



Disturbing the Peace: The Story of Father Roy Bourgeois and the Movement to Close the School of Americas

James Hodge, Linda Cooper

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Disturbing the Peace tells the story of a controversial Cajun priest, a former gung-ho Navy officer injured in a bomb blast in Vietnam, who has tirelessly championed human rights and aroused the conscience of a nation. The fast-paced historical biography also profiles the movement he founded to close a notorious U.S. Army school whose graduates have committed atrocities across Latin America.

The journey of this "spiritual hobo" has more twists and turns than the Mississippi River: from love affairs that ended in heartbreak to patriotic impulses that ended in disillusionment. From dreams of wealth to missionary work among the poor. From protests and prison terms to a cloistered monastery. From confrontations with church hierarchy to political battles on Capitol Hill.

Bourgeois' opposition to militarism began after a blind Vietnamese orphan opened his eyes to the realities of war. Since then, his human rights work has taken him to half a dozen war-torn countries: To Bolivia, where U.S.-backed security forces kidnapped him after he spoke out against torture. To El Salvador, where he disappeared and two of his friends were killed by U.S.-trained death squads. To Nicaragua and Honduras, where the CIA was helping contra commandos overthrow a government. To Colombia, where he witnessed the human toll of the drug war, escorted by an Army general linked to terrorist bombings. To Iraq, where he met with desperately poor Iraqis just before the country became a bloodbath.

The assassinations of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador in 1989 spurred Bourgeois to investigate the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, then a little known training installation whose graduates were later linked not only to the Jesuit massacre, but to gross human rights abuses throughout Latin America.

The latter half of the book profiles the movement he founded to close the school; the Congressional battles over its funding; the Pentagon's forced admission that the school used manuals advocating torture and assassination; and the courage of average Americans – including WWII and Vietnam veterans, students, union workers, professionals, clergy and elderly nuns – who have risked imprisonment each year at the annual November demonstration at Fort Benning, Ga., where the school is located.

In documenting the sordid record of the school's graduates – from dictators and intelligence agents to death squad leaders and torturers, Disturbing the Peace shines a light on the dark side of U.S. foreign policy – not only in Latin America, but in Iraq, where Bush administration policies on torture led to the disgrace of Abu Ghraib.

While the Pentagon closed and then re-opened the school under a new name -- the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, the SOA Watch movement has remained one of the strongest voices of dissent since Sept. 11, 2001, winning court battles that have helped safeguard First Amendment rights at a time civil liberties are eroding.

Time and again throughout the struggle, Bourgeois, along with his fellow provocateurs for justice, lend credence to Margaret Mead's belief "that a small group of committed citizens can change the world."

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