does not reflect the post-Cold War imperative of a military dialogue for diplomatic purposes, where the sole objective is increasing military efficiency in a conflict or in preparing one.” Frédéric Charillon, Thierry Balzacq, and Frédéric Ramel, “Defense Diplomacy,” in *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, ed. Thierry Balzacq, Frédéric Charillon, and Frédéric Ramel, The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 270, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28786-3_19.

²² O'Lavin, “War on the Cheap.”

²³ Walter C. Ladwig III, “Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar Rebellion;” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 1 (2008), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592310801905793?journalCode=fswi20>.

resources, the relationship between military and political authorities, equipment procurement, logistics, strategy, and war planning.²⁴

As capacity-builders, advisors gain unparalleled *access* to the local military—especially when they are embedded with local forces. Embedded advisors are sent either alone or in small groups to work and live with their counterparts for a few months or years. In contrast, advisors that are not embedded rotate from unit to unit for short periods of training and advising and have far less consistent contact with their counterparts. Or, as was common during US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, combat units from the intervener and the local military might be *partnered* and participate in combat together but advisors would not be embedded. The level of access that military advisors have depends on where they work. Advisors usually work both at the strategic level with the local partner’s Ministry of Defense or top military leadership, and with operational units like a brigade or battalion, but for large advising missions, they may be embedded with tactical units down to the company level. When embedded at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, advisors have access to the most important people of a proxy military.

The second role of military advisors in the literature—gathering intelligence—follows directly from the access that advisors have to the proxy military. British military advisors sent to work with the Soviet general staff during the Second World War focused on intelligence gathering (mostly on the order of battle and German equipment), along with some intelligence sharing, coordination, and planning for resistance to a possible German occupation.²⁵ Similarly, John Waghelstein notes how he and other advisors received intelligence about a likely coup during an advising mission to the Dominican Republic. The American Embassy disregarded the intelligence and then was surprised when the coup happened roughly on the timeline the advisors predicted.²⁶ By placing their people on

²⁴ Alexandra Chinchilla and Paul Poast, “Defense Institution Building from Above? Lessons from the Baltic Experience,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 17, no. 3 (2018): 61–71, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.17.3.05>. On military effectiveness more broadly, see: Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator’s Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Alaric Searle, “Uneasy Intelligence Collaboration, Genuine Ill Will, with an Admixture of Ideology: The British Military Mission to the Soviet Union, 1941-1945,” in *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization, 1815–2007*, ed. Donald Stoker (Routledge, 2007).

²⁶ John D. Waghelstein, “Ruminations of a Woolly Mammoth, or Training and Advising in Counterinsurgency and Elsewhere during the Cold War,” in *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization, 1815–2007*, ed. Donald Stoker (Routledge, 2007).

the ground to collect critical information, interveners can monitor proxy behavior more broadly.²⁷ Biddle argues that collecting information is central to the role of certain kinds of advisors, such as special forces, who can offer “language skills, cultural awareness, and intelligence-gathering skills to serve as more-effective monitors of partner behavior.”²⁸

The third role of military advisors in the literature is the military advisor as warrior-diplomat. This literature focuses on military advisors as individuals who build relationships with their counterparts and frequently get involved in local politics. When we think of advisors, we often think of those with big personalities who played this warrior-diplomat role, like T.E. Lawrence and Edward Lansdale.²⁹ They were more akin to “kingmakers”³⁰ in their relationships with the proxy’s military-political leaders than to technocrats or passive gatherers of intelligence. But even a technocratic advisor, focused on building military capacity, must confront politics.³¹ This is true not only for advisors to the local military’s Ministry of Defense (the focus of Karlin’s analysis), but also for rank-and-file advisors on the ground with operational or tactical units. Advisors working alone with local counterparts to manage an insurgency or counterinsurgency face blurred lines between the political and the military.³² There is “no good way to be effective without becoming enmeshed in local politics.”³³ The melding of military and political concerns is particularly acute in the modern military, as advising transformed from a colonial project to regime change or people-centric counterinsurgency. Advisors must rely on their identity as peacekeeper-diplomats, alongside their classical identity as highly-skilled warriors, to develop personal relationships with their counterparts based on cultural flexibility and understanding.³⁴

²⁷ O’Lavin, “War on the Cheap”; Robert D. Ramsey III, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador* (Combat Studies Institute, 2012), <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/ramsey.pdf>.

²⁸ Biddle, “Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations,” 135.

²⁹ Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (Liveright Publishing, 2018).

³⁰ Anna Simons, “The Military Advisor as Warrior-King and Other ‘Going Native’ Temptations,” in *Military Anthropology: Soldiers, Scholars and Subjects at the Margins of Empire*, ed. Montgomery McFate (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/12372992>.

³¹ Mara Karlin, “Building Militaries in Fragile States,” 2017, <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15725.html>.

³² Richard A. Jones, “The Nationbuilder: Soldier of the Sixties,” in *Advice for Advisors: Suggestions and Observations from Lawrence to the Present*, ed. Robert D. Ramsey, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 19 (Fort Leavenworth, Kan: Combat Studies Inst. Press, 2006).

³³ Simons, “The Military Advisor as Warrior-King and Other ‘Going Native’ Temptations,” 124.

³⁴ Remi M. Hajjar, “Military Warriors as Peacekeeper–Diplomats: Building Productive Relationships with Foreign Counterparts in the Contemporary Military Advising Mission,” *Armed Forces & Society* 40, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 647–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X13493275>.

The literature on the intelligence gathering and political roles of advisors is the most promising. However, it does not explicitly theorize the kinds of information advisors collect and when they will be most effective at collecting it, the roles of advisors and how they are connected to one another, the political issues that advisors face, why advisors are sent in some cases and not others, and the implications of sending advisors for the relationship between intervener and proxy. I build upon this literature to argue that advisors do not merely brush up against politics in their work on military reform or rely on cultural understanding in their relationships with their counterparts. Instead, navigating and influencing the politics of proxy war is an explicit part of their responsibilities and a core reason why interveners send advisors. Advisors end up doing the work typically attributed to “defense diplomacy”—relating to foreign soldiers based on their identity in a shared community and using these connections to improve political understanding between the sending and receiving groups³⁵ – across the proxy military during conflict.

The interconnectedness of capacity-building and politics

I argue that states use military advisors to fulfill a two-fold political role acting as both information gatherers and conduits of influence over the local partner’s military, and advisors recognize their role as such. This political role goes beyond navigating the politics of military reforms aimed solely at increasing military effectiveness and includes influencing the military as a political actor. During wartime, solutions to political disagreements between intervener and proxy requires buy-in from the military. The military makes key decisions about politics on a daily basis, such as how to treat civilians, implement aid and political projects, and relate to civilian authorities. And when the proxy military is a non-state actor or a military with weak command-and-control, buy-in requires lobbying an array of military actors spread out across zones of conflict. Advisors provide “boots on the ground” for the intervener to manage a complicated network of proxy military actors.

The capacity-building role of advisors provides the *access* for both information gathering and influencing (**Table 1**). As one advisor put it: “Our excuse for being there was to make them more combat effective, but the real purpose was to modify their behavior.”³⁶ Interveners recognize when sending military advisors that their capacity-building and political roles are interconnected. When

³⁵ Charillon, Balzacq, and Ramel, “Defense Diplomacy.”

³⁶ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 16).

considering in 1959 whether to send US military advisors to support the government of Laos in their fight against the Pathet Lao, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that the US government “authorize an augmentation of the US training and support personnel in Laos to the extent necessary to ensure more effective training of those forces; and the positive U.S. direction and control of the forces.”³⁷

Table 1 – The Roles of Military Advisors

<i>Type</i>	Specific Roles	Mechanism	Effects
<i>Political</i>	Information gathering	Embeddedness	Intervener gains deep knowledge about the situation on the ground
	Influencing	Personal relationships	Change in proxy behavior and attitudes
<i>Capacity-building</i>	Training	Advising on training	Access
	Technical assistance	Advises counterparts on or fills specific roles: eg. aviation, PSYOPs, artillery, Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTACs), engineering, logistics, intelligence	
	War planning	Advises on operations and/or strategy	
	Building defense institutions	Advises on force structure, leadership, recruitment, force posture, procurement, and civil-military relations	

Sometimes interveners even organize military advising missions to reflect the dual military and political roles of advisors. North Vietnam (DRV), for example, sent both military and political advisors at the level of the province and the battalion to work in tandem to direct the military operations of the Pathet Lao, the guerilla force that North Vietnam was supporting against US armed and trained Hmong fighters in Laos. Political advisors had wide authority to suggest political changes to the Pathet Lao.³⁸ During Russian intervention in the Donbas, a range of Russian intelligence agencies work to control

³⁷ Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, RG 218, Box 140, “The Joint Chiefs of Staff: Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense,” “Laos (3 September 1959),” National Archives and Records Administration.

³⁸ Paul Fritz Langer and Joseph Jermiah Zasloff, “The North Vietnamese Military Adviser in Laos,” Product Page, 1968, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM5688.html.

and direct the Donbas militias. In addition to Special Forces advisors, Russia also deploys a network of embedded *agentura* (spies) of the GRU attached to *spetnasz* units that take on a political role of handling separatists, while the FSB is responsible for “supervising and disciplining” of the separatist forces.³⁹

Information gathering

I first theorize the role of advisors as information gatherers. That is, advisors collect specific kinds of information that can only be collected through personal relationships on the ground and that are useful to the intervener to hold the proxy accountable, understand the proxy’s military, and assess the operational environment.

While it is clear from the literature that advisors can gather intelligence about the proxy’s military capability, it is unclear what kinds of information they gather, how they collect information, and whether this information is actually useful to the intervener. The literature does not fully develop the former two concepts, and is rather skeptical about the overall usefulness of information collected by people on the ground. The literature on monitoring, for instance, argues that it is not an important determinant of success in controlling the local partner,⁴⁰ and can often fail to be informative when a combat situation is rapidly evolving,⁴¹ when the monitoring contingent is small,⁴² or when advisors are afraid they will be punished if they report the true competency of the local partner’s military.⁴³ I argue that when we examine information gathering through advisors more carefully, we can see that substantial variation exists in when and how much information advisors can gather. Even less-than-ideal circumstances still yield a lot of information to the intervener.

³⁹ Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas,” *Parameters; Carlisle Barracks* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 13–21.

⁴⁰ Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front*.

⁴¹ Ramsey III, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador*.

⁴² Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 0, no. 0 (April 12, 2017): 1–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745>.

⁴³ Olga Olikier, *Building Afghanistan’s Security Forces in Wartime: The Soviet Experience* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2011). One advisor interviewed validated this concern, stating that given the US desire to withdraw from Iraq, advisors faced pressure to submit overly rosy reports on the progress made by the Iraqi units they were advising. Interview with US military advisor in Iraq (Interviewee 9).

Because military advisors are embedded with the proxy, they can collect a kind of information that the intervener could not gain in any other way. Embeddedness creates the proximity for informal relationships to develop and creates trust between advisors and their counterparts. Advisors use these relationships to collect highly detailed information on the behavior, opinions, and attitudes of their local counterparts—even those who would be unwilling to work as intelligence assets for the intervener. They can reveal information about which military officers support reform and appropriate civil-military relations and which are opposed. They can reveal information about the operational environment and micro-changes in the local context. Military advisors gather a kind of information that could not be gained through technology, short-term visits from Embassy personnel, or even intelligence assets. It is a kind of information that requires intimate observation by people on the ground.

The first kind of information that advisors can collect is useful information about the proxy's behavior. Recall that a source of tension in the relationship between intervener and proxy is the proxy's hidden information about its own behavior, which makes it difficult for the intervener to properly apply incentives. To address this problem of moral hazard, interveners can invest in monitoring.⁴⁴ We can think of monitoring dynamically as a multi-step process by which the intervener first communicates its policy positions to the proxy, the proxy then complies enough to keep support, the intervener verifies this and then maintains support if the proxy complies enough. Advisors can act like two-way conduits of information.⁴⁵ They first communicate the intervener's policy preferences to the local military and in turn communicate the behavior of the local military back to the intervener. Intervenors can use the valuable information that advisors provide on the actions of the military – anything from advance warning on a possible coup to reports of atrocities committed by security forces – to hold the local partner accountable for its actions. The visible presence of advisors reminds the proxy's military of the intervener's preferences and that information about its behavior will be communicated

⁴⁴ Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff?"; Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*. For an extensive discussion of principal-agent theory and various incentive structures for addressing moral hazard, see: Jean-Jacques Laffont, *The Theory of Incentives: The Principal-Agent Model*, ed. David Martimort (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Colonel Bryce Denno, US military advisor in Vietnam, describes the use of advisors to communicate messages from the intervener and then to report back on the counterpart. Bryce F. Denno, "Advisor and Counterpart," in *Advice for Advisors: Suggestions and Observations from Lawrence to the Present*, ed. Robert D. Ramsey, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 19 (Fort Leavenworth, Kan: Combat Studies Inst. Press, 2006), 33–43.

back to the intervener.⁴⁶ Interveners can use this information provided by advisors to specifically condition their future actions on the proxy's past behavior.⁴⁷ Therefore, with military advisors on the ground, the intervener gains information about the proxy *and* the proxy knows it is being watched, which changes its behavior.

Furthermore, since advisors are acknowledged by the intervener, their information can be revealed when useful, unlike some kinds of intelligence that cannot be shared to protect sources and methods.⁴⁸ This specific and revealable information about leaders in the proxy's military allows the intervener to press for reforms with the proxy's political and defense officials. These reforms can range from modernizing defense institutions to requesting the removal of specific military leadership.⁴⁹

The second kind of information that military advisors provide to the intervener is situational awareness based on the local context in which they are embedded. Using their position on the ground embedded with a local military unit, advisors complement information collected through other sources of intelligence. Advisors pass on information about the micro-dynamics of civil war: information about local threats and enemies, successes or failures, public opinion, and trends over time. To collect this kind of information, advisors talk to a wide variety of people, from local civilians, military officers, and rank-and-file soldiers to captured enemy combatants. A US military advisor embedded with a militia unit in northern Mali in 2011 described how his team used its position on the ground to report

⁴⁶ On this point, many interviewees talked about how their presence was a deterrent to the proxy military, e.g.: "The good thing about an advisory effort is it does two things. It gives the host nation, the receiving nation, an incentive to use what we give them properly. It also gives them an incentive not to commit human rights violations.... Just the idea of having someone physically present with the indigenous armies is very beneficial, even if what I did for 14 months was completely ineffective, because just by me being there changes their behavior.... There's a lot of effort to have the appearance of towing the line and not being found out or being ratted-out. So the advisory effort serves that purpose, and it's a very open purpose.... I want to make sure I mention that because it's not just a collateral benefit. In some cases it's the number-one benefit. And if you can get them to do anything that makes sense, well, that would be good too." Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 14).

⁴⁷ Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff."

⁴⁸ Allison Carnegie and Austin Carson, "The Disclosure Dilemma: Nuclear Intelligence and International Organizations," *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 2 (2019): 269–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12426>. States can face a "disclosure dilemma": disclosure of intelligence can further political goals but tip off a violator that it is being observed.

⁴⁹ Several studies note the importance of hiring-and-firing decisions by great powers seeking to shape a proxy military. I highlight the role of information asymmetries that make it difficult to determine who should be hired without advisors on the ground. See Karlin, "Building Militaries in Fragile States"; Louis-Alexandre Berg, "Elite Bargains and External Influence: Security Assistance and Civil-Military Relations in Post-War Liberia and Sierra Leone," *Civil Wars* 22, no. 2–3 (July 2, 2020): 266–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2020.1707495>; O'Lavin, "War on the Cheap."

on the threat of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which was not being provided by other channels:

I think [we were] the first Operational Detachment Alpha [small Special Forces unit] up in Northern Mali in a couple of years at that point...And what we were gathering from our discussions with locals and then some of the intelligence work that we were doing was like, “Hey, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Maghreb is much more entrenched and bigger up here than I think anyone realizes now”...I think that the [US Embassy Mali] Country Team at the time in 2011, was interpreting the lack of reporting on Al-Qaeda activity in Northern Mali as evidence of lack of Al-Qaeda. Whereas in reality, there was a lack of reporting because there was a lack of access. So we submitted a number of reports while we were up there about what appeared to be a growing influence. And frankly that was generally discounted because we didn't have any other reporting of Al-Qaeda growing in influence out there.⁵⁰

In sum, advisors provide interveners with key access to the local environment. They use their personal relationships with locals and people in the proxy military to collect information. The intervener can use this information to monitor, that is, hold the proxy accountable for its actions through selectively revealing information. Advisors are a visible sign of monitoring, which makes them deterrents to misbehavior. But advisors can also collect a second kind of information about local dynamics that allows interveners to “keep a finger on the pulse” of the conflict. In turn, interveners can use this information to continually assess the success of intervention.

Influencing

The story I have been telling about advisors thus far is a rationalist one playing out at the strategic level; advisors gather information for the state that sends them. But viewing advisors as mere conduits of information is rather limited. It requires us to believe that advisors live with their local counterparts, often in close quarters, for months or years, and yet have no effect on their counterparts (or their counterparts have no effect on them) other than possible strategic incentives generated by advisors' reporting. This seems obviously false.

⁵⁰ Interview with US advisor, US Army Special Forces, (Interviewee 23).

Consistent, prolonged interactions between the advisor and his⁵¹ counterpart leave both changed by the experience. If the advisor cultivates a relationship with his counterpart based on trust, understanding, and even friendship, he can exercise a great deal of influence. But this is not always the case. Some advisors are not up to the task of advising and exert little influence in the process. Others are fully capable but are put in impossible positions, with hostile counterparts that have different political goals or methods of fighting than their advisors. In other instances, the advisor can become the influenced and “go native,” that is, begin to identify too strongly with the perspectives of the local community when they conflict with the interests and goals of the sending state.⁵² Advising is ultimately a complicated process playing out at the individual level. Its effects are likely to vary across conflicts and across advisors.

Advisors do not command local units, so getting their counterparts to adopt advice is a mission of influence.⁵³ Historically, colonial powers or other powerful states sometimes sent military advisors to directly command the local partner’s troops.⁵⁴ When intervening in Oman during the Cold War, British military advisors filled the roles of non-commissioned officers since outsiders had more credibility than locals did in commanding a multi-ethnic force.⁵⁵ In Afghanistan (1978-89), Soviet advisors assumed operational planning and even direct command of military forces.⁵⁶ Today, countries often use military advisors in a manner similar to the US model of letting the local counterpart lead. While intervening in the Donbas (2014-present), Russian military advisors from the *spetsnaz* forces of the GRU assist and provide advice while avoiding combat.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Note that I use the male pronoun to refer to both the advisor and counterpart. Since advisors and their counterparts in other militaries are nearly always male—and all of the advisors I interviewed were male—it seemed appropriate in this case. While I could have consistently referred to “advisors and their counterparts,” “advisor and his counterpart” seemed during specific anecdotes to better convey the intimacy of these relationships as personal ones at the individual level.

⁵² Simons, “The Military Advisor as Warrior-King and Other ‘Going Native’ Temptations.”

⁵³ Captain Richard A. Jones, US military advisor to Vietnam, put it this way: “Our soldiers are deprived of command—the most necessary factor in influencing the action—although, curiously enough, they may still be charged with a large measure of the responsibility. Therefore, our leadership training must be almost completely recast. We must study and teach all the subtle nuances, all the Carnegie-like techniques of winning friends, and we must learn to be patient and to apply Lenin’s maxim of ‘one step backward, two steps forward.’ Otherwise the advisor may face endless frustration and will be only marginally effective.” Jones, “The Nationbuilder: Soldier of the Sixties.”

⁵⁴ Barkawi, “‘Defence Diplomacy’ in North-South Relations,” 611.

⁵⁵ Ladwig III, “Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar Rebellion.”

⁵⁶ Oliker, *Building Afghanistan’s Security Forces in Wartime*, 24.

⁵⁷ Bukkvoll, “Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas.”

Since advisors have no command authority, their impact is greater when they have more influence over their counterparts. To explain how influence develops and when it is likely to be strongest, I draw on sociological theory of social bonding between diplomats.⁵⁸ To begin a relationship, the advisor and his counterpart first must have *bodily co-presence*, i.e. they must interact in person.⁵⁹ The initial reason for interacting in person is purely practical: advisors are there to provide value by building military capacity for their counterparts.⁶⁰ This is why the capacity-building and political roles of military advisors are so closely intertwined: without their role as capacity-builders, advisors would have no reason to interact with their counterparts and would bring little to the table. Advisors tend to call the outcome of positive relationships with their counterparts “rapport.” They emphasize the importance of doing a good job at capacity-building as the foundation for rapport. One advisor described the process as the following: “The best way to establish a rapport is through hard work. And so maybe start off with something quick and easy that, whoever your counterpart is supposed to be, wanted.”⁶¹

For a positive interaction to result between advisor and counterpart, *barriers to outsiders* and *mutual focus of attention* must be present.⁶² In the diplomatic context, clear separation must exist between those involved in the interaction and those who are excluded, and the interacting individuals must understand that they are “jointly trapped in this conflict together.”⁶³ In the context of a military advisor and his counterpart, their shared identity as warriors⁶⁴ provides a sense of exclusivity. Advisors have credibility because they are insiders; their advice comes from a place of understanding and expertise. Because the advisor is the “expert” from a strong and powerful military, the counterpart might seek to *emulate* the advisor.⁶⁵ When the advisor and his counterpart work together on defeating a shared enemy, they have a mutual focus of attention. This focus will be heightened when advisors accompany their counterparts into combat or incidentally come under fire. In combat, advisors can directly

⁵⁸ Marcus Holmes and Nicholas J. Wheeler, “Social Bonding in Diplomacy,” *International Theory* 12, no. 1 (March 2020): 133–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971919000162>.

⁵⁹ Holmes and Wheeler; Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁶⁰ David L. Shelton, “Some Advice for the Prospective Advisor,” in *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador*, ed. Robert D. Ramsey III (Combat Studies Institute, 2012), <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/ramsey.pdf>.

⁶¹ Interview with US military advisor in El Salvador (#5).

⁶² Holmes and Wheeler, “Social Bonding in Diplomacy.”

⁶³ Holmes and Wheeler, 149.

⁶⁴ For more on professional military identity, see the following on the US context: Risa Brooks, “Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States,” *International Security* 44, no. 4 (2020): 7–44.

⁶⁵ I thank Risa Brooks for suggesting this mechanism. Simons, “The Military Advisor as Warrior-King and Other ‘Going Native’ Temptations”; Robert D. Ramsey, *Advice for Advisors: Suggestions and Observations from Lawrence to the Present*, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 19 (Fort Leavenworth, Kan: Combat Studies Inst. Press, 2006).

demonstrate their expertise as soldiers as well as focus their attention on the task of fighting alongside their counterpart. One advisor told me how he saved his counterpart's life under fire, and after that "everybody knew what happened. So I was pretty bulletproof after that, and I could pretty much do what I wanted to do."⁶⁶ Advisors as skilled practitioners of combat can thus more easily bond and establish personal relationships with their counterparts than the intervener's civilians can.

In addition to interacting through their professional relationship, advisors are able to 'get on the same page' with their counterparts through an array of social activities as part of working and living alongside their counterparts on a daily basis. Advisors utilize these informal interactions as a key way to generate influence over their local counterparts, using occasions like a meal or a meeting over drinks as an opportunity to broach proposals for reform in a non-threatening way.

One advisor described using social engagements, like meeting for drinks after work, as a means to get a meeting with his counterpart (who was higher in rank). While deployed as US military advisor to the Ministry of Defense of the Central African Republic (CAR), this advisor took his Ministry of Defense counterpart out for drinks and spoke French to bond with him. As a result, he convinced his counterpart to contribute to a US-Ugandan coalition fighting against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) when the US Ambassador and the country team hadn't been successful.⁶⁷ Another advisor described a lengthy process of social interactions that generated influence: "...It was often after a couple of beers or something that you could even broach the subject with your counterpart and say, once alcohol sort of dulled the sensitivities a little bit...golly, 'don't you realize' and 'you know what this is doing.' And then they would respond, and little by little, you could make that argument. And that's what happened. It happened a little by little over time."⁶⁸

The final criterion for a positive interaction is *shared mood* between the interacting individuals, that is, recognizing shared interests and the "human" in the other.⁶⁹ Shared mood is the product of repeated interactions with mutual focus of attention.⁷⁰ Over time, interacting individuals can develop trust and

⁶⁶ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 13).

⁶⁷ Interview with US advisor, US Army Special Forces, (Interviewee 23).

⁶⁸ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 16).

⁶⁹ Holmes and Wheeler, "Social Bonding in Diplomacy."

⁷⁰ Jonathan H. Turner and Jan E. Stets, *The Sociology of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 75.

empathy, understanding each other's motivations.⁷¹ When the elements of a successful interaction (face-to-face interaction, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood) are present, the interacting individuals share a positive, "excited reaction of experiencing something together."⁷² As one advisor put it: "...Both [the other American advisor] and I lived on that cuartel with [our counterparts]. It was a rather austere place, they saw us sharing both their hardships and their victories with them. And that made it easier to assimilate into the organization."⁷³ But if the interactions occur and the individuals do not recognize shared interests, a negative rather than positive social bond will develop.⁷⁴

Advisors often build close personal relationships with their counterparts that are characterized by positive emotions, loyalty, and even affection. Some of these positive bonds are the expected outcome of an exchange relationship where both parties benefit,⁷⁵ e.g. the advisor provides advice and the counterpart feeds and provides security for the advisor. But over time, some of these relationships become intense and more akin to the bonds between two close friends than between two individuals working with one another.⁷⁶ I asked my interviewees to describe their relationships with their local counterparts. Advisors often responded using emotive language, such as: "He was the finest officer I ever met in my life....We became good friends, really good friends"⁷⁷; "We really liked [him]. We believed in him. We didn't go native. It wasn't like in that sense, it's just we had faith in him"⁷⁸; "...I made the mistake of getting emotionally involved to some extent because it did feel like a paternal relationship. I felt like I was their company commander and I was responsible for them because I realized that if I didn't fight for them, nobody else would"⁷⁹; and "I had better relationships with the people I was advising than I did with a lot of my [American] counterparts."⁸⁰ Other advisors described

⁷¹ Naomi Head, "Transforming Conflict: Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue," in *Emotions in International Politics: Beyond Mainstream International Relations*, ed. Yohan Ariffin, Jean-Marc Coicaud, and Vesselin Popovski (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁷² Holmes and Wheeler, "Social Bonding in Diplomacy," 150.

⁷³ Interview with Simeon Trombitas.

⁷⁴ Holmes and Wheeler, "Social Bonding in Diplomacy," 150–51.

⁷⁵ Turner and Stets, *The Sociology of Emotions*, 302; Simons, "The Military Advisor as Warrior-King and Other 'Going Native' Temptations."

⁷⁶ Gibby differentiates between "professional courtesy" and "genuine friendship." Bryan R. Gibby, *The Will to Win: American Military Advisors in Korea, 1946-1953*. (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 116, <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/11143118>.

⁷⁷ Interview with US advisor in El Salvador (Interviewee 5).

⁷⁸ Interview with military advisor, US Special Forces, (Interviewee 27).

⁷⁹ Interview with US advisor in Iraq (Interviewee 9).

⁸⁰ Interview with US advisor to Afghan combat aviation units, (Interviewee 25).

strong friendships with their counterparts that continued even after their professional relationships ended.⁸¹

Both the more “thin” and “deep” forms of these personal relationships, I argue, allow military advisors to act as conduits of influence for the intervener at the local level, influencing their counterparts’ approach to issues such as human rights and civil-military relations. After building trust through positive interactions, advisors can persuade their local counterparts that certain reforms or objectives that the intervener wants are in the local counterpart’s best interests, too,⁸² persuading them that actions like restraint toward the civilian population or proper and humane interrogation of prisoners can lead to better military results. When relationships are close between advisors and their counterparts, advisors can exercise substantial influence over them and even change their minds over time.

Archival evidence shows that at the highest levels of the United States government – the National Security Council – policymakers considered the influence of US advisors over their counterparts. In Liberia, following a coup on April 12, 1980, the People’s Redemption Council (PRC) led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe established itself as Liberia’s government. The PRC immediately arrested members of the former government, and executed some of them. In June 1980, the head of the US Military Mission in Liberia, Colonel Robert Gosney, was due to be transferred back to the United

⁸¹ To build close relationships, advisors had to be able to actually converse with their counterparts in a language that both understood reasonably well. While interpreters can assist, communication is better when it includes only the advisor and counterpart. US advisors who spoke the local language well or whose counterparts were fluent in English felt they more easily built relationships and had more influence. An advisor described the importance of language in fostering connection with his counterparts in an Afghan Special Operations aviation unit and intelligence unit (but note how he puts the burden for cultural connection on the Afghan advisees rather than himself): “We trained them to fly helicopters at Fort Rucker in the U.S, so they’re very competent, great English, really smart guys. They know American culture. They understand how U.S. advisors work and talk and think. So, it just was a really cool thing to see on the ground, that really strong relationship. It did translate to the intel side. It wasn’t quite as easy for me, only because none of the intel guys had come to the U.S. So, they were, I guess, maybe a little bit less culturally understanding and a little bit ... They just didn’t have the same level of interaction with Americans prior to the advisory mission happening that some of the other guys had, but very, very intelligent....I just got really lucky in that I had a team of guys that was already really smart and competent and that could speak English well. And that it was already a cut above the rest in that sense. I don’t think I could have gotten a quarter of as much done if I was in a regular unit that got to interact with their guys for a quarter the amount of time and in a different capacity. I got lucky, essentially, because it does not look like that everywhere.” (Interview with US advisor to Afghan combat aviation units, Interviewee 25). For more on the importance of language competency, see: David T. Gardner, “Lessons from the Past: Vital Factors Influencing Military Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan” (Naval Postgraduate School Monterey CA Dept Of National Security Affairs, March 1, 2012), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA560642>.

⁸² Carol Atkinson, *Military Soft Power: Public Diplomacy through Military Educational Exchanges* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 5.

States. Carter's National Security Council intervened to keep him in his post for a few months longer, stating that Gosney was "playing *the* key and absolutely essential role in keeping the members of the PRC in-line. It was he who told the PRC to stop the executions. [Samuel] DOE and the whole group see him as a father/uncle figure, and if anyone is going to keep them in-line, Col. Gosney is the man to do it."⁸³ Policymakers clearly recognized the importance of personal relationships as a source of influence. Not just any American advisor could fill Gosney's role: it had to be Gosney himself because he was the one with close relationships already in place.

Limitations to information gathering and influencing

When will information gathering and influencing be successful? I theorize how the effectiveness of information gathering will vary with the level and degree of embeddedness of advisors, as well as the total number of advisors in country. I also theorize potential threats to influence, ranging from the individual characteristics of advisors to the challenge of "going native."

Since information gathering depends on a combination of first-hand observation and personal relationships with counterparts, it is improved when more advisors are present in country and when they work with a wider range of local units. The kind of information that advisors provide will vary with the level at which the advisor is embedded and whether the advisor can accompany the local unit into combat. The table on the next page (**Table 2**) shows how I expect the effectiveness of information gathering to vary with the level of embeddedness of advisors. I use El Salvador as an example. Advisors were embedded at the strategic level and with brigades at the operational level but were not allowed to accompany their counterparts into combat.

Advisors embedded at the strategic level can provide information on the attitudes of senior officers toward the conduct of war, as well as on strategic decisions. When embedded with local forces in the field at the operational level but not allowed to accompany local forces into combat, advisors can provide first-hand information on military leadership and mostly accurate information about how the military performs in combat, whether they are using appropriate plans and tactics, and how they treat the civilian population and captured enemy combatants. When advisors are also allowed to accompany

⁸³ Memo, Jerry Funk to Zbigniew Brzezinski, June 7, 1980, Folder "Meetings – Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski, 5/80," Box 23, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

proxy forces into combat at the tactical level, the quality of the information provided will be even higher since advisors will have first-hand knowledge of the proxy military's combat performance. Information gathering, then, is at its best when all three rows of the table are populated by advisors, which will require a fairly large number of embedded advisors.

Table 2 - The Effectiveness of Information Gathering

Embeddedness	Number	Accompany in Combat?	Information gathering	El Salvador
Strategic Ministry of Defense	Few	No	Highly accurate information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Civil-military relations - Attitudes of top military leadership - Budgetary and strategic decisions 	Yes
Operational Brigade level	Some	No	Mostly accurate information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Combat - Human rights/atrocities - Local environment Highly accurate information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attitudes of officers in key field command positions 	Yes
Tactical Battalion level or below	Many	Yes	Highly accurate information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Combat - Human rights/atrocities - Local environment 	No

That being said, advisors can provide “good enough” information gathering with a far smaller force. The case of El Salvador, as I will describe in the next section, shows that interveners can “keep a finger on the pulse” with a relatively small advising force. Even when only a few advisors are assigned at the brigade (operational) level, advisors circulate among units and seek out a wide range of people to talk to, effectively gathering information about the local military unit and broader environment. Advisors can still get a good sense of the local force's capability by observing their training and sitting in on after action reports, even if they do not accompany them into combat.

The advisors I spoke with were confident that they did possess some measure of influence, but were also aware of limitations. An advisor who served in El Salvador summed it up quite confidently as “...We were able to get them to support democracy, get them to respect human rights, and get them

to win, as well.”⁸⁴ US advisors who served in Iraq and Afghanistan were more pessimistic about their influence on political issues, such as political and tribal divisions, but repeatedly stated that being on the ground allowed them to directly influence their counterparts’ decision-making about the use of force. An advisor to Iraq described having a lot of control over missions where he accompanied his counterparts. However, he was unsuccessful in stopping an operation where his counterparts wanted to conduct house-to-house raids based on flimsy intelligence against another tribe. He eventually agreed to accompany them in order to “go out there and supervise and make sure it just doesn’t get stupid.”⁸⁵

The relationship between advisor and counterpart, however, does not always translate into large gains in influence at either the individual or strategic level. Influence depends to some extent on strategic factors, such as how much the local military needs advice and how much the intervener and proxy disagree.

When the proxy’s military effectiveness is high, the intervener’s support will be less valuable and the proxy will likely have the upper hand in the interaction. An advisor who worked with Hamid Karzai in the early days of US intervention in Afghanistan against the Taliban stated how Karzai ignored his advice about how to resist the Taliban, preferring to conduct operations his own way. The advisor commented that “I don’t know in his eyes...what he wanted us there for. I think the simplest answer...is that we gave him the credibility that the U.S. backed him, just by our presence...he wanted that. Just by us being by his side, but letting him and his fellow Pashtun have the lead on securing the Pashtun tribal belt. He showed U.S. support, but he wasn’t a puppet, it was just that happy medium I think he was going for, probably.”⁸⁶

When the proxy’s military effectiveness is low and the intervener has boots on the ground, it also has little incentive to heed advice because the intervener will pick up the slack. US advisors in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, repeatedly mentioned how their local counterparts would be indifferent to their efforts to build military capacity.⁸⁷ An advisor to Iraq mentioned how his counterparts did not a

⁸⁴ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 20).

⁸⁵ Interview with US advisor in Iraq (Interviewee 9).

⁸⁶ Interview with military advisor, US Special Forces, (Interviewee 27).

⁸⁷ Note that I am speaking here from the perspective of the advisors; the Iraqi and Afghani militaries sustained many casualties and fought hard during years of conflict, as noted in Owen West, *The Snake Eaters: Counterinsurgency Advisors in*

have strong will to fight: “They would make up holidays (such as Shiite holidays when they were all Sunni) so they could get out of training.”⁸⁸ Another advisor who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan stated: “Believe it or not, the most frustrating thing is trying to get the military to defend their own country. Otherwise dealing with tribal, clan, local, and national politics that demand bad security decisions or unwillingness to cooperate even if cooperation means their own job would be easier.”⁸⁹

Compliance also depends on how the intervener uses incentives at the strategic level.⁹⁰ When interveners are committed to supporting their proxies no matter what, proxies have a lot of leverage. There is little point in monitoring, for instance, unless the intervener will use the information it receives to apply diplomatic pressure to the proxy. Advisors cannot substitute for diplomatic efforts to influence the proxy at the strategic level.

While strategic factors set the stage for what is possible, influence can also fail to materialize at the individual level. Some advisors, especially those with better interpersonal skills, more easily build influence.⁹¹ For example, the advisor working with Hamid Karzai in late 2001 explained how once Karzai was identified as a potential future leader of Afghanistan, a US lieutenant colonel was assigned to interface with Karzai when “talking geopolitics and the future of Afghanistan.” The advisors that had been working with Karzai for several weeks at that point “had a degree of trust and the battalion commander didn't really know how to work with Karzai” so Karzai kept working with the Americans he trusted and sidelined the others.⁹² In some cases, the advisor's own incompetence or lack of experience prevents a relationship from developing. In Iraq and Afghanistan, military personnel lacking combat experience and training in how to effectively advise local forces were sent as advisors,⁹³

Combat (Simon and Schuster, 2013). The presence of cultural differences in how and when to fight no doubt contributed partially to the assessment of advisors, so the “will to fight” assessment may not be objective. However, more objective assessments of military capacity in Iraq and Afghanistan do make clear that *relative* to US forces, the local militaries had less capacity and were eager to have US forces do more of the fighting.

⁸⁸ Interview with US military advisor in Iraq, (Interviewee 1).

⁸⁹ Interview with US military advisor who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations (Interviewee 7).

⁹⁰ Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*; Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front*.

⁹¹ Christopher Ely Phelps, “Selecting and Training U.S. Advisors: Interpersonal Skills and the Advisor-Counterpart Relationship” (Thesis, University of Kansas, 2009), <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/5657>; David T. Gardner, “Lessons from the Past: Vital Factors Influencing Military Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan” (Naval Postgraduate School Monterey CA Dept Of National Security Affairs, March 1, 2012), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA560642>.

⁹² Interview with US military advisor, US Special Forces, (Interviewee 27).

⁹³ Interview with US military advisor, US Special Forces, (Interviewee 26).

and they often struggled to work successfully with their counterparts until they could prove their worth in combat.⁹⁴

The final challenge to influence working the way I have described is that of reverse influence. When the relationship between an advisor and his counterpart becomes very close, and bonds of loyalty and emotion develop, sometimes the advisor begins to identify so closely with his local counterpart that he becomes the influenced.⁹⁵ When an advisor “goes native,” he is unlikely to serve as a useful conduit of influence and his ability to gather information that could reflect negatively on his counterpart will decrease.

It’s not just advisors in the field who can be influenced by their counterparts; reverse influence can also affect top military leadership working with a local military. The commander of MAAG-Vietnam during 1955-1960, Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, seems to have been too close to President Diem to see his faults accurately. When US Ambassador Elbridge Dubrow made clear that he saw Diem as a flawed ally, Williams responded: “I resent a friend of mine being referred to as a SOB.”⁹⁶ As the senior US military officer in Vietnam, Williams was responsible for the flow of information up his chain of command. Instead of reporting accurately on the deteriorating security situation in Vietnam, he gave rosy reports of progress to US Congressional delegations and policymakers and was unwilling to hear negative reports from advisors about their units’ lack of military effectiveness.⁹⁷ Information gathering can break down, even when information is accessible, because of the biases and emotions of those responsible for reporting it.⁹⁸

In sum, personal relationships between advisor and counterpart can often be extremely close, but this does not mean that advisors will always have influence. Structural factors can determine how much counterparts are willing to listen. Advisors have significant agency as man “on the spot,” as Lansdale put it in the epigraph to this paper, to decide how they will behave and the kind of relationship they

⁹⁴ West, *The Snake Eaters*.

⁹⁵ Simons, “The Military Advisor as Warrior-King and Other ‘Going Native’ Temptations.”

⁹⁶ Karlin, “Building Militaries in Fragile States,” 91.

⁹⁷ Karlin, 100.

⁹⁸ Of course, even completely impartial observers (if such individuals exist) can struggle to accurately determine what and how to report. For instance, the US Army in Vietnam found itself awash with data but uncertain which indicators were worth tracking to evaluate progress. Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring US Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 48–51.

will build with their counterparts.⁹⁹ Their local agency can lead to good results when advisors innovate and make wise decisions about how to handle their counterparts and analyze the information available to them, but sometimes advisors will not be up to the task of influence. In other instances, the close personal relationships built between advisor and counterpart will backfire, prompting the advisor to identify too closely with his counterpart's point of view.

Choosing to send advisors

If advisors are useful, as I have argued, why not send always them? Interveners have political incentives not to send advisors. Advisors are often deployed in dangerous positions close to the front lines or embedded in exposed outposts where they could be attacked. This is especially true if advisors accompany their local counterparts into combat. If military advisors die, interveners could face public pressure either to escalate and pay the costs of combat or to withdraw and give up the goals of the intervention, similar to the effects of combat casualties.¹⁰⁰ For these reasons, sending advisors signals to the proxy that the intervener is very committed to the conflict. As a result, decisionmakers in intervening states view advisors as a serious commitment and are often reluctant to deploy them. For example, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which ended in a nearly ten-year commitment of Soviet combat troops, began with Soviet officials refusing even to begin a training program for officers and border guards, despite repeated Afghan requests.¹⁰¹

When faced with compelling reasons to send advisors, interveners can lower the costs of sending them through limiting their public visibility. They can limit visibility by reducing the size of the advisor deployment, generating less media attention and public backlash in both the host and sending countries. Interveners minimize attention to the small numbers of advisors that they do need to deploy through actions such as requiring the advisors to wear civilian clothing when traveling to their work location (as US advisors did in 1950s Vietnam and 1980s El Salvador) or limiting their contact with the media (as US advisors were restricted in El Salvador).

⁹⁹ Hajjar, "Military Warriors as Peacekeeper-Diplomats," also notes the agency that advisors have to construct their own role.

¹⁰⁰ Dieuwertje Kuijpers and Gijs Schumacher, "Don't Mention the War versus Escalating Commitment: Political Party Responses to Military Casualties," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 4 (September 26, 2020): 587–607, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa003>.

¹⁰¹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817991>.

States send advisors more often when there is little cost to sending them. In the aftermath of 9-11, for example, the United States deployed advisors throughout the world to help local governments contain armed non-state actors. With modern air power, the United States can limit the likelihood of casualties and a resulting public exposé.¹⁰² As a result, US policymakers know that a small deployment of advisors is unlikely to attract much attention, especially when ubiquitous. Advisors have been deployed to many African countries, for instance, with little public visibility except when casualties happen, such as when four US advisors were killed in 2017 in Niger.¹⁰³ When costs of sending advisors are low, we should expect to see them deployed more often to a wider range of conflicts.

3. US Intervention in El Salvador (1979-89)

In this brief case study, I examine US intervention in the Salvadoran Civil War under the Carter and Reagan administrations (1979-1989). I demonstrate that policymakers considered both the capacity-building and political roles of advisors when choosing an intervention, and advisors considered information gathering and influencing to be a key part of their responsibilities. Advisors complemented US diplomatic efforts to restrain the Salvadoran military from committing human rights abuses and to stop the military from overturning the civilian government in a coup. US intervention in El Salvador also illustrates the benefits and limitations of advisors as a tool to restrain the local proxy.

The Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992), fought between the junta government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), was from the beginning marked by widespread human rights violations committed by the military and political right in El Salvador.¹⁰⁴ On January 26, 1980, just two days before the Carter administration met to consider greater US involvement in the civil war, the Washington Post ran a short story about 11 political killings in El Salvador, one of many

¹⁰² For an extended discussion of the ways that states take on more expansive projects of intervention by using technology and limiting casualties, see: Krieg and Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare*; Vladimir Rauta et al., “A Symposium – Debating ‘Surrogate Warfare’ and the Transformation of War,” *Defence Studies* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 410–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2019.1680290>.

¹⁰³ Rukmini Callimachi et al., “‘An Endless War’: Why 4 U.S. Soldiers Died in a Remote African Desert,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/17/world/africa/niger-ambush-american-soldiers.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/17/world/africa/niger-ambush-american-soldiers.html>.

¹⁰⁴ The FMLN committed human rights abuses, too, but it is generally agreed in scholarly literature that groups affiliated with the government committed the vast majority.

stories to follow that year—and every year thereafter of the civil war—in top US news outlets about the victims of deaths squads and the military.¹⁰⁵

The Carter administration's top priority was to restrain the military from overthrowing the moderate civilian government in a coup and to keep the military and pro-government "death squads" from committing extrajudicial killings, execution of prisoners, and torture. Progress in this area was imperative for domestic and international political backing of US intervention. In addition, the Carter administration believed that looking the other way on human rights violations would ultimately be self-defeating: the impetus for the insurgency was the government's lack of reform - a "crisis of delegitimization," as NSC staffer Robert Pastor called it.¹⁰⁶ Pastor noted that the right was the "most immediate threat to US interests" in El Salvador, and if the right seized power to prevent reform, a "bloodbath of unbelievable proportions" would ensue, ensuring a victory for the Communists.¹⁰⁷

To prevent a military coup and build the political legitimacy of the Salvadoran government, the Carter administration sought to broker a deal between the moderate Christian Democratic Party, or PDC, led by Napoleon Duarte, to rejoin the junta with the military.¹⁰⁸ In this context of ongoing negotiations, the Carter administration was wary of sending in more substantial aid such as helicopters and military advisors, since it would represent a bigger commitment to the Salvadoran government.¹⁰⁹ It began deliberating in February 1980 about how to use to its advantage the Salvadoran military's desire for military advisors and US aid to fight the insurgency. The idea was to use advisors as a reward for cooperation between the military and the PDC. Outlining the benefits of sending military advisors, a Carter administration official stated that the PDC saw US military advisors "as a way to increase their own influence (through us). Moreover, the 36-man team will train the army, which is more supportive of reforms and opposed to the repression, than the Treasury police or the security forces, and so the [military advisors] will help us to strengthen the hands of those who are more willing to curb the

¹⁰⁵ The Washington Post (Jan. 1980), *11 Political Slayings in El Salvador*, English.

¹⁰⁶ Memo from Robert A. Pastor for Zbigniew Brzezinski, July 19, 1979, Box 30, Folder "Meetings – SCC 183, 7/17/79," Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁰⁷ Memo from Robert A. Pastor for Zbigniew Brzezinski, February 26, 1980, Box 37, Folder "Serial Xs (2/1/80-4/15/80)," Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁰⁸ Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front*, 221–25.

¹⁰⁹ Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: RAC Project: NLC-6-20-9-7-7.

repression....One of the purposes of sending them is to let the extreme right and left know we're there and to send a clear message to all kinds that we support reforms and oppose terrorism."¹¹⁰

By March 1980, the Department of Defense had briefed Pastor on the potential roles of military advisors, should Carter choose to send them. The briefing (after Pastor's edits) made clear that the administration envisioned three main roles for the military advisors: first, to demonstrate US support for the junta government that is "critical to: forestall any coups, carry out announced reforms," second, to build military capacity, and third, to teach "the military proportionate responses to various situations rather than the overuse of force which they tend to rely on." The advisors would assess what else was needed once they got on the ground.¹¹¹ Pastor wrote after the briefing that if the "DOD/JCS understand clearly that their mission is not just to help the Salvadoreans [sic] beat the Left, but also to curb the right and minimize the use of lethal force on their part" then "There is no question in my mind that the [military advisors] could be an effective instrument because our military has tremendous influence over the military in Central America..."¹¹²

Even though the Carter administration recognized that military advisors were needed both to build capacity and to curb the right, they were reluctant to send advisors because of potential domestic and international political backlash. The principals agreed the United States should not send advisors unilaterally; they would only send in military advisors if Venezuela followed suit.¹¹³ When a Washington Post article on US aid to El Salvador revealed that Carter was considering sending in military advisors, Venezuela experienced intense domestic backlash. The Carter administration considered gradually sending in the military advisors in small groups to reduce political pressure.¹¹⁴

Meanwhile, the centrist government that the United States was trying to broker in El Salvador was slipping away, as the reactionary elements in the military and the right intensified their repression. Rather than forcing out the civilians in a coup, the Salvadoran right used repression to force leftists

¹¹⁰ Memo from Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, March 13, 1980, "Mini-SCC on El Salvador," El Salvador Collections, DNSA.

¹¹¹ Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: RAC Project: NLC-24-21-2-12-7.

¹¹² Memo from Robert Pastor to Zbigniew Brzezinski, March 13, 1980, "SCC on El Salvador – March 13, 1980," El Salvador Collections, DNSA.

¹¹³ Special Coordination Committee Meeting Minutes, January 28, 1980, Folder "Meetings – SCC 274, 2/15/80," Box 32, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹¹⁴ Special Coordination Committee Meeting Minutes, February 15, 1980, Folder "Meetings – SCC 274, 2/15/80," Box 32, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

and centrists out of the government and replaced progressive military officers with rightist ones.¹¹⁵ These actions intensified the violence in El Salvador into a bona fide civil war, much as Pastor had predicted. In this context, the US ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, strongly opposed sending in advisors lest it tie the United States to the Salvadoran right. He threatened to resign as ambassador if the Carter administration went through with sending the advising teams.¹¹⁶

The US Department of Defense continued advocating for military training teams to be sent to El Salvador. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown argued that their visibility could be reduced with a small team of advisors with instructions to avoid combat (the approach he advocated is similar to what the Reagan administration eventually adopted).¹¹⁷ Though a few teams of advisors were sent on a temporary basis to assess the situation on the ground, the Carter administration was still concerned about appearing too close to the Salvadoran government and not putting appropriate pressure on the government to reform.¹¹⁸ Carter gave the Salvadoran military a set of conditions for badly needed aid – 6 helicopters – and waited for the reforms.¹¹⁹ Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, agreed that military advisors should not be sent before the reforms were enacted, or they would be a signal of support for the right.¹²⁰ By November, Carter even considered withdrawing the operational planning teams because rumors that US military advisors were in El Salvador were starting to circulate.¹²¹

On December 2, 1980, four US churchwomen were murdered in El Salvador by troops from the Salvadoran National Guard.¹²² In response, the Carter administration suspended all aid to El Salvador, despite the worsening security situation and growing evidence that the FMLN was receiving support

¹¹⁵ William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 47.

¹¹⁶ LeoGrande, 45.

¹¹⁷ Memo from Harold Brown for Zbigniew Brzezinski, [nd], Folder "Serial Xs (10/80-12/80)," Box 37, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Subject File, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹¹⁸ Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 134.

¹¹⁹ Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front*, 226–29.

¹²⁰ Memo from Zbigniew Brzezinski to the Secretary of Defense, [nd], Folder "Serial Xs (10/80-12/80)," Box 37, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Subject File, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹²¹ Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: RAC Project: NLC-6-21-1-35-3.

¹²² Ray Bonner, "How One American Diplomat Solved the Case of the Murdered Churchwomen in El Salvador," *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/02/el-salvador-churchwomen-murders/460320/>.

from Nicaragua.¹²³ In this context, the Carter administration debated how to restore support to a Salvadoran government that increasingly needed it yet showed little willingness to reform. The rationale for withholding aid was not to punish the Salvadoran government for the murder of the churchwomen, but rather to give the PDC leverage in its ongoing negotiation with the military.¹²⁴ Salvadoran President José Napoleón Duarte and the new Commander in Chief of the Army, Jaime Abdul Gutierrez, settled on a plan to increase the Army's role in counterinsurgency and empower it vis-à-vis the other security forces, who were conducting the majority of the human rights abuses. They asked for US help to implement it.¹²⁵

Once again, the Carter administration noted the need for military advisors but was concerned about receiving blame if it supported the Salvadoran government and the military did not follow through on reform.¹²⁶ As Pastor advocated against advisors: "They will give us many more problems than they can possibly help the Salvadorans."¹²⁷ After the military and the PDC reached a bargain, to include installing Duarte as President and committing to firing some rightist officers that the United States wanted to depose, the Carter administration agreed to resume assistance.¹²⁸ In terms of priority, military advisors were ranked "last because they are the most visible and will require significant political justification both in Salvador and elsewhere."¹²⁹

After the FMLN launched a Final Offensive on January 11, 1980, revealing the strength of the insurgency, the Carter administration reversed course and rushed military assistance to the Salvadoran government. Brzezinski advised Carter to renew assistance because the situation was now urgent and the US Military Group in country believed the Salvadoran military had only one week of ammo left.¹³⁰

¹²³ Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: RAC Project: NLC-6-21-2-9-1.

¹²⁴ Memo from Edmund Muskie to the President, December 16, 1980, Folder "El Salvador: 12/80-1/81," Box 21, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Country File, Jimmy Carter Library; Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

¹²⁵ Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: RAC Project: NLC-6-21-2-19-0.

¹²⁶ Special Coordination Committee Meeting, December 11, 1980, Folder "Meetings – SCC 354, 12/11/80," Box 33, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹²⁷ Memo from Robert Pastor to ZB, December 11, 1980, Folder "Meetings – SCC 354, 12/11/80," Box 33, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹²⁸ Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: RAC Project: NLC-24-22-3-9-8.

¹²⁹ Memo from Zbigniew Brzezinski to President, December 16, 1980, Folder "El Salvador: 12/80-1/81," Box 21, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Country File, Jimmy Carter Library; Jimmy Carter Presidential Library: RAC Project: NLC-24-22-5-4-1.

¹³⁰ Memo from Zbigniew Brzezinski to President, January 14, 1981, Folder "El Salvador: 12/80-1/81," Box 21, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Country File, Jimmy Carter Library.

This assistance included a few teams of military advisors,¹³¹ even though Duarte had told White just a few days earlier that what he “did not want or need was US military advisors, Green Berets, or any other military presence that could give the impression of US military participation.”¹³²

El Salvador was now the incoming Reagan administration’s problem. Despite Reagan’s public critique of the Carter administration for not doing enough to help the Salvadoran government resist a Communist insurgency, his plan for intervention in El Salvador differed from Carter’s only in its rhetoric.¹³³ In initial meetings of the Security Council, Reagan complained: “We don’t throw out our friends just because they can’t pass the ‘saliva test’ on human rights,” while General Jones made clear that he saw military advisors as an important way to increase US influence in Latin America and increase the competence of the Salvadoran military.¹³⁴ But the administration soon encountered the political constraints on US intervention in El Salvador. At a meeting on February 11, 1981, just 5 days later, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger observed: “As far as the training teams are concerned, there are problems. If American military men are caught in the crossfire, there is the temptation to send in more men to protect them and we get into a Vietnam situation.”¹³⁵

Besides deciding whether advisors were worth the risk of escalation, the Reagan administration had to consider the international and domestic political costs of sending them. Deploying US advisors throughout El Salvador was the best way to build capacity, but it had serious drawbacks. An interagency report put it this way:

Deployment outside of the capital, however, adds a new dimension to U.S. involvement. It brings U.S. personnel closer to areas that might be subject to attack by major hostile forces, increases U.S. visibility, blurs the distinction between ‘trainer’ and ‘advisor,’ possibly undermines [Government of El Salvador] efforts to project an independent image, could ‘legitimize’ the introduction of Cuban and Nicaraguan ‘advisors’ into El Salvador, and could

¹³¹ Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992*, 180.

¹³² US State Department Telegram “Demarche on Military Assistance,” January 1981, Folder “El Salvador 1/16-19/81,” Box 22, Robert Pastor Country Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹³³ Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992*, 200–220.

¹³⁴ National Security Council Meeting Minutes February 6, 1981, Folder “NSC 0001 6 Feb 1981,” Box 1 Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

¹³⁵ National Security Council Meeting Minutes February 11, 1981, Folder “NSC 0002 11 Feb 1981,” Box 1 Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

also eventually bring us within the terms of the War Powers Resolution. While these teams will be instructed not to accompany Salvadoran units on combat missions, the insurgency is such that their inadvertent involvement in hostilities cannot be discounted.¹³⁶

To overcome the political problems of sending advisors to El Salvador, the DoD proposed sending advisors to Honduras to train Salvadoran troops there. But NSC staff rejected this option and developed an in-country alternative. They argued that US advisors needed to be present in-country in order to influence the Salvadoran troops: “U.S. presence at brigade locations will also have an important disciplining effect on the Salvadorean [sic] troops. The sense of despair and fear when you are in combat alone and losing sometimes leads to acts of brutality and even barbarism. Conversely, any group of soldiers in the world tries to ‘show’ better in the presence of military ‘observers’ from another nation.”¹³⁷

In the end, the NSC staff won. The Reagan administration decided to send in-country advisors to multiple training sites, in both San Salvador and other garrisons, but with clear restrictions: “They would not go on patrol. They would not accompany on helicopter combat missions. They would use arms only in self-defense. They would not be stationed in areas where guerrillas are strong.”¹³⁸ They decided to “avoid the Laos approach” and send the advisors in uniform, to avoid the even worse political consequences of getting caught in a deception. But advisors couldn’t wear their berets in the field, and they had to travel to El Salvador in civilian clothes. They couldn’t be photographed carrying weapons.¹³⁹ To dampen the political consequences at home, the Reagan administration decided to consult with Congress to inform it of the decision, even though administration lawyers determined that the War Powers Act (which limits the President’s authority to deploy troops to participate in hostilities without Congressional approval) did not apply in this case because the advisors would only train rather than accompany Salvadoran soldiers in combat.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ El Salvador Interagency Options Paper for the NSC, February 18, 1981, Folder “NSC 0003 18 Feb 1981 (1/2),” Box 1 Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

¹³⁷ Memo from Robert L Schweitzer and Roger Fontaine for Richard V Allen, February 24, 1981, Folder “NSC 0004 27 Feb 1981 (4/4),” Box 1 Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library. Emphasis in the original.

¹³⁸ National Security Council Meeting Minutes, February 27 1981, Folder “NSC 00004 27 February 1981 (3/4),” Box 1 Executive Secretariat Meeting Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

¹³⁹ In interviews, advisors to El Salvador mentioned how they knew advisors who had been sent home early as punishment for breaking these restrictions.

¹⁴⁰ Legal Considerations, Folder “El Salvador Meetings February 19, 1981,” RAC BOX 7, Roger Fontaine Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

The decision to send in advisors was made in a tense political environment. Advisors were a politically sensitive issue within El Salvador. Duarte was adamant about not being seen as too close to the United States and wanted to keep the US presence to “a bare minimum.”¹⁴¹ As I mentioned previously, he originally did not want advisors and then reversed course when the Reagan administration asked. But the worst political problems were at home. Former Ambassador White (who was promptly fired by Secretary Haig upon taking office) told a Congressional hearing that US military aid would increase killings by government forces and provide the excuse for a right-wing coup. Congress compared the Reagan administration’s proposed policies to the early days of US involvement in Vietnam.¹⁴² In 1983, in response to Congressional pressure, the Reagan administration agreed to limit the number of advisors in country to only 55.¹⁴³ To highlight the distinction between the proposed policy in El Salvador and US policy in Vietnam, the Reagan administration began calling the advisors “trainers” both internally and in discussions with the press. As Richard Allen put it in a letter to Congressman Bill Goodling: “The small number of trainers (not advisors) in no way represents a repetition of the unhappy and ill-conceived Vietnam experience.”¹⁴⁴

Despite its early bluster, the Reagan administration began to view human rights and preventing the military from launching a coup as central to winning the war in El Salvador. Consequently, in March 1982, it once again revisited the question of the US advising mission. NSC staff member Roger Fontaine bemoaned how “the Government of El Salvador continues to be its own worst enemy and demonstrates that it cannot come to grips with the excesses of its security forces.” And the Salvadoran military seemed to be losing the war to boot. To address these twin problems, General Paul Gorman (Commander in Chief, United States Southern Command) recommended that US advisors accompany Salvadoran combat units into combat, which would “ensure most effective use of US intelligence but also would discourage excesses by the units themselves.” NSC staff member Richard Childress responded that the DoD proposal to have advisors accompany Salvadoran forces would be politically

¹⁴¹ Memo for the Secretary of Defense, February 9, 1981, “Military Training Teams (MTTs) and Other US Military Programs for El Salvador.”

https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/MDR_Releases/FY19/FY19_Q4/Military_Training_Teams_and_Other_US_Military_Programs_9Feb1981.pdf

¹⁴² United States Department of State. *Testimony of Ambassador White [Reprint of "Washington Post" Account of Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee]* 1981. El Salvador Collections, DNSA.

¹⁴³ Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992*, 253.

¹⁴⁴ Letter from Richard V. Allen to The Honorable William Goulding, March 81, Folder “El Salvador 03/07/1981 – 03/10/1981,” RAC BOX 6, Roger Fontaine Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

untenable: It would “carry the inherent danger of permanently halting our current program – especially the role of the military advisor in El Salvador. This change could create a lightning rod for Congressional and public sector opposition. The effectiveness of this change on the battlefield becomes irrelevant if its symbolism become [sic] dominant – the President’s announced policy will be cynically viewed as a cover-up for direct US involvement and the emotional baggage of Vietnam will be attached to us immediately.”¹⁴⁵ The proposal was not adopted on essentially these grounds. Due to the political environment, the US advising mission was constrained from carrying out the most effective forms of information gathering and influencing.

The United States had to find other ways of influencing the Salvadoran military. To drive the message home that human rights abuses were counterproductive, the United States enrolled Salvadoran military officers in human rights training in classrooms at Ft. Benning and Ft. Bragg, as well as at the central Salvadoran training center and Salvadoran bases (cuartels). Advisors were supposed to “look in on” the training in the cuartels, although as one advisor put it: “...when I talked about human rights training to a Salvadoran Colonel once he just turned and spat ...and just rolled his eyes. That’s just the complexity of a war.”¹⁴⁶ Other strategic US priorities in reforming the military and the conduct of the war included instituting a prisoner system and civic action program. US advisors were instrumental in enacting these reforms. Another key reform was strengthening command and control of the military by the high command, which helped address the problem of low-level human rights abuses (although not of abuses sanctioned by the high command like the 1989 murder of Jesuit priests).¹⁴⁷

The role of advisors evolved organically on the ground. Advisors initially understood their mission as one of capacity-building (as Robert Pastor had feared), but quickly realized their true mission was monitoring and influencing. One of the first advisors in El Salvador described it this way:

When we were planning and thinking about this in 1980 and before we deployed in ‘81 we considered our role to enhance the combat effectiveness of the Salvadoran army and help their army and air force to defeat the guerrillas on the battlefield. However, once we got

¹⁴⁵ Memo from Richard Childress to William P. Clark, February 26, 1982, Folder “El Salvador 01/29/1982 – 03/01/1982,” Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC Country File, Ronald Reagan Library.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with military advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 12).

¹⁴⁷ Department of State Telegram 065259 “Human Rights Action Plan,” March 82, Folder “El Salvador – Human Rights,” RAC Box 3, Jaqueline Tillman Files, Ronald Reagan Library.

there and it happened within the first six months...we realized the real mission was to guide and correct the behavior of the Salvadoran military.

...The guys in the first OPAT [team of military advisors] went to train up the Atlacatl Battalion. There were two teams, one with the Atlacatl and then my team was sort of roving. We went to Sonsonate and then to Chalatenango. I became aware of an atrocity out in the Sonsonate area and thought that I should probably pull my guys out of there. I went to the MILGP [office in the US Embassy that was coordinating security assistance] and ended up talking with the MILGP ops officer, a Lieutenant Colonel at the time. He was a special forces officer, an old Vietnam guy. And he said, let's go talk about this. And we went over to British club and had some fish and chips and a beer. And essentially what he said is 'You can pull your guys out of there, but then who's going to change how they act?'

And that became where I personally understood the change of mission. Now, to my knowledge the army, from anybody above us to include the MILGP, was still bringing us in telling us how to do tactical operations. In fact, we were put on a helicopter with our brigade ops officers and sent to Panama and shown by the Rangers how to do a proper ambush to kill more guerrillas. So that's where the army was at but that's not where we were at. And that continued as an informal sort of mission at the O-4 [US Major rank] and below level. Now, not everybody adhered to that but most did. And in my opinion, that's what made the difference there because we did change their behavior.¹⁴⁸

Eventually, through the initiative of military advisors on the ground in El Salvador, the advising mission changed from temporary teams of roving advisors to one where advisors were embedded for several months at a time with the Salvadoran brigades. This change happened in 1984, concurrent with major changes in the Salvadoran security sector that reduced the presence and activity of death squads.¹⁴⁹ Embedding with the Salvadorans improved information gathering for monitoring and eventually influenced the behavior of the Salvadoran army. As one advisor put it: "One of the things that I think the OPATs instantly provided was accuracy in what the Salvadorans were really doing.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 16).

¹⁴⁹ Kenneth Finlayson, "OPAT to PAT: El Salvador to Colombia and the Formation of the Planning and Assistance Training Teams," *Veritas* 2, no. 4 (2006), https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_patt_page_1.html.

Could have been a lot better because they weren't allowed to go to the field with them. But they had a finger on the pulse that did not exist before....Once we had people living inside the cuartels, we had the information, and the Salvadorans knew we had the information about what they were doing.¹⁵⁰

Being embedded with local counterparts created the proximity to allow additional informal relationships to develop and create trust between advisors and their counterparts. Advisors would collect information by eating meals with their counterparts and engaging them in conversation.¹⁵¹ A US advisor in El Salvador commented on how advisors formed close bonds with Salvadoran NCOs, who were sidelined by their commanding officers and therefore were grateful to US advisors for working closely with them. US advisors would de-brief them after patrols to get the real story of what happened.¹⁵² Another advisor stated that Salvadoran NCOs were more than willing to share information because US advisors "treated the troops well, and they weren't used to that from their folks, from their officers. And so they would open up to us and tell us what was going on."¹⁵³

While some communication from the Reagan administration to the press noted a lack of monitoring¹⁵⁴ since advisors could not accompany (as does some of the academic literature),¹⁵⁵ advisors in interviews described easy access to information from a wide variety of sources:

...As you're moving around and traveling around, you're talking to real people. Everybody that's out there from all levels, you find yourself meeting with the governor of San Miguel, the mayor of San Miguel, the zone commander in the morning and in the afternoon, you're out there talking to some campesino guy who's at the civil defense of San Alfonso or something....You're talking to the privates, the colonels....*Never before or since have I felt I had more of a finger on the pulse than when we were out there in those locations.*¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Interview with US advisor in El Salvador (Interviewee 22).

¹⁵¹ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 12).

¹⁵² Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 13).

¹⁵³ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 16).

¹⁵⁴ Memo from Oliver L. North to Robert C. McFarlane, March 28, 1984, Folder "El Salvador 11/1/83-3/31/84, Box 30, Executive Secretariat, NSC, Ronald Reagan Library.

¹⁵⁵ Ryan T. Baker, "El Salvador, 1979-92: Revisiting Success," in *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*, ed. Eli Berman and David A. Lake (Cornell University Press, 2019), 142.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 18). Emphasis mine.

In El Salvador, US advisors made hire-and fire decisions (that were then negotiated by US diplomats with the Salvadoran government) about which military officers should assume key command positions and which should be sent to the United States for professional military education, which would position them for promotion. A US advisor to El Salvador put it this way:

What we were tasked to do is to look for officers, primarily officers, that were more moderate to see if we could curry their favor and groom them to take on positions of authority.... We were just looking for those people that we saw had the ability and that we would do our best to encourage. And in some cases, that encouragement would eventually manifest itself in an offer to the Salvadoran military to send these officers and these noncommissioned officers to these training programs in the United States or places like Fort Gulick in Panama...¹⁵⁷

The information advisors provided actually had consequences. A US advisor to Salvadoran officers described how one of his counterparts wanted to “go out and do terrible things.” He complained to his chain of command in the MILGP and “they put the pressure on and he was relieved.” The replacement was “super” and much more receptive to the advice of his advisors.¹⁵⁸ Another advisor described the conditionality attached to monitoring in El Salvador:

I think the presence of US soldiers on most of the cuartels was a deterrent in terms of human rights violations. I think that they knew that the Americans would report violations and if violations were reported, they would lose support in terms of materiel, in terms of advisors, in terms of equipment and ammunition.... I know that during the [1989] offensive, at some of the cuartels, the U.S. advisors were asked to leave just due to the fact that they were seen as rats, so to speak.¹⁵⁹

The real work to “guide and correct the behavior of the Salvadoran military,” as one of my interviewees stated, came through personal relationships and their influence on the ground. Advisors had to begin by providing value for their counterparts: “We worked ourselves into a job...instead of

¹⁵⁷ Interview with US military advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 2).

¹⁵⁸ Interview with US military advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 16).

¹⁵⁹ Interview with US military advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 11).

just being a pain in the ass, we were adding value and that helped.”¹⁶⁰ But their job was not just to add value for their counterpart, advisors were supposed to use their position to advocate for change. As one advisor put it: “...We had three talking points: you must respect human rights, you must support democracy, you must subordinate yourself to civilian leadership, and you’re supposed to say that to every Latin American military you ran into. No matter where you are, that’s what you’re supposed to say to everybody.”¹⁶¹

Embedded advisors used their consistent professional and informal interactions to build influence with their counterparts, inserting themselves into everything from the brigade’s operations to discussions about civil-military relations and human rights with their counterparts. One advisor described influence as the following:

...I can’t give orders, but what I can give is suggestion after suggestion after suggestion, or really just circulate ideas. That’s the cultural part. I’m a pretty gregarious guy. Most of the advisors, they’re not introverts...And so I know these guys. I live with them. I’m in the field with them. I hang out with them and watch TV with them at night. So you could say things like, ‘Well, do you think we could get away with this? Do you think we could try this? Do we have enough money to do this?’ How do you influence people? That is how we did things.¹⁶²

One advisor to the Salvadoran armed forces stated that he would put his counterpart on the spot when planning an operation, asking questions about the target of the operation and the actionable intelligence that prompted it. He would discuss the operation with them before they went out and ask them not to use artillery, aircraft, rockets, etc. against civilians by telling them he would make the case to the US Embassy why they should not get any more foreign aid if they planned bad operations that broke these rules.¹⁶³ In addition, advisors inserted themselves into the politics of civil-military relations. An advisor, who served as commander of the Military Group in El Salvador, described conversations near the end of the war with high-level Salvadoran military officers to make sure they understood that

¹⁶⁰ Interview with US military advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 14).

¹⁶¹ Interview with US military advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 20).

¹⁶² Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 14).

¹⁶³ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 21).

they would have to stand aside and not conduct a coup in order to reach a peace agreement in El Salvador.¹⁶⁴

A key means that advisors used to cultivate influence was to draw attention to the interests they shared with their counterpart. Both wanted fewer guerilla attacks against the brigade or the Salvadoran economy, and the advisor was there to teach his counterpart more effective ways than repression to reach this goal. One advisor described how he had to be selective about which issues he could use his influence to change, but on certain issues he took a stand:

...I felt that it was in the best interest of the cause, to try to get them to change the way they did interrogation....If you were smart about it, you can get intelligence that will end up being very beneficial, and would undermine the insurgent movement. So, these are just little techniques that we used to reduce the level of violence on the part of the Salvadoran Military, and increase effectiveness through a degree of benevolence, versus ruthless conduct.¹⁶⁵

Yet another advisor described having a conversation with his counterpart during social engagements – “Of course it was easy because he was a drunk” – about human rights abuses that the brigade had committed the other day, trying to persuade him to recognize “that just makes more guerillas.”¹⁶⁶

My interviewees frequently told me that they believed their roles of information gathering and influence changed the Salvadoran military over time; one advisor referred directly to these two mechanisms as *constant supervision* and *interaction*:

...In order to change as we did, I think in Salvador, the complexion and nature of a military, it takes *constant supervision, interaction*, and not just saying, we can't work with you, we're going to totally disavow you and never work with you again. I think that's the worst thing we can do if we want to implement values and our ideals on foreign armies, we need to maintain contact, we need to be the examples.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 19).

¹⁶⁵ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 13).

¹⁶⁶ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 16).

¹⁶⁷ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador (Interviewee 11). Emphasis mine.

Did US advisors actually improve the human rights situation and impart more respect for professional norms and democratic control of the military in El Salvador? The picture is mixed. On the one hand, it is universally acknowledged that human rights abuses declined after 1983.¹⁶⁸ The decline is probably the result of some combination of the following factors. First, US conditionality tied to both human rights and civil-military relations empowered the military instead of the more repressive security services such as the National Guard and Police. This conditionality was made possible partly by information gathering by military advisors, in conjunction with intelligence and Embassy sources, which provided specific information not only on the atrocities that were committed but the identity of the perpetrators. Second, broader US diplomatic efforts maintained the political bargain between the civilian political parties in the government and the military, and prompted promotion of Salvadoran officers who were more willing to work with the United States. Third, increased US monitoring and influence through the introduction of US military advisors into the brigades incentivized individual military units to clean up their act. Advisors also provided support and training in military tactics that increased the military's capacity to fight a cleaner counterinsurgency war.

On the other hand, repression could have ended because of its success rather than anything the United States did.¹⁶⁹ By 1983, the guerillas were in a weaker position, partly because many of their leaders had been killed, and so the government did not need to rely on repression. Furthermore, abuses continued throughout the war, with an uptick around the 1989 guerilla offensive, which does indicate that repression was at least partially tied to the government's precarity and perhaps did not vary all that much with US conditionality and influence. While I do not dispute that repression was both severe and perhaps even effective, the success of advisors should be judged against the counterfactual: would repression and civil-military relations have been worse had US advisors not been present? I argue that they would have.

US intervention in El Salvador illustrates not only the successes but also some of the challenges of sending military advisors to work with local militaries. For one, information gathering and influencing

¹⁶⁸ Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

¹⁶⁹ Jacqueline L. Hazelton, "The 'Hearts and Minds' Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (July 1, 2017): 80–113, <https://doi.org/10/ggqg6n>.

are inherently in tension. If an advisor submits a negative report about his counterpart, that report could lead to punishment for the counterpart, which would obviously damage his relationship with his advisor or future advisors. Therefore, to continue to have the trust of their counterparts, advisors often were selective about when to report misbehavior. One US advisor in El Salvador described not looking too closely into issues such as the treatment of prisoners, although on the issue of interrogation, he “felt a moral obligation...to try to get them to change the way they did interrogation.”¹⁷⁰ Another advisor stated he was quite confident there were no large-scale human rights abuses because he had sufficient access to all areas of the cuartel and would have come across such abuses if they were occurring. However, he too stated that he purposely did not look into some issues too closely.¹⁷¹ Advisors, then, were caught in this dilemma: if they were too slow to report human rights abuses they would fail to fulfill their moral obligation and their explicit orders, but if they were too quick to report abuses they could irreparably damage their relationships with their counterparts and therefore lose any influence they had. A former MILGP commander in El Salvador put it this way: “...You can't just obviously be a rat down there. On the other hand, because we talked about it constantly, you may not ignore [human rights abuses].”

When advisors place information gathering and influencing at the center of their mission, the dynamics I describe here are more likely to emerge. However, some advisors decided to focus primarily on building military capacity, eroding their influence. My interviewees who served in El Salvador described debates among advisors about whether their mission was to increase capacity or restrain the proxy military. Some advisors believed “...the central issue was teaching them military doctrine and the military way to do things”¹⁷² while others believed that their mission was to “develop a different social context”¹⁷³ where “the single most important thing we did was enforce human rights.”¹⁷⁴

Advisors also sometimes “went native” and drifted away from US priorities. Major Eric Buckland, US advisor assigned as a National Staff Advisor to the Salvadoran Armed Forces, showed clear signs of identifying too closely with his counterpart, Colonel Carlos Armando Aviles, head of Civil-Military Operations for the Salvadoran Armed Forces. After the Salvadoran Army murdered Jesuit priests of

¹⁷⁰ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador, (Interviewee 13).

¹⁷¹ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador, (Interviewee 5).

¹⁷² Interview with US advisor to El Salvador, (Interviewee 14).

¹⁷³ Interview with US advisor to El Salvador, (Interviewee 14).

¹⁷⁴ Interview with military advisor in El Salvador, US Special Forces, (Interviewee 12).

the Central American University in 1989, Buckland learned the identity of the perpetrators from his counterpart. The “extremely close professional and personal rapport” between Buckland and his counterpart made Aviles willing to confide, leading him to “relay information to [Buckland] not as an El Salvadoran military officer to an American military officer but from ‘Carlos to Eric.’”¹⁷⁵ Buckland chose not to report this information for several weeks because it would be “betraying [his] trust and friendship” with his counterpart¹⁷⁶ – even though the US government needed this information to press the Salvadoran government to investigate the atrocity. In further testimony, Buckland indicated that he identified far too closely with his counterpart, feeling both ambivalence about potential human rights abuses as well as a strong sense of loyalty to El Salvador that outweighed his identity as a US advisor.¹⁷⁷

A few months after Buckland’s actions came to light, the US Military Group Commander issued a memo to all advisors. Advisors, he wrote, must “attempt to stop violations of customs and laws of land warfare, and if unable to stop then, to disassociate yourself and report the violation.” The memo closes with an oblique reference to Buckland’s statements under FBI interrogation: “Let me give you a blunt example: A reference to a human rights violation which describes it as ‘unfortunate’ or ‘coming at a poor time’ is insufficient. Violations of human rights are ‘unprofessional’ and ‘unacceptable.’ Never leave any room for interpretation of your stance.”¹⁷⁸

I have argued that policymakers were aware of the potential of military advisors to influence the Salvadoran military – for good or bad – and thought carefully about whether to deploy them as part of the overall intervention. The political costs to sending advisors were high for both the Carter and Reagan administrations, who cautiously considered ways to limit public visibility despite the costs to the overall effectiveness of the mission. I also demonstrated that advisors were aware of their roles of monitoring and influencing, and the interview and archival data I collected show their ability to fulfill these roles. While the conflict in El Salvador was still a “dirty war” until the end, relative to the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ "U.S. Major Eric Buckland's statement (typed) of prior knowledge of Jesuit murders, addendum, polygraph report, and retraction of original prior knowledge statement." Document. January 1990. *Digital Commonwealth*, <https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth-oai:xw42ng911> (accessed February 01, 2021)

¹⁷⁷ Buckland, Eric W., “Transcript of interview with U.S. Major Eric Buckland regarding Jesuit murders,” *Moakley Archive & Institute*, accessed January 31, 2021, <https://moakleyarchive.omeka.net/items/show/3893>.

¹⁷⁸ United States Southern Command, “Reporting Human Rights Violations,” 1990, El Salvador Collections, DNSA.

counterfactual without their presence, advisors improved the situation through monitoring and influencing their counterparts.

4. Conclusion

States send military advisors to help interveners manage the costs of proxy war by *gathering information* and *influencing* the proxy's military. This political role of advisors is possible because advisors have *access* to the proxy's military through their other role of building military capacity. As information gatherers, advisors provide specific and detailed information about the behavior and attitudes of their counterparts from top military leadership down to officers in the field, the operational environment, and the proxy's military effectiveness. The precision and wide coverage of this information complements other sources of intelligence and allows interveners to hold their proxies accountable without revealing intelligence sources and methods. When watched carefully by advisors, the proxy military is more likely to follow the interests of the intervener than when they are not. Suggestive evidence from interviews and archival sources shows that both interveners and advisors expect that monitoring will lead to more compliance.

In addition, the personal relationships advisors develop with their counterparts allow them to move beyond this more narrow role of gathering information and serve as conduits of influence for the intervener at the local level. As such, advisors rely on persuasion and informal interactions with their counterparts to influence their decision-making on issues ranging from military effectiveness to proper restraint in the use of force. Advisors cultivate this influence first by providing value for their local counterparts and encouraging them to make self-interested changes in behavior. As the relationship between advisor and counterpart deepens, however, advisors can leverage these personal connections to influence their counterparts' beliefs.

By focusing only on the military capacity building role of advisors, we overlook an important tool for interveners to directly shape a military at the local level. While this influence operates within the constraints of the overall strategic relationship between the intervener and proxy, advisors can play the same role for the proxy's military as diplomats do for its government, nudging it toward better outcomes.

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Appendix

I interviewed 28 current or retired members of the United States Army who had served as military advisors between 1970-2019, and one civilian who served in a government agency with involvement in US intervention in Afghanistan. Interviewees were selected using snowball sampling: I reached out to my contacts who served in the US military and asked for referrals to colleagues who had served in an advising capacity. In addition to ensuring good coverage of the major US interventions of the past 20 years, I focused specifically on US intervention in El Salvador (1979-1992). I identified people who served as advisors in El Salvador using a list of officers and non-commissioned officers who received a combat decoration for their service in the conflict.¹⁷⁹ I reached out via email or LinkedIn to establish initial contacts across different networks of advisors who had served in different capacities and with different military units/security services in El Salvador, and then used snowball sampling to identify other interviewees. Jacqueline Hazleton also provided crucial assistance in establishing initial contacts with military advisors who served in El Salvador.

16 of my interviewees served in El Salvador, 7 served in Afghanistan, 5 served in Iraq, 2 in Ukraine, and 1 in Syria. The numbers do not add up to 28 due to some advisors serving in multiple conflicts.

After establishing contact with an interviewee, I conducted an interview ranging from 1-4 hours, with the average interview length around 90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured; I asked a generic set of questions to each interviewee (listed below) and then asked follow-up questions depending on their answers. Most interviews were recorded and on the record, but interviewees were given the option not to record the interview and to keep their identity confidential. If the interview was recorded, transcripts were made using Rev (machine-produced and human-edited) and Trint (machine-produced). I then reviewed and edited the transcripts for accuracy. If the interview was not recorded due to the interviewee's choice or failure of the recording device, I took notes during the interview and then filled them in with my best recollection and impressions immediately after concluding the interview. Using transcripts and notes, I then hand-coded the interviews for major themes related to information gathering and influencing. In this draft, I have decided to keep all interviewees anonymous to protect their privacy.

The generic interview protocol I used for the semi-structured interviews follows below. Subjects either were asked these questions in an interview or filled out the questionnaire via email. For interviews, I would then ask follow up questions based on interviewees' responses to these questions. The interview protocol for advisors who served in El Salvador was slightly different from the generic protocol; questions asked only to advisors who served in El Salvador are bolded. I occasionally asked only a subset of these questions if we ran out of time during the interview.

Question Protocol

1. Describe your experience in the US military. What was your training or military qualifications?
Your MOS?
2. **When you served in El Salvador, were you part of the 55 advisors in-country or was it a temporary duty assignment?**

¹⁷⁹ Mumma, Jr. Nelson. "El Salvador vets honored," *Sine Pari*, August 1998, Vol. 2, No. 4. <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=opSS9Xmsjw4C&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA23>

3. When you were deployed as an advisor, where were you assigned, specifically what region, department, or province?
4. Role as military advisor: what local forces were you advising? If possible, share specific military units and their capabilities. What size unit (Platoon, Company, Battalion-size element)? Or were you advising a Brigade staff? What is the US equivalent?
5. What training or briefings did you receive before being assigned?
6. What was the capability you were ask to build? Do you know if this capacity was requested by the local partner or as a result of guidance by US leaders?
7. What were your responsibilities as military advisor? What did your day-to-day routine look like?
8. Describe the combat quality of the military force you were advising. What were their strengths and weaknesses?
9. Describe your relationship with the leadership of the unit you were advising.
10. What were the main challenges in your role as a military advisor?
11. What limitations did US leadership put in place and what affect did it have on your mission?
- 12. If they won combat award: can you tell me how you received your combat award in El Salvador?**
13. Did you engage in combat with the forces you were advising? If so, describe some major operations that you undertook.
14. Do you know if the forces you trained engage in combat operations? If so, how did they perform?
15. Did you witness any human rights abuses or any actions contrary to US interests while acting as an advisor? If so, what did you do?
16. Did you have a formal means of measuring success of your mission? How would you rate the improvement in the local ally over time?
17. When and where should advisors be sent?
18. When your assignment ended, were you replaced by other military advisors?
19. Any other comments you would like to add?
20. Anyone you could refer me to?