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Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War by Diana Villiers Negroponte (review)

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*Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War.* By Diana Villiers Negroponete. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, Pp, 244, Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$95.00 hardcover.

On January 16, 1992, on an international stage in Mexico City, the peace accords were signed that ended El Salvador's 12-year civil war. The underlying cause of the war was endemic social and economic inequality--an inequality that was facilitated by the alliance of the national armed forces with powerful elites through decades of military domination of society. To understand how the armed conflict challenged this status quo requires looking beyond domestic tensions and taking into account Cold War geo-politics and the myriad of international actors who took sides and perpetuated the civil war, as well as those who were essential to negotiating the terms of its cessation. Diana Villiers Negroponete provides a comprehensive political history that details this multi-faceted context. Presenting the background to the conflict and a thorough chronology of the peacemaking process, Negroponete identifies the national actors and interests, as well as the regional, super-power, and international community actors involved. The theoretical core applies three different models of political mediation to the actors and actions that ultimately concluded El Salvador's civil war. The author identifies the protagonists, the mediators and the spoilers of the protracted process of peace negotiation. After addressing the "Ancient Conflicts, Modern Violence" that underpinned the civil war, the book unfolds with chapters that examine the internal socio-political dynamics of guerrilla forces and popular movements gathered behind the leftist Frente Farabundo

Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and the Frente Democrática Revolucionaria (FDR); and the “Internal Pressures” for a negotiated solution to the war that involved conservative politicians affiliated with the Alianza Republica Nacional (ARENA), as well as the Jesuits and the USAID funded Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico Social (FUSADES). A chapter focused on the role and influence of the United States government takes us through the transition from Cold War antagonisms played out in Central America to pressure from the State Department to reach a solution to end El Salvador’s conflict. Among the other “external Influences” examined include the FMLN’s relations with Moscow, Nicaragua and Cuba as well as the consequences of Soviet President Gorbachev’s reform policy that transformed Soviet Union support for Central America’s national liberation movements. The Mexican government is another important external actor especially during the 1989-1991 period of negotiation. The peacekeeping and mediator role of the United Nations is introduced and critical moments in the negotiations are detailed. The achievements of the peace accords include the collection of evidence for the UN Truth Commission. While noteworthy for recognizing the excesses of state violence against civilians in El Salvador’s war, this achievement is deflated by the subsequent passage of a general amnesty law that prevents the prosecution of perpetrators of atrocities. Other remaining challenges included contradictory economic philosophies held by the major political parties, incomplete judicial reform, and an inability of “old fighters” to shake off the enmity generated by the civil war. The book concludes with a reflection on contemporary El Salvador. Today, in the aftermath of civil war, El Salvador demonstrates increased

democratization in particular as evidenced by political pluralism. The FMLN has gained the presidency and their power sharing with ARENA extends throughout the nation. The withdrawal of the armed forces and the formation of a national police force attempts to correct a tradition of impunity. The reform of the judiciary continues to take shape. In economic terms, El Salvador has modernized its economy in line with the “Washington Consensus”. However, the neoliberal policies have not benefitted most Salvadorans and the gap between rich and poor widens. Emigration continues to be one of the few options for economic mobility. Negroponte concludes that the peace accords did not solve all of El Salvador’s woes. Nonetheless, the process of international mediation examined in this important book offers a valuable lens on contemporary political conflict resolution.

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