

# Obama praised, criticized for visit to Romero tomb

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President Barack Obama's visit in March to the tomb of the late Oscar Romero, the martyred archbishop who was assassinated 31 years ago, is getting mixed reviews by U.S. commentators. The president was already being rapped for taking a five-day trip to Brazil, Chile and El Salvador as critics sought his answers on Libya plans, budget impasses in Congress and consequences of Japan's troubles.

His stop in El Salvador to honor an icon of Latin American battles for justice might have endeared him to religious liberals. Accompanied by Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes, Obama went on March 22 to the tomb of Romero, who was killed after he criticized the U.S.-supported Salvadoran military, which had been aligned with death squads during a civil war that killed more than 75,000 people.

Mary Sanchez, a commentator for the *Kansas City Star*, wrote that Romero was "a martyr for the country's poor [and] their struggles for social justice" and was worthy of a visit by the U.S. president. "Obama's respect at the priest's tomb is a hopeful sign of positive relations going forward," she said.

However, in an interview with the *National Catholic Reporter*, an independent weekly also based in Kansas City, Roy Bourgeois, an excommunicated U.S. priest who has long campaigned against the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly called the U.S. Army School of the Americas, called the Obama visit a missed opportunity.

"Obama didn't even acknowledge, let alone apologize for, the U.S. role in El Salvador," Bourgeois said, adding that the institute had trained Salvadoran military leaders who were involved in human rights violations. "I and many other human rights activists were hopeful," Bourgeois said, that the president would publicly acknowledge "that Romero and thousands of others were killed, tortured and disappeared by graduates of this school."

Bourgeois noted that former president Bill Clinton had formally apologized for the U.S. role in support of Guatemalan security forces that killed more than 200,000 persons during a decades-long civil conflict in Guatemala.

Writing in the *Reporter*, Dean Brackley, a Jesuit priest who teaches at the University of Central America in San Salvador, said Obama deserves credit for the gesture of visiting Romero's tomb: "Even as he exercises U.S. power, with its militarism and imperial sway, he detours to acknowledge a champion of the poor and a martyr for the truth." —ENInews