

“On the Line” Film Discussion Guide

Film length: 55 minutes

Synopsis: ON THE LINE is an inside look at the people behind one of the largest nonviolent movements in America today: the movement to close the School of the Americas/WHINSEC, a U.S. Army school that trains Latin American soldiers. In a world where politics, passion, and Constitutional rights collide, protesters discuss their activism, the dark side of U.S. foreign policy, and the challenges of protesting since 9/11.

Before Viewing the Film:

Informally assess the knowledge level of the audience viewing the film by asking for a show of hands in response to the following.

- How many in the room are familiar with the School of the Americas and know what it is?
- How many in the room have participated in an SOA Watch event or witness action?
- How many have been arrested or crossed the line?
- How many have personal connections to members of the military? To the people in Latin America?
- How many in the room are familiar with U.S. Foreign policy in Latin America?

Vocabulary: Disappeared, CIA, solidarity, conscience, dissent, protest, nonviolent protest, civil disobedience

Film Discussion Guide – Arranged by Chapters - beginning on page 3.

Themes to Engage through the film:

The film provides a powerful tool to make several distinct, yet interrelated connections. Some of the themes which can be explored through viewing this film include the following:

1. *The role of dissent and protest in a healthy democracy.*
2. *The history or U.S. corporate involvement in Latin America - from bananas to how, and how the School of the Americas is connected and intersects.*
3. *The impact of nonviolent movements and social change.*
4. *The changing role of US foreign policy – Is it about democracy & freedom, or preserving US Corporate and economic interest?*
5. *The impact of 9/11 on the School of the Americas – Should the threat of “terrorism” abroad shut down protest at home?*

Supporting Education for Justice Resources:

- Backgrounder on Structural Sin
<http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/2906>

Film Discussion Guide: Questions for Reflection and Discussion

“You don’t teach democracy through the barrel of a gun.” - Fr. Roy Bourgeois

General Questions for Reflection & Discussion:

- After viewing the film, what does the title, “On the Line” mean? **What** is on the line according to this film? What different levels can this question point to?
- What are your reactions and impressions after seeing the film? What new questions does it raise for you?
- The right to protest is one of the rights guaranteed by the Bill of rights in the first amendment. What is the value and purpose of protest or dissent in a healthy democracy? Why Civil Disobedience?
- This film is a powerful presentation illustrating what it means to be in solidarity with others – with the oppressed, the voiceless, etc. Describe some of the ways you observed in the film to be in solidarity with others demonstrated in the film. What are some other ways you can be in solidarity? What new insights about solidarity have you gained? What is one step you will take after viewing the film to be in solidarity with those represented in the film?
- What does the vision of Catholic Social Teaching call us to from the perspective of:
 - The sacredness of human life?
 - The treatment of “the enemy”
 - The use of taxes
 - The protection and promotion of human rights
 - The common good
 - Social Sin & Institutional Sin
- What are the moral and ethical limits of “protecting and defending” one’s country? Is training for torture included?
- One of the most significant aspects of filmmaking is its ability to spur the imagination to change. How can the images and ideas, the critiques and questions raised in this film call us to change? What needs to change?
- In one sentence, what was the film trying to say?

Chapter Specific Questions:

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Chapter 1. Main Titles / Presente Prologue

- In the opening of the film, Martin Sheen notes that there is a great fear gripping this country that was not there before. What is he referring to? What danger does this fear pose for a country that historically has called other global actors to moral and ethical behavior? How has exploiting this fear been used as a weapon against the people of U.S. by the government since 911?
- What is the role of dissent and questioning in a democracy? What happens when a call to patriotism forbids any questioning of means and ends of our government?

Chapter 2. School of the Americas

- Protecting democracy in the region was considered an important part of U.S. foreign policy after the decline of colonialism at the end of WWII. Do the original reasons for the founding of the school still exist? Explain.
- The film notes that graduates of the SOA continue to make headlines for their human rights abuses and misuse of military force. How do these actions undermine “democracy?” What connection is made between the graduates and the training provided by the U.S Government and taxpayer?

Chapter 3. Death in El Salvador

- What’s your reaction to the clip of George H. W. Bush defending U.S. Foreign policy in Latin America?
- What similarities do you notice between the elder Bush using labels like “guerilla’s” and the younger Bush using labels like “terrorists” to justify their actions and silence debate. How do such labels prevent deeper analysis and blind people with “fear”?
- Based on your viewing of the film is the School of the America’s keeping democracy safe?
- Keeping alive the names of the victims is a liturgical act of remembrance that goes back to the early Church. Why are such acts of commemoration important rituals of remembrance? Where do we see this connected to the Eucharist?

Chapter 4. The Movement Grows

- The “movement” to close the school of the America’s started with 10 people and has grown to annual protests of more than 20,000. What impact can a movement such as this have on U.S. officials in your opinion?
- The point is made in the film that silence on the part of U.S. citizens equals complicity. What do you say in response to that?

- What do those who disagree with the SOA protest state as the reasons behind their views? Is such a school that condones human rights abuses really teaching democracy?
- In the film, John Perkins notes, “We do not support democracy around the world by any means, we support governments that help our corporations. Or if democratically elected governments stand in the way of helping our corporations, we think nothing of overthrowing them or assassinating their leaders and replacing them with dictators.”

Chapter 5. Notorious Graduates

- In the film, Fr. Roy Bourgeois states that the greatest enemy in our country today is ignorance of other countries, their cultures, religious beliefs, their histories and that SOA Watch is giving people knowledge of what the US foreign policy in the countries of Latin America. Why are such movements an important part of a healthy democracy? Can you site examples in history when information was/is withheld as a way of maintaining power and control and suppressing the voices or will of the people?

Chapter 6. Third World Communities

- In the film, Martin Sheen notes that, “We don’t really have a sense of what our [the U.S. Government’s] action is doing in the third world so we have to have our consciousness enlarged so that we see ourselves as part of a universal community.” How can an understanding of the CST principle of solidarity provide a useful tool to help us address issues like the school of the Americas?

Chapter 7. An Encounter with the Poor

- What is the impact of war on the communities in the film? Who are the disappeared?
- How and where have you encountered the poor? What impact did this have on you?

Chapter 8. Torture

- What the Salvadoran army did in El Salvador – using torture, is what the U.S. Army did in Abu Ghraib, and is doing in Afghanistan, in Guantanamo Bay. Is condoning torture a legitimate act of a democratic government? Should it teach its military and the military of other countries in the region to torture and oppress its own people as well as to kidnap, blackmail and spy on political opponents? What are the short term and long term repercussions?
- If torture is part of US policy, how does that actually threaten and endanger our democracy as opposed to strengthening it?
- If political will and congressional legislation are not enough to close the School of the Americas, what other ways could the American people make their voices heard to



achieve this goal? What other ways are there for making change?

Chapter 9. Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation

- Why would the Pentagon hold on to this school? Fr. Roy suggests it may be because this school provides “muscle” for US foreign policy to protect our economic interests in the region – not because of the threat of communism. Why does he suggest this?
- If the original reason for establishing the school no longer exists, is protecting our economic interests a legitimate reason for using force in the manner described in the film?

Chapter 10. 9/11 - No Protest?

- Fr. Roy stated, “Shutting down terrorist training camps begins in our own back yard.” What does he mean?
- How has 9/11 actually led to shut down protest in the name of patriotism? In your opinion should the SOA Watch have honored the request to cancel the protest after 9/11? Why or why not?
- After 9/11 fear has been manipulated in several ways even to the point of calling into question whether someone who protests is un-patriotic or un-American? What danger does this pose for a democracy?

Chapter 11. Fear of Being Isolated

- What is the value or necessity of having voices of dissent in a healthy democracy? What are the dangers or consequences when such voices are silenced? Where have you seen this evident?
- Judge Gerald Tjoflat stated, “September 11th, already a day of immeasurable tragedy, cannot be the day that liberty perished in this country.” Since 9/11 what measures have been enacted by the US Government that have eroded or impinged upon the rights of citizens of this country? Why was there no protest?

Chapter 12. Metal Detectors

- In a post 9/11 world how do you balance the rights of citizens with the needs of government? What was the stated motivation and what was the reasoning for using metal detector screening on the protestors?

Chapter 13. Crossing the Line

- History has chronicled the impacts and advances made by protest movements. (Some to consider include the Abolitionist movement, Women’s Suffrage movement, Prohibition movement, Labor Movement, Civil Rights movement, Women’s movement etc.) How do you think history will view the SOA movement?

- What was your reaction to Brian’s crossing the line? Did it make sense to you? As his mother says: ‘Will it make a difference?’

Conclusion

- In one sentence, what was the film trying to say?