

A brief history of the SOA Watch Movement

On Nov. 16, 1989, 14 year old Celina Ramos, her mother Elba Ramos, and six Jesuit priests were massacred in El Salvador. A US Congressional Task Force reported that most of the killers were trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) at Ft. Benning, GA. Since then, mounting evidence proves soldiers who trained at the SOA are and continue to be responsible for the worst human rights abuses in Latin America.

SOA Watch began in a tiny apartment outside the main gate of Ft. Benning by Fr. Roy Bourgeois in 1990. The vigils and activities quickly grew, drawing upon the knowledge and experience of many in the U.S. who had worked with people in Latin America in the 1970's and 80's. Today, SOA Watch is a large, grassroots movement rooted in solidarity with the people most affected by the SOA- those poor and oppressed.

The main goal of SOA Watch is to close the SOA/ WHINSEC, but also to change oppressive U.S. foreign policy in Latin America by educating the public, lobbying Congress and participating in creative, nonviolent action. In response to the success of constituent pressure on Congress, the Pentagon launched a public relations campaign to give the SOA a new image. Their most brazen act was to simply rename the school to "The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC)" which took effect in Jan. 2001.

You can change the name, but you can't take away the shame!

Despite cosmetic changes that have occurred throughout the last decade clearly in direct response to grassroots exposure, people of conscience all over the world continue to call for an end to this institution that is connected to so much bloodshed and suffering.

There is much work to be done and we invite you to join the SOA Watch movement:

- ❖ SOA Watch is rooted in non-violence and civil disobedience. Over the years...
 - Thousands of people have participated in other acts of civil disobedience at the SOA or at the Pentagon. Over 300 people have been tried and as a result, more than 200 SOA Watch human rights defenders have collectively spent over 90 years in prison and more than 50 probation sentences ranging from 6 – 36 months have been given out. Most defendants have also received fines ranging from \$500- \$3,000.
 - Activists have fasted and lobbied- 10 activists in 1990 participated in a 35-day water-only fast at the main gate of Fort Benning; 11 activists held a 40-day juice-only fast on the Capitol steps in 1994; 17 held a 31-day juice-only fast at the main gate in 2001.
- ❖ SOA Watch includes many active, hardworking SOA Watch groups in the U.S. and beyond its borders.
- ❖ Many faith communities, student groups, national and local labor unions and veterans groups around the country, strengthen SOA Watch.

We are grateful to our sisters and brothers of Latin America for their inspiration and invitation to accompany them in their struggle for peace and justice. We also acknowledge the hard work and many sacrifices made by the many organizations, groups, and individuals in the SOA Watch Movement.

A brief history of the SOA and SOA Watch

Early 1800s onwards: numerous US land grabs and interventions in Latin America & Caribbean.



1946: SOA predecessor opens in Panama

1970s: Somoza's Nicaraguan National Guard trains at the SOA

1980s: Civil War of El Salvador. Salvadoran military — including the Atlacatl Battalion — train at the SOA

1983: Fr. Roy Bourgeois, impersonating an officer, enters Ft. Benning, climbs tree next to the Salvadoran barracks, and after dark loudly plays the tape of Archbishop Oscar Romero's last homily. Gets 18 months in prison.

1984: Booted out of Panama, the SOA "School of Coups" moves to Ft. Benning, GA.

1989: On Nov. 16 the Atlacatl Battalion perpetrates the Jesuit massacre at University of Central America in San Salvador.

1990: Roy moves into tiny apartment across the street from Ft. Benning's main entrance and founds SOA Watch. Roy, Kathy Kelly, and eight others do a 35-day water-only fast at Benning's main gate

1993: Rep. Joe Kennedy (D-MA) introduces anti-SOA bill—we lose by 87 votes.

1994: On Jan. 1, in response to NAFTA, the Zapatistas rise up in Mexico; the number of Mexican soldiers sent to the SOA increases sharply. Roy and ten others do a 40-day juice-only fast on the steps of the Capitol in DC. Joe Kennedy introduces second bill to close SOA—we lose by 42 votes.

1995: Beginning of strategy to do direct actions at Ft. Benning's main entrance every November on or just after November 16. On November 16 some of the "SOA 13" simulate Jesuit massacre at the gate; octogenarian Judge J. Robert Elliott gives each a sentence ranging from two to six months in federal prison for "trespass."

1996: SOA Watch office in DC opens to do legislative work. Pentagon forced to release SOA training manuals; numerous passages encourage torture, extortion, and "neutralizing" and in general are permeated with contempt for law and democracy.

1997: Six hundred briefly detained for "crossing the line." Orbis Books publishes Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer's *School of Assassins* (revised edition 2001)

1998: Over 2,000 cross the line—with 8,000 supporters present; one of the largest civil disobedience actions in the US since the Viet Nam War. There are no prosecutions.

1999: Over 4,000 cross the line—with 6,000 present. The following year 10 of these go to prison for three months each.

2000: Several thousand cross the line—with thousands of supporters present. 26 "recidivists" are prosecuted; one gets probation; 25 get prison—most for six months.

In April, SOA Watchers take part in A16, the anti-World Bank mobilization; many spend five nights in the DC jail doing jail solidarity. "Gandhian Wave" civil disobedience actions begin" periodically as SOA Watchers do direct actions at the SOA or at the main gate apart from the annual November vigil action.

In December the SOA "closes," i.e. takes a holiday break.

2001: In January the SOA re-opens under a new alias: the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Within months, Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) introduces HR 1810 calling for a close to WHISC. In May, 26 people received sentences ranging from two years of probation to one year in federal prison for acts of nonviolent civil disobedience in November of 2000.

2002: In a historic ruling, Judge Faircloth acknowledges the right to assemble as endowed by the First Amendments, and grants SOA Watch protestors the right to continue gathering at the gates of Fort Benning each November. Forty-three people faced trial in July 2002 for civil resistance at the gates of Fort Benning. Rebecca Johnson is arrested for her direct action at the gates of Ft. Benning protesting this trial – she is later tried and sentenced to six months in prison.

2003: Representative Jim McGovern and 49 other Representatives introduce HR 1258. In January and February, 86 people arrested in November of 2002 face trial in front of Magistrate Faircloth. In November, 10,000 gather at the gates of Fort Benning.

2004: In January, 27 SOA Watch activists went on trial for arrests the previous November; twenty-three of the defendants were sentenced to time in prison. Fr. Roy Bourgeois and a delegation meet with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Chavez announces that Venezuela will no longer send troops to train at the SOA/WHINSEC. In October, the 11th Circuit Court rules that the city of Columbus may not search each protestor as they enter the SOA Watch vigil site, noting that the searches performed at the 2002 and 2003 vigils violated the First and Fourth Amendments. In November 16,000 gather.

2005: In January, 14 people face trial before Judge Faircloth. Eleven are sentenced to federal prison. In March, Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) introduces HR 1217 with more than 75 bi-partisan co-sponsors to investigate and suspend operations at the SOA/WHINSEC. Over 19,000 people come to the gates of Ft. Benning in November to protest the SOA/WHINSEC.

2006: In February 37 members of our movement go to trial and 35 are sentenced to federal prison.

After a historic Latin America delegation of human rights activists, Uruguay and Argentina publicly denounce the SOA/WHINSEC legacy of torture and violence and stop sending troops to train at the SOA/WHINSEC.

In June, Representatives James McGovern (MA) and John Lewis (GA) introduce an amendment to the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill to cut funding for WHINSEC. The amendment failed by a vote of 188-218. While over 20,000 attended the annual demonstration at the gates of Fort Benning, thousands more gathered at protests and vigils throughout the Americas. Coordinated actions calling for the closure of the SOA took place over the weekend of Nov. 17-19 in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Paraguay and Peru, as well as in Ireland, Canada and at other sites in the US.

2007: In January 16 human rights advocates are sentenced to federal prison and probation. In March, after meeting with an SOA Watch delegation, President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica announces that they will no longer send police to be trained at the SOA/WHINSEC. Later this year President Evo Morales announces that Bolivia will similarly no longer send troops to the SOA/WHINSEC.

In June, thousands of SOA Watch supporters and partner organizations mobilized to support an amendment to the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill to cut funding for the SOA/WHINSEC. The amendment, introduced by Representatives James McGovern (MA) and John Lewis (GA), failed by a vote of 203-214.

2008: In January 11 human rights advocates are sentenced to 1 – 3 months in federal prison and regional jail facilities. In May, Representatives Jim McGovern (MA), Joe Sestak (PA) and Sanford Bishop (GA) introduce an amendment to the Defense Authorization bill to release the names of the students and instructors at the SOA/WHINSEC...

