

The Blood of Paradise

Author's Note

I conceived *Blood of Paradise* after reading *Philoctetes*, a spare and relatively obscure drama by Sophocles. In the original, an oracle advises the Greeks that victory over the Trojans is impossible without the bow of Herakles. Unfortunately, it's in the hands of Philoctetes, whom the Greeks abandoned on a barren island ten years earlier, when he was bitten by a venomous snake while the Achaean fleet harbored briefly on its way to Troy.

Odysseus, architect of the desertion scheme, must now return, reclaim the bow, and bring both the weapon and its owner to Troy. For a companion, he chooses Neoptolemus, the son of his slain archrival, Achilles.

Neoptolemus, being young, still holds fast to the heroic virtues embodied by his dead father, and believes they can appeal to Philoctetes as a warrior. But Odysseus—knowing Philoctetes will want revenge against all the Greeks, he himself in particular—convinces Neoptolemus that trickery and deceit will serve their purposes far better. In essence, he corrupts Neoptolemus, who subsequently deceives Philoctetes into relinquishing his bitterness to reenlist in the cause against Troy.

The tale has an intriguing postscript: It turns out to be the corrupted Neoptolemus, by killing King Priam at his altar during the sack of Troy, who brings down a curse upon the Greeks even as they are perfecting their victory.

This story suggested several themes, which I then molded to my own purposes: the role of corruption in our concept of expedience, the need of young men to prove themselves worthy in the eyes of even morally suspect elders (or especially them), and the curse of a hard-won ambition.

I saw in the Greek situation a presentiment of America's dilemma at the close of the Cold War: finally achieving unrivaled leadership of the globe, but at the same time being cursed with the hatred of millions. Though we have showered the world with aid, too often we have done so through conspicuously corrupt, repressive, even murderous regimes, where the elites in charge predictably siphoned off much of that aid into their own pockets. Why did we look the other way during the violence and thievery? The regimes in question were reliably anticommunist, crucial to our need for cheap oil, or otherwise amenable to American strategic or commercial interests.

We live in a dangerous world, it is said. Hard, unpleasant choices must be made.

But policymakers in Washington and others in their camp have gone beyond even this, embracing a resurgent American exceptionalism as the antidote to the kind of moral self-reflection, which they consider weak and defeatist, that asks if we might not frankly deserve some of the hatred directed at us. Instead, they see a revanchist America marching boldly into the new century with unapologetic military power, uninhibited free-market capitalism, and evangelical fervor—most immediately to bring "freedom" to the Middle East.

The historical template for this proposed transformation is Central America—specifically El Salvador, trumpeted as "the final battleground of the Cold War," and championed as one of our greatest foreign policy successes: the crucible in which American greatness was re-forged, banishing the ghosts of Vietnam forever.

There's a serious problem with this formulation, however: It requires an almost hallucinatory misreading of history.

I conceived of *Blood of Paradise* as a moral thriller—a term often used to describe the recent work of Denise Mina, whom I greatly admire—and I have been overwhelming flattered that several of my fellow writers, such as George Pelecanos, Denise Hamilton, John Connolly, and Luis Alberto Urea, have likened the book to the work of Graham Greene and Robert Stone (also writers whose work has been greatly inspirational and influential). In it, I've attempted to prove the lie to the claim by men like Vice President Dick Cheney and former Defense Secretary Don Rumsfeld, that our Cold War "success" in El Salvador would prove a reliable template for victory in Iraq. Such remarks almost wholly ignore the true state of affairs in El Salvador today, which I try to portray in the book, things such as:

- an indifferent ruling elite with total civil and criminal impunity;
- corruption at the highest levels of the national police force;
- a shadowy mafia comprised of former military officers;
- rampant child prostitution and human trafficking;
- devastation of the environment by commercial interests;
- out-of-control gang violence, exacerbated by U.S. immigration policy;
- the return of death squads conducting "social cleansing;"
- the disintegration of the middle class;
- the emergence of a new political fringe, threatening a return to civil war;
- the migration of an estimated seven hundred people per day out of the country (most to the U.S.).

I also have attempted to show how all these failings have their roots in the conflicts that gave rise to the civil war, conflicts that continue to haunt El Salvador today. As one Salvadoran cleric remarked: "We signed the peace agreement, but we never lived the peace."

Blood of Paradise focuses on Jude McManus, the son of a corrupt Chicago cop, who tries to escape the family scandal first in the military, then by finding work as an executive protection specialist—a bodyguard—in El Salvador. He is charged with the safekeeping of a truly decent man, Axel Odelberg, an American hydrologist who refuses to whitewash the aquifer depletion caused by a soft drink bottling plant operated by a cabal of local businessmen, several of whom are linked not only to death squads but an international child prostitution ring.

Jude's task is complicated by the sudden appearance of an old cohort of his father's, Bill Malvasio, who fled to Central America rather than face the charges against him. He seems to be a changed man, and Jude is moved by the depth and honesty of his regret. Then Malvasio asks a favor, and slowly draws Jude into a twisted conspiracy that threatens to destroy everything and everyone he has vowed to protect.

Like Neoptolemus, Jude allows himself to be seduced by a morally questionable elder into a reckless scheme. In a sense, he stands for all of us: An everyman who wants to do good in a world he knows needs plenty of it, but who also suspects that to accomplish that end a few nefarious deeds must be indulged. He wants to believe as well that one can withstand such evil, rise above it, even as one does its bidding: Good intentions, sound character, and professional skill will prevail over necessary compromises with immorality. Who knows, it might even be fun—kick ass, take names, shake hands with the devil but don't let him hold your wallet. We're Americans after all, blessed by God and history. How can we not prevail?

Another character, A Salvadoran war orphan named Clara, sees the matter differently. She ultimately understands that only through real sacrifice can the future possibly redeem the past. Being deeply religious, like many Salvadorans, she sees this call for renunciation as the challenge of the crucifixion. And so, in the end, she finds the heart to act upon her conviction—not in an empowering act of violence, but a selfless, agonizing act of love.

The book concludes with a non-fiction essay, which explores in greater depth the political and social factors I've discussed here, explaining how the American linkage between El Salvador and Iraq not only tragically misrepresents the present, but also insidiously distorts the past, creating an American "victory" where none existed, with the predictably horrific results for our troops in the Middle East.

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The Murder of Gilberto Soto

As I was writing the book, a particularly chilling and relevant act of violence took place in El Salvador, an event that not only underscored the deterioration of civil society in that country, but eerily echoed elements of the novel's plot: the murder of an American—in this case, the murder of a Teamster named Jose Gilberto Soto.

He was visiting family in El Salvador—and also hoped to meet with port drivers to discuss possible plans to unionize—when gunmen shot him dead outside his mother's house in Usulután. Many of the trucking companies that would have been affected by unionization are run by ex-military officers, but the police investigation never pursued this. Instead, two gang members were pressed and possibly tortured into confessing that the victim's mother-in-law, who had less than a hundred dollars to her name, hired them to kill Soto out of some vague, illogical family rancor.

Two of the three defendants, Soto's mother-in-law and the alleged triggerman, were acquitted in February 2006. The man alleged to have supplied the murder weapon was convicted, despite the fact the Human Rights Ombudsman, in her scathing critique of the investigation—an investigation which was not conducted by the local prosecutor, but the PNC's notoriously corrupt Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime (DECO)—specifically noted that no chain of evidence existed concerning the gun and bullets.

This murder took place during the American debate over ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and only by considerable arm-twisting was the Bush administration able to secure the necessary votes for passage. (CAFTA passed the House by a mere two votes.) How can there be free trade, opponents argued, if men and women seeking a just wage can be murdered with impunity? But such arguments did not prevail.

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