

James P. McGovern (Massachusetts)
Representative of U.S. Congress
Universidad de Centro America Jose Simeon Cañas (UCA)
Conferring of Honorary Doctorate in Human Rights
San Salvador, El Salvador
Friday, November 13, 2009
6:00 PM – 7:30 PM

I want to thank Father Tojeira and the University of Central America for this honor.

I have a long history with the UCA, this campus and the people of El Salvador. My involvement began in the early 1980s when I worked for Congressman Joe Moakley. He got involved with Salvadoran refugees who had fled the violence and ended up in Massachusetts. He sent me here to learn the reality of El Salvador. And when I asked who I needed to talk to, everyone told me my first stop had to be the UCA.

I got to meet Ignacio Ellacuría on my very first trip in 1983. I worked with Segundo Montes on refugee issues. And I got to meet and know the marvelous Ignacio Martin-Baró.

In a particularly violent time in the mid-1980s, I asked Martin-Baró what message I should take back to the people in Congress. He said to me, “Tell them that we’re human beings, too.” Those words still haunt me.

As I stand before you today, my heart is filled with many memories. Some of them are of the tragic and painful times that occurred in El Salvador during the war – including the murders of the six Jesuits and two women here on this campus.

But most of my memories are about good things: The courage of those who work here at the UCA – and the spirit and endurance of the Salvadoran people.

I’m here tonight with my wife, Lisa, and my two children, Patrick and Molly.

Lisa and I were married less than two weeks before the Jesuits were murdered. So she, too, has powerful feelings about what happened here in this country.

My kids are with me because I want them to get to know this campus and this country. There are so many important and wonderful things for them to know.

As I look out at this audience, there are so many people I want to acknowledge – and I hope to have time later this evening to thank each of you for being so gracious and helpful to me over the decades – and in teaching me the real meaning and respect for human beings and their rights. But I’d like to acknowledge Leonel Gomez, who was so instrumental in helping put the pieces of the puzzle together to identify who ordered, carried out and covered up the murders of the Jesuit martyrs; Father Charlie Currie, the U.S. Society of Jesus, and all the students and faculty at the U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities; and Heather Foote and Geoff Thale, whose

work and insights on El Salvador have helped so many Members of Congress and decision-makers over the decades. I also want to thank Tom Quigley, who served for so long at the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, for all of his wisdom, good advice, pointed wit, and guidance over the course of my time in Washington. [Congressman McGovern may acknowledge others in the audience at this point in his remarks.]

I would also like to acknowledge and remember two individuals who not only taught me so much about El Salvador, but how to live my life as a man, with passion and commitment to helping others and standing up for human rights – and that’s Father Jon Cortina and Bill Ford, the brother of Sister Ita Ford, who was murdered in El Salvador in 1980. They were, each of them, among the most beautiful souls it has ever been my privilege to know. I miss them very much – but as the Spanish language says so beautifully, they are now and always will be “*presente*” in my life and work.

It is incredible as I stand here – less than 20 years after the war ended – to see the many changes that have occurred in this country.

The new President of this country, Mauricio Funes, is a member of the FMLN political party – a party that only a couple of decades ago was an armed insurgency. No matter what your political philosophy, no matter who you voted for in the last election, you have to admit this would have been unthinkable just one brief generation ago.

This is indeed a special moment. But special moments are often fleeting.

The challenge for all of us in politics is not just getting elected to office – but governing. Governing is not easy.

President Obama and the Democratic Congress in the United States are making important strides forward to help people. But it’s not easy.

I want President Funes to succeed. And I think everyone in this country, whether from the FMLN, ARENA, or other political parties, should want the same. Because as a result of this election, the world is once again focused on El Salvador. El Salvador faces daunting problems – an economy facing an international economic crisis, a society scarred by poverty and inequality, institutions weakened by impunity and corruption, and problems of crime and violence that require sustained civilian leadership to control. And this week, of course, you face an immediate crisis – rebuilding after the storms and landslides of last weekend that caused so much human misery. These aren’t easy issues. But if all the political forces in El Salvador can join together to address them, El Salvador will succeed – the people and the nation of El Salvador will succeed.

And if El Salvador succeeds, it will be a model and a leader, not only for Latin America, but for the rest of the world. Maybe this sad and tragic moment of natural disaster might be the opportunity – the doorway – for everyone to work together for the common good of the nation and the Salvadoran people.

Being a politician myself, I know only too well the impulse to criticize your political adversaries and members of opposition political parties. But at this special moment, there should be a truce on political attacks and petty politics – if even only for a short time.

I believe that the United States needs to be a better partner for El Salvador. The U.S. spent billions on war. We owe it to the people of this country to invest more during this time of peace. And the more El Salvador succeeds, the easier it will be for the U.S. and others to find ways to help.

This can be a time of incredible collaboration between our countries. This can be a time when universities like this one can collaborate with some of the finest universities in the United States.

There's a lot that El Salvador can learn from the people of the United States – and there's a lot the people of the United States can learn from El Salvador.

The U.S. can sometimes appear to be arrogant. And that's because sometimes we are.

We need to develop a relationship with El Salvador in which we become true partners. I am talking about a relationship significantly different from the one the United States had with El Salvador during the 1980s. Because if we're going to work together to overcome the legacy of corruption, impunity and violence – if we're going to create strong, transparent, trustworthy institutions that support the rule of law, human rights, development and peace – then we must be true partners, respectful of one another. And this is what I'm committed to helping create – in genuine partnership with all of you – and in memory of my boss, Congressman Joe Moakley, who introduced me to El Salvador, 26 years ago

Joe Moakley was the most extraordinary “ordinary man” I've ever known. When Joe was diagnosed with leukemia, he was asked by a reporter what was his most important accomplishment. And this celebrated politician – the dean of the Massachusetts Congressional delegation – he didn't say it was the bridges and hospitals he'd gotten built in his district; it wasn't the schools he'd constructed; or the lakes and harbors he helped clean up. It was El Salvador and the people who had touched his heart. He deeply loved the people of El Salvador – and I still do.

The people on this university campus and throughout this country have greatly influenced me. The Jesuits here at the UCA and the Jesuit community have taught me that religion and faith are much more than going to church, or rituals or even prayer. Religion and faith are about action – and that's why the Jesuit martyrs lost their lives: They acted on their faith and religion. They stood with the poor, the hungry and the oppressed. They made it clear that every single human being on this planet is important.

And so it is with a deep sense of gratitude to this campus and this community – the UCA family, which has always embraced and welcomed me, and which is now and will be forever a part of my family – that I humbly accept this honorary degree. From my heart, I thank you.