

TEN KEY REASONS TO CLOSE THE SOA/ WHINSEC

TALKING POINTS TO CLOSE THE SOA/ WHINSEC – 111TH CONGRESS

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[1] The existence of WHINSEC is only a name change

In response to the mounting international campaign to close the SOA/ WHINSEC following the disclosure that torture manuals were used at the school, as well as a United Nations report citing the connections between graduates of the school and human rights abuses in Latin America, the House of Representatives voted 230 to 197 in 1999 to close the institution. In response, the DOD mounted a campaign to convince Congress that the school could teach human rights and democracy, and closed the school for three weeks. The school was reopened in the same buildings, with the same instructors, and virtually the same curriculum. Statements from the school's supporters confirm that this deceptive tactic to change the name of the school was exactly that, a change in name only:

- In a media interview, the late Paul Coverdale, former Senator, characterized the DOD proposal as "cosmetic" changes that would ensure that the SOA could continue its mission and operation.
- A military TRADOC study determined "that negative publicity about the School would probably continue and that a new name for the School may be an appropriate way to break with the past."
- Major Joe Blair, a former instructor at the SOA, Bronze Star recipient and career political military officer noted, "White washing a perverted past with an institutional name change has done nothing to promote democracy and liberty in our western hemisphere."

[2] There is no oversight or accountability for WHINSEC

After the name change to WHINSEC, Congress and the public are less informed about the impact that WHINSEC has on Latin America. After SOA Watch publicized and shared information with Congress and the public about known human rights abusers attending the school, FOIA requests for the name, rank, and country of origin for WHINSEC attendees have been denied to human rights organizations. Despite claims of transparency and oversight, the recent refusal to allow tracking of graduates to determine the impact that graduates have in their home countries demonstrates that WHINSEC continues to operate in the dark. Not only do they refuse to implement a tracking mechanism of their graduates, but they also prevent tracking from independent research by human rights groups.

The Board of Visitors (BOV) that is supposed to provide oversight for the school has a provision for the possible inclusion of members of the human rights, religious and academic communities. However, these communities are not defined nor any selection criteria established. Furthermore, nothing mandates the inclusion of independent human rights experts, religious leaders or other potential critics. It is solely in the discretion of the Secretary of Defense to determine whether or not it is "practicable" to include independent organizations. With the majority of the BOV represented by officials working with the military, the BOV does not provide independent and outside review, oversight or accountability.

[3] The existence of SOA/ WHINSEC damages our relationship with Latin America

As of October 2008, Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Costa Rica have all made public announcements that they will no longer send students to WHINSEC. In meetings with human rights organizations, these countries cited the negative human rights message this institution sends to the people in their nations. Comments from representative Defense Ministers include experiencing first hand the horrors of tortures, detention, imprisonments and "disappearances" caused by WHINSEC's graduates. They also stated that knowing the history of the school, "we have absolutely no need for training at this kind of school." A former Uruguayan general expressed feeling "used" by the Pentagon to protect U.S. interests, to the point of leading (many of his) fellow officers to repress, torture and kill their own people. Latin American nations are pulling away from WHINSEC and from United States policies as a whole. Closing the school would send a strong positive human rights message to these nations and to the world.

[4] WHINSEC's human rights public relations campaign is old news

Knowing that Congress demanded the closure of the SOA due to connections to human rights atrocities at a time when 8 hours of human rights courses were already a part of the school's curriculum, demonstrates that mounting a public relations

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campaign to promote those 8 hours of human rights discussion does not represent a NEW reform that changed conditions at the school, but rather a continuation of existing policy. Something to think about: ask yourself what course you took in school to learn the meaning of, and how to promote, human rights. What possible human behavior will be modified or changed because a military student sat through an eight-hour class? What principles of democracy can be taught to soldiers whose armies are universally undemocratic?

There is no requirement that the new school seek input from noted, outside human rights specialists and no provision to modify human rights content to address specific human rights issues in particular countries (for example, paramilitaries in Colombia). The fact remains that like the SOA, WHINSEC is a military institution and Latin American troops will be hosted and educated in military skills. The clearest proof of this is to ask how many soldiers would come to the school if it removed ALL combat-related training? We must also ask that if the primary purpose of the institution is to teach democracy and human rights, as claimed, wouldn't it be more appropriate to instill these values in a civilian setting with proper oversight and independent representation?

[5] WHINSEC's "commitment to human rights" includes admitting known human rights abusers

Despite WHINSEC's claims that applicants undergo a stringent, five-step vetting process, they look the other way when known human rights abusers seek the reward of U.S. military training. There are a number of students with well-documented prior histories of human rights abuses who have studied at WHINSEC, including:

- Colonel Francisco del Cid Diaz of El Salvador (whose high profile and notorious massacre was cited in the annual State Department Human Rights Country Reports and investigated by the El Salvador Truth Commission and the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) - *Attended WHINSEC in 2003*
- Captain Filmann Urzagaste Rodriguez of Bolivia (indicted for the kidnapping and torture of the then director of the Popular Assembly for Human Rights in Bolivia and now the Human Rights Defender, Ombudsman) - *Attended WHINSEC in 2002*
- Captain Dario Siero Chapeta, Lt. Col. Francisco Patino Fonseca, and Captain Luis Benavides Guancha, three Colombian police officers (investigated for personal use of counter-narcotics funds and corruption). - *Attended WHINSEC 2002, 2003*

The fact is, students with known human rights violations and problems of corruption repeatedly attend courses at an institution that boasts about the "meticulous screening process" that all students pass to ensure they are "law-abiding citizens". This undermines the claim that WHINSEC "teaches" respect for human rights, or that it is serious about claiming to train "only personnel of unquestionable character." To the contrary, these cases can be interpreted as the WHINSEC's -- or more seriously the U.S. -- rewarding of human rights violators with the honor of studying in the United States.

[6] Graduates of the school are more likely to commit human rights abuses

In a recent master's thesis researched at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Katherine McCoy evaluated whether U.S. military training helps improve human rights in other countries and used a statistical sample of graduates of the SOA/ WHINSEC from six countries tracked over a 40-year period to determine what effect SOA/WHINSEC training had on graduates' human rights records. The school argues that human rights abuses committed by graduates represent only a "few bad apples" but this unique study found:

- [a] Graduates who took more courses were more often the perpetrators of human rights (McCoy)
- [b] Taking into account type of SOA/WHINSEC training, civil wars, dictatorships, rank, and time attended, soldiers who took two or more courses were almost four times more likely to have committed human rights violations than soldiers who took one course. These results are highly significant: "Hence when reviewing differences in rates of human rights abuses among graduates of the School of the Americas, we find that the worst offenders are students who took more than one class at the SOA...this suggests that more courses in fact result in much higher rates of abuse." (McCoy)
- [c] "Another key finding of this study is that, contrary to the Army's claim that the School of the Americas has corrected past faults and that professional standards have been raised over time to promote the highest respect for human rights, there is no statistical evidence that students who attended the SOA in the 1990s were less likely to engage in human rights violations than those who graduated in the 1960s. . .the absence of any indicator that SOA graduates improved over time with respect to human rights raises the possibility that recent reforms have not managed to curb existing patterns of human rights violations." (McCoy)

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Despite the addition of human rights components to the curriculum, this study found that these reforms do not affect the negative human rights impact of the school. Because the training has never been analyzed or scrutinized, and because past reforms did not result in statistical changes in human rights violations, we cannot assume that the current “reforms” have had any positive impact. The U.S. Army, DoD and the U.S. Congress have failed to deal with the pervasive record of the SOA. These examples illustrate that “reforming” the SOA/WHINSEC has not and will not result in significant or substantive change in the training or democratization of Latin America or Latin American militaries.

[7] Thousands of deaths and disappearances at the hands of SOA/ WHINSEC graduates

It is not a coincidence that some of the most notorious dictators and worst human rights massacres in Latin America are linked to graduates of the SOA/ WHINSEC. Among the SOA's more than 60,000 alumni are notorious dictators Manuel Noriega and Omar Torrijos of Panama, Leopoldo Galtieri and Roberto Viola of Argentina, Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru, Guillermo Rodriguez of Ecuador and Hugo Banzar Suarez of Bolivia. SOA graduates were responsible for the Uraba massacre in Colombia, the El Mozote massacre of 900 civilians in El Salvador, the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the massacre of 14-year-old Celina Ramos, her mother Elba Ramos and six Jesuit priests in El Salvador, countless incidents of torture and hundreds of other human rights abuses.

Yes, any institution could have a graduate who commits terrible crimes. However, any institution with such a high percentage of its graduates committing such despicable crimes related directly to the skills they received from that institution should raise a large, red flag about the need for investigation.

[8] SOA/ WHINSEC tactics subvert oversight and valid opposition

No other military training facility has to go to such great lengths, spending taxpayer dollars on a nationwide PR campaign to justify the existence of their programs. According to the official history of the School of the Americas written by staffer Joe Leuer, the SOA developed an Interagency Working Group to defend the school in 1994. Leuer credits this Working Group with preventing a Congressional vote in 1995, “convincing key Congressional members that the 1996 vote should be withdrawn”, and attempting “to retaliate using its own internal assets.” Then Secretary of the Army Togo West had to issue an order that the Group disband and “not independently generate position papers or advocacy pieces designed to influence outside audiences, including Congress, the media, and the general public.” Since the SOA was renamed WHINSEC, several tactics have been employed by the Army’s Strategic Communications Campaign Plan including a monthly “road show” coordinated by the PR office, harassment of grassroots activists both at work and home, and bi-weekly “letters to the editor/op-ed review and submission” campaigns. In addition, an FBI counterterrorism investigation now focuses on SOA Watch and its supporters speaking out against torture.

[9] Time has come to reevaluate foreign policy priorities with Latin America

Given the well documented evidence of continued human rights abuses in Latin America, it’s time to reevaluate why military assistance comprises so much of our overall assistance to Latin America. The needs of Latin American nations are not weapons and military training, but much needed development assistance programs that can truly benefit the health and well-being of their citizens. For centuries, conflicts in Latin America have not been between nations, but between citizens in civil conflicts whereby U.S. military assistance provides the tools to Latin American militaries to wage war against their own people. WHINSEC course offerings are no different than those at the SOA. Congressional Certification Reports have indicated that over 85% took the standard SOA fare including: commando tactics, military intelligence, psychological operations, and combat training. Newspaper headlines sum it up: “Bombs and Bullets Most Popular Classes at the US Army School of the Americas.”

[10] You are not alone: Support to investigate and close the school is gaining Congressional support

The House of Representatives has already voted to close this institution, and the name change to WHINSEC ignores many of the changes Congress has already called for. In the 110th Congress, 125 bipartisan representatives cosponsored legislation to suspend operations at the school pending an investigation into the use of torture manuals and the school’s connections to human rights abuses, and 203 voted in June 2007 to cut funding for the institution. Senior members of Congress from both parties are included in the growing support for investigating and/or closing the school.

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- To ask that a Representative be added as a cosponsor of HR 2567 to suspend operations at the SOA/ WHINSEC pending investigation of the school and conduct an overall assessment of foreign military training in Latin America, have them contact Cindy Buhl in Rep. McGovern’s office.
 - For more information about the research in this document, contact SOA Watch at (202) 234-3440 or info@soaw.org