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It Happened at El Mozote: How Two Reporters Broke the Story that Washington Refused to Believe

Naomi Rubel LaChance
Bard College

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It Happened at El Mozote:
How Two Reporters Broke the Story that Washington Refused to Believe

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
and
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

Naomi Rubel LaChance

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
May 2016

For my parents, and for all those who dare to tell the truth.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to my advisor, Daniel Mendelsohn, for the support, encouragement, and astounding literary insight. He understood my vision from the beginning and guided me to its best possible iteration. I am also grateful to my professor Mark Danner for trusting me to continue the story he wrote two decades ago.

Thank you to professors at Bard who have given me guidance, particularly Rob Culp, Wyatt Mason, Christian Crouch, Tabetha Ewing, Richard Aldous, Cole Heinowitz, and Omar Cheta. Thanks to my friends and family, especially my parents.

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And thank you to Brooke Williams, for teaching me skepticism, and whose recommendation last summer that I read *935 Lies: The Future of Truth and the Decline of America's Moral Integrity* by Chuck Lewis gave this project its beginning.

–NL

¹ I hope to buy Bard a subscription to the National Security Archive someday if someone else doesn't beat me to it.

“In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.”

—Abraham Lincoln in Ottawa, Illinois, 1858²



Susan Meiselas' 1982 photo of Rufina Amaya, a survivor of the massacre at El Mozote.³

² Lincoln, Abraham. “In the First Debate with Douglas.” Accessed October 15, 2015.
<http://bartleby.com>

³ Meiselas, Susan. *Rufina Amaya, survivor of “El Mozote” massacre*. January 1982.
Photograph. <http://www.susanmeiselas.com/latin-america/el-salvador/#id=>.

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To explore sourcing, please visit elmozoteproject.wordpress.com.

Prologue

The man held a microphone in his hand, ready to report. He had not believed what he heard; numbers that high could never be true. And if he didn't believe it, no one would.

But what he found in front of him pushed all that doubt aside.

Vultures pecking at piles of the dead.

The statue of the Virgin Mary peppered with bullets.

5.56-caliber shell castings from M-16 rifles all over the dirt.

A man cried out that he had been looking for his four children for days: "My God, look at what they've done! What did we do to deserve this?"

A farmer stopped to talk to the reporter. He described a soldier going "mad with rage," chasing a child around the village—kicking, stabbing, suffocating, and finally shooting the boy to death.

The journalist collected the stories of several survivors who had seen the rapes and murders of their family members and neighbors and friends. He recorded all the stories to add to his radio segment.

In charcoal, on a table, he found a note from the perpetrators:

*"The Atlacatl was here.
The daddy of subversives. Second Company.
This is where these sons of bitches met their fate,
and if you still haven't got the balls
just ask us for them.
We're hell's angels, and we'll be back.
We want to finish off the rest of you."*⁴

⁴ Henríquez Consalvi, Carlos. *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio*. Austin: University of Texas Press, Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, 2010, 84.

On the ground, there was a box of machine gun ammunition. Four letters spread across the side, indicating where the ammo had come from, made him gasp.

The man cut his tape into a story. People heard it in the mountains of Morazán. People heard it in San Salvador. People heard it, later, in Washington. He didn't know it yet, but he had just written the first draft of the Cold War's final chapter.

Part One

“I am very worried by the news that the government of the United States is studying a form of abetting the army of El Salvador by sending military teams and advisers to 'train three Salvadoran battalions in logistics, communications, and intelligence.' If this information from the newspapers is correct, instead of promoting greater justice and peace in El Salvador, it will without doubt sharpen the injustice and repression against the organizations of the people who repeatedly have been struggling to gain respect for their fundamental human rights.

The present junta and above all these armed forces and security forces unfortunately have not demonstrated their capacity to resolve, in political and structural practice, the grave national problem. In general they have only reverted to repressive violence, producing a total of deaths and injuries greater than in the recent military regime whose systematic violation of human rights was denounced by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights...”

For this reason, given that as a Salvadoran and an Archbishop of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, I have an obligation to see that faith and justice reign in my country, I ask you, if you truly want to defend human rights, to prohibit the giving of military aid to the Salvadoran government. Guarantee that your government will not intervene directly or indirectly with the military, economic, and diplomatic or other pressures to determine the destiny of the Salvadoran people.”

—Archbishop of San Salvador Oscar Romero, letter to President Carter,

February 17, 1980, five weeks before his assassination⁵

⁵ Studds, Gerry. Letter, “Request for Support of Bill Halting Military Assistance

Alma Guillermoprieto had smelled decomposing flesh for forty-five minutes by the time she and her guides reached the village.⁶ She had a swollen leg, she didn't know her exact location, and her guides from the FMLN— the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, the major leftist guerilla group fighting the El Salvadoran civil war— were tense. She had walked for three days over mountains and across rivers to reach the place her guides wanted her to see. At one point, her camera broke in the rushing waters; she still had pen and notebook. She and her guides travelled only by night.⁷

Guillermoprieto, a correspondent for the *Washington Post*, had tried to gain access to El Salvador for months.⁸ Calling from Mexico City, she had initiated “desperate, intense, round-the-clock phone lobbying” with her guerilla contacts ever since *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner had called to say that he was headed on his own guerilla-led trip to the Morazán region.⁹ Bonner and photographer Susan Meiselas were also in the fractured country. They had arrived to the village a few days before Guillermoprieto did, led by the same rebel guides.¹⁰

to El Salvador,” July 1981. National Security Archive. Washington, DC.

⁶ Andersen, Robin. *A Century of Media, a Century of War*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

⁷ Guillermoprieto, Alma. “Shedding Light on Humanity's Dark Side.” *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), March 14, 2007.

⁸ Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

It was the first time that American reporters visited the country through the rebel faction—the group that the U.S. was putting arms and money into defeating.

For Bonner, it was an exciting opportunity: “No journalist had gone in with the guerillas,” he told me recently. “So, I mean, it’s kind of like being one of the first to go with ISIS today, although much less dangerous, obviously... You know this was the enemy of the United States; we ought to know something about them.”¹¹

Understanding the rebels’ perspective was imperative to understanding the war, at least to Bonner. The stories were important to tell, even if they did not paint the war the way Washington wanted to see it.

Morazán was dangerous; death was everywhere in El Salvador.

“The guerrillas were very, very spooked about the whole security situation and they didn’t want to tell us much,” Guillermprieto told Mark Danner. “It was a military secret where we were; they didn’t want to tell us any specifics.”¹²

Guillermprieto kept walking. Children came up to her on the paths and pointed to houses, their voices shrill.

“*Aquí hay muertos, aquí hay muertos,*” they said to her. No one had seen attempts to bury bodies; A pile of bones rested in the town center. Something had happened, but no one was sure about how many were dead or why.

She was taken to see a woman called Rufina Amaya, “a small-boned woman in her thirties, dressed like any *campesina* in a skirt and short-sleeved blouse, a frilly apron and plastic sandals, and with a face that seemed to have turned to stone. In precise detail

¹¹ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

¹² Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 99.

she told me the same story she would repeat throughout the years, and that forensic evidence would confirm a decade later.”¹³

Guillermoprieto was, in fact, the third reporter to listen to the stories of the men and women of Morazán who had seen their families killed. Like *New York Times* reporter Ray Bonner and FMLN radio reporter Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, before her, she listened carefully.

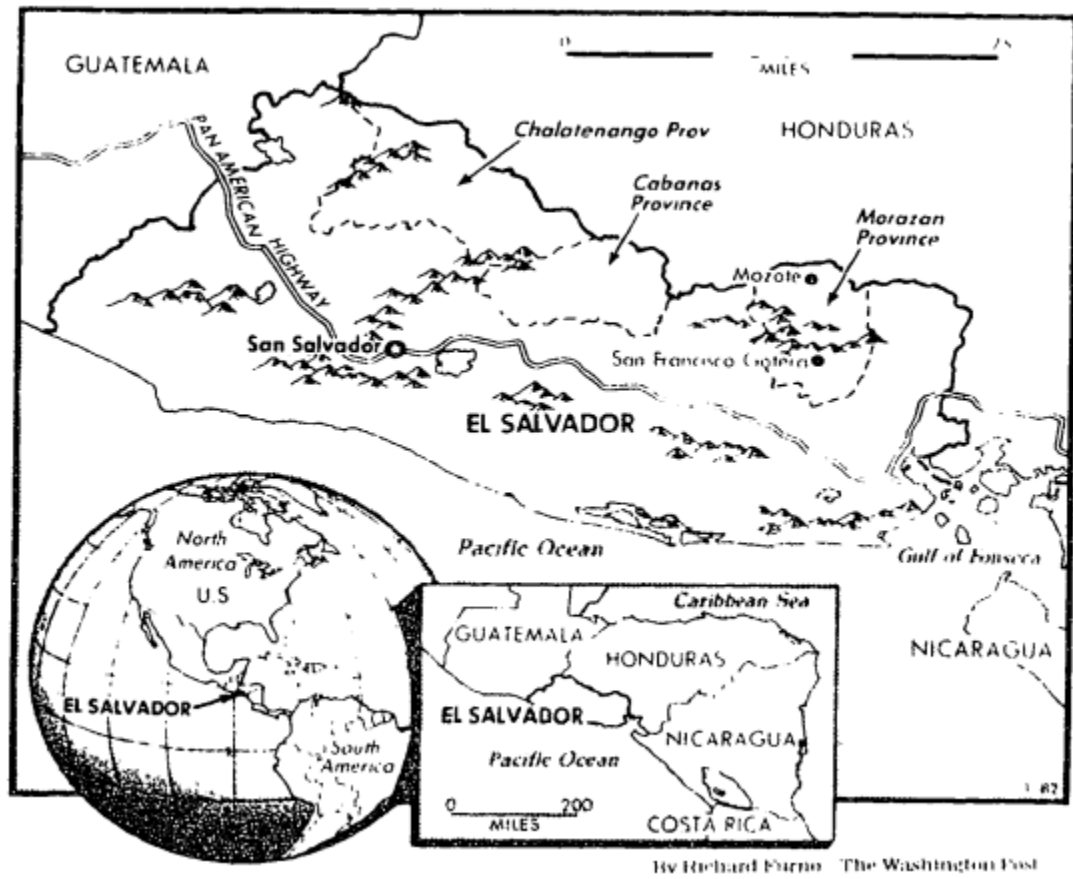
Her article was written on notebook paper. She stored it in a film canister for safekeeping. A guerilla took it from the massacre sight and carried it to a colleague in Tegucigalpa, across the border in Honduras and one hundred and twenty-five miles away. He read the story aloud over the phone to someone at the *Washington Post*.¹⁴

Bonner, who had left the village before Guillermoprieto arrived, typed and filed his story from Mexico City.

The American journalists were there to tell another part of the story of the Latin American civil war that had become so important to United States foreign policy. And when they came, it was when the guerillas said it was time to come.

¹³ Guillermoprieto, Alma. “Shedding Light on Humanity's Dark Side.” *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), March 14, 2007.

¹⁴ Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 102.



Map that accompanied Alma Guillermoprieto’s story for the *Washington Post*¹⁵

On January 10, the day that Alma Guillermoprieto reached El Mozote, Catholics around the world were called to attend mass for the victims of the evil she was working to piece together.

¹⁵ Guillermoprieto, Alma. “Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing: Woman Tells of Children’s Death.” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), January 27, 1982, A1.

Father Rogelio Poncel, a Roman Catholic priest from Belgium,¹⁶ did not leave any question as to the circumstances of the violence; the mass, as he said it, was “for the 1000 peasants of Morazán Department who were murdered by Salvadoran Junta.”¹⁷

Poncel was one of several clergy members who came to lead in El Salvador, a country where the church has the huge importance. He had been in El Salvador since 1970. Eleven years later, after a bomb exploded in his rectory, he decided to join the rebels with full force.

He moved to northern Morazán, the place controlled by the leftist fighters. For him, it was the only option if he wanted to stay in El Salvador.¹⁸ He rose to become a leader of the movement. The experience was just the revelation he craved; As with the saints whose stories he read over and over again, he could finally understand the meaning of Christian sacrifice.

The priest called for mass on Radio Venceremos, the radio station of the FMLN.

Over the airwaves, Poncel said: “Radio Venceremos joins this initiative and calls on all peoples of the world to join this international campaign, rejecting the genocidal policy being pursued by the Reagan administration in El Salvador and the military Christian democratic junta’s plan to exterminate large segments of El Salvador’s population.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Hedges, Chris. “Why Father Poncel joined El Salvador's guerrilla movement.” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 5, 1984.

¹⁷ United States Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Letter, “El Salvador: Priest Calls for Worldwide Mass in Protest,” January 5, 1982. National Security Archive.

¹⁸ Hedges, Chris. “Why Father Poncel joined El Salvador's guerrilla movement.” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 5, 1984.

¹⁹ United States Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Letter, “El Salvador:

Radio signals can only reach so far; Radio Venceremos's story was likely heard by no one beyond El Salvador. But telegrams carried the message further. A cable about the mass was sent on January 5 to a variety of recipients in the U.S. government, including the embassy in San Salvador and the Secretary of State in Washington, D.C., Alexander Haig.²⁰

“Going back to Vietnam, the whole government is always trying to sell something to the American people,” said a Foreign Service officer who served in El Salvador for Presidents Carter and Reagan. “Why not just tell the American people the truth? We’re not used car salesmen for chrissake. Tell them what’s happening and let them decide.”

—Ray Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*²¹

Alma Guillermoprieto and Ray Bonner reached El Salvador in time to see the aftermath of the massacre, but other Americans had been there a month earlier. On December 10, 1981, CIA operatives in El Salvador were collecting information to send

Priest Calls for Worldwide Mass in Protest,” January 5, 1982. National Security Archive.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bonner, Raymond. *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*. New York, N.Y.: Times Books, 1984, 9.

back to Langley, Virginia. A cable with the subject line “Status of the armed forces major sweep operation in Morazán Department after four days” depicts Salvadoran armed forces conducting a “sweep operation” in the region.

The level of detail in the cable, including specific dates, numbers of people, and coordinates, suggests that the CIA operatives in the region were in a position to intimately observe the actions of the Salvadoran military government’s troops, which were armed and trained by the United States.²²

“The purpose of the movement,” the cable states, “is to force the insurgents in this area into the Honduran blocking force along the border.” In the cable, the officer reports that on December 9, “the heaviest fighting” had happened in the hamlet of El Mozote. He says that 30 to 35 insurgents were killed and four Salvadoran soldiers were killed—very different numbers from those the priest, Poncel, had said on the radio broadcast.²³

“The Salvadoran soldiers were in high spirits during the operation because of the large number of men involved in the sweep,” the American report said.

El Mozote was an area unusual in that it was known for not being receptive to the guerillas’ leftist ideology. The rebels only passed through at night; the townspeople, many of whom were religious, made a point of not getting involved in their operations. In the late 1970s, a rebel commander named Licho told Mark Danner: “The people who were still in El Mozote were afraid of us.” The U.S. government cable made no mention of this nuance.

²² CIA. Letter, “Status of the Armed Forces Major Sweep Operation in Morazán Department After Four Days,” December 1981. National Security Archive.

²³ Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 179.

On December 10, the CIA agents watched as fighting took place in a town known for trying to distance itself from the fighting. Their report would be sent to Virginia days later.

In the U.S., December 10 was Human Rights Day, and the following day was the beginning of Human Rights Week.²⁴ “During this week,” President Ronald Reagan stated in his official proclamation, “let each of us give special thought to the blessings we enjoy as a free people and let us dedicate our efforts to making the promise of our Bill of Rights a living reality for all Americans and, whenever possible, for all mankind.”²⁵

He went on: “We will continue to strive to respect these rights fully in our own country and to promote their observance abroad. We could have no greater wish for mankind than that all people come to enjoy these rights.”

Reagan had inherited a country in the throes of the Cold War. Under the campaign slogan “Make America Great Again,” he came into office with 50.7 percent of the popular vote. It was less than a year into his presidency, and he was passionate about delivering on his promise.

At 1:19 on that day, President Ronald Reagan participated in a photo opportunity with Elliott T. Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian

²⁴Reagan, Ronald. “Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981.” Google Books. Accessed September 6, 2015.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=duTcAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA1143&lpg=PA1143&dq=human+rights+december+10,+1981&source=bl&ots=ZcGVFy8P5C&sig=5K7UfAsEdnORDildacGhT7YjeHc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CCMQ6AEwAWoVChMI6c-9uo-VyQIVwno->

²⁵ Reagan, Ronald. “Proclamation 4885.” University of Texas Reagan Archives.
<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/120481h.htm>.

Affairs, and his family.²⁶ It was to commemorate the president's dedication to the worldwide protection human rights.

Reagan had a busy day. He had a "contentious" meeting with economic advisors.²⁷ He also asked that Americans in Libya leave the country, noting security and safety concerns in Col Muammar el-Qaddafi's regime.²⁸ He met with Thomas O. Enders, his new Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs.²⁹ With Enders in particular, the American president had a lot to discuss: fear of a Communist takeover in El Salvador, efforts to overthrow Sandinistas in Nicaragua, support for anticommunism in Guatemala, and war brewing in the Falklands. It was just as good a time as any for Human Rights Day.

Reverend William L. Wipfler was five years into his eleven-year tenure as director of the human rights office of the National Council of Churches³⁰ when he

²⁶ Reagan, Ronald. "The Daily Diary of President Ronald Reagan December 10, 1981." The Reagan Foundation. <http://www.reaganfoundation.org/whdpdf/121081.pdf>.

²⁷ Raines, Howell. "Economic Panel Offers Reagan Tough Choice." The New York Times.

Last modified December 11, 1981. <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/11/business/economic-panel-offers-reagan-tough-choice.html>.

²⁸ "News Summary; THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1981." The New York Times. Last modified

December 10, 1981. <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/10/nyregion/news-summary-thursday-december-10-1981.html>.

²⁹ Reagan, Ronald. "The Daily Diary of President Ronald Reagan December 10, 1981." The Reagan Foundation. <http://www.reaganfoundation.org/whdpdf/121081.pdf>.

³⁰ "Romero Trial Transcript." Center for Justice & Accountability. Last modified

received a phone call from Roberto Cuellar at Sucorro Juridico, a human rights organization associated with the archbishopric in San Salvador.³¹ Cuellar had disturbing news. There had been a *limpieza*, or “cleaning,” he said, of the rural hamlets.³² He said that the Atlacatl Battalion had carried out a massacre, and that grisly evidence was still there.³³³⁴

On December 15 the Reverend sent a telegram to the American Ambassador to El Salvador, Deane Hinton.³⁵

“Begin text: Reliable reports received here indicate that between December 10 and 13 a government joint military and security forces operation took place in Morazán department which resulted in over 900 civilian deaths... would appreciate confirmation or otherwise of these reports thank you. End text.”³⁶

It was not unusual for Wipfler to inquire into rumors about the events in El Salvador. He was one of several clergy members making an effort to keep tabs on U.S.

August 24, 2004. http://www.cja.org/downloads/Romero_Trial_Transcript_8_24_04_52.pdf.

³¹ Andersen, Robin. *A Century of Media, a Century of War*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006, 85.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Stockwell, Eugene. Eugene Stockwell to Deane Hinton, December 15, 1981. National Security Archive.

³⁵ Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

³⁶ Ibid., 179.

efforts in the country. In March 1980, he had joined other members of the church in urging President Jimmy Carter to stop sending U.S. arms to El Salvador.³⁷

As far back as 1979, Wipfler had made his stance clear before Congress: “Where unpopular regimes escalate repression in order to retain power we feel it is necessary to demand equal accountability from the governments of nations that provide material, logistical, or moral support to such regimes. This is especially true if it involves our own government.”³⁸

When Wipfler contacted Hinton in December 1981, it was a continuation of a long tradition Wipfler had built of keeping tabs on the status of human rights in Latin America.³⁹ He was accustomed to oblique answers and questions left hanging. And in fact, weeks would pass before he received reply.

³⁷ “Oscar Romero program to be held at St. Matthias Church.” Last modified September 25, 2015. <http://episcopalwny.org/oscar-romero-program-to-be-held-at-st-matthias-church>.

³⁸ *Human Rights and the Phenomenon of Disappearances: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96th Cong., 1st*

³⁹ His job, as he described it, “involved gathering considerable amounts of information about specific violations, and then presenting them to entities of an international nature, like the International Commission of Jurists, or Amnesty International, or to committees of the Congress.”

Human Rights and the Phenomenon of Disappearances: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 96th Cong., 1st

(1979).http://njlw.rutgers.edu/collections/gdoc/hearings/8/80603094/80603094_1.pdf³⁹

*“Had to be the heaviest schedule & most frustrating day yet. One long series of meetings on bud. on Nat. security and a half dozen other things.”*⁴⁰

—Diary of President Ronald Reagan, December 18, 1981

Traditionally, major news outlets will strive to appear unattached to either side when reporting a conflict. To those whose country is in the throes of a vicious civil war, however, the pose of objectivity can seem like a luxury. The rebel radio station in El Salvador, Radio Venceremos, had just suffered a massive defeat.

Three of the FMLN soldiers had just been shot, and their transmitter had been captured. Carlos Henríquez Consalvi imagined that Domingo Monterrosa, the commander of the Atacatl Battalion, was celebrating.

“The colonel must feel quite satisfied with himself as he considers the fact that we won’t have the capability of reporting the countless crimes he will commit against the civilian population,” Consalvi wrote in his memoir.⁴¹

He was part of FMLN, formed a year earlier as an umbrella organization of leftist groups fighting the status quo. Their guerilla style of fighting and their Communist inclinations would make it easy for Washington use to incite fears of another Vietnam conflict, and this time one closer to home.

On December 11, 1981 Consalvi and his group reached an FMLN camp, up high in a pine forest. They could see the entire area of Morazán.

⁴⁰ Reagan, Ronald, and Douglas Brinkley. *The Reagan Diaries*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

⁴¹ Henríquez Consalvi, Carlos. *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio*. Austin: University of Texas Press, Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, 2010, 75.

“Columns of smoke rising from the El Mozote zone catch our eye; it seems that the army is burning down houses. Hundreds of families that had refused to leave the area lived there,” Consalvi wrote.⁴² They set up camp and stayed for the night, mourning mourning their dead. At this point they were convinced that, without any more equipment, they would have to accept the end of Radio Venceremos.

The truth about what happened in Morazán that day fell into Consalvi’s lap on December 17. He was in a hammock by the sea, chatting with a young leader “who has a natural and flowing intellect” named Gonzalo. A message came across from the rebels still in Morazán: “The Atlacatl Battalion has massacred one thousand civilians in an area comprising a number of *cantones* and villages.”⁴³

Consalvi doubted the report, even though he had known to expect atrocities when his radio station’s equipment had been taken by Monterrosa’s squad, effectively silencing the only people who would publicize the injustices. The number of the dead was far too high to be true, he thought.

The message on the radio continued: “The Radio Venceremos team and equipment should return immediately to be in Morazán by the twenty-fourth of December!”

Consalvi had mixed feelings on hearing the command: he was exhausted and far from ready for the long trek to Morazán. But he was glad to have a chance to continue the

⁴² Henríquez Consalvi, Carlos. *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio*. Austin: University of Texas Press, Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, 2010, 75.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 79.

activities of FMLN's radio station. "Radio Venceremos is back from the dead," he wrote.⁴⁴

The Radio Venceremos team reached Morazán on December 24, as promised. "This is the loneliest Christmas in the history of loneliness itself!" Consalvi wrote. "To top it all off, the black hen that we cooked ended up being tasteless and tough. On the other side of the river, one thousand bodies are all that is left of a strategy that the Pentagon has called a low-intensity war."⁴⁵

It was hardly a low-intensity war.

Consalvi and his team broadcast reports about the massacre from Morazán, but they had to be careful. Government troops were still watching the area and were ready to fight off intruders. On December 29, the rebels recaptured the territory. On December 30, the members of the radio station entered the hamlet.

Consalvi had a microphone in his hand, ready to report.

This is when he heard the desperate father call out: "I'm looking for my four children; I've been looking for them for two days. My God, look at what they've done! What did we do to deserve this?"

This is when he spoke to Doroteo, the farmer from La Joya who'd seen a rebel soldier killing a small child. "I saw a soldier go mad with rage," the farmer said. "He was chasing a child around. The kid was kicking wildly. The soldier stabbed the boy, but the

⁴⁴ Henríquez Consalvi, Carlos. *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio*. Austin: University of Texas Press, Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, 2010, 79.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 81.

child didn't die. Then he covered the boy's mouth to suffocate him, but he still didn't die. Finally, the soldier shot him."⁴⁶

Consalvi collected the stories of several survivors who had seen the rapes and murders of their family members and neighbors and friends.

In charcoal, on a table, the Radio Venceremos crew found a note:

*"The Atlacatl was here.
The daddy of subversives. Second Company.
This is where these sons of bitches met their fate,
and if you still haven't got the balls
just ask us for them.
We're hell's angels, and we'll be back.
We want to finish off the rest of you."*⁴⁷

Vultures pecked at piles of the dead. This was when Consalvi saw 5.56-caliber shell casings from M-16 rifles lying on the ground. When he saw a statue of the Virgin Mary sprayed with bullets. And this was when he found the box of machine gun ammunition with the lettering down one side, the letters that had made him catch his breath and gasp aloud: NATO.

This wasn't just a battle in a civil war, he understood. This was an international injustice.

⁴⁶Henriquez Consalvi, Carlos. *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio*. Austin: University of Texas Press, Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, 2010, 83.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

Radio Venceremos was far from the only group to criticize American involvement in El Salvador. Certain members of Congress had been trying to halt aid for a long time. In July 1981, Gerry Studds, a state representative from the 12th District of Massachusetts, sent a letter to his colleagues about the Reagan administration's participation in El Salvador. Military funding, he wrote, was exacerbating the crisis.

On November 19, 1980, the Senate Appropriations Committee had passed the largest military funding bill in U.S. history.⁴⁸ When Studds began his crusade, this \$161 billion dedicated to war was still looming. The U.S. had unlimited power, or at least that was what Washington wanted to believe.

Studds wrote: "It would be nice to believe that President Duarte is leading his people into an era of social progress and democracy; it would be nice to believe that U.S. military aid is helping to transform the Salvadoran armed forces into a competent and professional defender of civilized law; it would be nice to believe—as the Administration would have us believe—that the problems of El Salvador will soon simply fade away."⁴⁹

He included a list of 86 reasons why his colleagues should join him on a bill to terminate U.S. military aid to El Salvador. Again and again, those on the left in Congress tried to implement changes to the U.S. military aid to El Salvador. Studds' bill, HR 1509, would amend the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act to forbid certain forms of assistance to El Salvador.

Studds garnered support from 90 cosponsors—88 Democrats and 2 Republicans. Putting pressure on the issue meant that Reagan had to periodically formally defend the

⁴⁸ AP. "Senate Panel Passes Largest Military Bill in History; Compromise to Be Explored." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), November 19, 1980.

⁴⁹ Studds, Gerry. Letter, "Request for Support of Bill Halting Military Assistance to El Salvador," July 1981. National Security Archive. Washington, DC.

efforts in El Salvador. It did not, though, have much effect in constricting the flow of training, weapons and funds to the country.

Deane Hinton, the ambassador in San Salvador, knew that he was under Congress' watchful eye. In a January 1981 telegram, he wrote to Alexander Haig that he had learned a congressional investigator would be coming to El Salvador to investigate corruption involving U.S. aid.⁵⁰

It was a tough sell for Studs, because the other side talked about an obligation toward the future of civilization. Alexander Haig, Reagan's Secretary of State, wrote of "The war in El Salvador as a soviet 'probe' designed to 'test the strength of western determination.'"⁵¹

To Noam Chomsky, the noted linguist and activist who became a vocal critic of U.S. involvement in Latin America, the war represented something else entirely. "The Reagan administration and its cohorts, he would write in 1985, "are unusual in their commitment to aggrandizement of state power, state violence and terror, deception and other means to protect state actions from scrutiny by citizens, the quality noted by Congress as well as human rights groups."⁵²

So Congress, as it often does, straddled two camps, enabling the military spending while some members tried to halt it.

⁵⁰ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to Alexander Haig, "Presence of a Congressional Investigator in El Salvador," January 23, 1982. National Security Archive.

⁵¹ Haig, Alexander Meigs. *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*. New York: Macmillan, 1984, 95.

⁵² Chomsky, Noam. *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace*. Boston: South End Press, 1985, 85.

On January 5, 1981, as Ray Bonner and Alma Guillermoprieto were nearing Morazán, three members of the U.S. embassy in San Salvador met with an American university student working as a freelance journalist. The young man had spent five days in Morazán, where he accompanied security forces of the junta.

It was dangerous for the U.S. bureaucrats to enter the rebel lands, so they usually had to trust third parties for information.

Hinton summarized the significance of the locale in his telegraph with typical embassy doublespeak: “Morazán was the site of considerable fighting between GOES [government of El Salvador] and guerrilla forces in December, 1981.”⁵³

The journalist told them that combat morale among the security forces was high, that the forces rarely ambush or engage in fighting at night, and that the troops rarely take prisoners.

Someone at the State Department underlined his next observation, which is that these military personnel “distrust... international journalists intensely.”

The young American journalist also gave the embassy a death list of political subversives, circulated, he believed, to discourage leftists. Bonner and Guillermoprieto were familiar with these lists. Their names were on some of them.

⁵³ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to U.S. State Department. “Conversation with a Journalist Just Returned from Morazan.” January 5, 1982. National Security Archive.

Deane Hinton was left with a dismissive takeaway: “His understanding and analysis of Salvadoran politics are not exceptionally perceptive,” he wrote in the cable. “His basic observations, however, are interesting.” Nonetheless, it is hard not to feel that his surface cool had been disrupted: “Department should be alert to the possibility that critical stories concerning this list may surface soon in the U.S. press,” Hinton added.

Personnel from the American embassy were unable to visit the rebel-controlled territories themselves: the risk of attack was too great. Though Hinton does not find this journalist’s findings particularly impressive, the journalist has had access to an area that Hinton would probably never see.

That January, after their visits to the region, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* published Ray Bonner’s and Alma Guillermoprieto’s stories about El Salvador. In piece after piece they described life for the guerilla fighters, examining life in the elusive FMLN camps. One story of Bonner’s would have certainly been his most controversial, had El Mozote not carried quite the political weight that it did.

On January 11, 1982, the *New York Times* published the story, which accused U.S. military advisors of being present during torture sessions of a two teenagers

suspected of being guerillas.⁵⁴ A harbinger of Guantanamo, this story drew criticism for its condemnation, but also for its single source format.

For a story that was so damning of American military involvement, Bonner should have more aggressively sought a definitive answer. Instead, it was the single source's word against the anonymous official's denial. It makes sense that the story stoked the fire rather than providing accurate information.

"I think I should have gotten a second source on that story," Bonner told me, three and a half decades later. "I've been troubled by that story over the years."⁵⁵

The story set Bonner's reputation as a reporter who looked for stories that would condemn U.S. military involvement in El Salvador. Insiders worried that his work was too adversarial.

Bonner expressed regret at the way he handled the story: "I just am not confident enough that it really happened the way he [the single source on the story] described it. Now I know other reporters have tried to confirm it or have confirmed it but I don't know. It's just left me uncomfortable and I shouldn't have written it based on one source."⁵⁶

The *El Salvador News Gazette* published a front-page story about the anger Bonner's report initiated.⁵⁷ It said that the U.S. Embassy condemned the story; the story would now undermine U.S. aid.

⁵⁴ Bonner, Raymond. "U.S. Advisors Saw 'Torture Class,' Salvadoran Says." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 11, 1981.

⁵⁵ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Letter to U.S. Embassy at San Salvador, "Torture Class," January 12, 1982. National Security Archive.

The reception of Bonner's story, and his later regrets about it, highlight the vital importance of public opinion in the Salvadoran proxy war. Though accusations of human rights abuses were common, they were shot down easily.

Victor Snyder spent late December in Collomanchaugua, Honduras, at an El Salvadoran refugee camp. A doctor who had served as a corporal in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War and would later represent Arkansas in Congress, Snyder considered the experience a privilege. He and two Arkansan medical students were the only doctors for 6,000 refugees and 2,000 locals.⁵⁸

Snyder heard a story that refugees and relief workers repeated over and over again at the camp; he heard the same story on the radio. After he heard it so many times he could no longer ignore it, he wrote his Senator. It was, he thought, too great an event to go unnoticed by the U.S. government.

In a letter to Senator David Pryor, a Democrat from Arkansas, Snyder described the event he had heard. El Salvadoran troops, "sometime during the third week of December, 1981... massacred approximately 1,000 men, women, and children near the village of Mosote [sic], El Salvador."⁵⁹ Snyder said that the bodies had not been buried.

Pryor passed the news on to Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs, Thomas O. Enders. Powell Moore, Assistant Secretary for Congressional

⁵⁸ Snyder, Victor. Victor Snyder to David Pryor, "Account of Mozote Massacre from U.S. Physician at Refugee Camp on the Honduran Border," January 11, 1982. National Security Archive.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Relations, replied on Enders' behalf. The guerillas, he insisted, used this story for propaganda purposes. It was incredibly dangerous to visit the region without rebel guides, he added.⁶⁰

This was the creation of a steadfast position to which the U.S. government would cling: to deny the very possibility that the massacre had happened, stopping the momentum of the story by insisting that the facts were unverified and unverifiable. There were no more than three hundred residents at El Mozote, Moore insisted. Both guerillas and civilians were present at the fighting, he said. The claims about a massacre just could not be true.

As it turned out, the El Mozote story was one in which both sides would blame the other in order to advance their political agendas..The FMLN was able to leverage the massacre to further embolden their fighters, but it was hardly a feat of excessive propaganda. In an interview with a German journalist named Al Nuer that published in several Latin American Newspapers, guerilla Commander Joaquin Villalobos spoke with certainty about the FMLN cause.

According to a U.S. government cable: “when asked for details of the massacre perpetrated by the army in Morazán, [he said] that these actions further isolate the junta internationally and prove that [their] people are right in their struggle.”⁶¹ The FMLN was able to leverage the massacre to legitimize their fighting, but they did not do so by lying.

⁶⁰ Moore, Powell A. Powell A. Moore to David Pryor, “Account of Mozote Massacre,” n.d. National Security Archive.

⁶¹ Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Letter, “Categorical Advance by FMLN,” January 5, 1982. National Security Archive.

In his letter, the doctor had asked the senator for an investigation into the event. “If true,” Snyder wrote, “such action by a government which we are enthusiastically supplying with arms warrants thorough investigation.”

The letter, dated January 11, may have been one of the first times that Pryor heard of the alleged massacre. But it’s also possible he’d seen it already; the story, after all, had made print.

The January 11, 1981 edition of the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* included an article that gave Arthur F. Burns pause. He was the American ambassador to West Germany, another country, like the U.S. and El Salvador, that was divided over Communism. In a classified State Department telegram dated January 29 and sent to United States embassies overseas, Burns provided a translation of “significant parts” of the article. “Scorched Earth,” the headline read. “In the province of Morazán, government troops murdered some nine hundred civilians, but they are not able to make an impression on the guerrillas.”

The story included several strong facts: first, that the peasants were Protestants who considered themselves neutral, but that the civil war “no longer permits neutrality.” Almost half of the dead, according to the article, were under the age of fourteen; female victims, it said, were raped before they were killed.

Burns included lines that would have been far from reassuring for the recipients of his telegram: “For up to now, the search-and-destroy actions of the army have had

little success. Even the special unit ‘Brigada Atlacatl,’ trained and advised by U.S. Special Forces, has up to now had no decisive victory over the rebels.”

After, he included “a request for action,” which is redacted. The only line that is included is the following: “Perhaps significantly, the office of El Salvador’s honorary consul in Cologne was bombed recently (causing no injuries but some damage).” It would appear that Burns was looking for some motive for the story, some reason that Germany would publish information that was so damning to both Salvador and the United States.

When the FMLN briefly captured Perquin—the largest town in Morazán—in 1981, Deane Hinton called the municipality “a speck on the map that doesn’t amount to a hill of beans.”⁶² Now, months later, the ambassador was being forced to reckon with the idea that no matter how cartographically insignificant the region, it was the source of attention.

Hinton worried that the story would spread in Europe, where readers would be more receptive to the story that he saw as an FMLN propaganda offensive. In a telegram to the State Department, he noted that the story about a massacre in Morazán was “bearing fruit in Europe.” The story was not credible, but he knew that for readers of *Der Spiegel* that did not matter. “There is evidence of invented storeis,” [sic] he wrote. He asked to discuss the “exact charges” and the “details of problem” with Ambassador Burns.⁶³ They had a rumor to tackle.

⁶² LeoGrande, William M. *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, 196.

⁶³ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to Arthur F. Burns, “FLMN,” January 22, 1982. National Security Archive.

Part Two

“Met with the Polish Ambassador & his wife. It was an emotional meeting. They have asked for asylum here. He is defecting because of what the Polish govt. (ordered by the Soviets) are doing to the Polish people.

An N.S.C. meeting on what we are going to do about the situation. I go on T.V. tomorrow nite 3 networks. Its supposed to be a Christmas message but I intend to deliver a message to the Soviets & the Pols. We cant let this revolution against Communism fail without our offering a hand. We may never have an opportunity like this one in our lifetime.⁶⁴

—Diary of President Ronald Reagan, December 22, 1981

After New Year’s 1982, it had become clear that Washington needed to formulate some kind of consistent answer to what had happened in Morazán. Even if they didn’t trust guerilla radio, government officials had now received notice from a reverend, a priest, a doctor, and the German press that a large-scale massacre may have occurred. And as we know, were they to send a convoy to check the scene in Morazán, they would have found corpses, bullets, and a written confession.

⁶⁴ Reagan, Ronald, and Douglas Brinkley. *The Reagan Diaries*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

On January 8, Deane Hinton, who had by then served as ambassador to El Salvador for a little more than half a year, sent pages in reply to Reverend Wipfler.⁶⁵ “It was good of you to seek my ‘confirmation or otherwise,’” he began. “I certainly cannot confirm such reports nor do I have any reason to believe they are true. None of tested sources available to this embassy has given us even hint of massive civilian casualties which has not always been the case in the past.”⁶⁶

Hinton then quoted extensively from “clandestine Radio Venceremos reports,” afterward noting, “Frankly, I do not consider Radio Venceremos to be a reliable source,” but pointing out that the account “made no mention of any massacre of civilian in its treatment of recent operations in Morazán.”⁶⁷

The radio report that Hinton quoted, which comprises the majority of his telegram, was from the passionate words of Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, determined to condemn what he saw as genocide. The portion cited by Hinton in the telegram begins with the following line: “The direct intervention of Yankee imperialism through U.S. army officers is becoming larger and more widely known every day.”⁶⁸

It continues in its condemnation of American military aid: “Insofar as murder, inhumanity and genocide are concerned, there is no difference between My Lai and El Mozote... those responsible for these mass murders are the same. Ilké⁶⁹ admitted that this military plan, drafted by the U.S. advisors and the Salvadoran army’s high command to

⁶⁵ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to William Wipfler, “Alleged Morazan Massacre,” January 8, 1982. National Security Archive.

⁶⁶ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to William Wipfler, “Alleged Morazan Massacre,” January 8, 1982. National Security Archive.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Fred Ilké, undersecretary of defense for U.S. governmental policy.

murder the civilian population of Morazán, was directly supervised by the U.S. defense secretary. In other words, imperialism admits having carried out the design and supervision of genocide in El Salvador.”⁷⁰

By giving service to the indictment, perhaps he sought to show that the source of the rumors was not worth taking seriously. Certainly Consalvi’s hyperbolic rhetoric played a part in making the story ripe for being discredited. Inevitably, though, this focus on the furious radio program, he shows that the U.S. government does not yet have a good answer to what happened—or didn’t—at El Mozote in Morazán.

Deane Hinton concluded the note with a request that Wipfler sent future communication to his address in Miami instead of Washington, “since your letter took almost a month to reach me through intern mail.”

On January 27, 1982, Alma Guillermoprieto’s story about El Mozote appeared on the front page of the *Washington Post’s* first edition.

Guillermoprieto was surprised that her story did not run immediately after she filed it, but it was because her editors experienced the same incredulity that the Radio Venceremos staff had. She told Stanley Meisler at the Columbia School of Journalism: “Both Jim [Assistant Managing Editor Hoagland] and Karen [Foreign Editor De Young]

⁷⁰ Bonner in *Weakness and Deceit* talks about that there was a myth the radio station was located in Nicaragua, which hurt its credibility; they were in fact reporting from within El Salvador.

thought I was overwrought and got too emotional and was too sympathetic to the guerrillas. What happened was so unbelievable that they didn't believe it."⁷¹

Guillemoprieto eventually convinced her editors that the story was trustworthy. They inserted a paragraph stating that the FMLN had invited Guillermoprieto two weeks after their report ran. It was a transparent way of accounting for what was an easy place to discredit the story.

The piece was published with the headline "Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing: Woman Tells of Children's Death." Guillermoprieto described decomposing bodies and related the stories of three survivors. It also included an official rejection: "In Washington, Salvadoran Ambassador Ernesto Rivas Gallont said, "I reject emphatically that the Army of El Salvador" was engaged in "killing women and children. It is not within the armed institution's philosophy to act like that.""⁷²

Guillermoprieto's piece treated the story with a delicate touch, describing the horrors that were evident to her without dipping into hyperbole. By focusing on what she found in her own first person reporting, she was able to build a convincing case.

Bonner's story, rushed to the desk in an effort to keep up with the *Post*, would be subject to far more post-publication scrutiny. It ran with the headline "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village."⁷³ He described the rubble, the dead bodies, and the lists of the dead: one, compiled by villagers, said that seven hundred thirty-three people, "mostly children, women, and old people" had been killed by Salvadoran

⁷¹ Meisler, Stanley. "El Mozote Case Study." Columbia School of Journalism.
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/j6075/edit/readings/mozote.html>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Bonner, Raymond. "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 27, 1982, Evening edition, A1.

soldiers. The other list, compiled by the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, said that nine hundred twenty-six were dead.

In Washington, a CIA briefing prepared officials for how to respond to Guillermprieto's piece. "It likely contains some elements of truth," the briefing says. It undermines her credibility, calling her a columnist (columnists often have a more polemical stance than reporters) and suggesting that the three witnesses quoted in the story are the only ones who knew about a massacre.

The briefing also notes that there was indeed a "sweep" in the province, which would have included civilian casualties; that was a fact of war. The numbers that the leftist fighters report, though, are very unlikely, from the CIA's perspective. Their own counts said 30–35 guerrillas and 4 government troops were dead.

These counts of a death toll were from the CIA cable written on December 10, the day before the massacre happened. Amnesia was about to sweep Washington.

"Verification of these incidents," the CIA reminds staffers, "is at best extremely difficult and often impossible."⁷⁴

The political significance of the story was not lost on the editors at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. An editor at a mainstream American newspaper will

⁷⁴ CIA. "El Salvador: Mozote Massacre." Digital National Security Archive. Last modified June 16, 2015. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679104461?accountid=15054>.

never acknowledge that a story was published in order to have political impact—and the story of El Mozote had not been. But nevertheless, the context in which a story is being written will always be in the back of the editor’s mind. Congress was meeting to discuss certification for military aid to El Salvador the very next day. That made the story newsworthy, at the very least.

On the evening of January 26, 1982, the editors at the *New York Times* learned that the front page of the next day’s *Washington Post* would have a story about the massacre at El Mozote.

“Back in those days, the *Times* and the *Post* would exchange their front page lists,” Bonner said.⁷⁵

“When the *Times* got the post and noticed Alma’s story was going to be on the front page the next day, they then rushed mine into print,” he said.⁷⁶

Craig Whitney, deputy foreign editor at the *New York Times*, set to work editing the story. He went home to Brooklyn, ate dinner, and let the story rest, he told me. The next day, he went over further changes over the phone with Bonner. The story ran in the paper’s late editions.⁷⁷

Bonner’s recollection offers a slightly different account. He was unsure as to what the editing process had looked like, exactly.

⁷⁵ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Whitney, Craig. E-mail interview by the author. Washington, DC. March 22, 2016.

“I mean I’m sure the editing process was pretty heavy in New York,” he said. “I may have been naïve, but the editors in New York they knew this was going to cause a problem.”⁷⁸

Whitney was careful to see that Bonner’s sourcing was trustworthy. The story included that the interviews were carried out over two weeks, among the peasants in the area. The story included the traditional line of government denial, a sign that the reporter had done his job tracking down the answer according to both sides.⁷⁹

Whitney inserted a mea culpa into the piece:

“It is not possible for an observer who was not present at the time of the massacre to determine independently how many people died or who killed them.”

“They [*New York Times* editors] knew it would cause a reaction in Washington by the administration to have a story on the front page of the *New York Times* reporting that the American trained soldiers in El Salvador had massacred these seven hundred fifty people or one thousand or whatever,” Bonner said. “Remember it’s the biggest massacre in Latin American history or one of the biggest. So I’m sure it went through a lot of editing. I just don’t know what it was. I’m not sure I want to know.”⁸⁰

The publication of the story took place in part out of a desire to remain competitive with the other newspaper, not to tell the story when it happened. The *New York Times* would later be accused of overusing the political significance of the story.

⁷⁸ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

⁷⁹ Whitney, Craig. E-mail interview by the author. Washington, DC. March 22, 2016.

⁸⁰ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

The El Mozote massacre came as one chapter in an extended series on El Salvador, a small part in a continued narrative. The *Times* may have done well to take extra effort editing what was obviously a deeply contentious story.

At the *Washington Post*, the story was edited more carefully and more extensively. Jim Hoagland, assistant managing editor for foreign news, and another editor, Karen DeYoung, spent the period up to publication going over the story.

“It required a lot of courage on Alma’s part to try and take this on,” Hoagland told me. Aware of the conflict that the story represented, followed his normal routine as an editor to make sure that all the information was reliable and the sources were solid. He said they did not have specific concerns about the story, but rather, they were careful to ensure that the story could be backed up because it was bound to upset some.⁸¹

Hoagland said he worked endlessly to make sure that the *Washington Post* was “absolutely fair and honest” when it covered Central America. “It’s one of the things I’m proudest of,” he said.⁸²

Guillermoprieto’s piece was subject to less public scrutiny than Bonner’s. Though Bonner’s piece contains solid reporting, it is not bulletproof. He began decisively: “it is clear that a massacre of major proportions occurred here last month.”

He then proceeded to describe the evidence that makes him confident that a massacre had happened. A great deal of the evidence comes from his own observations, but many more of his descriptions do not seem sufficiently concrete. Though descriptions that evoke more questions than answers, though, Bonner left his piece open to the aggressive questioning that was to follow.

⁸¹ Hoagland, Jim. Interview by Naomi LaChance. Washington, DC. March 2016.

⁸² Ibid.

Bonner quoted 5 people who saw the attack: 38-year-old Rufina Amaya, a boy, 46-year-old Cesar Martinez, 15-year-old Julio, and 39-year-old Gumersindo Lucas.⁸³ Their stories were for the most part told without the textured detail necessary to make their stories convincing.

For example, here is how he describes what happened to Lucas' mother: "He said the soldiers shot her there and then burned the house." But Lucas, we learn in the preceding sentence, had fled El Mozote by the time his mother was killed. Without further explanation of how Lucas learned about his mother's fate, his account seems untrustworthy.

Many of his descriptions are oblique. One of the eyewitnesses is described as "a boy who was working among beehives behind the mud hovel." What was he working on? Why are there beehives? What is his name, how old is he, and how did he survive? Bonner's story became easier to challenge than Guillermoprieto's had been because too many of its descriptions leave the reader with a pervasive sense of confusion as to the precise details and circumstances of the actions in the foreground.

On the other hand, Bonner did make it clear that he carried out extensive reporting. He noted that he spoke to 13 peasants, saw remains of 14 young men, women, and children, and quoted military officials, human rights groups, and guerillas.⁸⁴ He gave a cushion by giving several inches to the excuses and denial of the Salvadoran military.

These careful inclusions would have been enough, had the story not been such a vulnerable topic. Given the culture of denial around war crimes, though, compounded

⁸³ Bonner, Raymond. "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 27, 1982, Evening edition, A1.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

with the tendency to discount third world voices, Bonner and his editors should have gone to greater lengths to make the story protected from attack.

“Deane Hinton believed, as Robert White believed, that the situation in El Salvador was bad, terrible, squalid beyond anyone’s power to understand it without experiencing it.”

—Joan Didion⁸⁵

On January 30, over dinner, two allies, Deane Hinton and General Jose Garcia, discussed a few issues concerning both the American ambassador and the Salvadoran defense minister.

Hinton told Garcia that he should be prepared to have a response to a story about a massacre in Morazán. His response was, to Hinton, “his usual cocky self.”

“I’ll deny it and prove it fabricated,” Garcia said.

Hinton countered that there were details the reporters included that Garcia should be ready to counter. He thought it would be possible. He told Garcia that they were investigating the issue of massacre claims, and that they were grateful for his help.

But Hinton pressed the issue that it was clear that something had gone wrong.⁸⁶

In a secret cable to the State Department, Hinton listed the topics they discussed A through D: “Morazán massacre allegations” was the first; the second was an army

⁸⁵ Didion, Joan. *Salvador*. New York: Vintage International, 1994, 88.

⁸⁶ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to Alexander Haig, “Chat with General Garcia,” February 1, 1982. National Security Archive.

attack on a house where an American lived; the third was about an attack on Jesuits; the final issue, which Garcia brought up, was “latest thinking on nuns murder case.” These were all accounts of violence in El Salvador that Hinton found concerning.

Each of the reports had one thing in common: the testimony of Rufina Amaya. She spoke with Radio Venceremos, she spoke with Ray Bonner and she spoke with Alma Guillermoprieto. A survivor of the massacre, she told each of them her harrowing story. She became, through granting these interviews, the symbol of all that had happened at El Mozote.

First, she told Radio Venceremos:

“They brought the children – they were naked and getting cold – they brought them to their homes and locked them inside. The men were locked inside the church, and the women in Alfredo Marquez’s house, where we were getting hungry and thirsty until 6pm. And then they began to kill the men at noon. At 2pm, they took the women to the hills – they took them and they were gone until 6 the following morning. There they killed them and burned them – the women they raped. But the men they blindfolded and they killed.”⁸⁷

“They took us out to line us up – they were going to kill us. I stayed behind. I hid next to a small apple tree and a pineapple bush. I crouched down and covered myself

⁸⁷ *Radio Venceremos*. FMLN. December 31, 1981. Hosted by Carlos Henriquez Consalvi. Guest Rufina Amaya. Translated 2016 by Stephanie Presh.

with a branch. Because I did that, they didn't see me. Then they killed all of the women and burned their bodies, and then they left, and I ran away. They went to sit and talk where the lieutenant and other soldiers were – they weren't from any town around here – they were from somewhere else, far away. They were ordered to kill people, they were not ordered to keep the peace and treat people with respect.”⁸⁸

“ I survived because they murdered everyone with their families. They killed all of my children and my husband – Domingo Claros who was also blind. One of my children was named Cristino Claros, Lolita Claros, Lilian Claros and my little baby girl that they killed was named Isabel Claros.”⁸⁹

The next person she spoke with was Ray Bonner. She told him: “They said they wanted our weapons. But we said we didn't have any. That made them angry, and they started killing us.”

Bonner has a vague recollection of meeting her: “You know I remember sitting on the grass with her,” he said, “but whether I remember that or whether I remember it from the pictures and interviewing her, you know—very small, very quiet, very understated.”⁹⁰

Alma Guillermoprieto gave Amaya a great deal of attention in her story. Amaya told her:

“The soldiers had no fury. They just observed the lieutenant's orders. They were cold. It wasn't a battle. Around noon they began with the women First they picked out the

⁸⁸ *Radio Venceremos*. FMLN. December 31, 1981. Hosted by Carlos Henriquez Consalvi. Guest Rufina Amaya. Translated 2016 by Stephanie Presh.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

young girls and took them away to the hills. Then they picked out the old women and took them to Israel Marquez's house on the square... I could hear the children crying. I head my own children. When it was all over late at night the lieutenant ordered the soldiers to put a torch to the corpses. There was a great fire in the night."⁹¹=

Guillermoprieto noted: "Amaya spoke with what appeared to be controlled hysteria. During our conversation, she broke down only when speaking of what she said were the deaths of her children."⁹²⁹³

Amaya would be called to give testimony again and again, as the story of the massacre was revisited in the coming decades by the U.N., by the United States government, by journalists, and by students. She was the only witness who spoke out, and without her story to carry the news about the massacre, it may never have gotten the attention that it did.

⁹¹ Guillermoprieto, Alma. "Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing: Woman Tells of Children's Death." *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), January 27, 1982, A1.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ In the piece she wrote commemorating Amaya's death, Guillermoprieto would criticize herself for what she saw as sloppy sentence construction.

Part Three

On January 30, 1982, Todd Greentree and Major John McKay, two embassy officers, set off to investigate whether any of the claims of a massacre could be true. Two days earlier, their colleague Kenneth Bleakley had received a cable from Carl Gettinger, a reporting officer at the Embassy, who said he had heard from multiple sources about a massacre in Morazán.⁹⁴

The investigation would give the Embassy ammunition to say that it had taken steps to see independently what had happened at El Mozote, but it would also highlight the tyranny of propaganda within the Embassy itself.

They were met with many difficulties in the visit that would hinder their ability to find information. Years later, Greentree would tell Mark Danner: “The primary policy objective at the time was to get the certification through... From the Embassy’s point of view, the guerrillas were trying to make us look as bad as possible.”⁹⁵

Greentree and McKay met with Salvadoran officials, who showed them through parts of Morazán. They were not the most gracious or compliant hosts, though. “In general, we had very little cooperation when we went to Morazán,” McKay told Danner.

It was too dangerous for the two men to set foot in El Mozote; it was still controlled by the FMLN, who had just conducted a raid called Operation Martyrs of Heroic Morazán.⁹⁶ They flew over the village; it was obvious that fighting had happened.

⁹⁴ Gettinger, Carl. Carl Gettinger to Kenneth Bleakley, “Mozote and Arambala,” January 29, 1982. National Security Archive.

⁹⁵ Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 104.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

They saw widespread destruction similar to what Bonner and Guillermprieto had described.

They flew closer, at about 200 feet, and were shot at. They decided not to go any closer.

Later that day, alongside Kenneth Bleakley, deputy chief of the mission, they visited a refugee camp asking people if they knew anyone from El Mozote.

They had trouble finding any answers that struck them as candid, particularly because they were accompanied by soldiers. At some points, McKay distracted the soldiers while Greentree conducted interviews.

“People were freaked out and pretty scared about talking and stuff, but there was enough to give a pretty strong impression of the horrors of war,” Greentree said.

In a jeep with the soldiers, McKay and Greentree went to five villages within a few miles of El Mozote.

The mayor of Jocoaitique told them: “this is something one should talk about in another time, in another country.”⁹⁷

Then, they set out on foot to visit the village. At a point along the path, the soldiers simply would not continue.

McKay, “scared shitless,” was convinced that they should turn back.

They sent a cable to the Secretary of State, released in part in 1983 and in full in 1993 through a Freedom of Information request by Bonner. The cable, signed by Deane Hinton, said:

“Although it is not possible to prove or disprove excesses of violence against the

⁹⁷ Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

civilian population of El Mozote by government troops, it is certain that the guerilla forces who established defensive positions in El Mozote did nothing to remove them from the path of battle which they were aware was coming... Civilians did die during Operation Rescate but no evidence could be found to confirm that government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operation zone, nor that the number of civilians killed even remotely approached number being cited in other reports circulating internationally. We are still pursuing question as to which army units were present in El Mozote.”

Hinton also noted that the Altacatl Battalion was in Morazán at the time of the massacre, that there were many refugees in the region, and that there were many who indicated great fighting had happened. But it concludes that it is very unlikely the massacre took place.

The cable makes little note of the fact that the investigators had so much difficulty ascertaining the information they sought, and that this would have greatly colored the information they found. It was better just to say that a massacre of civilians of such proportions seemed like propaganda.

“The Truth is a version of reality distilled and sharpened each day as the rich talk only to one another, as government ministers whisper the names of the rich softly and lovingly as

the army acts as their personal guards and the newspapers as their personal press agents.”

—Tina Rosenberg in the *Nation* in 1991 on reporting in El Salvador⁹⁸

On January 31, the Embassy finally formulated its response. They sent a cable to the State Department: “El Salvador investigation of El Mozote massacre found allegations [Journalists; Guerrilla groups] unlikely and impossible”⁹⁹

Hinton and his colleagues found that civilians did die, and the guerilla troupes made no effort to remove civilians from the line of battle.

“They claimed they saw dozens of bodies,” said the Embassy report.¹⁰⁰

Their description of Mozote affirms skepticism over the numbers of the dead: “Accessible by dirt road, it consists of a small cluster of buildings, including a chapel and a store, surrounded by scattered single family adobe houses. Many have fled the violence in the area in recent years. And the population of El Mozote at the time of the December operation was estimated at no more than 322, primarily *caposions*.”¹⁰¹

The U.S. didn’t want the story to be true, so they made the facts work for them.

Fighting happened, they said, on December 11—it was the height of the Atlacatal Battalion’s sweep. Both guerillas and civilians were present, but the guerillas carried out strong defense.

⁹⁸ Binford, Leigh. *The El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996.

⁹⁹ Hinton, Deane. Letter, “Report on Alleged Massacre,” January 31, 1982. National Security Archive.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Another point the Embassy makes, which makes the killing seem more improbable, is that refugees had flooded surrounding areas.¹⁰² If so many had fled, it didn't make sense that there could there have been 1000 left in the tiny village when the fighting took place.

There were no more than about 300 civilians in El Mozote, of that they were certain.

Hinton, to his credit, oversaw several defense attachés who were trying to identify which Salvadoran Army unites were in El Mozote when the massacre was said to have happened. Unsatisfied with what they had found, he asked an MILGP commander, who asked the Chief of Staff, who said that the Defense Minister was the man to answer that question.

On the afternoon of February 2, Hinton visited General Garcia again.

“We joshed a bit as is our wont,” Hinton wrote in a telegram to the State Department. “Then Garcia complimented me on my *Washington Post* interview which he said put things exactly right.”

Hinton mentioned that Enders was in the midst of arguing to Congress for the approval of the additional military aid to El Salvador. He was worried, he told the general, about incidents, including the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* allegations of a massacre in Morazán.

¹⁰² Hinton, Deane. Letter, “Report on Alleged Massacre,” January 31, 1982. National Security Archive.

“There was one good sentence in the Bonner piece,” Hinton said: “It is not possible for an observer who was not present at the time of the massacre to determine independently how many people died or who killed them.”¹⁰³

“This Morazán business is a novella,” Garcia said. “Pure Marxist propaganda devoid of foundation.”¹⁰⁴

Hinton agreed: the story was propaganda, and its timing was carefully calculated. But there were details of the story he needed answers for. He wanted to know whether the Atlacatl Battalion was really at El Mozote, and he wanted to know about Lts. Caceres and Ortega, two names he had heard but did not know about.

Garcia replied that Major Caceres was a deputy commander of the Atlacatl, a “straightforward, honorable soldier who would never have killed women and children as described in the story.”¹⁰⁵ He did not know who Lt. Ortega was. Hinton kept pressing on whether the Atlacatl Battalion was really there.

Yes, the Defense Minister said, the Atlacatl Battalion was at El Mozote during the sweep in December. But “the story was a pack of lies.”

General Garcia told the Ambassador that, in the interest of having a firm story for an upcoming visit to Washington, he would talk to Major Caceres and examine the Daily Action Reports from the dates when the distorted story was reported to have happened.

He asked if he might leave the Bonner and Guillermprieto stories with him. Hinton did, adding as a “sweetener” a January 29 *Washington Post* editorial supportive of

¹⁰³ Bonner, Raymond. “Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 27, 1982, Evening edition, A1.

¹⁰⁴ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to Alexander Haig, “More on Alleged Morazán Massacre,” February 1982. National Security Archive.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

the policy in El Salvador.¹⁰⁶ The piece lauded Reagan’s certification of El Salvador as “the right an necessary thing.”¹⁰⁷

El Salvador, despite its flaws, has so far been worth saving for U.S. leaders. “For people who can’t take the junta, the honest response is not to say the junta is—surprise—beset and flawed, but rather to make the case that it’s acceptable to the United States if El Salvador goes the Cuban way,” the piece argues.¹⁰⁸ The U.S. involvement in El Salvador is appropriate and follows in a long precedent of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Hinton would continue trying to figure out what really happened at El Mozote. A member of his staff met with officers of the Atlacatl Battalion to figure out the details of their participation in the fighting that happened in Morazán in December. He said he could not tell details of the fighting until he had received permission from the general staff. The author’s “personal opinion, and he emphasizes ‘persona,’ is that Atlacatl Battalion or elements thereof participated in the attack on El Mozote.”¹⁰⁹

Despite continued probes, the Embassy could not seem to find anyone to tell them what had happened at El Mozote. On February 1, the State Department’s daily press briefing had the Embassy’s findings at the top of its list.¹¹⁰ There had been fighting, so

¹⁰⁶ Hinton, Deane. Deane Hinton to Alexander Haig, “More on Alleged Morazan Massacre,” February 1982. National Security Archive.

¹⁰⁷ Washington Post Editorial Board. “Certifying El Salvador.” *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), January 29, 1982, Opinion.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ USDAO San Salvador. Letter, “Conversation With Atlacatl Battalion Officers Concerning; Alleged Mis Conduct of the Army in Morazan Department,” 1992. National Security Archive.

¹¹⁰ Letter, “DOS Daily Press Briefing,” February 1, 1982. National Security Archive.

civilian casualties were inevitable. The second element of the list: the introduction of emergency military aid to El Salvador.

Ray Bonner would later say that the killing of four American nuns in El Salvador had far more influence on American public opinion than the killing of Salvadorans ever would.¹¹¹ If the story of the massacre at El Mozote were to have weight, it would have to overcome several burdens that impeded whether the story seemed trustworthy.

The fact that Radio Venceremos broke the story and facilitated the coverage that followed meant that it was easy for people like Deane Hinton to cast it aside as propaganda. Yet the FMLN was the only group in a position to tell the story. They were the only group with access to the dangerous Morazán Department and the only ones equipped with tools for telling the story. Estranged from means of communication, the victims of the massacre could have called for help, but the story would have gone very differently had it happened today.

Today, parallels might be in the Arab Spring, or the Black Lives Matter movement. Everyday citizens are able to express everyday injustice through smartphones and the internet; they do not need mediators to tell the story for them. The very metabolism of the media cycle has changed.

¹¹¹ *Weekend Edition*. “Rufina Amaya, Survivor of the El Mozote Massacre.” NPR. March 17, 2007. Hosted by Scott Simon. Guest Raymond Bonner.

Guillermoprieto's story was filed a month before it was published; today, a newspaper could take a video clip and file a report afterward. There would have been concrete evidence. It would have been harder to refute.

Several days later, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Elliott Abrams echoed Enders in his statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The El Mozote case was, Abrams said, "a very interesting one in a sense." ("Interesting" was at the time a word much in use, as were "strange" and "unusual." Enders for example had noted that Socorro Jurídico "strangely lists no victims of guerrilla and terrorist violence." I recall watching Jeane Kirkpatrick during this period whip an audience to a frenzy with little silken whips of innuendo as she described how "interested," even "bemused," she was by the "unusual standards," the "extraordinarily, even uniquely demanding standards" imposed by the certification requirement.)

—Joan Didion¹¹²

¹¹² Didion, Joan. "Something Horrible' in El Salvador." *New York Review of Books*, July 14, 1994.

On February 2, 1982, Thomas O. Enders appeared before Congress, to the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, to argue that the U.S. should continue military aid to El Salvador, because they were following human rights regulations. In Washington, the issue of the violence of course seemed less pressing, and the need to continue the policy, as is often the case on Capitol Hill, took precedent. Enders, the Assistant Secretary of State, argued that continuation of aid was the best way to ensure the best possible solution for El Salvador.

“We must use our assistance to help El Salvador control the violence in that country,” he said. He argued that the law does not require an elimination of human rights abuses, but rather, progress in that area. He acknowledged human rights violations. He spoke of what fuelled the so-called propaganda at its core: “Accurate information—I think we have all found that is very hard to establish.”¹¹³

The source of information impedes the likelihood that the government will take it seriously.

“I should say,” Enders continued, “that the organization that calls itself the Human Rights Commission, which occasionally issues statistics from outside the country, did just recently on the incident in Mozote, has become itself a propaganda vehicle for the insurgency. It has no independent information-gathering capability.”¹¹⁴

Once again, the fact that information was being used as propaganda meant that it was entirely inaccurate in the eyes of the official.

¹¹³ *Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, 97th Cong.* (February 2, 1982) (statement of Thomas O Enders).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Enders addressed allegations of massacres, including that of El Mozote. “There is no evidence to confirm,” he said, “that Government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operation zone, or that the number of civilians remotely approached 733 or 926 victims cited in the press... So we have to be very careful about trying to adduce evidence to the certification.”¹¹⁵

Though so credulous about the veracity of sourcing, Enders neglected to say—likely because he did not know—that the Embassy’s own information gathering efforts were impeded. They did not have evidence to confirm the massacre because they could not reach the village. They could not reach the village because the violence was so extreme, and the fighting so ruthless.

Representative Gary Studds, who had been leading the effort to discontinue military aid to El Salvador, raised his hand. He said: “If there is anything left of the English language in this city after your long assault by your immediate superior, it is gone now because the President has just certified that up is down and in is out and black is white. I anticipate his telling us that war is peace at any moment.”¹¹⁶

Studds then read from an Amnesty International report and asked for the sources of the “reassuring statements” about El Mozote. He said he did not think that the allegations were so unusual, other than that it was a larger group than was usually reported killed.

“You take empty rhetoric and call it reform. You accept promises without having demanded action... We have given El Salvador more military aid than we have ever

¹¹⁵ *Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, 97th Cong.* (February 2, 1982) (statement of Thomas O Enders).

¹¹⁶ *Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, 97th Cong.* (February 2, 1982) (statement of Gary Studds).

bestowed on any Latin American country, and it hasn't worked. In response, you—and you have had some experience in this area—have resurrected the State Department approach to Vietnam: if it doesn't work, do more of it”

He continued, concluding with: “I suggest to you that this is just one more step, one more poke into that tar baby. How in the world are we going to get out of this one?”¹¹⁷

He was met with applause. The chair of the committee, Senator Michael Barnes, asked the audience not to clap.

Enders said: “There is a substantial amount of violence. We intend to overcome it.”

He was asked again about El Mozote, and he spoke again of the difficulty of ascertaining correct information. He said that the Embassy had done its best work to investigate.¹¹⁸

The funding was continued, in the interest of creating reforms and communicating to the Salvadoran government the importance of human rights law.

¹¹⁷ *Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, 97th Cong.* (1982) (statement of Gary Studds).

¹¹⁸ *Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, 97th Cong.* (1982) (statement of Thomas O Enders).

“They thought they were killing guerrillas, but really, they were just murdering women and children. They need to realize what they’ve done.”

—Rufina Amaya to Radio Venceremos¹¹⁹

Much of U.S. foreign policy in the second half of the twentieth century was propelled by fear of Soviet incursions into American spheres of influence—or, worse, of actual Communist takeovers. It was this fear that had propelled the U.S. to become so intertwined in El Salvador, and this was the fear that made Ray Bonner’s story so threatening. The United States needed to succeed in El Salvador because the entire future of their ideology was at stake. For some journalists, that ideology was vitally important to uphold.

This passion and fear is what was at the core of a *Wall Street Journal* editorial called The Media’s War, which criticized the manner in which the American press had been covering the El Salvadoran civil war.¹²⁰

Seth Lipsky, a former *Wall Street Journal* editor, told me that the editorial “is an example of what, to me, is the profound understanding on the part of the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page of the struggle between freedom and communism.”¹²¹

He continued: “The editor of the Journal, Robert Bartley, was one of the few editors who understood that capitalism was a better engine of development for the Third World than communism. He understood that communism was destined to lose, despite its

¹¹⁹ *Radio Venceremos*. FMLN. December 31, 1981. Hosted by Carlos Henriquez Consalvi. Guest Rufina Amaya. Translated 2016 by Stephanie Presh.

¹²⁰ *Wall Street Journal* (New York, NY). “The Media's War.” February 10, 1982, Opinion.

¹²¹ Lipsky, Seth. E-mail interview by the author. New York, NY. March 21, 2016.

claims to the contrary. He understood that communism ruined or claimed outright more lives than claimed by errors or crimes of our side.”¹²²

This was what was at stake for these editors: the economic well being of the world at large. Which is presumably why the writers had no qualms about creating their own fiction. They accuse Guillermoprieto and Bonner as having been taken on a propaganda exercise. Indeed, it is probably true that the FMLN allowed the journalists to come into Morazán at the strategic time to spread the word about the massacre.

At the core of the piece’s argument is the assumption that there will never be a conclusive answer over what happened at El Mozote. When I spoke with George Melloan, who helped write the editorial he held on to this argument. I asked him about the books and trials that have taken place in the past 35 years since the massacre that have, through careful research and presented evidence, proven that a massacre took place at El Mozote. He seemed not to have heard of them.¹²³

What about the photos, I asked Melloan. Susan Miselas had taken photos of piles of corpses. Certainly there was such a thing as being overly credulous; but there was also such a thing as acknowledging what seemed to be clear-cut evidence. I had to repeat the question several times. Melloan never directly answered me.¹²⁴

Today Bonner calls the continued doubt “unbelievable.”¹²⁵

Bonner added: “Look, people say will they ever apologize to you. No, of course they won’t.”¹²⁶

¹²² Lipsky, Seth. E-mail interview by the author. New York, NY. March 21, 2016.

¹²³ Melloan, George. Telephone interview by the author. Washington, DC. March 21, 2016.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

Anger in editorial circles continues to linger over the *Wall Street Journal's* accusatory writings. Craig Whitney, who edited Bonner's story, told me: "I'd take Ray Bonner over that right-wing apologist George Melloan any day, and I did then."¹²⁷

Whitney writes in his unpublished memoir: "By God, Ray had the facts. The bones were there."¹²⁸

So it was a reporter's word against the government's. Bonner's stories, by nature primarily of topic and not the nature in which they were told, divulge a particular policy stance. This is a perennial dilemma of the reporter, made all the more pertinent in the age of the internet, with a person's entire life on display. On one end of the spectrum today you have Glenn Greenwald, a lawyer by training who was able to so successfully tell the stories in Edward Snowden's NSA leak in part because he passionately understood and had thoughts about the issue. A little further down the spectrum is Jay Rosen, whose 'view from nowhere' doctrine shows the way that journalistic "objectivity" can prevent a reporter from telling the best story.¹²⁹ And then you find the dominant perspective in the majority of American newsrooms, including the one in which I currently work. For a reporter to say she has an opinion is to render their storytelling

¹²⁶ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

¹²⁷ Whitney, Craig. E-mail interview by the author. Washington, DC. March 22, 2016.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Rosen, Jay. Twitter post. September 3, 2005, 10:54 a.m. https://twitter.com/jayrosen_nyu/status/639436236596363264?lang=en.

obsolete.

When former NPR reporter and current NPR correspondent Cokie Roberts wrote an opinion piece denouncing Donald Trump, NPR went to great lengths both internally and externally to distance themselves from her.¹³⁰ The argument, and this was upheld by many of my colleagues, was that knowing her definite stance would make anything she said after that illegitimate. What baffled me is that Roberts had not been a reporter for more than a decade. By nature of her role as commentator, she is expected to give her opinion and analysis. NPR, though, is wedded to its role as distanced storyteller from the “view from nowhere.”

Here is the thing that everyone forgets: a reporter is a person first and a journalist second. It is the sense of humanity that should inform and deepen their news telling. A fair story gives treatment to all of the people involved in a story, and that in many ways is the strongest way to keep a balanced story.

What I have seen in various newsrooms in my career so far is that when reporters don't let themselves have opinions, they don't let themselves think critically. They open themselves up to being manipulated and misled, because they have blocked off that part of the mind. A reporter—not publicly, but internally or with trusted confidants—needs to be honest with their opinions so that they'll be able to recalibrate to tell the story right.

Newsrooms secretly understand this. When during a CNN presidential debate the cameras cut to Don Lemon, who is African-American, to ask the question about race, there was an implicit understanding that some journalists are able to tell some stories

¹³⁰ Folkenflik, David. “NPR Clarifies Cokie Roberts' Role After Anti-Trump Column.” *NPR* (Washington, DC), March 14, 2016, Morning Edition.

better than others, because of their own experiences.¹³¹ Although it was awkward and insinuated Lemon has a role as the “token minority,” it did imply that a network that is billed as an iconic unbiased news teller does understand that sometimes, an individual perspective or experience is able to better inform news coverage.

If Bonner had ever said that he was in El Salvador reporting for the New York Times because he was trying to end the U.S. military aid, then the legitimacy of his work would have fallen. But he was exposing injustice not for an ultimate means but rather for his judgment that something wrong was happening. The distinction is that he was not working to an ultimate goal. Reporters need to be able to be in touch with their basic sense of dignity. Sometimes a fair story doesn't give weight to all sides equally, because it knows that some sides are not just. Journalism is about humanity. It's about connecting people, it's about shared experience, and it's about conveying the way that the world works in a compassionate way. To do that, reporters need to be thinking, feeling people. This means newsrooms need to hire from diverse backgrounds, so that they can bring a variety of perspectives.

¹³¹ Power, Lis. “Racial Justice Issues Ignored During CNN's GOP Debate Get Airtime During Democratic Debate.” *Media Matters* (blog). Entry posted October 14, 2015. <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2015/10/14/racial-justice-issues-ignored-during-cnns-gop-d/206166>.

In the months following Bonner and Guillermprieto's stories, El Salvador—and El Mozote—made their presence known on the pages of all of the major American newspapers.

In early February, the *Los Angeles Times* carried a story about a list of names given to the embassy in San Salvador. The list, of course, was those killed at El Mozote. The story includes a line that would not pass every editor: "State Department officials, embarrassed by charges that the Reagan administration supports a brutal military government, have called the reports of a massacre exaggerated."

To this reporter, Juan Vasquez, the debate is over reputation—or public opinion. The story also refutes a major point about why the massacre could not have taken place, that the story could not be true because there were not as many residents of El Mozote as there were people reported killed. The reporter wrote—and this is a point journalist Mark Danner would make in the *New Yorker* article that finally laid the debate to rest—that there were people from all around taking refuge at the village.¹³² The same reporter, Juan Vasquez, would later cover the story that General Jose Guillermo Garcia conceded that government soldiers fought a battle at El Mozote in December.

The March 1, 1982 edition of the *Washington Post* included several letters to the editor about El Salvador and U.S. policy. One is particularly striking: Judson Piner of Lansing, Michigan was a Peace Corps volunteer from 1977 to 1980. "I worked extensively in this community and in the surrounding hills," he writes. "I probably know

¹³² Vasquez, Juan M. "U.S. Embassy in El Salvador Given List of Hundreds Allegedly Massacred by Troops." *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), February 17, 1982, B9.

this area better than any other American.”¹³³ He feels “horror and sorrow” knowing that many of his friends could have been killed by government soldiers.

“The solution,” Piner writes, “as proposed by President Reagan and Secretary of State Alexander Haig will not cure the inequities that are at the heart of the conflict.”¹³⁴

Buried in the back of the newspaper, Piner’s letter could have been treated in such a way that it carried greater weight. Indeed, a person who understand this guerilla-held area of El Salvador well would be an asset to all sides of the conflict. Note that his letter has no sign of doubt as to whether the massacre happened. Were the issue truly about what had happened, he may have been treated with more attention.

As the case was, though, it was an argument of words and reputations, and it did not matter anymore whether hundreds of Salvadoran peasants had been killed or not.

“There were harrowing situations. But I’ll tell you one thing, Naomi. It’s not like it is today. Journalists weren’t targeted like they are today. You might be killed doing your job, you might run into a landmine, or you might be caught in the crossfire, but they didn’t target journalists like both government and rebel groups do today. I mean there were risks, but nothing like it is today. With the exception in El Salvador, the killing of

¹³³ Piner, Judson. “El Salvador and U.S. Policy.” *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), March 1, 1982, Letters to the Editor.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

the 4 Dutch journalists that was premeditated, planned, and everything else, but for the most part, look: I used to go jogging every day in El Salvador, I mean San Salvador. I was on the top of the hit list, supposedly. The hit list. And I still—and I'm not being macho—maybe I was crazy, but you know, I ran past soldiers with automatic rifles, etc. Etc. I went back into Salvador after writing the El Mozote massacre story. I mean not right away. So it was different then. It's much more dangerous today to be a journalist. Much more."¹³⁵

—Ray Bonner in April 2016

August 1982 was Ray Bonner's last month on the Latin America beat. The *New York Times*' Managing Editor A. M. Rosenthal moved the reporter to the business desk in New York. He said he needed more training. Changes to staffing happen; no foreign correspondent stays in a war zone forever. But to readers who had followed the controversy over the story of El Mozote, the change seemed like more than a coincidence.

Ray Bonner told me that he certainly came onto the El Salvador beat in 1980 as an unexperienced reporter, but by the time that he was moved back to New York, he had proven himself. He explained:

¹³⁵ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

“In December 1980 I’m writing front-page stories... and the *New York Times* had no idea who I was. In many ways, they should have sent a reporter down there then. In many ways the *New York Times* should have sent an experienced reporter.”¹³⁶

Charles Lewis, founder of the Center for Public Integrity, wove the move into a larger narrative: “when the atrocities were occurring, the chief response of American officials was to deny, obfuscate, and misled—and then attack the journalists who sought the truth. Consider, for example, what happened to Raymond Bonner of the New York Times when he dared to reveal facts that undermined the administration’s preferred narrative about the conflicts in Latin America.”¹³⁷

Craig Whitney saw Bonner’s removal as fitting with the leadership changes at the *Times*: “Abe’s own inclinations showed later when he hired Shirley Christian, an avowedly conservative writer whose reports had been more to the Reagan Administration’s liking, to cover Latin America (from Miami). Could he have had doubts about whether Ray had all the details on Mozote right? Of course. But he never disavowed the story, though some of his journalistic critics asserted that pulling Ray out months later amounted to that, and he never took me to task for putting that story into the paper on Page One and defending my decision to him— indeed, a few months later, he promoted me.”¹³⁸

Bonner told Lewis: “You tell me that Deane Hinton, who’s been beating the hell out of me, didn’t raise me at lunch with the executive editor of the New York Times?” He

¹³⁶ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

¹³⁷ Lewis, Charles. *935 Lies: The Future of Truth and the Decline of America's Moral Integrity*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2014, 109.

¹³⁸ Whitney, Craig. E-mail interview by the author. Washington, DC. March 22, 2016.

continued: “It wasn’t the massacre [coverage], it was the totality of my [Central America] reporting that both the embassy didn’t like and that Abe didn’t like.”¹³⁹

It was far from the end of Bonner’s career as an investigative journalist, although he did not stay with the *New York Times* much longer.

“I—so you know when they hired me it’s a decision they regretted later—but they hired me,” Bonner told me. “Two years later I had proved myself, I had done this, I had done that, then it was clear that for political reasons they... they didn’t trust me. I was suspect. Et cetera, et cetera.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Lewis, Charles. *935 Lies: The Future of Truth and the Decline of America's Moral Integrity*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2014, 109.

¹⁴⁰ Bonner, Raymond. Telephone interview by the author. New York, NY. April 20, 2016.

Epilogue

There will be democracy in Afghanistan, make no doubt about it. Freedom is the best antidote to terror... Twenty years ago we had a similar situation in El Salvador. We had — guerrilla insurgency controlled roughly a third of the country, 75,000 people dead, and we held free elections. I was there as an observer on behalf of the Congress. The human drive for freedom, the determination of these people to vote, was unbelievable. And the terrorists would come in and shoot up polling places; as soon as they left, the voters would come back and get in line and would not be denied the right to vote. And today El Salvador is a whale of a lot better because we held free elections. The power of that concept is enormous. And it will apply in Afghanistan, and it will apply as well in Iraq.

-Dick Cheney in a vice presidential debate against John Kerry in 2004¹⁴¹

Rufina Amaya lived to see the 1992 U.N. Truth Commission conduct excavation to show that a massacre had indeed taken place in her village, as she had said all along. She lived to see Mark Danner's 1993 New Yorker story showing, once and for all, that her story was true. She lived to see, in 2005, the new investigation by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

When Rufina Amaya died of a stroke in 2007 at the age of 64, her death was recognized in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

¹⁴¹ *Democracy Now!* "Cheney Cites El Salvador Civil War That Killed 75,000 As Model for Afghanistan." *Democracy Now!* October 6, 2004. Hosted by Amy Goodman.

At NPR, Weekend Edition host Scott Simon had Bonner on the show to share his memories on the phone from Oxford, England.¹⁴² Although he doesn't say it in the interview, Simon was in El Salvador during the civil war as well. It is clear in the interview that Bonner is still adamant about the veracity of Rufina's account.

"This is a woman who, I don't—words escape me. She survived something worse than the worst nightmare a human being can have," Simon said.¹⁴³

Bonner said, "what she did was give it a human face, a human voice, and I don't think she'd been coached."

He continued: "You don't just ask one question. You ask a lot of questions. And then when you saw it with yourself you saw the bodies you saw the massacre you saw the skulls you saw the carnage, it all fit.

Simon said that the Salvadoran government denied it had happened; Bonner reminded him "not only the Salvadoran government, the U.S. government."

Though all of Simon's questions implied that he agreed with Bonner, that he believed Amaya to be a trustworthy source and that he believed the story of the massacre to have taken place, Bonner was dedicated to using his time on air to continue defending the story to its core. Simon was interested in remembering an El Salvadoran heroine.

Bonner was interested in something else:

"Why wouldn't I tell this story?" Bonner said. He added: "There was something about her that was very, very genuine."

¹⁴² *Weekend Edition*. "Rufina Amaya, Survivor of the El Mozote Massacre." NPR. March 17, 2007. Hosted by Scott Simon. Guest Raymond Bonner.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*.

There are still bodies being found in and around El Mozote, even though the massacre 35 years ago now.

In 2012, in a groundbreaking ruling, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights instructed the Salvadoran government to re-open the investigation about what happened at El Mozote.

In March 2016, forensics crews continued to dig through El Salvador's mass graves. A man named Saul Quijada examined a skeleton. It was darker than the others—it showed more signs of decomposition.¹⁴⁴ Many of the bodies Quijada studies are from recent gang wars. This particular body, though, which lay unnamed and unaccounted for, was clearly much older. The tag on it says two words: “El Mozote.”

¹⁴⁴ Lovato, Roberto. “El Salvador's Archives of Death.” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), March 6, 2016.

Appendix 1

Timeline

- February 27, 1981 – U.S. National Security Council approves \$25 in military aid to El Salvadoran government
- March 9, 1981 – President Reagan authorizes CIA covert operations in support of the Salvadoran government
- December 10, 1981 – CIA gathers intelligence from the Morazán Department in El Salvador reporting a major “sweep operation”
Reagan and the U.S. observe Human Rights Day
- December 11, 1981 – the Atlacatl Battalion murders 767 people around El Mozote
- December 24, 1981 – FMLN radio station Radio Venceremos broadcasts the first report about the massacre
- January 6–9, 1982 – Journalists Raymond Bonner, Susan Meiselas, and Alma Guillermoprieto arrive at El Mozote, guided by members of FNLN
- January 11, 1982 – *Der Spiegel* publishes a story about the El Mozote massacre
- January 11, 1982 – A doctor at a refugee camp writes his senator about reports of a massacre in Morazán
- January 27, 1982 – Guillermoprieto’s story about the massacre appears in the morning edition of the *Washington Post*; *New York Times* editors rush to put Bonner’s story in the evening edition
- January 27, 1982 – CIA morning briefing says Guillermoprieto’s story “likely contains some elements of truth” and that verification is “often impossible”
- January 28, 1982 – Reagan tells Congress that the Salvadoran government is “making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights”
- January 30, 1982 – Defense Minister Garcia tells Deane Hinton he will deny accusations about the massacre
- January 30, 1982 – Todd Greentree and Major John McKay visit Morazán
- February 2, 1982 – Thomas O. Enders goes to Capitol Hill to defend U.S. military assistance to El Salvador
- February 8, 1982 – Elliott Abrams tells a Senate committee that reports of a massacre were not credible
- February 1982 – Reagan uses presidential emergency powers to send \$55 million more in aid to Salvadoran government
- February 10, 1982 – *Wall Street Journal* writes editorial casting doubt on Guillermoprieto’s and Bonner’s stories
- May 7, 1982 – Embassy reports it had attempted to further investigate massacre
- August 1982 – Ray Bonner is reassigned from Central America to the business desk in New York

Weather
 Today—Partly cloudy, high 35-35, low 24-24. Chance of precipitation is near zero through tonight. "Monday" 35-45, with a chance of showers, low around 40. Yesterday—Low 40-40, high 50-50. Details on Page C3.

The Washington Post

FINAL
 10 Pages—Editions
 Appointments: H-1 Metro, C-1
 Classified: H-1 Business, C-2
 Circulation: H-1 Sports, D-1
 General: H-1 News, C-3
 Federal: H-1 State, C-4
 Financial: D-1 Television, D-2

106th Year WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 27, 1982

Reagan Asks Shift of U.S. Programs to States

Huge 'Sorting-Out' Of Federal Role

By David S. Broder and Herbert H. Goldhamer
 Washington Post Staff Writers

President Reagan last night proposed a massive "sorting-out" of federal responsibilities that would, by the end of the decade, give states full responsibility for funding and running almost all major domestic programs except those for the elderly.

The ambitious and elaborate plan, outlined in the State of the Union address and further explained yesterday in a series of briefings, would be a major step toward reversing the centralization of power in the national government, a long-heralded Reagan theme.

"In a single stroke," the president said, "we will be accomplishing a realignment that will cut enormous administrative and operating costs at the federal level while we ensure those programs will be more responsive to both the people they are meant to help and the people who pay for them."

But the program, by itself, would offer no help in reducing the federal budget deficit. It would not begin until fiscal 1984, which starts Oct. 1, 1983, and even then, officials said, would not provide any net savings for the federal government.

It was also not clear how the administration proposes to go to ensure that benefits and services do not disappear when the states take over. Officials said they wanted to work out a flexible standard for maintaining minimum aid to the needy, but had no formula for doing that.

Then, according to the president's proposal, a "turnover" for debate, and made it clear that they were ready to consider substantial modifications. The initial reaction in Congress and the status report from states to the administration, guaranteeing that the complex proposal will be a major center of controversy throughout the year.

The program has two main parts. The first is a \$10 billion study, in which the federal government would take over the state share of Medicaid payments for the poor, while the states take over the federal share of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) plus the federal-state program, say all federal.

If legislation is passed this year, the study would take effect at the beginning of fiscal 1983. Medicaid costs have been rising faster than food stamps and welfare benefits. The states would fund this program.

The second is a transfer of more than 40 federal programs to states and cities, including major aid programs in transportation, community development, vocational and specialized education.

See PROGRAMS, A14, Oct. 1



President Reagan is applauded by Vice President Bush and Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. during his State of the Union address last night.

A Promise to Stick With the Basic Script

By Leo Lewis
 Washington Post Staff Writer

In the face of mounting adversity, President Reagan reached back last night to the fundamental values that propelled him into politics—the belief that the federal government must be cut down to size.

Whether or not that vision ultimately prevails, Reagan, in his first State of the Union address, served notice that he does not intend to waver in the face of presidential pressures who allowed events to force them away from their original agenda.

Reagan, unfazed by an economic recession and other unforeseen difficulties, sticking to his basic script. What Americans heard from their president last night was nothing Reagan, the first Republican to take more than 40 programs over to U.S. states since the 1930s.

Reagan promised more of the same. To those who said that his economic program was a failure, Reagan pledged to stick to it until it brings results.

"If we had not acted as we did, things would be far worse for all Americans," he said.

See MESSAGE, A14, Oct. 1

Rules Out Increase In Taxes This Year

By Leo Lewis
 Washington Post Staff Writer

President Reagan proposed a massive realignment of government responsibilities between Washington and the states yesterday and said he would not raise taxes this year because the economic program will bring federal deficits down and reduce unemployment.

In his first State of the Union address, Reagan called for "a single, bold stroke" to make government more responsive to the people by stripping a host of state and 40 programs out of federal control and handing them over to the states.

The program, which Reagan called "The Revolution," would require a drastic but he said since the states are the best managers of government, it would pay for itself by the year.

"Our citizens feel they have lost control of even the most basic decisions about the essential services of government, such as schools, welfare, roads, and even garbage collection. They are right," Reagan told a joint session of Congress.

In the major element of the program, the federal government would assume all costs of Medicaid, which presently is a joint federal-state program, and would turn over to the states welfare and food stamp programs.

Reagan also proposed handing some 40 other domestic spending programs over to the states to maintain or cut as they chose. For an interim period, the federal government would also turn over funds to help the states pay for them, but after 1983 that aid would end and it would be up to the states to buy the laws to support them.

The president was interrupted by applause 30 times, but initial reaction from legislators indicated that his proposal will meet strong opposition from Democrats and from some Republicans. Sen. Frank Lautenberg, Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he would not support the program.

Reagan also has strong opposition from members of his own party to continuing high federal deficits. Sen. William A. Roth (R-Conn.) said, "It is against the world we are prepared to accept a deficit of between \$275 billion and nearly \$500 billion to cover over the next three years—and that is the present position—then Wall Street and Main Street are not going to accept that at all."

See PRESIDENT, A14, Oct. 1

Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing

By Alma Guevara
 Washington Post Staff Writer

MOROZCO, El Salvador, Jan. 24 (UPI)—Several hundred civilians, including women and children, were taken from their homes and around the village and later by Salvadoran Army troops during a December offensive against leftist guerrillas, according to three survivors who say they witnessed the alleged massacre.

Witnesses taken to the region and speak to the survivors by guerrilla soldiers, who control large areas of Morozco Province, were shown the rubble of scenes of abuse houses they and the survivors said were destroyed by the troops in the now deserted village, normally, dozens of decomposing bodies still were seen lying in the rubble and lying in nearby fields, despite the month that has passed since the attack.

In Washington, Salvadoran Ambassador Roberto Howe told last night, "I repeat emphatically that the Army of El Salvador" was engaged in "killing women and children. It is not within the armed institutional philosophy to act like that." He acknowledged that the "armed forces have been active in that part of the country," particularly during a December offensive against the guerrillas, but said that they are not "definitely not here against the civilian population."

The survivors, including a woman who said her husband and four of her children were killed, maintained that no health care was given during the second week in December when the alleged massacre took place.

The woman, Rufina Arana, a 36-year-old housewife, said that the troops entered the village one morning and, after herding the residents into two separate groups—men, divided from women and children—took them off and that they, Arana said, she had hidden during the shooting and later cremated in the night.

See SALVADOR, A14, Oct. 1

Kremlin's No. 2, Mikhail Suslov, Dies of Stroke

By David Dodge
 Washington Post Staff Writer

MOSCOW, Jan. 26—Mikhail A. Suslov, the most influential Kremlin figure after President Leonid Brezhnev, died yesterday after suffering a stroke, the government news agency said today. He was 70.

The departure of Suslov, who was elected to the top leadership body of the Soviet Union in 1976, was a surprise, as he was still in power, making the end of one more than anyone else, symbolized the continuity of Soviet policy over the past three decades. (UPI, Page C3)

Suslov, known as a major player in the collective leadership and is expected to have an impact on the question of Khrushchev's succession, although it is not expected to lead to any short-term changes in Moscow's foreign and domestic policies.

Suslov, in length of continuous service, was the senior member of the present leadership. He has been a member of the Central Committee since 1946 and one of its powerful national secretaries since 1947. He was also the senior member in the Politburo, having been admitted in 1952, five years before Brezhnev.

As the position of communist secretary, he played a decisive role in all major shifts in the Kremlin. He is believed to have been mentioned the formation of Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 and to have proposed Brezhnev to replace him.

A tall, gaunt, middle-aged man, he was last seen in public in December when he presented medals to hockey players on the occasion of his 70th birthday. At that time he appeared to be in good health.

An official medical bulletin said he died from cerebral artery aneurysm rupture following a cerebral hemorrhage. He had been suffering from a stroke since Thursday.

The cause of his death was withheld from the Soviet public for more than 20 hours.

A statement issued by the Soviet government, the party Central Committee and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet was read over Moscow radio tonight. It announced that

See SUSLOV, A17, Oct. 1

Poland Casts 'Long, Dark Shadow' Haig, Gromyko Hold Lengthy Talks

By Dan Gheesbrey
 Washington Post Staff Writer

GENEVA, Jan. 26—Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. followed lengthy talks with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko today with the possibility of new negotiations to reduce strategic arms, despite a "long, dark shadow" cast by Poland on all aspects of Soviet-American relations.

In a written report on the nearly eight hours of talks—about twice as long as had been planned—Haig would tell Gromyko that the U.S. of State is "actively engaged" in preparations for strategic arms negotiations to be initiated "when conditions permit."

In a Times report from Moscow that appeared soon after the end of the talks, the Soviet Union characterized the Haig-Gromyko session as "sincere and useful."

Before meeting, Haig had participated in talks before central leaders in Poland in Poland.

U.S. officials also pointed out that Soviet leaders that prevented U.S. proposals. (Page A17)

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Compiling the Body Count

By John Deegan
 Washington Post Staff Writer

SAN SALVADOR—A political officer in the British Embassy here last week had one chart and graphs depicting statistics he had meticulously called from Salvadoran newspapers for the past 15 months.

Two weeks ago a Salvadoran newspaper told a visitor his name showed long lists of names and other information written in damaged handprint in red ink.

In the throes of El Salvador's 2-year-old struggle of political violence and civil war, the two men are compiling the country's most meticulously recorded statistic: the body count of noncombatant civilians.

By extreme count, the numbers are horrifying. The latest calculations in the U.S. Embassy's 1,772 people killed since the fighting began to keep track in September 1980.

The highest estimate was reported by Salvadoran Defense Minister Gen. Jose Guillermo Garcia, who had had reports from two months ago that the violence had claimed 20,000 victims since 1979—20,000 of them "people who had nothing to do with the conflict."

At stake in the reporting of the deaths is more than the

See BODIES, A14, Oct. 1

PORK BARREL POLITICS

A symbolic fuel plant costing \$43 billion largely financed by tax funds meant to be made for the budget as, yet it survived. The way it survived helps explain why, in a house of Congress, many senators continue to support large public subsidies for private energy projects. (Page A2)

■ Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party announced a series of steps yesterday to disengage itself from its trade barriers and open its markets to more foreign products in the wake of a recent Japanese withdrawal from the United States and Korea. (Page D2)

■ Two passages are anticipated for and may have been passed in House earlier than a World America (WCA) bill to force more than 200 persons added into the water but the court is expected to stay Saturday, unless officials said yesterday. (Page A5)

Va. Senate Panel Approves Increase in Business Taxes

By Patricia E. Bauer
 Washington Post Staff Writer

RICHTMOND, Jan. 26—The Senate Finance Committee today voted to impose a \$0.2 million tax increase on state corporations and to reduce the state's income tax by \$112 million. The state is expected to lose because of Virginia administration federal tax cuts.

Business lobbyists immediately complained that the committee's action would undermine Reagan's policies and endanger the state's economic stability. But committee members who passed the measure in a 21-12 vote said they were making progress in increasing much of the \$112 million that Reagan tax breaks to businesses will cost Virginia over the next two years. Virginia is also expected to lose about \$100 million because of Reagan tax cuts to individuals.

"They [Reagan and Congress] didn't think about us. They did it with us over knowing what the impact on us would be," said Senate Minority Leader Blaine R. Anthony (D-Hampton), one of the bill's sponsors. "All this bill attempts to do is to cut our certain income that we would otherwise have received."

The House budget cuts, the re-

See VIRGINIA, A6, Oct. 1



SEN. BLAINE R. ANTHONY ... IS OPPOSED BY CONGRESS

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

VOL. CXXI... No. 43,206

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 27, 1982

LATE CITY EDITION

Weather: Increasing clouds today; steady tonight. Showers tomorrow. Temperature range today 34-51; tomorrow 35-57. Details, page D1B.

25 CENTS

HAG AND GROMYKO HOLD 'SOBER' TALKS ON RANGE OF ISSUES

POLAND SAID TO CAST PALL

American Says Situation There Puts 'Long, Dark Shadow' Over East-West Issues

By **BERNARD WEINSTEIN**
Special to The New York Times

GENEVA, Jan. 26 — Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. met with Foreign Minister Andre A. Gromyko of the Soviet Union for eight hours today and discussed a wide range of issues, including Poland, "cast a long and dark shadow" over East-West issues.

There seemed to be no agreement on any major issue, and Mr. Haig would not say whether the impression that the discussion had been so chilly and confrontational as he said his aide had advised beforehand that they would be.

Mr. Haig said that the situation in Poland was a long and dark shadow over all the discussions being held here.

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Mikhail A. Suslov

Mikhail Suslov, Chief Ideologist, Is Dead in Soviet

By **JONATHAN FLEMMING**
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 — Mikhail A. Suslov, chief ideologist of the Soviet Communist Party and one of the most powerful men in the Kremlin after Leonid I. Brezhnev, died Monday at the age of 79, the official press agency Tass announced today.

Mr. Suslov's death left a major gap in the Soviet leadership and raised new questions about the direction of the country.

Mr. Suslov was an ideological counterpart to Mr. Brezhnev, the party leader, who is 75 years old and has been in leadership for several years.

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REAGAN VOWS TO KEEP TAX CUTS; PROPOSES \$47 BILLION TRANSFER OF SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO STATES

VOLCKER CAUTIONS THAT BIG DEFICITS IMPERIL RECOVERY

Federal Reserve Chief Defends His Policy of Tight Money in Congress Testimony

By **JONATHAN FLEMMING**
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 — Paul A. Volcker, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, warned the Administration today that big deficits imperil recovery.

Mr. Volcker's testimony was the strongest on far about the problems, the Administration will face if it fails to act on the deficit.

Without any additional spending cuts or tax increases, budget deficits have been projected by Administration officials to reach \$80 billion in the fiscal year 1982.

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President Reagan acknowledging applause before delivering his State of the Union Message. Vice President Bush, who is President pro tem of the Senate, and Thomas P. O'Toole Jr., the House Speaker, are visible.

Democrats Hold Reagan's Theme Has Been Unfairness to the Needy

By **ADAM CLYMER**
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 26 — The Democrats charged President Reagan's State of the Union message that the basic theme of the last year of his term had been "unfairness to the poor and the elderly, to young families seeking homes, to small business men and to farmers."

Mr. Reagan's message was the strongest on far about the problems, the Administration will face if it fails to act on the deficit.

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Woman Refuses Aid, Dies in Carton on Street

By **BERNARD WEINSTEIN**
Special to The New York Times

An elderly woman who had lived for almost eight months in a cardboard box covered by a rug in the Avenue C and 73rd Street was found dead on the street yesterday.

The Chief Medical Examiner's office said she had died of hypothermia, in a reinforced body temperature, in a reinforced body temperature, in a reinforced body temperature.

Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village

By **RAYMOND BONNER**
Special to The New York Times

MELBOURNE, Fla. — From reports received here, it is clear that a massacre of 500 to 1,000 people occurred here last month.

The massacre occurred here last month. The massacre occurred here last month.

Williams Sentence Delayed

By **ADAM CLYMER**
Special to The New York Times

The sentencing of Herman A. Williams Jr. for bribery was postponed before he had undergone surgery to repair a brain condition.

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City Drops Covet Tax Plans

By **ADAM CLYMER**
Special to The New York Times

City officials have decided not to announce cooperative apartment buildings under a draft that would have led to a higher property tax.

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