

by Gary Ashbeck and Joseph E. Mulligan, S.J.  
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Some faculty and students of Jesuit and other universities are being invited to make an officially approved visit to the U.S. Army's Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), formerly the School of the Americas (SOA). Those who accept the invitation may be able to raise some important questions and to learn some interesting things about WHINSEC, but they should recognize that they will be entering onto the Army's well-financed public-relations turf. Military officials would not extend the invitation if they were not confident that they could make a good presentation of their Institute -- within their desired parameters of analysis.

To those who may visit the Institute we would like to offer the statement (see below) which we and others issued last November when we "crossed the line" at Ft. Benning. We tried to express aspects of our opposition to WHINSEC which are broader than the reasons which have to do with the past -- teaching torture (which the Pentagon admitted in 1996), training future human-rights violators and even a few dictators, etc.

Visitors must be prepared to hear distortions of the truth. For instance, in the past Army spokespersons at WHINSEC have denied such basic facts as the existence of the torture manuals ([which can be seen online here](#)). It is hard to debate when your adversary uses falsehoods.

For the reasons given in our statement, we urge the closure of the Institute rather than its reform. As you may know, Rep. Jim McGovern has introduced a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives which calls for the appointment of a truly independent investigating commission; during the investigation, the Institute would be suspended. We support this bill.

In our opinion, there is considerable risk that your visit and any possible public statements which you may make afterwards about the Army's positive presentation would lend support to the Institute and would be used to counteract the impact of the massive participation of students and faculty in the November protest and the impact of the Jesuit martyrs of the Central American University on this question of WHINSEC. This does not mean that we are discouraging such visits, but we would suggest that visitors recognize afterwards that they have heard only one side of the story.

We grant that the U.S. Army instructors are probably not teaching torture now, and we acknowledge that they are including a few human-rights and democracy units in their curriculum. These aspects will most likely be highlighted by the military to the visitors, who would in fairness report what the military is asserting.

But, as we explained in our statement, for us and many other opponents of the Institute, our criticism is not at this level, but deeper and broader. It has to do with our view of the imperial role of the U.S. military in the world at this time, as well as the repressive role of Latin American armies in their countries. However, this is probably a level of analysis which could not be entertained during a relatively brief visit to the Institute. In this regard, we recommend the

thorough analysis presented by Lesley Gill in her book, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2004), based on unprecedented access to SOA/WHINSEC.

**The following is the statement of some of the defendants:**

"IS THE CAUSE WORTH A PRECIOUS SOLDIER'S LIFE?"  
STATEMENT ON PARTICIPATING IN THE PROTEST AGAINST SOA/WHINSEC  
November 23, 2003

There are many and varied reasons for opposing the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC, formerly the School of the Americas -- SOA).

We are here today to repudiate the U.S. Army's practice in the past of using torture manuals in the training of Latin American soldiers.

We are here today to reject SOA's record of training dictators, torturers, and other human-rights violators. Some of its graduates participated in the brutal assassination of the six Jesuit priests and the two women in San Salvador in 1989. These martyrs are present with us here in Columbus, Ga., this weekend as we revere and honor in our Mass and procession a very significant relic of them -- some of the blood which they shed for the people of El Salvador, which was collected from the garden where they had been slain.

In another case, Father James Carney, who had been in basic training at Ft. Benning before serving in Europe during World War II in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, disappeared in Honduras in 1983; some of the Honduran troops alleged to have been involved in his torture and disappearance were products of the SOA.

But we are not concerned only about past atrocities. And our concern goes beyond the question of whether a few human-rights units are included in the institute's curriculum. Indeed, when Father Joseph Mulligan visited the SOA in 1990, some instructors told him that some mention was being made of the notion of human rights but that the trainees did not take it seriously, throwing in the teachers' faces the facts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and other U.S. atrocities.

One of our main reasons for demanding that the U.S. government close SOA/WHINSEC has to do with the recruitment of Latin American troops into the military strategies and operations of the U.S. government. SOA/WHINSEC is a symbol and instrument of this, as its very name indicates. Other countries of the hemisphere have been pressured into sending token forces (about two hundred from each of several nations) to cooperate in a military occupation which the Bush administration has defined as necessary for U.S. security. Do the people of Latin America need to participate in this kind of "security cooperation"?

Troops from Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic have joined U.S. soldiers in Iraq, which we find very sad and ironic. It is especially ironic in the case of Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, since those countries were occupied by the U.S. military in the early 20th century.

Another reason for closing SOA/WHINSEC has to do with the nature and purpose of the Latin American military forces. They do not exist primarily to defend one nation against another, but rather to protect an unjust and inequitable distribution of resources within each country against movements of social and political change. By training and equipping the armed forces of Latin America, the U.S. military is strengthening the hand of the privileged elites in their efforts to repress unions, farmers, students, and others struggling for justice. The most needed priority for Latin America is not further militarization.

As Christians we hope and struggle for a world of justice and peace: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied.... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5).

Of course, this year the demonstration against SOA/WHINSEC is an occasion to express opposition to the invasion and the current occupation of Iraq as well as the growing militarism of the U.S.

We grieve for the U.S. soldiers who have been killed in Iraq, and our hearts go out to their loved ones. We are also profoundly saddened by the far greater number of Iraqi deaths resulting from the U.S. invasion and military occupation. And we are deeply concerned about the troops from Latin American countries and from other nations who are in Iraq.

We support these troops, but we want to do more than pray for them and send condolences to their families when they die. And so we say: bring them home, save their lives.

They are seen by many as foreign invaders in Iraq, and they seem to be killing more and more innocent civilians in their pursuit of the guerrilla combatants.

To the U.S. and Latin American soldiers in training at Ft. Bennett, Ft. Bragg, and other military installations, we say: please reflect seriously on the reasons which have been given for the war in Iraq. Weapons of mass destruction? Ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda terrorists?

Or does it have more to do with oil and other natural resources in the Middle East, and lucrative construction contracts for well-connected U.S. corporations, and privatizing the Iraqi economy for American companies?

Do you want to risk your life, and risk leaving your family without you, and kill Iraqi militants and civilians for such purposes of the Bush administration? If not, please consider applying for conscientious objector status.

Vernon Baker, who received the Medal of Honor for his bravery as a 2nd Lt. in World War II, has said: "Before we fight a war, we have to ask ourselves a basic question: Is the cause worth a precious soldier's life? Each of our soldiers has loved ones, and if you can't answer the question `yes,' then don't fight the war" (Chicago Tribune, Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2003).

Let us all follow our conscience, being faithful to the truth as we see it. As Jesus said: "if you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the

truth will set you free" (John 8:31-31).

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