



CJA Tribute to Ambassador Robert E. White

By Patty Blum, CJA Legal Advisor, on behalf of the clients, staff and pro bono partners of CJA who had the privilege of working with Ambassador White

On March 19, 1980, then-U.S. ambassador to El Salvador Robert White sent a 30-page telegram to the Secretary of State Warren Christopher. He had been in El Salvador for less than two weeks but he quickly assessed the situation – El Salvador was a country where the disparity between rich and poor was one of the worst examples of income inequality in the world; where a grassroots movement to address this disparity and the need for land reform, labor rights, victims’ rights, and the restoration of democracy was capturing the imagination of its people; and where the military violently repressed those aspirations. White urged that human rights must be the key underpinning of U.S. foreign policy. This was quintessential Robert White.

Not five days after White’s telegram, Archbishop of El Salvador Óscar Romero was assassinated by right-wing death squads. By the end of the year, the Salvadoran military had murdered over 10,000 civilians, scores disappeared and thousands were tortured in secret military cells. White spent his time as ambassador holding meeting after meeting with El Salvador’s top military commanders to confront them with these atrocities and insist that they halt this course. Near the end of 1980, White was one of the first at the crude roadside grave of four American churchwomen, slaughtered by Salvadoran security forces. When White refused to fabricate progress in the Salvadoran investigation of that vicious crime, he was forced out of the Foreign Service, where he had enjoyed a distinguished career of more than 25 years.

From his “civilian” perch, White continued to write and talk about El Salvador and all of Central America, to advocate for change in U.S. foreign policy and for social change in the region. We at CJA came to know him well. From our earliest days as an organization, as we crafted a litigation strategy to insist on justice for the victims of the crimes of the Salvadoran military, we turned to Ambassador White. White agreed to testify in all [three of CJA’s civil cases](#) for accountability against the top military commanders and architects of some of its most heinous abuses. He also testified for the Department of Homeland Security in their [removal cases](#) against two former Salvadoran Ministers of Defense, the defendants in one of CJA’s ground-breaking cases. He was a unique witness: he had the gravitas of a diplomat, the learnedness of a scholar, the keen eye of a witness to a terrible history. He touched jurors and judges in a special way – never did they listen more intently than when Bob White was on the stand.

It’s probably in the “off hours” of those trials, though, where we all benefited the most from the wisdom, dedication, and great humor of Ambassador Bob, as we all liked to call him. We lawyers, with our clients, other witnesses and supporters, had many hours, sometimes in fairly sketchy hotel restaurants, or the lobbies of courthouses, or the offices of our pro bono partners, to talk, share and reminisce with him - to hear Ambassador Bob’s amazing stories and experiences, to observe and bask in his wonderful, compassionate, kind and engaging manner with all of us. He took the time to know each of our clients, to honor their histories, to remember with them the extraordinariness of their homeland – its varied beauty, the dignity of its people. Those are the times we’ll most remember and cherish.

Ambassador Bob lived a rich, full, and noble life. He will be deeply missed.