U.S. Policy in Central America
By Patricia Goudvis, Justin Sybenga, and Teaching for Change

Lesson 2:
Re-Imagining U.S. Policy in El Salvador in the 1980s: A Role Play

Time: 120-180 minutes

Background

North Americans have played a dominant role in Central American politics since colonial times. As Latin American countries gained independence in the early 19th century, the United States adopted the Monroe Doctrine, which forbade European powers from interfering with any country in the Western Hemisphere. Ostensibly, the Monroe Doctrine protected Latin America from Europe’s influence, but the doctrine’s unofficial slogan “America for the Americans” belied the ambition of the United States to dominate North and South America. At the turn of the century, the United States was emerging as the dominant world power, and used its economic and military might to establish industries in Latin America, especially Central America and the Caribbean, that would supply its empire with natural resources and build its wealth.

In general, the United States supported governments in this region that provided social stability and favorable conditions for U.S. corporations. Frequently, these governments were military dictatorships, whose primary goal was to protect the financial interests of the oligarchs who controlled most of the land and industry. Furthermore, the U.S. was determined to fight against any threat of communism that might emerge in the Western Hemisphere.

Due to many factors including the progressive turn of the Catholic church, the spread of socialist ideas in academic circles, the blatant corruption and horrific violence of the military state, and the increasing poverty of the masses, revolutionary forces began to foment across Central America by the middle of the 20th century. These inevitable clashes between social classes built to a crescendo in the late 1970s as the Sandinistas successfully overthrew the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua and revolutionaries challenged the military establishment in El Salvador and Guatemala.

To engage students in debating the policy choices that shaped the United States involvement in the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s, students will play the role of policy influencers and policy makers. Each student will be given the role of one of the stakeholders who had a vested interest in
the outcome of U.S. policy toward El Salvador. Students will learn about their stakeholders’ perspective and then advocate for U.S. policy that best meets the stakeholders’ interests.

For the sake of the role-play, the decision-maker will be the president of the United States, Ronald Reagan, near the beginning of 1981 when he was starting his first term. Three students will assume the role of Ronald Reagan and two of his advisors, and they will listen to the role-play unfold, taking notes on the arguments presented. Once the debate has concluded, these students will debate and then develop an official U.S. policy response.

From the outset, inform students that although each of the roles is historically accurate, the structure of the role-play is an artificial learning simulation that doesn’t reflect the decision making process of the United States administration. The politicians who crafted Central American military policy in the 1980s would not have consulted all of the voices represented in the class discussion. And certain voices in the administration’s internal discussion would have been given more weight than others.

**Purpose**

- To identify the many stakeholders in U.S. policy decisions in El Salvador in the 1980s and to explain their perspectives and interests
- To develop and defend arguments for how and why the United States should intervene or not intervene in El Salvador in the 1980s

**Materials**

- Associated Press video report
- Role Play Scenario
- Role Play: Building Background Knowledge
- Stakeholder Roles
- Policy Proposal Speech and Rubric

Check out resources on why and how to use the [role play structure](#) in the classroom from the Center for Teaching and Learning

**Instruction for Learning Activities**

**Day One: Building Background Knowledge and Writing Policy Proposals**

In the first class period, students will be introduced to the historical context and be assigned their roles and task. In the second class period, students will engage in the policy role play scenario. In the third class period, students will observe the policy makers’ discussion and decision-making and debrief the simulation.
At the beginning of the first class period, students will watch a 13 minute Associated Press video report to engage emotionally in the dramatic historical events that frame the role play scenario. Post the following questions on the board, and invite students to jot down initial responses to them as they view the video clip:

- Which people or groups of people do you empathize with most and why?
- Why is the United States involved with this conflict? Should it be? Why or why not?
- How do you think this conflict will end? How will it be resolved? Why?

The teacher may decide to conduct a quick “turn and talk” or move immediately into a short whole-class discussion of these questions.

Next, the teacher will read aloud the Role Play Scenario to help students understand their task. Throughout this series of lessons, teachers should draw on their repertoire of theatrical tricks to heighten the sense of real-world drama. For example, tell students that they’ve been transported back in time to 1981 and flown into Washington, D.C. from all over the world to provide consultation on a world-changing historical decision.

Next, students will be assigned roles so that they approach the next reading from the vantage point of the stakeholder they play. Roles can be selected in a variety of ways. More complex or difficult roles could be assigned to students who are ready to meet the challenge. Students could scan the roles and then choose the role that most interests them. Or students could draw name cards from a hat.

To build additional background information about the root causes of social upheaval in El Salvador, including long term U.S. involvement in the region, students will read the Role Play: Building Background Knowledge handout, circling information they think might be most relevant to their role.

Students will use the background information handout and the Stakeholder Roles descriptors to prepare a ninety second policy recommendation, which they will present at the policy session simulation. Teachers may decide to provide class time for students to do additional research about the stakeholder role they represent and/or to write the policy recommendation.

The list of Stakeholder Roles is ordered into groups of stakeholders with similar geographical locations and/or political interests. Savvy students will familiarize themselves with the other roles to help them build strategic alliances during the caucusing segment of the simulation.
Before the simulation, students will write a ninety second **policy proposal speech** that:

- summarizes the most important needs/interests/goals of the stakeholder group they represent
- describes a policy recommendation that the stakeholder group would like the Reagan administration to adopt in El Salvador

Students should use the information provided in the description of their role to write their speeches. Encourage students to draw on additional resources to bolster their arguments with specific detail and evidence. Highlight key points on the rubric at the bottom of the **policy proposal speech** assignment to help students understand the expectations for high quality work.

The teacher may provide class time for students to do additional research and/or to write the policy speeches.

**Day Two: The Policy Session Simulation**

At the beginning of the policy session simulation, distribute name badges to each student so that students can clearly identify the roles their peers are playing. The teacher will serve as moderator for the discussion, following the agenda provided below. The role call and formal debate will fill most of one class period, so the caucusing, decision making, and debriefing will occur the next period. Students will submit their policy proposal speeches at the conclusion of the simulation as an assessment, but the teacher could save time by grading the speeches as they are delivered.

1. **Role Call (5 minutes):** The moderator will call the name of each stakeholder who will share aloud a one sentence profile introducing themselves.

2. **Formal Debate (40 minutes):** Each speaker is allotted ninety seconds to describe the goals, needs, and/or interests of his/her stakeholder group and to argue for a specific U.S. foreign policy response to the emerging civil war. **Teacher note:** Follow the order of speakers in the **stakeholder roles** handout. If possible, project an online timer on the board so that students can see their remaining speaking time. Encourage students to take notes on the arguments of other speakers so that they can build alliances and offer counterarguments to adversaries during the caucusing segment.

3. **Caucusing (20 minutes for caucusing and 15 minutes for joint statements):** Stakeholders meet with representatives of other groups to collaborate on joint statements. Only stakeholders who are able to form alliances with another group will receive additional airtime to speak. Joint statements can last no longer than 60 seconds, and are the final opportunity before the president and advisors meet to craft a policy. These statements can counter an opponent's argument or demonstrate the benefits of a particular policy.
recommendation to multiple stakeholder groups. **Teacher note:** Circulate around the room and encourage students to connect with others with similar positions/interests. Students could partner with more than one ally, and the teacher could mandate that each student contribute to at least one joint statement. Students will need some time to prepare their joint statements.

**Day Three: The President’s Decision and Reflection**

4. **Decision Making:** The president and his/her advisors debate what the U.S. response should be. Stakeholder parties listen and take notes to be used to answer the reflection questions during the debrief. The president and advisors write a short policy position proclaiming what they believe is the best U.S. political, economic, and military response to the burgeoning civil war in El Salvador. **Teacher note:** The president and his/her team must decide what military, economic, and political actions the United States should take in El Salvador. Their policy proclamation should identify specific actions to be taken and should be defended by logical reasons and specific evidence taken directly from the policy simulation. The president and his team of advisors will be graded on their policy proclamation, using the rubric provided at the bottom of the policy proposal speech and **rubric** assignment. The discussion and broad outline of the policy proclamation should be completed in class, but the team will likely need to meet outside of class to draft its official statement, which will be shared with the class before the simulation debrief.

5. **Debrief:** After the president and advisors share their policy proclamation, the moderator asks stakeholders and decision makers a number of open-ended questions to allow for critical reflection on the simulation. The teacher can choose from the following list of questions as time allows:

- As stakeholders, are you satisfied with the policy decisions of the president and his/her advisors? Why or why not?
- What values do you think should have been the most important in determining the U.S. plan of action?
- Could the United States have decided to do nothing -- to pull out of the region entirely and let the groups within El Salvador determine their fate? Why or why not?
- How do you think this simulation was similar to or different from the process the Reagan administration actually used to shape its policy in El Salvador?
- How do you think the policy plan your classmates developed compared to the plan that the Reagan administration actually implemented?