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Fighting for Peace

Alex Sanchez on Wars and Borders at Home and
Abroad

Isaac Ontiveros

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The US government's war on gangs has crossed, created, and exploited many borders. Its roots extend from the state's attempt to neutralize oppressed peoples' struggles for self-determination inside and outside the US, and its violence has targeted communities from Los Angeles to San Salvador. This war has led to the deaths of thousands and the imprisonment, impoverishment, disenfranchisement and dispossession of many more. Through his work in organizations such as Homies Unidos, Alex Sanchez has worked across many different borders as part of brave efforts to stop violence, make peace, and most importantly, make lasting shifts in power for those communities living through the war on gangs.

Isaac Ontiveros [IO]: While we often think first of national borders between countries, we can also think of the borders between people who are locked up and their loved ones on the outside or the economic and racial barriers that people come up against. In the work you do, how do you relate to borders?

Alex Sanchez [AS]: One of the ways that people have dealt with oppression is by fighting it, like with what happened in

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El Salvador. Guerilla groups came together under the FMLN [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front] and they started fighting the oppressive government that was funded by the United States. Many people fled. Some fled because they were being persecuted by death squads and the military, and, ironically, they fled to the country that was funding this war—the United States. When you cross these lines, the border from El Salvador to Guatemala, from Guatemala to Mexico, and from Mexico to the United States, you start looking at that picture and asking: “What am I? Who am I?”

We create borders all the time. Within our own families—“It’s *our* family”—we create that nucleus of what to belong to, what tribe we belong to... that’s nothing new. When it comes to issues of community, then we’re talking about larger issues than ourselves. How does that community identify you? How do you identify within that community?

I was a Salvadoran who was part of this wave of immigrant children who came from El Salvador in the late 1970s. We came from a war-torn community where we had been exposed to violence as children, and came to communities here in the US where our culture clashed with other cultures, with other ethnic groups that didn’t understand where we were coming from. We started dealing with these identity issues, and people creating their own issues, creating their own borders within their own communities, to identify their own little tribes, their own little organizations that they were using to deal with their own problems. I got into a gang to get answers to some of those questions I didn’t have answers to.

The street organizations started quickly and became so big because they provided a community to these kids that were disenfranchised; that nobody gave a damn about; that were seeking their identity. You had the war, children of war, immigrants. Most of them spoke only Spanish. Most of them were targeted by the other more traditional gangs. And what happened is that once you started creating that protection within the community, then

The bottom line to all of this is that they did not want us to continue helping our men and women coming out of prison, our young men and young women coming out of juvenile halls, our young generations that have been lost to violence and drugs. Not only was I on trial, but so was the work that we were doing.

What's happening is that they will never let former gang members or gang members that belong to street organizations become politicized. We saw what happened with the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, Latin Kings and other groups that started organizing in their communities. These organizations were infiltrated and criminalized and some were destroyed. They do not want these organizations in Los Angeles to become politicized, because we're talking about thousands and thousands of men and women that could become advocates of peace.

you start having issues with others outside that community. So, friction is created. This form of organization became criminalized and introduced to the criminal justice system. That's when these other borders within our communities were created. We started fighting each other. People were targeted, there were victims, and there was also internalized oppression that you've been growing up with. You let it out on each other. You cross that line in your community, that invisible line, and let it out on somebody else. You cross the street, you cross that border.

There's no physical border around certain areas, it's not visible, but we knew they were there. We were dealing with this land that had been divided by these borders: the Brown being divided by the white, which is how we looked at the United States, as a gringo, *yanqui*, *other* country. You knew that there were entire communities that were borders as well, that you could not go to. People were fighting each other behind that. You went deeper into downtown and then you had skid row. And it doesn't have borders around it but that's where everybody was pushed into. It's definitely an economic issue.

IO: Could you talk about another way you have crossed borders—doing truce and peace work among street organizations? Describe the historic truce between the Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18 organizations in El Salvador last year.

AS: In '92 in El Salvador there was an historical peace agreement between the government and the FMLN. Once this peace agreement was signed, and there was an official end to the war, it became difficult for Salvadorans who had fled as refugees to be able to stay in the US. Many of them started being deported down to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

The issue of deportation became worse in 1996 when some of the worst anti-immigration laws were signed, along with the anti-terrorism act, by Bill Clinton. Immigrants became a target. Many individuals coming out of prison that had their permanent residency, but not their citizenship, were deemed deportable because

of past convictions. They started deporting masses of people back to Central America. These individuals did not have places to go, did not have shelter, their families were in the US. For many, the only way they had to survive was by creating community. They learned how to survive within this oppression that they experienced in the United States. The same borders and rivalries that existed in California started to be recreated in communities in Central America. We can say that the gang violence was exported to El Salvador after the '92 peace accords.

What developed was years of warfare, years of fighting. The violence spread through all the different street organizations or gangs, Mara Salvatrucha [MS], Calle 18, La Mirada—gangs that have their origins in Los Angeles. They started fighting each other and the oppression by the state on these groups was influencing them. The US played a role. Corporations and institutions such as the NYPD [New York Police Department], LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department], acted as advisors on policies that started being implemented. We started seeing police policies such as zero-tolerance developed in New York now being implemented in Central America: extreme, continuous harassment of community members. Identifying individuals just on the basis of how they act, dressed, the community they lived in... Extreme oppression and extreme harassment led to other extremes: violence, mass killings. You had death squads in El Salvador targeting individuals that had been deported from the United States, identifying them by their criminal records.

Incarceration created a level of violence that had never been seen before in El Salvador. Prisons in El Salvador simulated prisons in California. One even became known as Alcatraz. Many of the individuals that were being sent there, like Pelican Bay Prison in California, were in the segregated housing units, and these individuals were being tortured. Many died from lack of health care. The meals that they served had rocks in them, so their teeth would break. Violence spread. More and more people started being targeted and targeting each other inside the prisons and in the communities.

Because we did that, they looked at us as the enemy. But I looked at the LAPD basically as this gang that was trying to shut me out of my community, trying to take control. And, being somebody that knows how to deal with these issues, I took out the tools that I had learned, which were community organizing, educating the community, and putting things on paper. We started organizing the community to develop strategies to file complaints against law enforcement, and so on, to protect themselves.

So this led to me being arrested in 2009 as part of a RICO indictment, in which the LAPD translated a wiretap in a way that seemed like I had conspired to hurt somebody in El Salvador. We realized that this officer has basically lied under oath. And he had omitted sentences that he did not want to translate because those sentences would clear me and show that I was not an active gang member. We had to fight for my bail. We ended up having to go to the court of appeals where we outlined all the mistakes that they made, in regards to the process, in regards to the evidence that they had and were using against me. We had Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries [a highly respected gang-intervention advocate] to testify on my behalf, and other people that came forward that were willing to testify on my behalf. We won the appeal and I ended up getting bail. It was a high bail, \$2 million. I was like, "I'm never getting out, because I don't have even one percent of that." Friends put down their homes, and our community came forward and I was bailed out.

In late 2012 we submitted a motion to dismiss the case, addressing all the intentional mistakes made by the government. The government submitted their own motion recommending that the court dismiss all charges against me. They did this to avoid addressing the issues pointed out in our motion. [The motion to dismiss] became official in January when the judge signed the order, and we have until late April to see if the government re-files charges against me. The fight continues.

that are making money out of crime, and advocating for harsher penalties against people that commit crimes, and the prison guard union, and the LAPD and other law enforcement [agencies] are not going to support any peace agreement, because it means they're going to lose money and power.

But we have come a long way. We are working to stop another generation of our children from falling through the cracks—and that's all we want. We want to help those brothers and sisters within those walls, once they come out to be able to create a life for themselves. And that's what we're trying to do. That's something that resonates not only here in California but across the borders. I have no doubt that many of the brothers that are part of the peace truce in El Salvador last year, were also part of the street negotiations and agreements in Los Angeles in '92 and '93. So there is a link that transcends our borders.

IO: On the subject of overcoming attempts by those in power to destabilize this work, could you talk a little bit about how you were recently targeted, and the victory you were able to celebrate?

AS: In 2009, I became part of a federal gang indictment as a part of a RICO Act case. They charged me with conspiracy to murder somebody in El Salvador. It was a shock to me because I had been away from gang violence for over 14 years. I had dedicated my life to trying to serve the brothers and sisters that have been in engaged in that environment. But it wasn't surprising for me to see myself get caught up in one of these indictments once I saw that the LAPD was also involved. The LAPD first targeted me in 2000. They came after me because I was the alibi for a 14 year old kid they were trying to charge with murder. And they tried to come after this group I was working with. They raided the church where we had our art program. I got arrested and they thought I was easily going to be deported back to El Salvador and not mess up the case that they had against this kid. It took two years but I beat the case and sued LAPD and won.

Many family members were being targeted. The violence was not only between gang members but also started [affecting] their families. Many individuals in the gangs didn't mind each other being targeted—that was the name of the game they were involved in—but once you crossed that border, once you crossed that line to targeting each other's families, it was beyond anything.

The level of aggression that street organizations visited on each other was horrific— There were 15 murders per day. And so some gang members started to speak with Raúl Mijango who was a former guerrilla and member of congress. They were able to bring in Monseñor Fabio Colindres and build communication with some of the leadership of the gangs in the maximum security prisons. The leadership said, "We can stop this. We need opportunities and support from the authorities in the prison system and also law enforcement. We need support from the government."

So there was some dialogue between the gangs. This included the Minister of Public Security and Safety, who did not oppose the truce. About 30 of these leaders were able to have communication. They spread the word to the other prisoners, and started communicating with their members in the streets.

The secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS) went to El Salvador, and there was a gesture by MS and 18th Street that they would turn over guns in a gesture of good faith. And we're not talking about hand guns; we're talking about high caliber .30-.30s, M16s, AK 47s—weapons they were using to basically annihilate each other, that now they were putting at their feet. They said, "You destroy them. We don't want to give them to the government because these guns might end up back in our hands."

So, news came out that there had been a truce called by the gangs, which led communities to also support the agreement. By the end of the week everybody was in agreement, and violence went down from 15 murders per day to four.

This happened in March 2012. It has been challenging. It's difficult to maintain a truce when you do not have the complete support of government. But they're not directly opposing it and it seems like there is some support from the Minister of Public Security. We also have the OAS and the World Bank involved and they're looking at how to provide some resources for prison reform. You have the European Union also engaged. You have the International Red Cross also beginning to support the truce. So, you have big international organizations that have been introduced to the individuals that have been creating this truce, and they believe this truce is real.

IO: *Last year was the 20th anniversary of not only the LA Rebellion but of the Watts Truce. Although this peace agreement between street organizations probably saved thousands of lives over the course of several years it was actively destabilized by the LAPD. Why is there such an investment in destabilizing these truces?*

Alex: In El Salvador, over 1,000 individuals have honored this truce. Violence has stayed down for almost a year now. But we know there are going to be forces that are going to try to undermine peace. We know that the Arena Party [a right-wing political party in El Salvador] has come out to put some pressure on the Salvadorian government, which right now is run by the FMLN, which is the first time that a left-wing government has taken power. The ones that have been making profit out of violence and mass incarceration are losing money in El Salvador. For example, the private security companies are losing money because the violence is reduced. There are a lot of people that are going try to undermine this truce, including the US State Department which named Mara Salvatrucha a "transnational criminal organization."

Here in California, once the 1992 truce between the Crips and the Bloods came into effect—and then the following year a truce between the Latino gangs—the issue became that there were was no outside support. There was no effort by any governmental agency to support and start investing in what was happening. The police

union and the prison guards' union, could not taking credit for reduction in violence. The reduction came from the street organizations in our community that had decided to stop the violence. And once *you* become able to reduce the violence, *they're* going to say, "No! You cannot be the ones in control of violence. We need to be the ones in control of violence. We need to keep these organizations fighting with each other." And this is because there are many stakeholders involved that are making profit out of it. And that's why you saw in '92 and '93, some of the most horrific policies introduced in California: Three Strikes; Proposition 21; anti-immigration policies. Some of those most horrific policies came after the peace truces. Even the Federal Government came in and said we cannot let these people be empowered to stop violence. They started infiltrating some of these organizations; they started using organized crime laws such as the RICO Act [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act] to go after organizations in our communities, basically funneling millions of dollars to targeting gangs and paying people to start turning against their own people. And this is why those agreements from '92 and '93 were not thoroughly sustained.

But many individuals that took part in the truces were able to say, "You know what? We can continue doing some of this peace work without any funding, without any support." Many of them started establishing organizations to continue trying to help and maintain these agreements. And that's why you see that the level of violence never went back up to the levels of the '80s. And now the city of LA, and other parts of the state and country are starting to create some funds for gang intervention work. But it is still not funded accordingly.

You can see the disparity. The Youth Justice Coalition [in Los Angeles] is pushing for just onepercent of the budget that law enforcement and probation gets to be used for gang intervention and prevention. This would create hundreds of millions of dollars for people in affected communities to do peace work. But, the people