

A Thousand Words

Photos connect history to diplomacy /// By Julia McKay

Although President Lyndon Johnson and Vice President Dan Quayle both slept at the U.S. ambassador's residence in San Salvador, El Salvador, no plaques or photographs commemorated it. When Chargé d'Affaires Robert Blau learned of this situation shortly after his arrival in 2008 as deputy chief of mission, he urged that action be taken to show the post's illustrious history.

The resulting exhibit, "The United States and El Salvador—An Enduring Relationship," consists of 40 photographs of high-level bilateral meetings from 1928 to the present and is being used as a public diplomacy tool throughout the country.

The exhibit, which debuted at a time of great change in El Salvador with the election of its first leftist president since the end of the civil war in 1992, provided the embassy with the perfect way to demonstrate the long-term U.S. commitment to close bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation.

Reunited Leaders

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton inaugurated the exhibit during her visit to El Salvador for President Mauricio Funes' inauguration in June 2009. The embassy used the occasion to reunite the subjects of one of the exhibit photos, Secretary Clinton and former Salvadoran First Lady Elizabeth de Calderón Sol, who were photographed together in 1998 when they met as first ladies.

The embassy also organized an event to honor the four living former presidents of El Salvador, all pictured in the exhibit.

"In contemplating the historic moments reflected in these photos, I cannot but express my sincere desire that someday soon we will have images to add to this exhibition that show the leadership of President Obama and President Funes ... as they work to strengthen the historical relationship between our peoples," said the nation's new foreign minister, Hugo Martínez.

In March, photos of presidents Obama and Funes at the White House were added to the collection.

The exhibit was the centerpiece of the embassy's 2009 July Fourth celebration. It then went on display at a national museum in San Salvador and is currently travelling to universities and cultural centers throughout the country. To make it accessible to the widest possible audience, the embassy put the exhibition on its Web site, <http://sansalvador.usembassy.gov>.

Local government officials have requested copies of the photos. The mayor of the port city of La Unión, for example, now has a copy of the photo of President-elect Herbert Hoover's 1928 arrival to his city hanging in his office.

Exhibit Tips

Posts interested in mounting a similar exhibition can take several steps to find material:

- Contact the Department's Office of the Historian, history@state.gov, and approach presidential libraries and the White House,

which is where the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador got the photos of presidential visits. Such photos are often free.

- Ask local newspapers. Three Salvadoran newspapers provided Embassy San Salvador with scanned front pages, articles and photos from historic visits and meetings. The material was free, and the publications were credited in all copies of the exhibition, publications and speeches.

- Turn to the Associated Press. The Department's agreement with AP lets it use AP photos free of charge, provided the copyright is acknowledged. Working with AP, Embassy San Salvador found photos of bilateral meetings in Washington, D.C., and of regional summits.
- Ask local historians, who often eagerly provide additional information and photos. This is how Embassy San Salvador obtained photos of Charles Lindbergh's visit to El Salvador in 1928 in the *Spirit of St. Louis*.

- Approach former senior officials, who often donate copies of photos from their private collections.

"The historical exhibit and the use we have made of it through so many high-profile events has been a key element in our public diplomacy strategy to emphasize the

continuity of good relations with El Salvador," said Chargé d'Affaires Robert Blau.

Because new photos can always be added, such an exhibit becomes an effective, low-cost public diplomacy program that can be refreshed continuously.

Every embassy has a story to tell. The next time someone asks if anyone famous stayed at your post, why not have the answer and the photos to prove it? ■

The author, who curated the photo exhibition, is an entry-level public diplomacy officer working as a consular officer and staff assistant at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador.



News of President Lyndon Johnson's 1968 visit to El Salvador ran on the front page of a Salvadoran newspaper.



Top: President-elect Herbert Hoover meets with Salvadoran officials in 1928. **Center:** Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton opens the photo exhibition with Chargé d' Affaires Robert Blau. **Bottom:** President George W. Bush and Salvadoran President Francisco Flores review the troops during Bush's 2002 visit to El Salvador.