William Wheeler & "State of War"

SEASON 2
episode six

Nicholas Lemann

Welcome to Underreported. I'm Nicholas Lemann. One of President Donald Trump's favorite rhetorical motifs is warning that members of a murderous gang from El Salvador called MS-13 intend to cross our southern border in force and wreak violent havoc on American society.

It's an inaccurate scenario and also an ironic one. MS-13 is much better understood as the product of an American invasion of El Salvador, than of an El Salvadoran invasion of the United States.

In State of War, William Wheeler, an intrepid and fearless young reporter, tells the real story of MS-13 and more broadly, of how El Salvador has descended into violence and corruption. MS-13 and its rival gang, Barrio 18, are stronger, richer and more influential than ever. And El Salvador is intermittently the most violent country in the world.

Through pathbreaking original reporting in El Salvador and Los Angeles, Wheeler has pieced together the entire history of the gangs for the first time. He has also produced chilling, unforgettable, up-close portraits of the people he encountered. Gang members, frustrated reformers, crime investigators and government officials.

The story he tells in State of War is the opposite of President Trump's, but it is no less dramatic. It also has the advantage of being true. Bill, thank you for joining us today.

William Wheeler

Thanks for having me.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's start just by asking you to talk a little bit about what got you interested in this topic. How did it happen?

William Wheeler

Yeah, I'd been kind of bopping around the world for a number of years, from subject

to subject, from environmental reporting to political conflict and a good deal of migration. So most recently, I've been coming out of, you know, reporting on the Libyan migration out of Libya and then also Syria into Europe.

And so I've kind of been following what was happening at the US southern border as an analogous sort of population movement. And you know, the rise of this greater percentage of people fleeing Central America, and sort of outpacing or outstripping the Mexican movement. So it kind of caught my attention there.

Nicholas Lemann

When you're writing about El Salvador and gangs, I assume it's not like you call their press secretary and ask for an interview. So how did you penetrate their world?

William Wheeler

Yeah, that's true. You know, a lot of it was I was also in Honduras, where the gangs are still a little bit more approachable, and access is easier. In El Salvador, particularly after this truce, everyone clammed up and it got exceedingly hard to access, you know, active current gang members. They have a strict code of silence, obviously.

I worked with a photojournalist, Juan Carlos, who has been on this beat for a while and had cultivated relationships with basically homicide detectives who had a few active informants that had just recently left the gangs.

And we all just sort of went out to, you know, sort of the few functioning rehabilitation programs that really exist to try to contact older gang members, because I wanted to sort of see the sweep of the gang's evolution. And then in the end, I went out to prisons and kind of went fishing, and that was where some of my most profitable investments and time and just talking to random people really brought some really new and important information.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's sort of take the story from the top, starting with, you know, long ago now, wars in El Salvador back, I guess, when Ronald Reagan was president. So let's start there and then we'll just walk-through step by step up to today.

William Wheeler

Yeah. So, you know, there was increasing inequality across Central America. The whole region was sort of wracked by some of the most unequal societies on the

planet. And academics still debate today at what point civil war became inevitable in El Salvador.

But the final straw, so to speak, was the assassination by sort of shadowy right-wing forces of a liberation theologian, Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was sort of a patron saint of El Salvador's poor and was really outspoken about all of these murder and human rights violations that the regime was doing.

Nicholas Lemann

What year are we in now?

William Wheeler

'79. So at his funeral, a quarter million people turn out and unknown forces start sniping at the crowd and detonating explosives. It turned into a massacre. In short order, conflict erupted between five guerrilla groups that were sort of joined under an umbrella and the right-wing government.

And it set into — originally the guerrillas' strategy was to try to end the war in the way that Nicaragua or Cuba had, with a show of force that would ignite popular uprising and support from the civilian population. Very much so, because they wanted to do this before Ronald Reagan took office, because they knew he was likely to double down and back the right-wing government. That didn't work.

And it's very interesting — we'll skip over most of that history. But the conflict and the way that it played out settled into a war of attrition, until the US really started to supply a lot of aerial capacity to the Salvadoran government. And at which point, you know, the sort of nature of the conflict settled into — the guerrilla didn't want to challenge a standing army.

They had had some successes, but with this US air power, it sort of fractured into these small insurgencies and guerrilla war of attrition that went on for an incredibly long period of time. I mean, the entire war was about 12 years.

And so in that process, you had a fifth of the population displaced. You had some of the most egregious human rights abuses of the era committed by troops that were advised, trained, and supported by US forces. It was sort of the moral — it was the Iraq or the Vietnam of its era. In that time period, you had about 500,000 Salvadorans came to the US. They still, I believe, make up the third largest immigrant population, people of Salvadoran heritage, in the US and they settled mostly in Los Angeles.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's just do a detail there, you know, because it's such a contrast to the situation now. So how did they get to the US? They were fleeing the war, basically. How did they get to the US and how did they pick Los Angeles and what happened once they got there?

William Wheeler

Yeah. I mean, there had been some, you know, it's common in migration movements, people leaving for either economic reasons or the sort of violent rumblings toward civil war. You get sort of magnet communities.

El Salvador was, you know, closer to the West Coast. And in that time, border enforcement was nowhere near what the system that we have today. It was pretty easy to get across with a coyote who knew the route. Most of the border was passable. You didn't have anything like a well-defined barrier. And so coyotes kind of knew where CBP would be based, and the best way to get around them. So it was pretty easy at that time.

Nicholas Lemann

Some people who are listening might not know what a coyote is and what CBP is.

William Wheeler

Okay. Right. So Customs and Border Patrol, you know, or any of the various immigration and border enforcement at that time was very different from the system that we have today. A coyote, you'd usually hire a coyote, it would be a guide who knew kind of the best routes, who knew, you know, generally where enforcement agents would be and how to how to best get around them.

Nicholas Lemann

And so people would get across the border and then somehow get from the border to LA, right?

William Wheeler

Yeah. And it was sort of, you know, they settled largely in this area, Pico-Union or around MacArthur Park, that sort of rundown and abandoned by the white flight to the suburbs ten years earlier. So you had these areas that were low rent, impoverished areas that were predominantly Mexican at that time.

Nicholas Lemann

Okay, so this Salvadoran population arrives, and how does that get us to gangs being born in Los Angeles?

William Wheeler

So mostly these were barrios dominated by Mexican groups. The Mexicans had founded their own gang, Dieciocho, Barrio 18, in the 1960s. And when the Salvadorans came, they were outsiders, kind of fighting for the bottom rungs of the ladder, socially, economically. The fact that, you know, they weren't given anything like asylum or refugee status kind of compounded that.

And so, you know, some people would say that it was a means of protection. And that, you know, had these other dominant gangs in Los Angeles, like the Bloods and the Crips in the African-American community, like Dieciocho from the Mexican gangs. And the Salvadorans were found, sort of being preyed upon and to stand up for themselves.

And it also is a sort of form of culture identity. They wanted to do their own thing and have their own group that they belonged to. At that time, bizarrely enough, what became MS-13 was a group of sort of metalhead stoners that weren't very violent. They came from a lot of broken homes. The process of migrating had usually happened in waves in El Salvador. The father would go on first and sort of get a foothold and then maybe send for the family. So you would kind of have families broken up, you'd have a new step-parent in the picture, and they showed up in this kind of bottom of the food chain environment that was a lot of broken families, a lot of pressures.

And, you know, what became MS-13 was — I talked to one of the sort of OGs and he said...

Nicholas Lemann

OG means...

William Wheeler

Original gangster. Alex Sanchez, who today is actually, does a lot of intervention to sort of try to get people out of the gangs. You know, so they were sort of Salvadoran metal heads. They weren't what we think of as, certainly not MS-13.

Nicholas Lemann

Where did they get the name from?

William Wheeler

So it's a source of debate. No one really knows. There's a lot of conflicting explanations. I think people largely agree that that a Charlton Heston movie that had been translated and was very popular in El Salvador, that that was part of the etymology. The "mara" was, you know, sort of a group of your clique, basically, your group of friends. But it wasn't anything sinister really, at that time.

Nicholas Lemann

So at that moment, it's now sort of the late eighties in LA.

William Wheeler

Early-mid eighties, still.

Nicholas Lemann

And so if you're a member of MS-13, what does that entail? Do you have a day job, and then this is like your social club? Or is it a full-time occupation?

William Wheeler

No, it's I mean, I think it's best thought of as what it's not. So, you know, the city had these gangs that were Chicano, Latino gangs, that had, you know, the hair kind of slicked back under hairnets. And a few years later, they would, you know, shave their heads completely. And they had this sort of LA Latino gangbanger look.

Mara Salvatrucha was — didn't look like that at all. They had long hair, they had bellbottom jeans, they had Converse because the star looks like a pentagram. And these were guys who would smoke pot and listen to metal music and maybe go see a show and hang out in the mosh pit. They were not anything like the sort of violent or predatory groups at that time.

They did start to end up in juvenile hall, and that was this period of transformation where they came out looking like these Chicano gangsters, where they'd cut their hair and they'd get the Nike Cortez and the baggy khakis. And so there was a period where you could literally see them appropriating the gang culture that they had found themselves confronted by increasingly violently. I mean, they were...

Nicholas Lemann

More in the neighborhood? Or more through incarceration?

William Wheeler

You know, a little bit of both, I think. I think once they started to go through juvenile hall and dressed like Chicano gangs, then they found themselves attacked or treated as such.

And, you know, sort of as a show of dominance, they found themselves fighting and becoming more organized. They also learned extortion as well from that period. You know, they kind of came out of juvenile hall with the tools to extort their neighbors. That was an idea that came out of that period.

Nicholas Lemann

Okay, so our story so far is, you know, brutal civil war in El Salvador with the US strongly backing the right-wing government, causing hundreds of thousands of people to flee. Many to Los Angeles. And in that culture, MS-13 is born. So now let's get them back to El Salvador. How did that happen?

William Wheeler

So in this period of transformation, where they become, start looking and acting more like what we think of as a street gang. You know, there's a sort of motif that ran through the reporting, which is this idea of the machete, where they'd seen the army use the machete in the civil war, they all had memories of the sort of fear that that had instilled.

And in this process, fighting the gangs, Alex Sanchez recalled the first time he saw somebody pull out a machete and it scared the hell out of the guys that they were fighting. Salvadorans were used to it, but they still remember that sort of scare tactic that the Salvadoran forces have used.

A period of escalation follows. They get involved in sort of neighborhood drug sales as all the gangs around them are doing. And then you have basically, starting late '89, you had the start of sending some of these Salvadorans, who didn't have anything like asylum or refugee status, back to El Salvador.

Nicholas Lemann

Who's sending them back. And how are they getting back?

William Wheeler

Well, so they'd be on, they'd be basically ejected by immigration. But really, very small scale in '89. It really picked up after, and during, Bill Clinton's tenure. And a lot of this comes back to '94 and the sort of pivot that Clinton did after Republicans who had campaigned on very harsh immigration policies, and made that a central defining issue of the of the campaign, Clinton had sort of pivoted both on crime and welfare reform and did a similar thing with immigration.

And so at this point, you have, you know, Alex Sanchez and these guys would get picked up, and if they had an irregular immigration status, the judge would usually just release them and start the process to getting a green card. Now you've got even guys who have green cards getting swooped up and sent back by the planeload.

And so starting in '96 mostly, but throughout Clinton's whole administration, you had planeloads of Salvadoran gangsters showing up. And there was no, there wasn't like a database, there was no real sharing of information between US and Salvadoran authorities.

So particularly after '92, civil war winds down and they really ramp up, start ramping up this deportation machinery. And these guys just show up by the planeload. And the Salvadoran government doesn't know they're coming, doesn't know who they are, and they start to establish the same sort of connections that they had made in California prisons.

And they find sort of, as a means of survival, that they don't really belong in the society that they've returned to. But all of the sort of orphans of this war start flocking to their banner. And pretty soon these guys have their neighborhood cliques and like little local armies that they're running as a sort of survival mechanism.

Nicholas Lemann

Do you know how many Salvadorans from LA and elsewhere got deported back to El Salvador during this period?

William Wheeler

Yeah, the numbers are really tricky. You know, it's something like there were 30, roughly 30,000 Central Americans with a criminal record deported in the first, I think it was the first three to five years. After that, you have something like 100,000 over the next ten years. I'm a little bit off in the numbers.

Nicholas Lemann

A lot of people.

William Wheeler

A lot of people.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah. Okay. So now if not, well, let's just to close the loop. So is MS-13 still functioning in LA during all this time?

William Wheeler

They are, but they're caught up in this, you know, anti-immigrant crackdown that's going on. And it's sort of unclear whether that was in — it was also in response to their success.

Basically, as they started using the sort of shock and awe campaign, that the sort of extreme hyper violence...

Nicholas Lemann

So let's drill down on that a little. So in the original days in LA, MS-13 is one of a whole bunch of gangs in a rich gang landscape in Los Angeles, and it's by no means the scariest one. But what does MS-13 look like in its El Salvador incarnation in the nineties?

William Wheeler

Yeah. Somebody said this really, really distinctly. This guy who went by the name Angel of Death, who I found in a Salvadoran prison who had been, you know, sort of aspiring to be this OG that I'd mentioned. He said that so really it was founded in LA. There's this sort of population transfer to the East Coast where MS starts to establish itself in New York, DC, Virginia areas. He gets arrested and deported for, I think he had a kilo of coke on him and, you know, when he got to El Salvador, he learned very quickly that it had become a very different beast.

You know, that this first sort of generation of kids that were 10 or 11 years old who were flocking to the banner of this really cool American gang, pretty quickly became, brought a new level of brutality to the game where they really outgrew their sort of first American incarnation.

So by the time he arrived, I think in '98, he didn't want to have anything to do with the gang. And the gang members were really suspicious, you know, of him at that time and sort of almost saw their American progenitors as outdated. It was almost like an "okay, boomer," sort of phenomenon.

Nicholas Lemann

So what did MS-13 kind of do for a living in these years in El Salvador? How did it organize itself and finance itself?

William Wheeler

You know, it was everyone sort of were small scale hustlers. And they would sort of throw 10 or 20 bucks into the group coffers at the end of the week. But it was very localized, kind of the only guys they knew were each other. You didn't know anybody who lived in another neighborhood.

At the same time, their rivals from LA were getting deported. And so territory started to get very — it was a little bit fluid at first, but it started to ossify. You know, you started to see these gangs controlling distinct neighborhoods.

But again, it was very local and it was very sort of freelance, whatever they did to make money. Some of them were involved in little bands of car robbery or robbing check cashing centers. But it wasn't, they hadn't really figured out extortion until the next wave of the gang's evolution, which is Mano Dura.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's take a break there and end part one of this interview and we'll talk about that in part two. So this brings us to the end of part one of our discussion with William Wheeler, author of State of War: MS-13 in El Salvador's World of Violence. Part two will be right here in the feed soon. You'll find links to this and all of our books, as well as our blog, events, and more at globaleports.colombia.edu. That's globalreports.colombia.edu. I'm Nick Lemann. Thanks for listening.