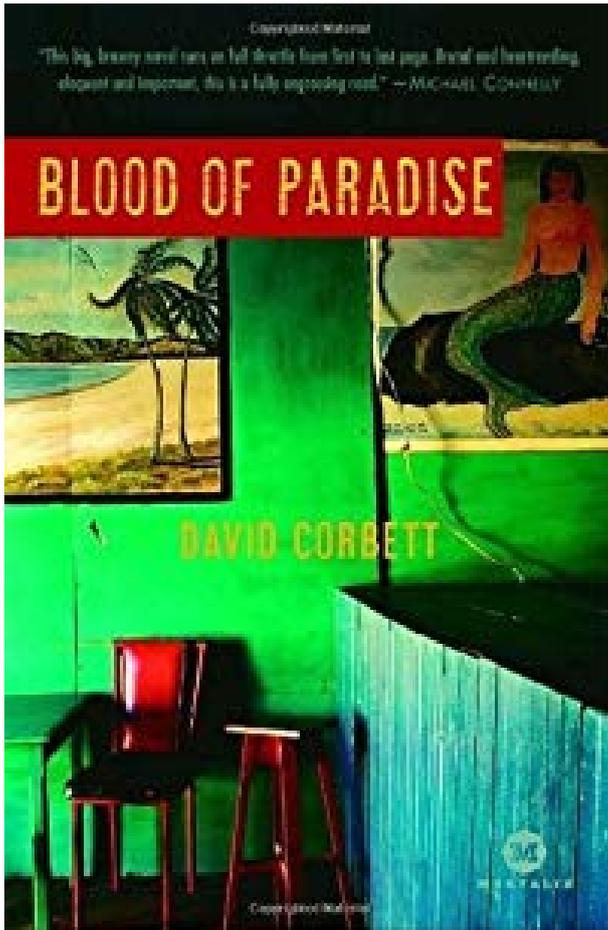


Blood of Paradise



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El Salvador: America's great Cold War success story and the model for Iraq's fledgling democracy—if one ignores the grinding poverty, the corruption, the spiraling crime, and a murder rate ranked near the top in the hemisphere. This is where Jude McManus works as an executive protection specialist, currently assigned to an American engineer working for a U.S. consortium. Ten years before, at age seventeen, he saw his father and two Chicago cop colleagues arrested for robbing street dealers.

The family fell apart in the scandal's wake, his disgraced dad died under suspicious circumstances, and Jude fled Chicago to join the army and forge a new life.

Now the past returns when one of his father's old pals appears. The man is changed—he's scarred, regretful, self-aware—and he helps Jude revisit the past with a forgiving eye. Then he asks a favor—not for himself, but for the third member of his dad's old crew. Even though it's ill-considered, Jude agrees, thinking he can oblige the request and walk away, unlike his father. But he underestimates the players and the stakes and he stumbles into a web of Third World corruption and personal betrayal where everything he values—and everyone he loves—is threatened. And only the greatest of sacrifices will save them. "This big, brawny novel runs on full throttle from first to last page. Brutal and heartrending, eloquent and important, this is a fully engrossing

read.” –Michael Connelly “A Quiet American for the new century.

Angry and impassioned, *Blood of Paradise* is that rare beast: a work of popular fiction that is both serious and thrilling.” –John Connolly, New York Times bestselling author of *Every Dead Thing* “David Corbett is a supremely gifted writer and *Blood of Paradise* reminds me of a Robert Stone novel. Its lyrical prose and exotic setting filled with damaged souls grasping for redemption any way they can combine in a tour de force that will haunt you long after you reach the end.” –Denise Hamilton, nationally bestselling author of *Prisoner of Memory* “If you’re looking for the best in contemporary crime fiction, this is it.” –The Washington Post, on *Done for a Dime*

THE MORTALIS DOSSIER- BONUS FEATURE FROM DAVID CORBETT FROM TROY TO BAGHDAD (VIA EL SALVADOR) The Story's Genesis I conceived *Blood of Paradise* after reading *Philoctetes*, a spare and relatively obscure drama by Sophocles. In the original, an oracle advises the Greeks that victory over the Trojans is impossible without the bow of Herakles. Unfortunately, it’s in the hands of Philoctetes, whom the Greeks abandoned on a barren island ten years earlier, when he was bitten by a venomous snake while the Achaean fleet harbored briefly on its way to Troy. Odysseus, architect of the desertion scheme, must now return, reclaim the bow, and bring both the weapon and its owner to Troy. For a companion, he chooses Neoptolemus, the son of his slain archrival, Achilles. Neoptolemus, being young, still holds fast to the heroic virtues embodied by his dead father, and believes they can appeal to Philoctetes as a warrior. But Odysseus—knowing Philoctetes will want revenge against all the Greeks, himself in particular— convinces Neoptolemus that trickery and deceit will serve their purposes far better. In essence, he corrupts Neoptolemus, who subsequently deceives Philoctetes into relinquishing his bitterness to reenlist in the cause against Troy. The tale has an intriguing postscript: It turns out to be the corrupted Neoptolemus who, by killing King Priam at his altar during the sack of Troy, brings down a curse upon the Greeks even as they are perfecting their victory. This story suggested several themes, which I then molded to my own purposes: the role of corruption in our concept of expedience, the need of young men to prove themselves worthy in the eyes of even morally suspect elders (or especially them), and the curse of a hard-won ambition. Why El Salvador? I saw in the Greek situation a presentiment of America’s dilemma at the close of the Cold War: finally achieving unrivaled leadership of the globe, but at the same time being cursed with the hatred of millions. Though we have showered the world with aid, too often we have done so through conspicuously corrupt, repressive, even murderous regimes, where the elites in charge predictably siphoned off much of that aid into their own pockets. Why did we look the other way during the violence and thievery? The regimes in question were reliably anticommunist, crucial to our need for cheap oil, or otherwise amenable to American strategic or commercial interests. We live in a dangerous world, we are told. Hard, often unpleasant choices have to be made. It’s a difficult argument for those who have suffered under such regimes to swallow. They would consider it madness to suggest that it is envy of our preeminence, or contempt for our freedom, that causes them to view America so resentfully. Rather, they would try to get us to remember that while their hopes for self-determination, freedom, and prosperity were being crushed, America looked on with a strangely principled indifference, often accompanied by a fiercely patriotic self-congratulation, not to mention blatant hypocrisy. Not only have we failed to admit this to ourselves, but the New Right has embraced a resurgent American exceptionalism as the antidote to such moral visitations, which such conservatives consider weak and defeatist. Instead, they see a revanchist America marching boldly into the new century with unapologetic military power, uninhibited free-market capitalism, and evangelical fervor—most immediately to bring freedom to the Middle East. The New Right’s historical template for this proposed transformation is Central America—specifically El Salvador, trumpeted as “the final battleground of the Cold War,” and championed as one of our greatest foreign policy successes: the crucible in which American greatness was re-forged, banishing the ghosts of Vietnam forever. There’s a serious problem with the New Right’s formulation, however: It requires an almost hallucinatory misreading of history. Misremembering the Past In their ongoing public campaign to justify the Iraq war, many supporters and members of the Bush Administration—including both Vice President Dick Cheney and former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld—have singled out El Salvador as a shining example of where the “forward-leaning” policy they champion has succeeded. Mr. Cheney did so during the vice presidential debates, contending that Iraq could expect the same bright future enjoyed by El Salvador, which, he claimed, is “a whale of a lot better because we held free elections.” What Mr. Cheney neglected to mention: • At the time the elections were held (1982), death squads linked to the

Salvadoran security forces were murdering on average three to five hundred civilians a month. • The death squads targeted not just guerrilla supporters but priests, social workers, teachers, journalists, even members of the centrist Christian Democrats—the party that Congress forced the Reagan Administration to back, since it was the only party capable of solidifying the Salvadoran middle.

• The CIA funneled money to the Christian Democrats to ensure they gained control of the constituent assembly. • Roberto D'Aubuisson, a known death squad leader, opposed the Christian Democrats as “Communists,” and launched his own bid to lead the constituent assembly, forming ARENA as the political wing of his death squad network. His bid was funded and supported by exiled oligarchs and reactionary military leaders, and managed by a prominent American public relations firm. • “Anti-fraud measures” proved intimidating. For example: ballots were cast in glass jars. Many voters, who had to provide identification, and who suspected the government was monitoring their choices, feared violent reprisal if they were observed voting “improperly.” • ARENA won thirty-six of sixty seats in the assembly, and D'Aubuisson was elected its leader. • This was perceived by all concerned as a disastrous failure for American policy. When D'Aubuisson tried to appoint one of his colleagues as assembly president, U.S. officials went to the military and threatened to cut off aid. D'Aubuisson relented, but it was the only concession he made to American demands. In short, there was American influence, money, and manipulation throughout the process, putting the lie to the whole notion the elections were “free”—though Mr. Cheney was arguably correct when he stated that “we” held them. Unfortunately, all that effort came to naught, as what America wanted from the elections lay in shambles. Even when, in the following year's election, a great deal more money and arm-twisting resulted in Washington's candidate being elected president, he remained powerless to reform the military, curtail the death squads, or revive the economy, measures Washington knew to be crucial to its counter-insurgency strategy. By 1987, the Reaganites decided to abandon the decimated Christian Democrats for ARENA—the party it had spent five years and millions of dollars trying to keep from power. As for Mr. Rumsfeld's remarks, he made them in the course of a brief stopover in El Salvador to thank the government for its support in the Iraq war. The defense secretary trumpeted the just nature of the cause in Iraq, noting that the Middle Eastern country had once been ruled by “a dictatorship that killed tens of thousands of human beings . . . A regime that cut off the heads and hands of people. A regime that threw people off the tops of six-story buildings with their hands and legs tied.” The irony of these remarks, which bordered on the macabre, was not lost on the locals: The Salvadoran military—which we funded, trained, and expanded tenfold—achieved a similar body count, employing similar if not identical methods in its bloody suppression of the internal opposition. The Salvadoran air force, for example, typically threw its bound captives not off rooftops but out of helicopters and airplanes (the so-called “night free-fall training”), and the practice of cutting off the head and hands of death squad victims was so common it earned the sobriquet “a haircut and a manicure.” These mischaracterizations, however, are merely part of a much larger deceit. In truth, America's claim to victory in El Salvador is delusional. As late as 1988, military and policy analysts of every political stripe were admitting that despite huge infusions of American cash, the government was in a stalemate with the Marxist guerrillas. Although six strike brigades were arguably up to the task of actually engaging the guerrillas, Salvadoran field tactics were often derided by Green Beret advisors as “search and avoid,” and the government's propensity to slaughter its critics desisted only when it felt unthreatened.

Then, in 1989, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Salvadoran oligarchy's main bargaining chip with Washington, its staunch opposition to a Communist takeover, became moot—but not before the guerrillas staged one final offensive, in response to which the military reverted to form, strafing and bombing whole neighborhoods, reviving the death squads, and murdering six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her fifteen-year-old daughter. International outrage over the murdered Jesuits finally brought matters to a head. The time had come to consider a truce, which the UN, not the Americans, stepped in to broker. In 1992, the final Peace Accords were signed. Thus, after over a billion dollars in military aid and three billion in non-lethal aid (most of it spent rebuilding infrastructure destroyed by the fighting) plus more than seventy thousand Salvadorans killed, over forty thousand of them civilians (and more than 90 percent of them murdered by their own government), the U.S.

obtained a result it could have achieved over ten years earlier, in 1981, when the guerrillas first proposed a

negotiated settlement—a prospect that the Reagan hard-liners, many of whom now serve in the Bush Administration, flatly and repeatedly rejected. Only victory would do for them, a victory that proved utterly elusive until the distortions of political memory took over. Mischaracterizing the Present But even if the Reaganites didn't "win" El Salvador, isn't it true the situation there has improved dramatically? With peace and stability, internationally monitored free elections, and a demilitarized judicial apparatus, cannot El Salvador be credibly described as "a whale of a lot better" now? Consider the following:

- Impunity from the country's civil and criminal laws continues, particularly for the politically, economically, or institutionally well-connected.
- The concentration of economic power remains in the hands of a few. In fact, in the 1990s wealth became even more concentrated as a result of neoliberal reforms introduced by ARENA.
- Land transfer provisions dictated by the Peace Accords have suffered end delays.
- Child labor remains endemic.
- El Salvador is a source, transit, and destination country for women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation.
- Civil society is under siege due to the availability of weapons left behind by the war, the formation of shadowy crime syndicates by ex-military officers now turned businessmen, and the presence of transnational youth gangs founded by Salvadoran immigrants in the U.S.
- Death squads have returned, to conduct "social cleansing."
- The highest levels of the the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) are controlled by former military men with dubious pasts. Corruption is widespread, and there are many ties between the police and organized crime. An attorney with the Human Rights Ombudsman stated: "When we go to the [police] Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime, we never go alone. There always has to be at least two of us, because they might do something to harm us." The old political system was based on corruption, privilege, and brutality, and such things do not just evaporate, even in the welcome light of peace and free elections. As we know from worldwide example—Serbia, Ulster, Palestine, Thailand, Somalia, Afghanistan, and, yes, El Salvador and Iraq—today's paramilitary force is tomorrow's Mafia. And so-called free elections can often mask extreme imbalances of power, which voters feel help to change. Meanwhile, almost a third of the population of El Salvador has emigrated to other countries, primarily the United States. The migration wave continues today, estimated by some observers at seven hundred persons per day. These expatriates now send back to their fortunate family members remittances (remesas) of nearly three billion dollars per year.

If the country were reliably secure and prosperous, with wealth distributed reasonably among its people, it would no longer need this foreign cash machine.

But the most significant form of voting in El Salvador is done with one's feet: If one can leave, one does. Those who have stayed behind have become increasingly frustrated. The unwavering grip that ARENA has on power—with conspicuous assistance from Washington—reminds many of the oligarchy's brutal control prior to the civil war. Organized protests have turned increasingly violent, and many fear the country is once again coming apart at the seams. On July 5, 2006, student protests against bus fare increases resulted in gunfire, with two police officers killed and ten wounded. President Tony Saca blamed the FMLN before any credible evidence was available (and subsequently retreated from this position). The FMLN responded by condemning the violence. As it turned out, a gunman caught on tape was identified as an expelled party member, now belonging to a splinter group calling itself the Limon Brigade. Beatrice Alamanni de Carillo, the Human Rights Ombudsman, remarked, "We have to admit that a new revolutionary fringe is forming. It's an open secret." Gregorio Rosa Chávez, the auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, stated, "We signed the treaty but we never lived the peace. Reconciliation is not just based on healing wounds, but healing them well. .

. . . People are losing faith in the institutions." The "Salvador Option" If we described honestly the real state of affairs in El Salvador, would ordinary Iraqis truly wish that for their future? Would Americans consider the cost in human life, not to mention billions of dollars per day, worthwhile? Forget all the blunders along the way (or the more jaundiced view that democracy was never the issue)—is this truly a sane model for a stable state? It's too late to pose the question, of course.

The New Right's distorted understanding of the past and present in El Salvador has created an almost eerie simulacrum in Iraq, with even ghastlier results. Taking one particularly ominous example: In the summer of 2004, as American efforts to stem the Iraqi insurgency foundered, U.S. officials decided to employ what came to be known as "the Salvador Option." American advisers oversaw the establishment of commando units

composed of former Baathists.

The commandos began to exert themselves in the field, enjoying successes the Americans envied, but also employing methods American troops shunned, especially in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal. The American advisers overseeing the commandos—who had extensive backgrounds in Latin America and specifically El Salvador—adamantly stated they in no way gave a green light to death squads, torture, or other human rights violations; they may well have been sincere. But matters spiraled murderously out of control when Shiites dominated the elections of January 2005 and took over for the Interim Government: Shiite death squads, linked to the Badr militia but acting under the aegis of the Ministry of Interior, soon began systematically hunting and killing Sunni men, creating a sectarian bloodbath that continues to tear the country apart. American calls for transparent investigations of the murders have netted little in the way of results. Regard of what the future holds for Iraq, these commandos, along with the paramilitary units and the other sectarian militias operating in Iraq, will not melt away into nothingness. Many of their members are tomorrow's gangsters (whose rackets will predictably fund terrorist organizations). Meanwhile, the escalating bloodshed has caused, among count other troubles, the dislocation of millions of refugees, and the flight from the country of large portions of Iraq's professional class, who like ordinary Salvadorans realize the future lies elsewhere. Given all this, it's difficult not to revisit the notion of a curse. In achieving sole superpower status, we have relied on false notions of ourselves and others, excused atrocity under the guise of expedience, sought our own national interest over all other considerations (with at times a cavalier appreciation of whether short-term successes might in fact poison long-term ones)—all the while proclaiming, not without some merit, all the best intentions in the world. To think this wouldn't come back to haunt us is to believe in notions of power and innocence too fatuous for an adult mind to entertain. One last example should make the case conclusive. Consider our support for the Contras, a makeshift band of mercenaries assembled for the sole purpose of causing as much havoc as possible for the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, whom we accused of supporting the Salvadoran guerrillas. While President Reagan steadfastly proclaimed the Contras to be the "moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers," an adviser to the Joint Chiefs of Staff called them "just a bunch of killers." By 1985, the Contras had murdered at least four thousand civilians, wounded an equal number, and kidnapped perhaps five thousand more. Even the CIA admitted the Contras steadfastly refused to engage the Sandinista military and instead preferred to execute civic officials, heads of cooperatives, nurses, judges, and doctors, while showing a stubborn propensity for abducting and raping teenage girls. The strategy: not to seize power or even prevail militarily, but simply to terrorize average Nicaraguans, and demonstrate that their government could not protect them or provide even basic services. And who has steadfastly imitated this strategy? The jihadists and insurgents in Iraq. Like the victims of, yes, a curse, we find ourselves trapped in the exact same position in which we put our previous enemies. Not even Sophocles could have devised it more neatly. The Murder of Gilberto Soto The historically suspect pronouncements of Messrs. Cheney and Rumsfeld and their camp followers were not the only topical incidents of relevance to occur during the writing of this book. Another, far more chilling event also took place, an event that not only underscored the deterioration of civil society in El Salvador, but eerily echoed elements of the novel's plot: the murder of an American—a Teamster named Gilberto Soto. He was visiting family in El Salvador—and also hoped to meet with port drivers to discuss possible plans to unionize—when gunmen shot him dead outside his mother's house in Usulután. Many of the trucking companies that would have been affected by unionization are run by ex-military officers, but the police investigation never pursued this.

Instead, two gang members were pressed and possibly tortured into confessing that the victim's mother-in-law, who had more than a hundred dollars to her name, hired them to kill Soto out of some vague, illogical family rancor.

Two of the three defendants, Soto's mother-in-law and the alleged triggerman, were acquitted in February 2006. The man alleged to have supplied the murder weapon was convicted, despite the fact the Human Rights Ombudsman, in her scathing critique of the investigation—an investigation which was not conducted by the local prosecutor, but the PNC's notoriously corrupt Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime—specifically noted that no chain of evidence existed concerning the gun and bullets. This murder took place during the American debate over ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA),

and only by considerable arm-twisting was the Bush administration able to secure the necessary votes for passage.

(CAFTA passed the House by a mere two votes.) How can there be free trade, opponents argued, if men and women seeking a just wage can be murdered with impunity? But such arguments did not prevail. A Final Note on Blood of Paradise All of which leads to a brief summarizing glance at two of my characters, Jude and Clara.

Like Neoptolemus, Jude allows himself to be seduced by a morally questionable elder into a reckless scheme. In a sense, he stands for all of us: an everyman who wants to do good in a world he knows needs plenty of it, but who also suspects that to accomplish that end a few nefarious deeds must be indulged. He wants to believe as well that one can withstand such evil, rise above it, even as one does its bidding: Good intentions, sound character, and professional skill will prevail over necessary compromises with immorality. Who knows, it might even be fun—kick ass, take names, shake hands with the devil but don't let him hold your wallet. We're Americans after all, bred by God and history. How can we not prevail? Clara—Salvadoran war orphan, rape victim—sees the matter differently. She ultimately understands that only through real sacrifice can the future possibly redeem the past. Being deeply religious, like many Salvadorans, she sees this call for renunciation as the challenge of the crucifixion.

And so, in the end, she finds the heart to act upon her conviction—not in an empowering act of violence, but in a self-agonizing act of love.