letter from El Salvador

Salvador's Prince of Darkness

Scott Wallace takes a hair-raising ride with the infamous Roberto d'Aubuisson

As I sat beside Roberto d'Aubuisson—the witty, fast-talking, chain-smoking reputed don of El Salvador's death squads—while he steered his Honda Accord through the clogged traffic of downtown San Salvador, I wondered if I was showing my fear. I was clinging to the passenger seat, trying to hide my deep apprehension at riding in an unprotected, unescorted car with one of the most wanted targets in El Salvador.

We were on our way to the countryside, where d'Aubuisson (pronounced "DA-bwee-sone") would address a number of grassroots political rallies held by rabid militants of his fiercely anti-Communist Nationalist Republican Alliance Party (known by its Spanish acronym, ARENA). The party, founded by d'Aubuisson in 1980, is gearing up for presidential elections this spring. Seeking to cleanse its murderous image, ARENA is running a soft-spoken, moderate alter ego to d'Aubuisson, named Alfredo "Freddy" Cristiani, for the job, and he is favored to win. Perhaps only a decision by the Government to put off the elections until the fall—to allow the leftist rebels of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN, to participate in them—could come between d'Aubuisson's party and San Salvador's Presidential Palace. In late January the guerrillas of the FMLN stunned their adversaries by offering to run in the elections if they were held in September.

Those least likely to gain from a postponement are the wealthy coffee barons and industrialists bankrolling the ARENA ticket, the "shareholders of the corporation," as one conservative lawyer describes the party's backers. ARENA cannot afford to appear recalcitrant in the face of the rebels' peace offensive. D'Aubuisson, Cristiani, and other ARENA politicians have countered with other proposals to the rebels. But it is difficult to imagine that ARENA will agree to a delay, which would jeopardize its chances of seizing executive power. ARENA controls a majority in the national legislature and the supreme court, and unless ARENA's leaders and backers can be persuaded that a delay is in their interests, the elections will proceed as planned.

To give Cristiani room to project his reasonable, even-handed appearance, d'Aubuisson has stepped back from the limelight. But in public he often hovers behind the candidate like a shadow, as if to remind Cristiani and everyone else that ARENA and Roberto d'Aubuisson are still synonymous terms. He generally avoids close encounters with journalists. But after I hounded his aides for days d'Aubuisson finally invited me to go with him on a tour of party rallies along the grim, dusty back roads of central El Salvador—where words have long since given way to bullets as the preferred form of discourse between political adversaries.

We were waiting for a traffic light to change when I noticed a car pulling up beside us. I instinctively ducked, not wanting to obstruct the line of fire of any would-be assassin. But it was just another car; d'Aubuisson laughed and pulled me back up in my seat. "Fear not, *hombre*," he chuckled. He shot a glance in the rearview mirror at his bodyguards stuffed in the back seat amid a heap of rifles, Uzi submachine guns, and ammunition belts. "It's safe here." But I knew it wasn't. Murder is an everyday occurrence on the streets of San Salvador, and there may be thousands who have personal scores to settle with d'Aubuisson. Virtually every politician, high-ranking army officer, or high-rolling businessman in El Salvador travels in an armor-plated Cherokee Chief with smoked, bulletproof windows.

El máximo líder Roberto d'Aubuisson surrounded by anti-Communist ARENA supporters in the Salvadoran countryside

SCOTT WALLACE/SIPA PRESS

Not d'Aubuisson. Here we were in an unprotected sedan, the windows rolled down, with d'Aubuisson himself behind the wheel, me riding shotgun, and his silent, efficient-looking guards in the back studying the traffic on our flanks. I searched d'Aubuisson's glazed eyes for an explanation for this come-and-get-me bravura. I had the sense of being dragged to a firing squad by a convict who couldn't wait to get there. I asked him why he chose to expose himself to such obvious risk.

"You can't let these *señores* reduce you to living in fear," he explained in his machine-gun Spanish staccato, referring to the guerrillas, who have been waging civil war against the US-backed Government for the past eight years.

Under the cloak of anonymity the death squads devastated the FMLN's urban underground at the onset of the war, slaughtering thousands of suspected subversives—including liberals, Communists, and even Catholic priests and peasant lay workers—along the way. The guerrillas in more recent times have responded to death-squad killings with gangland-style executions of rightist leaders by their own urban commandos.

Now 45, d'Aubuisson maintains the build of a scrappy bantamweight boxer. Only as a legislator in the National Assembly, when trading jabs with his Christian Democratic rivals, does he wear the obligatory jacket and tie. It's clear he feels most comfortable when freed from the formalities of proper dress or, for that matter, proper language. Once an intelligence officer in the fearsome Salvadoran National Guard, d'Aubuisson has exchanged his uniform for a pair of skintight Calvins and a body-hugging sport shirt. He keeps the shirt half-unbuttoned, exposing a cluster of crosses and charms that dangle around his neck.

"I believe in God," he offered, pointing reverently skyward as I subjected his crosses to a close-up examination. Then with his other hand he affectionately patted a pistol tucked in his waistband. "And I also believe in my revolver." The downturned gun mirrored his uplifted finger, giving him the look of a jack in a deck of cards or the Prince of Darkness. His fingers slid over to a hinged case hanging on his belt. "My sunglasses," he said with a smile and opened the case, revealing several rows of shiny bullets, food for his .38.

D'Aubuisson's charisma, his disregard for convention, and his tough-talking, gun-slinging approach to politics have made him something of a sex symbol, the closest thing El Salvador's upwardly mobile urban youth have to a rock star. But out in the countryside d'Aubuisson pulls on a ratty straw hat to complement a fiery, anti-elitist rhetoric. To the delight of the destitute peasants and small shopkeepers who gather to hear him, d'Aubuisson trashes established liberal authorities, such as Christian Democratic politicians and corrupt government functionaries.

"Underwater—that's the only proper place for the fish!" d'Aubuisson tells his audiences, derisively referring to the Christian Democrats by their party symbol—the fish Christ fed to the masses. "Either underwater or in jail, because some of them have robbed so much that there is nowhere else for them to go." The crowds howl. Then he tells the story of a corrupt politician who comes to town and, in a speech before the natives, promises to build the bridge they've long been waiting for. A local campaign worker nudges the candidate and whispers, "But, sir! We don't have a river here!" The candidate shrugs, turns back to the crowd, and says, "I promise to bring you the river!"

D'Aubuisson will never be El Salvador's President. He did run in the last elections in 1984—elections he says were stolen from him by the CIA. At the time reporters did uncover evidence that the Company was secretly funneling money to Christian Democratic candidate José Napoleón Duarte. But it was never determined how decisive that support was in securing Duarte's victory. In any case, as long as Congress and the Administration remain at least nominally committed to promoting respect for human rights, d'Aubuisson will be shunned in Washington. So ARENA's directorship—including d'Aubuisson—nominated Cristiani to run for president, and ARENA militants believe that only a massive fraud perpetrated by the CIA could prevent them from winning. But to the peasant vigilantes and National Guardsmen who man the trenches in San José Guayabal, a bullet-scarred town in the heart of the central war zone, Roberto d'Aubuisson is still, and always will be, "*el máximo líder*."

When our car bounced up the cobblestone streets of Guayabal, weary guardsmen, helmets pulled low over their eyes, suddenly snapped to attention. "*Buenos días, mi mayor!*" smiled one. "Good day, my major!" they said as they saluted, addressing d'Aubuisson by his former rank, their morale clearly lifted by our visit. The *guardia*, like the other branches of El Salvador's 65,000-man armed forces, is supposedly apolitical, now that they've sworn—at America's behest—to uphold the "democratic process" and refrain from paying favor to one party or another. But the awe and admiration d'Aubuisson inspires among the soldiers and patrolmen throughout the conflictive countryside cast doubt on the viability of our efforts to transplant US-style democracy to these sterile, highly polarized political soils. After all, no one from the Christian Democratic Party—the core of the "democratic center" the US has been trying to nurture—would hope to receive more than the most perfunctory greeting from local security forces.

The Christian Democrats, from incumbent Duarte on down, have suffered persecution at one time or another at the hands of the military. Last December a Christian Democratic campaign worker was murdered on the streets of Soyapango, a working-class city east of San Salvador, reportedly at the hands of the ARENA-controlled local police. After a series of denials and contradictory statements on the affair d'Aubuisson acknowledged that a Christian Democrat had been killed and called the incident a "lamentable accident."

The campaign worker became the 700th or so Christian Democrat murdered by death squads or security forces in the past ten years. In fact the guerrilla ranks are flush with radicalized Christian Democrats who long ago renounced electoral politics and took up rifles as the only means they

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saw possible of throwing off dictatorship. Their former comrades—those still in legal politics, who have formed the backbone of the US-backed civilian Government—fear they will be hunted down once Cristiani takes control of the presidency and appoints hard-line officers to key posts in the Armed Forces High Command. "If ARENA wins, there will be thousands of similar accidents," a close Duarte aide whispered to me.

The Christian Democrats—crippled by party infighting, charges of corruption, and failure to end the war—have been losing ground to ARENA in recent electoral bouts. Last year ARENA took 47 percent of the popular vote in legislative and mayoral elections, seizing a majority in the National Assembly and control over 80 percent of the country's municipal governments. ARENA is now gearing up for a clean sweep. Many Salvadorans who once backed the Christian Democrats, believing they would negotiate an end to the war, have grown disillusioned with the current Government and are expected to vote for Cristiani. Unconsciously or not, these voters will be asking ARENA for something that approximates a "final solution" to the guerrilla problem. US officials fear that any such upsurge in Government-directed violence will play into the hands of the guerrillas, who are hoping that further state repression will trigger a popular insurrection.

Cristiani denies that he will dramatically escalate the war, but strong pressures from within his party may force him to do so. Cristiani does promise to roll back a series of economic reforms that the US State Department, at least until recently, has considered crucial to keeping the rebels at bay. The reforms represent a decade-long effort by the Christian Democrats to divert funds away from the private sector to Government-sponsored social programs, with the idea of blunting the appeal of socialism among El Salvador's impoverished masses. But ARENA's leaders are unanimous in their contempt for any Government effort to redistribute the nation's highly concentrated wealth. That is why they have always regarded the Christian Democrats as closet Communists. "Like watermelons," d'Aubuisson's faithful say—the Christian Democrats are green (their party color) on the outside, red on the inside.

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Roberto d'Aubuisson first gained international fame in the late 1970s as El Salvador teetered on the brink of full-scale civil war. Revolution was sweeping across Central America. In nearby Nicaragua the Sandinistas led a popular insurrection that deposed a longstanding US ally—the dictator Anastasio Somoza. With popular opposition building in El Salvador and a guerrilla movement taking shape there, the US feared that the country's fifty-year-old run of military dictatorships would soon go the way of Nicaragua. The US supported a coup in 1979, led by a group of democratically inclined officers who believed that moderate social reforms were needed to avert a blood bath and an eventual Communist takeover. But d'Aubuisson—backed by powerful financial interests and hard-line officers opposed to efforts to subordinate the military to civilian control—led a counterattack against the liberals.

D'Aubuisson resigned from his position as intelligence officer at the National Guard, took dossiers on hundreds of suspected leftists with him, and began appearing on television to denounce the suspects. Students, union leaders, and even officials in the new Government feared that they would be singled out in d'Aubuisson's bizarre broadcasts; it was often only a matter of days before those mentioned in his speeches would be kidnapped or assassinated by the death squads. "You still have time to change your ways" was his message for Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. In early February of this year Minister of Justice Julio Samayoa publicly identified d'Aubuisson as the intellectual author of Romero's 1980 assassination, a charge that ARENA supporters dismiss as propaganda by the Christian Democrats.

D'Aubuisson is incensed by the death-squad charges and Washington's cool attitude toward him. He believes he is doing America's bidding on Central America's battlefields, defending the national security of the United States.

"I feel abandoned and misunderstood by my American friends," d'Aubuisson told me. "If I didn't believe the US should lead the Christian, Western world, then maybe I'd be with the Communists." He shook his head and smiled ironically. "And if I were a Communist, maybe then I'd get a decent reception in the States."

Charges of d'Aubuisson's death-squad links do nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of his supporters in the bitterly divided towns of central El Salvador. In fact the accusations may actually enhance his status, appealing to the dark recesses of El Salvador's collective unconscious, wherein lurk memories of iron-fisted rule and a certain adoration of the despot, waving his blood-stained cudgel aloft in triumph. Back in the 1930s General Maximiliano Hernández slaughtered between 10,000 and 30,000 Indians in reprisal for a failed peasant rebellion. Hernández went on to rule El Salvador for thirteen years. Many ARENA activists believe that El Salvador needs another Maximiliano Hernández now. (One of El Salvador's death squads is called the Maximiliano Hernández Brigade. The leader of the doomed revolt, executed by Hernández, was a Communist union organizer named Farabundo Martí.)

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We were feasting on a large spread laid out for us in the back of the town hall in Guayabal. We were sitting there, and d'Aubuisson was joking about my apprehension at driving with him up the long, winding road to town. He said my fear was pointless.

"It's already written down in advance," he asserted, finishing off a chicken wing and licking his fingers. "When your time comes, that's it. You don't live one minute longer or one minute less than the way it's supposed to be." Maybe so, I thought, but d'Aubuisson was certainly pushing his luck.

I thought back on the tense twenty-minute ride from the highway into Guayabal. My eyes had been shifting all over the place: to every knoll as it came into view, the high grass along the road, the cluster of trees at the approaching bend. D'Aubuisson glanced at me and laughed. "There's no problem," he said confidently, shifting into third, the highest gear the bumpy road would permit. "Look, if they ambush us the boys in the back seat jump out on our flanks and open up with their rifles." He motioned with his thumb back to the bodyguards, who smiled and nodded in agreement. "I dive out my door, take cover, and return the fire." He pointed to the bushes on his side of the road. "And you grab the Browning," he said, gesturing to another pistol, wrapped in a suede zipper bag, sitting on the console between us. "You dive that way and start blasting away."

Now, as we sat on the back porch of Guayabal's town hall, I looked out on the steep slopes of the nearby volcano Guazapa, a major guerrilla stronghold that dominates the landscape of central El Salvador. Here we were in the midst of the mountain's violently green, lush foothills—territory crisscrossed continually by guerrilla patrols on their way to and from Guazapa.

"The trip coming in was nothing. They don't know when you're going to arrive," d'Aubuisson continued. "But now that we've been here a few hours the Farabundos certainly know we're around. The danger really comes on the way out."

Perhaps d'Aubuisson really does believe, I thought, that he will go at a predetermined moment, in a prearranged way. But if he can influence God's work in some measure, as he seems to have done for others, it won't be any ignominious departure—not a car accident, not some crippling disease. Rather, I imagine a heroic last stand in which, his guns blazing, he offers up his cross-adorned chest to a hail of angry bullets. □