



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
www.comunica.org/passion/

Chapter 7

The Stubborn Izote¹ Flower

José Ignacio López Vigil

Who hasn't heard of Radio Venceremos, the official voice for the FMLN the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front? This guerrilla radio station, whose name means "we will win," stood by the side of the Salvadorean people and broadcast their struggle during eleven interminable years. Quite a record for pirate radio. In such a minuscule country as El Salvador – 21,000 square kilometres and against an army supplied with the latest in sophisticated weaponry by the United States, the resistance work of Venceremos is a heroic and incredible feat.

In the book The Thousand and One Stories of Radio Venceremos² José Ignacio López Vigil recounts the stories of those involved with Venceremos: how their first broadcasts originated from bomb shelters under the rain of 500 pound bombs, how they recorded reports from the frontlines, the jokes played on gringo radio engineers, the shooting down of the helicopter which carried Monterrosa, the Rambo of the Salvadorean Army, where he carried away like a trophy what appeared to be a Venceremos transmitter but which actually housed eight sticks of dynamite. Dozens of vivid anecdotes recounted by people who produced radio with one hand on the microphone and the other on a gun.

The following chapter is a selection from the book. It tells the story of Radio Venceremos' role in forcing negotiations, a decisive moment leading to the recent signing of the peace agreements. Based on actual conversations with FMLN guerrillas,

¹ The izote is El Salvador's national flower. It is edible and used in many traditional dishes.

² UCA Editores, San Salvador 1991.

2 / A Passion for Radio

the text is replete with Salvadorean slang and vulgarities. As the author states, neither the guerrillas nor the soldiers are wont to speak with dictionaries.

This particular chapter proved prophetic. In its concluding paragraph, one of the founders of Venceremos imagines himself able to conduct interviews openly in the working class districts of the capital. Prophetic, because this did indeed happen. On January 16, 1992 following the peace accord signed between the FMLN and the ARENA³ government, the compañeros set their transmitter on the roof of the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador. The legendary guerrilla broadcaster Santiago⁴ transmitted live from the Civic Plaza, with the noisy background of the huge crowd celebrating the victory of the people. The people had fought for peace. And Venceremos had gained legal status after so many years of broadcasting its message of freedom from the mountains of Morazán.

* * *

Manolo⁵ gave us the news:

- The FMLN Commanders have decided to launch an offensive, the heaviest in this whole war.
- When?
- Soon.

After almost ten years, there are more than enough reasons to want to put an end to the war. The country is worn out and in ruins. People want peace. We do, too. We don't want to make a profession out of being guerrilla fighters or living in the hills. The world is changing, and that drives you toward solving conflicts through negotiations. But neither Duarte nor, much less, the Army's High Command is going to negotiate anything if we don't put military pressure on them. That's the only thing they understand.

- We're going to take the war to the cities, continued Manolo. We're going to take all the experience we've accumulated over the years, all available arms, all the men, and all our strength. We'll make a big ball out of all that and stick it in San Salvador. They'll have to understand or burst.

That was towards the end of '88, around September. They entrusted us at Venceremos with carrying out a campaign aimed at mentally preparing our soldiers for an offensive without retreat, so we formed a propaganda commission and started to rack our brains for the slogan.

- For social justice and democracy, all unite together to fight the oppressors till the final victory! suggested someone, whose name I won't mention.
- That's too long, man. Before you finish pronouncing it, the bombs'll be dropping into your mouth.

³ ARENA: Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, the right-wing that is currently in power in El Salvador.

⁴ Santiago: First host and founder of Radio Venceremos.

⁵ Manolo: Captain Ramón Emilio Mena Sandoval, joined the guerrillas following the take over of the Santa Ana barracks during the first major guerrilla offensive on January 10, 1981.

- Crush criminal fascism! said somebody else, whose identity I won't reveal either.
- Too heavy.
- Build peace!
- Too cold. Look at the way the Nicaraguans do it: "Everybody all out!" Why can't we invent something that has a little bit of Salvadorean flavour to it?
- Salvadorean? said Santiago. Listen to this: With the finger of unity up the enemy's ass! You can't get much more Salvadorean than that.

We all laughed at the sick joke, but we couldn't get the slogan out. Finally, Maravilla came up with something:

- What does an officer say when he gives the order to storm?
- Stick it to' em!
- Well, that's the best slogan: "Stick it to' em!"
- Doesn't it sound too militaristic?
- Not that much. It's also erotic. When you're dancing, don't you stick it to the girl?
- Stick it to' em and what else?
- Stick it to' em, period. This is all coming to a head, isn't it? So we want to put a final end to this whole thing.

Of love and war, that's what stuck: "Stick it to' em, period!" With that, the feverish preparations began: training for urban commandos, the formation of insurrectional detachments, and concentrated operations on the war fronts. At the radio we were stirring up the fire.

- When? we wanted to find out.
- Soon.

The supplies, the organisation, and the entire plan for the offensive were ready. But the right time had to be found, politically speaking. It was going to be a big whack, and the population had to feel that the FMLN had exhausted all chances of doing things with the government by peaceful means.

The elections were drawing near. The gesture was as unexpected as it was audacious: the FMLN's General Commanders made known that they were willing to participate in the elections, provided that they be fair, subject to international supervision, and postponed until October in order to give the FMLN time to carry out a campaign in the same conditions as the other political parties.

The proposal was so logical that even the Gringos accepted it. However, ARENA rejected it outright. After hesitating at first, Duarte⁶ went along with ARENA, invoking "constitutional order." As a result of that attitude, a long history of electoral shams, and

⁶ José Napoleón Duarte, Christian-Democrat, a former President of El Salvador.

4 / A Passion for Radio

the promise of another to come, we called on the population to abstain from going to the polls.

The abstentions won those March 19 elections with a total of 62%. But since paper-ballot democracy doesn't take the people's rejection into account, the presidency went to the ARENA candidate, Alfredo Cristiani, who had received slightly over half the votes cast. In other words, Cristiani began to govern with the representation of 17% of voting-aged Salvadoreans.

– What's the story with the offensive? asked our combatants, who'd been left hanging.

– So when?

At Radio Venceremos we were continuing to heat up the atmosphere, but we were getting impatient. The Commanders presented another initiative for a peaceful settlement.

Doesn't Cristiani say that his government is democratic? Then let's sit down and have talks. And they did sit down in Mexico at a high-level meeting, with Shafick Handal and Joaquín Villalobos, from our side. Unfortunately, ARENA sent a second-rate commission with no power to make decisions.

The only thing that resulted from that meeting in September was the decision to hold another one in October, this time in San José, Costa Rica. There it went even worse. Military officers were spying from the second floor of the place where the talks took place so that the government commission wouldn't say or sign anything without first consulting with them.

A few days later, a bomb exploded at the FENASTRAS⁷ building, killing Febe Elizabeth, the leader of UNTS⁸ and ten other union leaders. There were more and more places being searched and people put in jail, and paramilitary repression against the popular movement increased. It was obvious that Cristiani didn't even have the slightest will to negotiate.

– Get it all ready for November 11, they told us. Now those bastards are going to find out what the FMLN's made out of!

The offensive was to be launched against the country's five major cities: San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel, Zacatecoluca, and Usulután. In addition to these strategic priorities, there would be a whole bunch of smaller military efforts.

Venceremos was going to stay up there in Morazán, broadcasting from an underground station. Only a small group of us would remain, practically without any security, because the war was going to be carried on down in the south and nobody was going to bother with us. Not even the buzzards would be flying overhead.

November 11 arrived. We checked the connections and went over the whole transmitting and audio system for the umpteenth time to make sure that absolutely nothing would go wrong. The sun went down. We were underground, sitting behind the

⁷ FENASTRAS: Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (National Union Federation of Salvadorean Workers).

⁸ UNTS: Unión Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (National Union of Salvadorean Workers).

microphones, surrounded by little light bulbs, and with all the military radios turned on. Just a few minutes before eight, Atilio⁹ called us:

- We're on the bucking bronco, he told us. There's no turning back now.
- Any orders? we asked him.
- If you know how to pray, do it.

You wouldn't believe it without having seen it. On Saturday, November 11, in the district of Colonia Zacamil, there was a wedding in which the bride, dressed in white, the groom, in coat and tie, the best man and bridesmaid, guests, musicians, and drunks were all urban commandos. The guns were wrapped up in gift boxes. It was all a trick to bring people together, distribute arms, and take over a sector of the city.

In Mejicanos there was a soccer game where the 11 players on each team, the referees, onlookers, women selling crushed ice, and the bus they came and left on were all part of a disguised movement of troops designed to take over that sector.

At a house in Colonia Metrópoli, the couples started to arrive at five in the afternoon. They were young men and women who'd shown up holding each other's arms, laughing, and making way for the cars that were leaving and returning full of guns. Those weapons still hadn't been oiled because they'd just come out of the caches where they'd been kept for months.

In that house 46 young people came together from different neighbourhoods. They were university students, union members, and all sorts of individuals. Three of them had combat experience. The rest had never touched a pistol in their lives. They'd been preparing with courses, radio programmes, and pamphlets, but they'd never had a shoot-out with anybody. At six in the afternoon, those in charge began to hand them their hardware and give them basic instructions about its use.

A National Police vehicle pulled up and parked across the street from the house. The cops got out and began to patrol the street.

- The police! warned one of the young men. Either somebody squealed to them, or we've got the worst fucking luck we could.

Comandante Choco, who was responsible for that group, didn't stop smiling when the police knocked at the door.

- Good evening, said the policeman.
- Good evening, Choco answered.
- Look, friend, could you give us a little water?
- Of course, just a second.

Inside, in the next room, 46 urban commandos were oiling a pile of guns. Had a neighbour noticed something? Was there an informer? But the police drank their water and took off without so much as sticking their heads inside the door. Maybe they

⁹ Atilio: Commander Joaquín Villalobos, Secretary General of the Partido de la Revolución Salvadoreña (Salvadorean Revolutionary Party).

suspected something and didn't want to get themselves into a fight when it was almost time to change shifts and they were about to go home.

At eight in the evening, Choco brought all the new combatants together:

– The time has come, guys. Everybody into the street!

The door opened, and the whole flock of guerrillas rushed out, each with a brand-new gun, to take over the sector. This would be their first encounter with the cops, whose truck was still parked only a few blocks away.

And with that, all hell broke loose. This was the biggest bang in ten years of war. Thousands of men and women poured out into the streets of San Salvador. They opened fire in the northern neighbourhoods, dug trenches, put up barricades, and completely disconcerted the Army, which had smelled something coming and prepared a large operation in Guazapa to keep our troops from entering the city.

But we were already inside! The FMLN was fighting in Colonia Zacamil, Mejicanos, Ciudad Delgado, Cuscatancingo, Soyapango, and Ayutuxtepeque. The guerrillas were attacking the capital of the country!

In San Salvador, the offensive began with a simultaneous attack on 50 enemy positions, including the Army's General Headquarters and Cristiani's own residence. However, at Venceremos we were playing dumb. We said that we'd received news of "some attacks" here and there. We didn't want to kick up a storm or use the word "offensive" until we saw how the wheel was turning. That way, if something went wrong and they drove us out of San Salvador that same night, we could just not make much of a fuss about what was happening.

But other stations didn't swallow it. At 8:15, Radio KL, set off its alarm:

Extra, extra! Heavy fighting is taking place in the northern area of the capital. Practically all the working-class neighbourhoods have become the theatre of one of the FMLN's most violent onslaughts.... We have also received information from Zacatecoluca, where the guerrillas have attacked....

The Armed Forces High Command didn't believe that mere skirmishes were taking place, either. Exactly two hours after the attacks began, Ponce¹⁰ publicly decreed a state of siege and established a national radio and television emergency network.

On Sunday, the 12th, at 6 a.m., we went on the air like the evening before, without making much noise. A short while later, Atilio gave us the green light:

– The rice is cooked, he said. Start using the word "offensive."

Now everyone was referring to the big FMLN offensive. The guerrillas had always attacked at night and withdrawn before daybreak, but now the sun was high in the sky and our people were still going at it in the streets of San Salvador, Zacatecoluca, Usulután, downtown San Miguel....

The urban commandos who'd opened fire from within had now been joined by the FMLN's real military force, the peasant columns that had taken advantage of the Army's

¹⁰ Colonel René Emilio Ponce, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

disorder and entered the cities. There was fighting going on in every department of the country That's when Venceremos let loose.

We'd set up three stalls with radio equipment to receive immediate military information from all our command posts. Facundo, Carmelo, and Dimas were informing. From every corner of the country, dozens of radio operators were sending us war reports with their 40-meter orange units, the famous *Spilsburys*.

Their signals were transmitted to any one of our three reception stalls, which were far away from each other to avoid interference. There was a radio operator in each stall, and, next to her, a messenger, a boy with wings on his feet.

The radio operator had pieces of paper already cut and ready, with their sheets of carbon paper. Every piece of news was written in three copies. As the information came in, she'd write it down as fast as she could, keeping one copy for herself and giving the other two to the runner.

Then the kid would take off like a bullet for the underground studio. At the entrance, before jumping into the hole, he'd give a copy to the girl who was sitting at the entrance and classifying the reports into fourteen folders, one for each of El Salvador's departments. All out of breath, the boy would reach the end of the shelter, where we were broadcasting. There Santiago grabbed the piece of paper and immediately turned on the microphone:

Just minutes ago, at 10:35 a.m., our forces destroyed an armoured tank on the corner of...

We had a fourth stall, the special one, for communication with other countries. Don't ask me how or where because I can't tell you. Let's just say that it's where the military thugs would never imagine. We'd set up Maravilla in an office with telephones, computers, and all that modern shit. just as day was breaking, Maravilla would call us on a direct channel:

– This is Mouse calling. Look, I've got a *New York Times* editorial that's just come by fax. Here it goes; I'll translate it for you.

Incredible! At six in the morning, a contact would buy the paper in New York. At 6:05, he was faxing it to Maravilla's office. At 6:10, Maravilla was translating it to us on a secret band, and, less than a quarter of an hour later, we were discussing it on Venceremos.

Down in our pit in Morazán, we were receiving opinions from the US press sooner than a Gringo sitting in his office in Manhattan! We also received news from the Spanish and German press. We were monitoring all the important TV news programmes in the world via satellite. Since we expected the government to decree a state of emergency and a put a gag on information, Maravilla spent his time watching foreign TV with his dish antenna. Later, he'd lend us his eyes.

Marvin, I'm watching the troops from the Atlcatl Battalion all crowded together around the Army's General Headquarters building. They're wearing camouflage uniforms, and their faces are painted. You can tell they're very nervous, and they don't know where to point their guns....

Maravilla would narrate in minute detail everything he was picking up over NBC or CBS, and we'd report it as if we were right in San Salvador. That's how that fantastic link worked.

On Monday we started to broadcast straight from six in the morning until eleven at night. There were only four of us announcers, and the broadcasts were exhausting marathons. We did shifts of six and eight hours, which left Santiago voiceless and loosened Leti's tongue. They ruined my nerves and finished training Herbert, the Venceremos rookie who still didn't have too much improvising ability.

Everything had to be improvised. There was no time to scratch your head. The news showed up, and you had to make your commentary right on the spot. Santiago and I would be talking and forgetting about the mike, as if we had our audience in front of us.

At other times, we'd challenge members of the high society, summoning them by name to abandon their mansions. One afternoon, Santiago started to pick on William Walker, the *gringo* ambassador in El Salvador and namesake of the other swine from the last century:¹¹

Aren't you ashamed, Mr. Walker? ... In what school did you learn your diplomacy?

He raked him over so hard, and the Ambassador was so upset, that the US State Department sent a message to the FMLN through our Political-Diplomatic Commission:

– Let's make a deal. Stop insulting our personnel, and we'll take the "terrorist" label off you.

Alright. The next day we held Santiago back, and they removed that little nickname. Venceremos had them concerned because, at that time, even the deaf were listening to it.

We'd never had so many listeners in all our ten years. People have told me that you could go to Metrocentro¹² and hear Venceremos at full blast in the stores. We were monitored without interruption by the middle class, the press, the enemy, the *gringos*, and even Cadena Cuscatlán, which all the stations in the country had to stay hooked up with. You'd hear Santiago informing that we'd just taken such and such a place, and, a couple of minutes later, the Cuscatlán commentator would furiously deny it.

We tried out new formats, which increased our number of listeners: news bulletins every hour, sketches, comic dialogues, and jingles based on well-known music, like this little rumba by María Cristina:

Freddy Cristiani can't govern

Because I cut off,

I cut off all his lights.

Everybody join in with

Sabotage and we'll win fast.

¹¹ In the 19th century an American named William Walker invaded Central America with a mercenary army, declaring himself President of Nicaragua before being forced out of the region.

¹² Metrocentro is a large shopping centre in San Salvador.

Stick it to 'em, period!

I'm not going to tell you what people said, but rather what they did. On the night of the 11th, when the guerrillas arrived, people went out to support them, but still with a bit of fear. The next day there were more of them. By the fourth day, everybody was busy making food for them and giving them clothes. One young guerrilla said to a lady:

– Ma'am, would you happen to have an old pair of pants that you could lend me, something that your husband doesn't wear anymore? I'd just need 'em until my uniform dries. I've been sleeping here in the trench with wet clothes for two nights now.

Just with that, the news travelled all around my community and the neighbouring ones, and a commission was formed in each district to provide clothing. People would show up with tons of clothes and say:

– For the guerrillas!

Even the poorest of people came out with their little dress, skirt, panties, underpants, socks, and all sorts of stuff for the guerrillas. And all that guy had needed was one pair of dry pants! But the neighbours got together and built up a mountain of clothes.

People were happy. We'd been told that those who were fighting were foreigners: Nicaraguans, Cubans, Vietnamese, and from I don't know where else. So we were watching out for the way they looked, right? And when people saw them come marching in, they'd say: hey, so and so. They were old friends or family whom they hadn't seen for years. And they gave each other big hugs.

– Nephew, where did you come from?

– Brother-in-law, we thought you were dead!

So it turned out that the so-called foreigners were from our neighbourhoods. Only the doctor, a big white fellow, had the look of a foreigner to us. The rest of them were all perfect Indians. Just like us. You know what I mean?

Something special happened with that guerrilla doctor. Since nobody in our neighbourhoods has money to pay for health care, people started to hang around when they found out that a doctor and a nurse were there.

– What's wrong with the little girl, ma'am?

– She's got a bit of a fever, Doctor. You know, she didn't even sleep a wink last night.

– Come on over here.

They took her into the little shelter they'd set up. It was a kind of field hospital. By the time she came out, another little girl was waiting. And the guerrilla doctor began to treat all the sick people in the area. There were people with diarrhoea, bad nerves, epileptic fits, people with so many ailments that the poor doctor couldn't even take care of his wounded companions anymore because he was too busy seeing the people from the neighbourhood. People were grateful, and they started to take him coffee or tortillas or shoes. Since nobody had any money, they gave the doctor whatever they had.

– No, ma' am. Keep the food for your son. If not, you'll have to bring him back soon to see me again. What he's sick from is hunger.

People started to feel at ease with the guerrillas.

– You can talk with these soldiers, they said. We can have a smoke together. We can take them into our houses to eat. They're not like those other soldiers that make you feel shaky just by looking at you cause you never know how they're gonna fuck you over.

That's the way my neighbours talked. In my neighbourhood we were happy just going to buy things for them at the stores and supermarkets. We'd give them sugar cane and other things so that they could hold out.

More than anything else we hoped that they'd never leave us. As things turned out, it was the other way around. We're the ones who had to run off. When people heard about what the Air Force was doing in Soyapango and Zacamil, about the bombings in areas where there were homes, well then they left in a hurry with whatever they could. People were crying as they left with their little bags, and, when they turned around to see the guerrillas, who'd stayed behind, they said:

– Those poor kids! May God forgive me, but I have to leave.

The planes were already coming in our direction.

On Wednesday, November 15, we were within a hair's breadth of collapsing the Army and winning the war. The working-class neighbourhoods had turned into FMLN strongholds. Each building was a fort. The Army entered with armoured cars and its troops behind them, trying to recover terrain and deplete our supplies, but it succeeded in neither. Instead, as time went by, there were so many neighbours joining us, and the setback to the Army was so accelerated, that on Wednesday evening, fearing a general insurrection, the High Command held an emergency meeting at its General Headquarters.

Many things have been found out about that sinister meeting in which the 30 highest-level Army officers took part. This is where they decided to step up the intensity of the war, no matter what the political cost of the ensuing genocide.

– It's them or us, asserted one of the colonels.

That's where they decided to use the Air Force against the civilian population. Helicopters would use machine-gun fire against the working-class neighbourhoods.

They also decided on a night of long knives: that very night and into the early morning they would murder those they considered to be the brains behind the subversion. At the head of the list were the Jesuit priests from the Central American University (UCA).¹³

It's said that, when the meeting was over, the military officers held each other's hands and prayed together for the success of their crimes. In the macabre circle were a few pairs of gringo hands, those belonging to CIA advisors.

I was still half asleep on Thursday, the 16th, when I managed to grasp the crackling news.

¹³ UCA: Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador.

- They killed Ellacuría,¹⁴ confirmed Ana Lidia.
- That can't be, I said.

Santiago was stretching and getting ready to start broadcasting. A terrible look came over his face when he found out.

- It's true. They also murdered Segundo Montes and Martín Baró and...

Santiago turned on the mike and began to speak. Since the times of the first offensive back in January of '81, I'd never seen him so indignant or so sad.

Here in Morazán in order to make soup for the guerrillas, the girls who work in the kitchens go out to look for izotes. They cut off their hearts and put them into the pot. But everytime it's cut, the izote shows its incredible instinct for survival. It reproduces immediately. If you go back a month later, you'll see the izote sprouting up again. Even if the machete cuts it off at the roots, the izote always comes back. It always insists stubbornly on blossoming again, on continuing with life.

It occurs to us that Ignacio Ellacuría is like those izotes. Martín Baró, Segundo Montes, Amando, Juan Ramón and Joaquín López are all like the izote flower, stubborn to die and stubborn in their efforts to continue growing.

Why do we say this? Because Cristiani didn't think about the fact that all of them were teachers who multiplied their knowledge with the thousands and thousands of young people who studied with them. They multiplied those moral values of Christianity that are so compatible with revolutionary principles. The moral values that these priests communicated are now thousands of seeds. They weren't the brains of subversion. They were part of our national conscience, of the critical and scientific conscience that searched for the roots of the conflict and researched our history, attempting to find the way to peace and national reconciliation.

We know that our people will take up this izote flower which is El Salvador's national symbol. We know the Salvadorean people will raise it in their fists as a symbol of the stubborn will for peace that flowed in the veins of the murdered Jesuit priests. And we know that the day of that victory, which is coming rapidly closer, people will pour into the city squares from all four corners of this nation.

These people will raise the izote flower of Ignacio Ellacuría and of the 70,000 Salvadoreans who have died. People will flow into the country's squares with an uproar, like a river during the rainy season, to pay tribute to these brothers of ours who died for the sake of peace, to these brothers who were born in Spain but were Salvadorean than their assassins, a pack of criminals with denationalised minds.

On the day of that victory, the mothers of the fallen, their brothers and sisters and children will all be there. This struggle has 70,000 martyrs. The barbarianism has affected millions of Salvadoreans: those of us who have lost a brother or a sister or a friend or Ignacio Ellacuría, those of us who have lost Monseñor Romero. On behalf of them, onward towards peace!

¹⁴ P. Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of the UCA.

– Santiago, November 19, 1989, the day of the Jesuits' burial.

They bombed the cities. In San Miguel, the Third Brigade's 105-millimetre cannon barrels were pointed towards the areas where neighbours had taken part in the insurrection. Colonel Vargas gave the order to open fire. The little wooden houses blew into pieces as they were hit by the Army's blindly launched shells. Afterwards, you saw dead children, corpses, and pieces of people trapped in the rubble. Then the helicopters completed the massacre.

They bombed the civilian population indiscriminately. They so thoroughly destroyed San Salvador's working-class districts that we were forced to change our positions. We carried out a manoeuvre during the night and moved into Colonia Escalón.¹⁵

– Let's see if they bomb these nice little rich people! said Chico¹⁶ as he was setting up his command post in one of the largest mansions that belong to the oligarchy.

The upper-class woman almost fainted when she saw that 30 guerrillas had invaded her house.

– What do you want? What are you looking for here?

– Take it easy, ma' am, said Chico, trying to calm her down. You just carry on your life as usual.

– And what are you going to do?

– For right now, we're gonna eat. We're hungry.

– Here there's no...

– Sure there is. We're not stealing anything here because you've got more than enough food.

– Alright, acquiesced Fufú, as she was going to call the servants.

– No, Chico replied, stopping her. You're the one who's going to cook.

– Me?

– Yes, you.

– How could you?

– This way, even though it's just for a few minutes, you'll get to experience what women go through every day in the kitchen. What do you want, guys?

– Fried eggs!

– Beans!

– Serve them, Chico told her. That's a simple-enough menu, isn't it?

¹⁵ Colonia Escalón is San Salvador's wealthiest neighbourhood.

¹⁶ Chico: Commander Claudio Rabindranath Armijo, member of the Political Commission of the PRS and of the joint Chiefs of Staff of the Central Front "Modesto Ramírez."

You should've seen the old lady grabbing pots and burning her hands with the grease. But yes she did cook. A woman from the oligarchy served lunch to our guerrilla fighters.

The capture of the Sheraton was directed from that mansion. We attacked the huge hotel because it was the highest point in the neighbourhood, but we didn't know who was inside: none other than Organisation of American States (OAS) Secretary General, Joao Baena Soares, who'd travelled to El Salvador in order to find out about the war and ended up experiencing it.

The Sheraton turned into something like the plot of a comic film. On the top floor you had a dozen *gringo* Green Berets barricaded behind mattresses and scared shitless, once they'd found out that guerrillas had slipped into the hotel. On the first floor, Army soldiers were even keeping an eye on the sewer manholes so that the guerrillas couldn't escape from the building. We were there in the middle, competing with a few soldiers to see who could protect Baena Soares the best.

Following several hours of great tension, negotiations got under way. Bishop Rosa Chávez came, in order to ensure the agreements. The OAS Secretary General left the hotel without so much as a scratch. Then our guys and the Army soldiers left.

The last ones to withdraw from the hotel were the fainthearted *gringos*. They went secretly out the back door, covering their faces and carrying little white flags, just in case. They looked horrified by the whole thing, which could only have taken place in the kind of violent country that their Pentagon sponsors.

Back in Morazán, we were able to broadcast everything as if it were live: both the commotion at the Sheraton and the taking of Escalón and the other rich neighbourhoods, which the Army of the rich naturally decided not to bomb. Maravilla used his eyes, and we provided the voices.

We also transmitted news immediately via our network of military-radio operators in other cities where the fighting was just as fierce as in the capital. We hooked up with our fellow station, Farabundo Martí, to inform the world, both near and far, about the most impressive military effort ever carried out by a Latin American guerrilla movement.

After 14 days of offensive, we began to withdraw from San Salvador and the other cities. The ruthlessness of the Air Force had much to do with this decision. If we'd had missiles, it would've been a different story, you know. But we didn't at that time.

We had to explain the order to withdraw to our companions in arms because they wanted to stay there in their positions. However, it wasn't of much use to hold onto trenches in bombed-out neighbourhoods that the civilians had evacuated. And, anyway, we'd won the main battle: strategically speaking, we'd turned around an apparently stalemated war.

SEE YOU IN SAN SALVADOR!

No one would've bet a dime on us before the offensive. The huge battles that we'd waged in the countryside weren't being seen in the city. When we stopped

transportation or blew up high-tension pylons, we were affecting the entire population, but sabotage is something very different from flying bullets.

People hadn't really felt the war in San Salvador. So, out of sight, out of mind and lots of propaganda in your head. Drop by drop, news item by news item, throughout their mass media, they told about what hadn't happened and omitted what had. They portrayed the FMLN as a weakened force, and they ended up believing their own lies: "They're barely a handful of guerrillas living along the Honduran border. They're deserting; they don't have any weapons; they've got nobody behind them...."

That's why we weren't making any progress in the negotiations Nobody wants to negotiate with the dying. If the guerrillas are dying out, let's put them off until they fade away all by themselves.

What went on in the Mexico and San José talks? Just a lot of blab. Cristiani sent his commissions only to stall for time and improve his governments international image. The talks also helped the US Congress to justify further military aid, which would contribute, finally, or so they thought, to liquidating the remaining pockets of guerrilla fighters. So the *gringos* also thought that they were giving us the full count of ten.

The November offensive changed all that. Who would have thought that we were capable of laying siege to the capital for almost a month? When had an oligarch from Colonia Escalón ever imagined that he'd be seeing military clashes on his own block?

Now they've smelled powder and heard explosions. Not even their grandmothers still believe the tale that we're just a thimbleful of guerrillas brooding in the hills. We took the war into the cities and right into the very heart of the nation's existence.

We did lose 401 lives. One by one, we read every name over Venceremos, starting with Commander Dimas Rodríguez. The great majority of our casualties were men and women who had just joined our ranks and hadn't had much combat experience.

On the one hand, the FMLN's military structure remained intact. On the other hand, the Army suffered its worst defeat in all the years of the war. According to confirmed data, the Army lost nearly 3,000 men. Another 3,000 soldiers and recruits deserted during the offensive. In January, with rumours circulating about a second offensive, 1,300 more soldiers ran away from the barracks.

We strengthened ourselves. We now have more urban commandos than ever before, more unit leaders, hundreds of young people who withdrew with us, and thousands of neighbours there in their little houses and apartment blocks, already trained and waiting for the next call.

The political victory was even more important than the military success. The offensive forced the ruling fascist Army to remove its mask. In its desperation, the Army had no qualms about assassinating the Jesuits and bombing civilians, right in front of international journalists and UN and OAS representatives.

Above all, the offensive forced the negotiations. That's what was intended: to wipe the smirk off Cristiani's face and, mainly, to sit the US representatives down for talks. They're the decisive counterparts in all this affair. They're the owners of the circus.

Now even Thurman¹⁷ has stated that the Salvadorean Army “cannot defeat the FMLN”. At least they understood that much.

In San José, when we raised the question of purging the Armed Forces, Larios¹⁸ termed that condition as absurd and ridiculous. Now it’s the main item on the agenda. When we brought up the agrarian reform and reforms in the judicial system, they simply paid no attention to us. Now it’s Cristiani himself who’s talking about negotiations. Fine. It was via military action that we dispensed with a military solution to the war. That was the greatest benefit of the offensive.

Sometimes, as if they were insane, the power elite lose their sense of reality and go back into an imaginary world. They’re encouraged by the invasion of Panama and the Sandinista electoral defeat in Nicaragua. They pluck up their courage with the fall of Eastern Europe, and they get all excited about these things. They’re confusing apples and oranges, and they’re dreaming about a rapid and repressive solution in EI Salvador.

Well, a mule only understands the language of a stick, so, if November’s offensive wasn’t enough, we’ll prepare three more for them. Unfortunately, we have to maintain the threat of a new offensive in order to ensure the negotiations.

Venceremos is included in the negotiating agenda. So they want us to go back to civilian life? We’ll do it, but with our entire communication apparatus; that’s to say, with the means to take part in public debate.

They want us to register for truly free elections, with full guarantees? Then, one of the things that we should guarantee is the freedom to communicate our thinking. In other words, a station hidden in the hills doesn’t fit our needs well enough anymore. Venceremos has already done its time as a guerrilla station. Because of the country’s current political situation, the developments of the war, and the new state of affairs in the rest of the world, we need Venceremos to come legally out in the open.

We have to rid the radio of its buzzing by obtaining a broadcasting license and we have to stop using barbed wire antennas. We have a right to debate our viewpoints in public and to use the media for that purpose on an equal footing with the country’s other political forces.

The time has come for the FMLN and its radio station to enter into public and legal existence and to vie for power on those terms. That’s what we’re proposing: Radio Venceremos in San Salvador, with its doors open to the public. Are these mad ravings, or natural demands in a country where people in arms have won the right to democratise?

What are we going to do in San Salvador? The idea isn’t to transplant our guerrilla programming to the capital. In order to respond to the new challenge, we have to make a tremendous change in our style and the way that we communicate.

* * *

¹⁷ General Maxwell Thurman: the ex-Chief of the US Southern Command, whose headquarters are in Panama.

¹⁸ General Humberto Larios: Minister of Defense.

We can't frankly say that we've attracted the greatest number of listeners in these last few years. Why not? The problem isn't how correct you are in what you're saying, but whether or not you can be heard. Technically speaking, we've had weak reception and strong interference. It's true that our programming hasn't been the best, either.

But it's also true that the message from Venceremos goes beyond the simple contents of what's being said. It's the fact that it exists, that it's there. If it's there, it's because they're strong, because they hold terrain, because they've got people's support.

When the first big operation was launched against Morazán, the objective was to resist, to show that there was territory being defended by the MN and that those zones were under our control. The radio's first political message consisted of letting our friends and the enemy know that we were there, just shouting or saying any damned thing, but there we were. And we spent those days broadcasting under mortar fire.

On countless occasions we've continued broadcasting underground, under the rain, with the soldiers nearby, with helicopters overhead, and with the greatest determination to go on the air ever displayed by a radio station anywhere in the world. Can you imagine what it means to keep a station like this one going for ten years in a tiny little country like ours with a full-scale war?

With your fingers you can count the times we've missed going on the air, and some of those times it was our own decision not to have a programme. When the station went dead in '84, it was in order to kill Domingo Monterrosa, and we had to send notice to all the guerrilla fronts so that they wouldn't be demoralised by our silence.

Now we're in a new stage. The present challenge is much more than just resisting: it's to compete. What's your message? What are you going to say? How can you reach everyone: guerrillas and non-guerrillas, peasants and city dwellers, our militants and those who aren't convinced? Especially those who aren't convinced.

So it's time to change, to make changes in everything: from increasing our broadcasting power and improving our signal to opening up our minds. What's done is done. Was it the best that could have been done or wasn't it? It was at a different point in the war. I guess Madonna wouldn't have been of much use to us when we were moving to take over Cahuatique. But now the winds have changed.

Where should we start? It's fine to play rock and popular music, but we need to do more than that. If we want to compete in the city, we have to deal with city themes and talk about the things the people are talking about. The war was making us one dimensional. We've put blinders on ourselves, and we only talk about the political and economic aspects of things and about the macro problems affecting workers.

But that same worker who's listening to us has a family, likes soccer, and goes drinking with his buddy. More than the union, he's concerned about the bastard who's prowling around his wife when he goes off to his meetings.

We have to talk about all those things, about people's everyday life. And it's starting there, with the price of milk, or with the Firpo team beating Alianza, that we have to put together our programming so that it's closer to and more captivating for the San Salvador listeners. For example, you've got the case of La Tencha, who reflects the way

we speak and the sexual humour that we Salvadoreans so enjoy. Atilio came a few days ago, and he asked me:

- What’s up? How are the *Renatos*¹⁹ doing?
- Damned good. La Tencha’s programme has made a big hit. How’s the reception in the city?
- It’s getting there. It reaches the fronts, too.
- Give them all the support you can. Do you know what I mean? In addition to the programme, there’s the question of unity with them.

Look at the way life changes! Rogue Dalton would be pleased to hear that the guys from the *Resistencia Nacional* are making one of the most popular programmes on Venceremos. I was thinking of that when I sat down to have a talk with Fermán Cienfuegos.²⁰

- Congratulations for La Tencha, I said to him.
- Really?
- Really.
- I told them not to politicise the programme too much, that it was better to do it more along the lines of daily life. With short steps you get where you’re going faster, don’t you think?

Another principle is the conviction that the truth cannot be imposed, even if it is true. We should avoid all forms of indoctrination that reduce truth to nothing more than slogans or that hide or manipulate information. At times, in order to do things the easy way, to save time, or out of impatience, we have taken the misleading shortcut of indoctrination.

But the road to a truth that is shared, shown, and discovered through participation is always more revolutionary. It is a long and difficult road, but it is the road. Whoever imposes and indoctrinates does not triumph. Triumph only comes when someone is convinced.

- Fermán Cienfuegos, *Propaganda, Democracy, and Revolution*, July 1989.

Who will be able to speak on Venceremos? Anyone, except for the dead. If we’re going to have a pluralistic model, then we should accept that same pluralism in the communication of ideas. We want the culture of debate to prevail over the stupidity of censorship in our country. We want to bring democracy to the microphones.

Let Venceremos in San Salvador be the best and broadest forum for all social sectors and all political positions: right, left, and centre. Listen and draw your own conclusions. If the others argue better than we do, they’ll force us to deepen our analyses and formulate the FMLN’s project better and more creatively.

¹⁹ Renatos: nickname for those belonging to the RN (Resistencia Nacional/National Resistance), one of the five political and military organizations that formed the FMLN.

²⁰ Fernán Cienfuegos: leader of the Resistencia Nacional.

This political and ideological pluralism does not respond to fashion or, much less, to outside pressure. Neither did the enemy force us to allow for it nor did our friends from fellow countries lay down conditions so that we would accept it.

It's because we believe in it. We believe because we've opened our eyes and seen what this whole process in El Salvador has been. Those who've made this revolution are Christians and Marxists, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. All of them have been making sacrifices, sticking their necks out, and firing bullets. They've all been part of the vanguard, not just the guerrillas.

In a revolutionary model, freedom of expression is obviously needed in order to maintain an internal social balance. The present context demands a political defence that can debate and educate the masses, that can teach them to reflect and defend their long-term project. This cannot be done without opposition or without learning about the adversary's plans.

This debate forces us to elaborate on and deepen the analysis of our revolutionary position if we are to save it from ideological dogmatism and paralysis. It is fundamental to provide for a professional, critical, and independent brand of journalism and to put an end to the oligarchy's exclusive ownership of mass media, but without violating freedom of expression.

– Joaquín Villalobos, *Perspectives for Victory and the Revolutionary Project*,
March 1989.

* * *

Venceremos originated in the context of the war. It has accompanied this exaggeratedly heroic struggle right from the first day and throughout its ten years. Our pieces of equipment have been used to inform, debate, provide political direction, and even as strategic weapons with eight sticks of dynamite inside them. Now these same pieces of equipment have become bargaining chips at the negotiating table.

By the time this book comes out, we'll probably be set up in San Salvador. Inevitably, such a democratic opening has to occur. We had to win a right to legality by acting outside the law. Just like the Salvadorean people themselves, our station had no other place but the mountains where it could exercise its rights and make its voice heard.

I can already see myself doing interviews in Colonia Zacamil, taping short soap operas in the markets, and offering time over these still-secret mikes to the poor people in the working-class districts. People who before had only Monseñor Romero's voice to speak for them will soon be able to speak for themselves. Let's listen to those who've spent years and centuries waiting in the line of history to speak their mind.

* * *