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Commitment Beyond Morality: American Complicity in the Massacre at El Mozote, El Salvador, 1981

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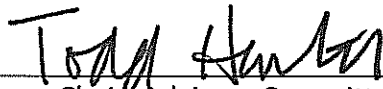
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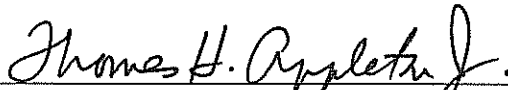
By

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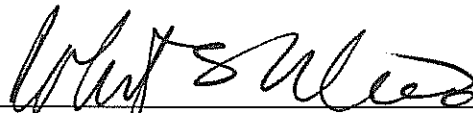
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COMMITMENT BEYOND MORALITY: AMERICAN COMPLICITY IN THE MASSACRE AT EL
MOZOTE, EL SALVADOR, 1981

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2011

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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DEDICATION

To the people of El Salvador

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the chair of my thesis committee, Dr. Todd Hartch, for his direction and patience, and my other committee members, Dr. Thomas Appleton and Dr. Robert Weise, for their comments, revisions, and assistance over the past three years. I would also like to thank the members of my family: my father Eddie Hill, mother Joyce McFarland, my sister Amy Creech, my nephew Garret, niece Mallory, and my beautiful and understanding girlfriend, Lauren. I would especially like to thank Tyler Francisco for providing the inspiration for writing on El Mozote. His two years of service in the Peace Corps in El Salvador sparked my initial interest on the topic, and our repeated correspondences sustained my attention. Our discussions culminated in a nine-day trip to El Salvador in March 2011 where I was able to visit a multitude of sites including El Mozote and El Cuco, and conduct an interview with a former guerilla in San Salvador.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, known as Santiago and a native of Venezuela, founded the clandestine Radio Venceremos, which broadcasted throughout the thirteen-year Salvadoran civil war from 1980 through 1992. The station represented the only oppositional voice to the repressive military-ruled government of El Salvador, and Santiago was among the first members of the media to broadcast reports of the massacre at El Mozote.

He noted in his memoir that the unmistakable stench of death shrouded the village upon his arrival on December 30, 1981. The deserted plaza of El Mozote was in complete disorder. Benches ripped apart, walls littered with bullet holes, and scattered about the ground were bodies, identification cards, shoes, dolls, baby bottles, and remnants of clothing. Santiago toured the ruined town noting that the perpetrators burned the majority of the dwellings. He also found hundreds of 5.56 caliber shell casings littering the area and noticed among the charred bones and rubble an ammunition box marked "NATO."¹

The Salvadoran army repeated such horrific acts in nine different villages in the area of El Mozote during the same operation. A charcoal inscription scrawled on a table in the plaza served as a warning to others: "The Atlacatl was here. The daddy of subversives. . . . 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."²

The massacre at El Mozote and surrounding villages in December 1981 was a gruesome reminder of the depths of American foreign policy and the limits of the Salvadoran imagination. Backed by a landed oligarchy composed primarily of coffee farmers and agro-industrialists, for fifty years from the 1930s until the 1980s, a nearly unbroken chain of military despots ruled the country. The massacre was but one

¹ Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio*, trans. Charles Leo Nagle and A. L. Prince (Austin: University Of Texas Press, 2010), 82.

² *Ibid.*, 82-3.

episode of thousands where the military, in service of the oligarchy and the status quo, quashed dissent, whether apparent or implied.³

In 1932, an event known as “*La Matanza*” propelled the military to the position of institutional and political dominance in El Salvador.⁴ It was then that a former member of the oligarchy, Farabundo Marti, launched an armed communist uprising which General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez brutally suppressed using the military. The suppression of the revolt was effectively genocide, killing approximately twenty to forty thousand campesinos and civilians, the majority of which were of indigenous descent.⁵ The legacy bequeathed to the military was one that championed wanton repression and the goal was to silence all opposition to the security forces and their policies.⁶

American aid to El Salvador was minimal throughout much of the military’s fifty-year reign of terror. Outside of economic aid, the United States placed little importance on the small Central American country prior to the late 1970s. It was after the Sandinista revolution in nearby Nicaragua in 1979 that American commanders and personnel started to fear the spread of communism into other parts of the region. In addition, rumblings of a “reformist coup” involving young Salvadoran officers reverberated through Washington. Reportedly, these officers planned to end military repression and promote social and political reform.⁷

On October 15, 1979, a bloodless coup ousted former President Carlos Humberto Romero, replacing him with a revolutionary ruling junta composed of both

³ Brian J. Bosch, *The Salvadoran Officer Corps and the Final Offensive of 1981* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 1999), xi.

⁴ Literally, the massacre.

⁵ Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza; El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 131-4, 138, 144-5; Bosch, 7.

⁶ In a December 27, 1982, interview with reporter Raymond Bonner of the New York Times, Jose Napoleon Duarte was asked why he thought the rebels were fighting in El Salvador and replies: "Fifty years of lies, fifty years of injustice, [and] fifty years of frustration. This is a history of people starving to death, living in misery. For fifty years the same people had all the power, all the money, all the jobs, all the education, [and] all the opportunities." Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 24.

⁷ Dermot Keogh, "The Myth of the Liberal Coup: The United States and the 15 October 1979 Coup in El Salvador," *Journal of International Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 1984): 153-4.

military commanders and civilians. The junta released ambitious proposals including land, banking, and electoral reforms, and the Americans used this as an opportunity to reinstitute funding of the military. U.S. policy personnel viewed the overthrow of Romero as a radical break from the past when, in reality, the opposite was the case. Rather than establishing a basis for reform and diminishing the grip of the Salvadoran military on the political process, the appropriation of huge American subsidies, according to scholar Dermot Keogh, created a new, independent military class.⁸

This new class was no longer dependent on the oligarchy for capital because American dollars provided a seemingly endless substitute, and prolonging the war became an economic necessity. The greed, corruption, and ineptitude of the Salvadoran military only increased with American funding. A Salvadoran priest who worked for the Inter-American Bank during the 1980s estimated that at least half of all American aid to El Salvador ended up in private, offshore bank accounts.⁹

The civil war in El Salvador emerged late in the 1970s amid the smoldering ashes of Vietnam, which, combined with the embassy standoff in Tehran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, made for an apprehensive period in American foreign policy. Even so, why did American policy-makers care so much about El Salvador? The answer was communism, and the campesinos of El Salvador would pay for Nicaragua's ties to both Moscow and Havana.

Salvadoran state terror was among the most severe in the Western Hemisphere during this period. Roughly 1 percent of the population was murdered and untold thousands "disappeared." The figure does not suggest the full impact of the violence since the killings were concentrated predominantly among young men and campesinos, increasing the likelihood that nearly every poor Salvadoran family experienced a political killing or at least knew of someone who had.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 177-8.

⁹ Keogh interview with Fray Jose Alas, Cork, May 1984, Keogh, 178.

¹⁰ William Deane Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 3.

American policy toward El Salvador during the early 1980s consisted of large aid packages designed to bolster the ruling junta and the security apparatus that policed the country. From 1980 to 1982, the Carter and Reagan administrations poured into El Salvador more military aid than in the previous history of relations between the two countries.¹¹ Neither the Carter nor the Reagan administration wanted to commit U.S. troops to the region, but both feared the encroachment of leftist influences in El Salvador.

Few Americans realize that their government poured billions of dollars into the economy and military of El Salvador throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Even fewer remember the massacre at El Mozote and the American involvement in its execution and cover-up. The story of the late 1981 massacre in the village of El Mozote by the elite American-trained Atlacatl Battalion served as a frightening reminder of the duplicitous nature of U.S. policy.¹² The specter of communist Cuba and the ubiquitous threat of the Soviet Union made El Salvador, at least in the minds of those in the State Department, a proxy battleground for the fight against the forces of communism, and policies that focused on human rights receded. Murder became the only means of political expression in El Salvador.¹³

¹¹ In Beverly's informative account, he related how in April 1980 Carter authorized \$5.7 million in military aid, which ceased in December due to the assassination of American religious personnel. However, in fear of the rebels' encroachment, Carter resumed the aid in January 1981 with an additional \$10 million. This policy continued under Reagan, although to a larger degree. Shortly after taking office, Reagan authorized, without congressional approval, \$20 million in "lethal" aid and an additional \$5 million subject to subsequent Congressional approval. John Beverley, "El Salvador," *Social Text*, no. 5 (Spring 1982): 67-72.

¹² The Atlacatl Battalion was an elite counterinsurgency strike force molded and financed by American aid and training. American advisors formed and trained the Atlacatl Battalion in El Salvador in 1981. A number of Salvadoran Officers and NCOs trained at the School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia, and some of them served in the Atlacatl Battalion at some point during their careers, but the members who took part in El Mozote trained in Panama and in El Salvador. Memorandum, Antonio J. Ramos to Chairman of Joint Chiefs, *Congressional Inquiry Regarding U.S. training of the Atlacatl Battalion*, 25 June 1993, EL00611, El Salvador: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1977-1984 (hereafter EL within document number), Digital National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com> (hereafter DNSA), 1.

¹³ Richard L. Millett, "The Politics of Violence: Guatemala and El Salvador," *Current History* 80 (1981): 70.

The human rights group Americas Watch compiled a report on the massacre, referring to it as one of the most “egregious of the entire conflict.”¹⁴ It described the incident as the “cold-blooded murder of hundreds of civilians in northern Morazán by Salvadoran troops of the U.S. trained Atlacatl Battalion.”¹⁵ U.S. policy makers ignored human rights atrocities committed by Salvadoran troops, and this denial “reflected a structural flaw in [American] policy.” President Ronald Reagan determined that equipping and funding the Salvadoran armed forces and encouraging elections could defeat the communist subversives both militarily and politically. This meant that the preservation of the Salvadoran government became vital to American security, and admitting human rights abuses would compromise U.S. and international support for the Salvadoran government.¹⁶ Thus, the Reagan administration had an “incentive to downplay, distort, [and] deny the human rights record of the Salvadoran Army.”¹⁷

Americas Watch was not the only group that monitored the behavior of the Salvadoran troops, especially as it pertained to human rights. Amnesty International compiled a report on the condition of human rights in El Salvador for 1981, and its findings varied little from those of Americas Watch. The Salvadoran government “encourage[d] and allow[ed] private persons and groups to commit acts which constitute[d] abuses of human rights.”¹⁸ Methods of torture included “electric shock,

¹⁴ Americas Watch Committee, *The Massacre at El Mozote: The Need to Remember* (New York: Americas Watch, 1992), 7-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ In a memo written February 4, 1982, to Assistant Secretary Elliott Abrams, the State Human Rights Bureau called the recently issued ACLU-Americas Watch human rights report, “An extremely well prepared effective documentation of the human rights violations in El Salvador by government forces. Its moderate and clinical tone contributed to its effectiveness and credibility. The report’s careful preparation and general tendency to stick to either what is credible or what cannot be effectively disproved make it a tough document to attack . . . However well done, the report is still fruit from a poisoned tree.” Report, State Department, Dale Shaffer to Elliot Abrams, *The ACLU-Americas Watch Committee on Human Rights in El Salvador: A Preliminary Analysis*, 4 February 1982, ES02548, El Salvador: War, Peace, and Human Rights, 1980–1994 (hereafter ES within document number), DNSA, 1-18.

¹⁷ Americas Watch, 4.

¹⁸ Amnesty International, *Current Assessment of the Human Rights Situation in El Salvador*, January 1982, ES0248, DNSA, 2.

beatings, the use of sulfuric acid resulting in scorched flesh on portions of the body and the use of hallucinogenic drugs.”¹⁹

The forcefulness of the reports of both Amnesty International and Americas Watch make it apparent that the American foreign policy intelligentsia downplayed and, in some cases, lied about human rights atrocities in El Salvador. At a certain point, by giving aid to the Salvadoran authorities who used it to violate basic human rights, the U.S. State Department became complicit in their actions. Significant U.S. investment in the Salvadoran military did not have the intended effect. Instead of curbing excesses on the part of security forces, the military used American funding to perpetuate the existing civil war in El Salvador.

Rather than observing that the problem was of a political nature with historical roots, the U.S. government did all it could to keep a favorable rightist regime in power. The regime feigned good relations with the U.S.; they relied on the belief that existed in Washington that the Salvadoran government could not win without American support. Certainly, the leftist regime that appeared poised to replace it would not be as welcoming. Thus, El Salvador became the recipient of the largest U.S. military aid program ever granted to a Latin American country to that time.

In order to highlight the complicity of the American government, this thesis will discuss in depth the most important massacre perpetrated by the Salvadoran military. While the American government maintained publicly that respect for human rights was one of the main goals of its mission in El Salvador, six billion dollars of aid and American actions in the region belied another reality. This examination argues that it is clear that the massacre at El Mozote in late 1981 was the direct result of U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Although the Americans kept themselves insulated to provide for plausible deniability, the policies of the Carter and Reagan administrations institutionalized the murder of civilians as a necessary element of American foreign policy in El Salvador.

¹⁹ Ibid.,1; Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 158.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

The historiography of the civil war in El Salvador and American involvement in it is replete with writings that advocate a particular political stance or ideology. Human rights organizations and other humanitarian agencies provided glimpses of the conflict augmented by neatly proportioned tables of murder statistics and their purported transgressors. Since the intent was to draw attention to the violations, aid organizations tended to focus on the “victims” only in so far as they represented a broader theme of repression and state violence. These works made little mention of the personal histories of the victims and often substituted numbers for names.

Conversely, writers with right-leaning political ideals have produced volumes that blasted the media and the former aid organizations for fostering the notion of repression where one did not actually exist. In these works, the authors eulogize the American administration while criticizing the work of its opponents. They attribute the shortcomings of American policy in El Salvador to the incompetency of Salvadoran military and government officials, while ignoring the myopia of those within the American administration.

Although both of the aforementioned types of sources have limitations, the conclusions they make are not meaningless when combined with other material. These historiographical divisions highlight the polarity of the conflict and signal its political importance. Rather than summarizing each respective area of scholarship, this examination endeavors to highlight some of the major contributions from each, beginning with those from the left. Scholar Donald Porpora and his work on American policy in Central America exemplify this first group.

Porpora argues for a definition of genocide that acknowledges “the willful destruction of civilians on political grounds.” If the definition expanded to cover political killings, then in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, the United States “was indeed sponsoring genocide.”²⁰ In his estimation, the United States was intent on

²⁰ Douglas V. Porpora, *How Holocausts Happen: The United States in Central America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 132-3.

destroying the peoplehood of El Salvador using proxies like the Salvadoran military. With the massacre at El Mozote as a prime example, he “sees no reason to not use the word that seem[ed] to fit . . . and admit that we, the people of the United States, became a party to just what it seem[ed]: Genocide.”²¹

The best embodiment of the rightist interpretation of the American role in El Salvador was the work of four lieutenant colonels from the U.S. Army. Each served as a National Security Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University during the 1987-88 academic year, and together composed an analysis of U.S. military policy in small wars. They argue that once having decided to use force to gain its ends, the United States needed to abandon “business as usual” and commit itself to winning. According to them, “The importance of commitment goes beyond morality.”²² This mentality was certainly not lost on the Salvadorans, but the multi-faceted goals of American policy made it a tough stance for the administration to advocate publicly in the face of massacres like that of El Mozote.

In addition, academics like Lars Schoultz and William Deane Stanley probed motivations for American policy in the region. Schoultz argues that the Americans pursued a bifurcated policy in El Salvador. This policy included a Food for Peace program to feed the hungry and destitute, and a military assistance program to stop the advance of communism. This curious bi-polarity made for a confusing policy, which aimed to eliminate guerillas, while simultaneously feeding the poor.

According to Schoultz, “[The] United States regularly filled two trucks, one with Food for Peace shipments . . . and the other with U.S. armed and trained Salvadoran soldiers to attack the communist guerillas.”²³ It was impossible to tell rebel from campesino, and at the village level, the Salvadoran military decided who got which. US policy glossed over the difficulty of this decision by assuming that someone could

²¹ Ibid., 135.

²² Andrew J. Bacevich et al., *American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988), 50.

²³ Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 358-9.

separate the instability caused by rising expectations among the hungry poor from the instability caused by communist adventurism. Before the recognition of this flaw, eighty thousand Salvadorans would be dead.²⁴

While Schoultz focuses on American policy, Stanley studies the government in El Salvador. According to him, the Salvadoran military state was a protection racket. The military earned the concession to govern the country in exchange for its willingness to use violence against class enemies of the country's relatively small but powerful economic elite. Again, El Mozote provided a cogent example of the lengths to which the Salvadoran authorities would go to ensure the continuation of the status quo. Stanley argues that state violence was the currency of relations between state and non-state elites in El Salvador.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 359.

²⁵ Stanley, 6-7.

CHAPTER 3: CORRUPTION IN EL SALVADOR

In order to determine American culpability in regards to the massacre at El Mozote and the killing of non-combatants in El Salvador during the late 1970s and 1980s, we must examine the American economic and military policies towards El Salvador before the massacre of December 1981. In doing so, we will closely follow the progression of a foreign policy that accepted as necessary the slaughter of innocent citizens. It will be clear that El Mozote was not an isolated incident perpetrated by a small percentage of rogue military commanders; rather it was the culmination of a concerted program of domestic terror by a corrupt military fostered and encouraged by American foreign policy in an attempt to thwart the advance of communism.

Between 1957 and 1979, the US trained 448 Salvadoran police, and US assistance for grants, credits, and training totaled \$16.7 million between 1950 and 1979. This included \$7.4 million for the military assistance program and \$2.1 million for police training.²⁶ Demographically, by 1980, El Salvador had the highest proportion of landless families in all of Latin America, a proportion only matched in prerevolutionary Cuba. In 1980 El Salvador had a higher population density than India, with about 580 people per square mile and the latter with 550. Farming operated on approximately 1.5 million hectares of land in El Salvador, and fewer than two thousand families, representing one-fifth of 1 percent of the overall population, owned over 60 percent.²⁷

In addition to the extreme concentration of land in the hands of a wealthy few, the Salvadoran military operated in very different ways than its American counterpart. Although their tactical training certainly lagged behind that of the Americans, more importantly, the Salvadorans differed on a philosophical level. Prospective officers did

²⁶ Michael McClintock, *The American Connection* (London: Zed Books, 1985), 178; Lars Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 215; Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 232, 261; Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, *U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador : Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 97.Congress, 1.Session, March 5 and 11, 1981* (Washington: U.S. GPO, 1981), 232.

not enroll in the academy to root out communist subversives; instead, they joined to enrich themselves and their families.²⁸

Fundamental differences in military philosophy included a disengaged officers' corps, which fostered what American trainers called a "garrison mentality." Rather than actively pursuing the rebels, Salvadoran commanders preferred to engage with massive force only during the day. American advisors continually commented on the need to overcome this "nine-to-five, five-day-a-week" garrison-bound ideology. The Americans encouraged unconventional tactics like night raids and psychological warfare but to no avail.²⁹

The Salvadoran army forced into service peasant conscripts who possessed little will to fight, and the bulk of the government forces were as destitute as the rebels they were fighting.³⁰ The highly motivated rebel resistance exposed the Salvadoran commanders' excessive reliance on firepower, and their unwillingness to take the fight to the rebels.³¹ As in Vietnam, the Salvadorans welcomed American assistance, but spurned American military advice. The advice, which advocated radical reforms, threatened to undermine the position of those in power roles in the Salvadoran military.³²

In the Salvadoran military system, graduates of the military academy formed associations called *tandas*. The *tanda* would receive group-based promotions, meaning it was predetermined that every commissioned Salvadoran officer would become colonel regardless of his own incompetence, lack of bravery, or corruptness. This system rewarded indolence and failed to promote or reward commendable

²⁸ Bosch, 14.

²⁹ Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, *El Salvador at War: An Oral History* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1988), 111-6; Andrew J. Bacevich et al., 5-6.

³⁰ Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, 28-9.

³¹ Benjamin C. Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1991), vi.

³² Schwarz, viii; Bosch, 14-5.

performance, and after each member of the *tanda* completed their thirty years of service, they would pass into honorable retirement.³³

U.S. military advisors undertook the reorganization of the Salvadoran military command structure. This reorganization implied challenging the entrenched *tanda* system, which not only meant curtailing the excesses of the *tanda* currently holding power, but also mollifying the ambitions of upcoming *tandas*. The hesitancy of the oligarchy to permit the army ownership of the means of production limited them to other disreputable activities. Thus, when a *tanda* reached the zenith of military power it was a most opportune time for its officers to increase their personal wealth and status.³⁴ Overhauling a system that provided, in the words of one long-time observer, “no incentive to excel – none whatsoever,” was a major roadblock to American success in El Salvador.³⁵

Salvadoran officers claimed a privileged status incongruent with the status of commissioned officers in the American military. Rather than inculcating in the soldiers a commitment to strategic mastery or a sense of responsibility for the performance of their units, on the contrary, the officer’s corps undervalued leadership, engendering a dangerously cavalier attitude towards combat operations, and did little to improve the non-commissioned soldier’s lot.³⁶ American trainers focused on the younger generations of Salvadoran officers, trying to break the hold of the *tanda* system. As opposed to creating a core of competent models for the military at large, it served to exacerbate tensions between the “gringo” officers and the traditionalists. This policy forced the younger officers to choose between being ostracized by the older corps or giving in to the demands of adherence to Salvadoran military traditions.³⁷

³³Bosch, 4; Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 135.

³⁴Mario Lungo and Arthur Schmidt, *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 71; Schwarz, 18-9.

³⁵Bacevich, 25.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 26, Schwarz, 19..

³⁷Bosch, 5; Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk, 27.

Colonel John D. Waghelstein, commander of the U.S. Military Group in El Salvador from 1982 to 1983 offered his analysis on the military and government. “The Salvadoran system was not designed to solve the problems of the campesino dating back fifty years,” he said, “or even longer if you go back before the Matanza.” Those in power designed the government to maintain order and if the “campesino didn’t like it, [you] had a couple of options: you could emigrate or you could become part of the fertilizer program.” No mechanism existed for the expression of grievances; “you were at the mercy of the landowner and the military in cahoots.”³⁸

Salvadoran military commanders thwarted American goals because of their cupidity, and fought jealously for their financial prerogatives. Every year Salvadoran regional commanders personally received the pay allotments for the soldiers under their command. Because the armed forces lacked proper oversight and did not keep accurate records, most commanders would fill a sizable portion of these spots with fictitious soldiers. The commanders collected the salaries of these “ghost soldiers,” and most brigades had at least one fifty-man “Ghost Company.” Since the salary for a re-enlistee was nearly double that of a conscript, a “ghost” re-enlistee was quite profitable to an individual commander. Thus, many commanders discouraged re-enlistees because it infringed upon their “ghost” salary profits. Even though American advisors thought it was critical to create a corps of non-commissioned officers, the individual greed of the entrenched Salvadoran commanders made it nearly impossible.³⁹

Salvadoran military avarice was institutional as well as personal. Every soldier paid a portion of his salary, matched by the government, to a special armed forces social security fund. The *Instituto de Prevision Social de la Fuerza Armada*, or IPSFA, was the military’s social welfare program, and it allowed the Salvadoran military to become the most powerful economic and social institution in the country. As the largest source of liquid capital in El Salvador at the time, the armed forces used this fund as their own

³⁸ Manwaring and Prisk, 8; Bosch, 14-5.

³⁹ Schwarz, 19; Joel Millman, "SALVADOR: 'We Have Been Acquiescing for Years in Corruption,' Says a U.S. Officer, 'all Because of the Realpolitik of Winning the War.'" *New York Times*, December 10, 1989.

commercial bank and invested heavily in myriad business ventures. Benefits were not available to conscripts although every soldier paid into the fund. Only injured conscripts and the relatives of dead soldiers received any payments. The only elements of the Salvadoran armed forces that were eligible for benefits were officers and a small number of re-enlistees. Officers enjoyed the overwhelming majority of the benefits and subsidies of the program, and it was necessary to ensure that the non-drawing members of the fund remained as large as possible. Certainly, a large corps of non-commissioned officers would shrink the available funds, which was yet another example of how the Salvadoran officers, because of greed, denied themselves an essential tool in the fight against the insurgency.⁴⁰

The greed and corruption of the officers of the Salvadoran armed forces included selling goods at inflated prices to their subordinates, embezzling cash from supply funds, and even leasing soldiers under their command as guards and laborers to landowners and businessmen for security. Many times, the officers sacrificed what was good for the war effort for what was better for their bottom lines.⁴¹ Leaders of the resistance in El Salvador admitted in 1984 that they procured 10 to 15 percent of their weapons and ammunition on the black market from high-ranking Salvadoran commanders. In addition to high-ranking corruption, individual rebels reportedly bought bullets for the equivalent of one dollar each from government soldiers. Thus, a large quantity of material meant for the Salvadoran forces ended up in the hands of the guerillas mainly due to corruption.⁴²

Since 1984, the United States maintained a training center in La Union to instruct Salvadoran recruits. Rather than encourage their troops to attend, the commanders did the opposite. Training at this American center entailed the release of the troops from the commanding officer's care, which also meant that the Salvadoran officers relinquished the control of the funds intended to provide for the recruits.

⁴⁰ Schwarz, 19-20; Millman.

⁴¹ Adam Hochschild, "Inside the Slaughterhouse," *Mother Jones* 8 (1983): 23; Bosch, 14.

⁴² Hochschild, 23; Raymond Bonner, "Year with Salvador Rebels Recounted," *New York Times*, March 16, 1983.

Preferring not to lose this flow of income, many of the Salvadoran commanders elected to train their soldiers themselves. Again, the officers concern presided with their pecuniary interests rather than the training of their men.⁴³ The systemic corruption of the military also thwarted human rights investigations because many of the officers had intimate knowledge of the seedy actions of other commanders and used this information to blackmail the occasional officer who cooperated with authorities during investigations of alleged human rights excesses.⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, corruption was an inherent aspect of the Salvadoran political system as well during the years of military rule, and the U.S. acknowledged that it continued throughout the government of Napoleon Duarte. Duarte was the founder of the Christian Democratic Party in El Salvador, and the American-backed candidate for president in 1984.⁴⁵ Duarte provided a democratic façade for the military, but American foreign policy officials argued that the level of corruption in the Salvadoran military and political systems was no different from those prevalent in other third world countries. The perception was that Duarte, himself, was not corrupt, but many accused him of tolerating corruption among his closest officials. According to multiple press reports, corruption was widespread in El Salvador, and some concluded that corruption increased during the presidency of Duarte.⁴⁶

Journalist James LeMoyné accused a close associate of President Duarte's son, Guillermo Antonio Guevara Lacayo, who was at the time one of Duarte's chief aides, of building a multi-million dollar mansion while making an annual salary of \$24,000. According to LeMoyné, Lacayo was "not apologetic; after all, many other government

⁴³ Library of Congress. Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, *El Salvador, 1979-1989: A Briefing Book on U.S. Aid and the Situation in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 1989), 72; Schwarz, 20-1; Millman; Bosch, 15.

⁴⁴ Bosch, 4; Schwarz, 21; Millman.

⁴⁵ Duarte left El Salvador in 1972, seeking exile from political persecution. He reentered the country in October of 1979, and became a civilian member third of the four military juntas that emerged from the coup of 1979. Whitfield, 139; Cable, Embassy, San Salvador, *Sitrep Number 11 as of 1130 Hours*, 23 October 1979, ES00261, DNSA, 2.

⁴⁶ Clifford Krauss and Robert S. Greenberger, "Corruption Threatens Political Gains Made by U.S. in El Salvador," *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 1987; Douglas Farah, "Salvadoran Ruling Party Beset from Left, Rights, as Vote Nears," *Washington Post*. March 17, 1988; James LeMoyné, "The Guns Of Salvador." *New York Times Magazine* February 5, 1989, 54.

officials and army officers have new farms, new Mercedes Benzes, new restaurants.” In February 1989, the *New York Times* reported that the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador had started nearly one hundred different audits to trace the uses of American aid.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Library of Congress. Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, El Salvador, 1979-1989: A Briefing Book on U.S. Aid and the Situation in El Salvador (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 1989), 69.; Lemoyne, 54-5.*

CHAPTER 4: AMERICAN AID TO EL SALVADOR

Since the American policy-makers never explicitly, either in a document or in a speech, advocated the wholesale slaughter of innocent civilians in El Salvador, we must explore other avenues to illuminate American collusion. One particularly fruitful approach is through an examination of American military and economic aid to the government of El Salvador. Beginning in 1979, American support for the Salvadoran government grew exponentially, and not coincidentally, the first four years of the war were, in fact, the bloodiest for civilians. Because of traditionalist, reformist, and revolutionary groups pressing their mutually exclusive agendas, El Salvador's economy was under great strain just before and during the war.⁴⁸

Between 1979 and 1983, the Salvadoran real GDP shrank by 25 percent after experiencing 5 percent annual growth during the 1970s. This was attendant with a drop in employment and exports, a 75 percent drop in private investment and increased capital flight.⁴⁹ Based in part on the American response to the "reformist" coup of October 1979, U.S. aid to El Salvador, economic and military, increased markedly, and with the fiscal year 1981 aid program, the Carter administration set the pattern for subsequent disbursements of aid. That is, rapidly increasing amounts of military and economic aid accompanied with relatively stable amounts of developmental aid. Reagan continued this pattern through the early years of his administration, and from fiscal years 1981 through 1984 U.S. aid to El Salvador saw an eight-fold increase.⁵⁰

The Military Assistance Program (MAP), the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) credit program, and the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program were the three main components of American military aid in Central America during the late 1970s and early 1980s. MAP supplied, on a grant basis, military equipment including weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and aircraft, while the FMS credit program provided for similar transfers on a commercial-rate, and, in some cases, concessional, loan basis.

⁴⁸ Jonathan E. Sanford, *Major Trends in U.S. Foreign Assistance to Central America: 1978-1986* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 1986), 21-3

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-5.

⁵⁰ *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 40; Sanford, 23-5.

FMS became the most popular conduit for military aid to Central America because it allowed the U.S. and the recipient country to avoid exposure to congressional oversight inherent with the MAP program. IMET offered training to military personnel from developing countries, which occurred at numerous American bases throughout the region and in recipient countries.⁵¹

From 1978 to 1980, American military aid focused on equipment, including vehicles and communication technology. From 1981 to 1984, these shipments continued with the addition of other military “consumables” such as small arms, ammunition, training, and field equipment. At the same time, IMET began emphasizing counterinsurgency skills rather than professionalization and general military skills. In fiscal year 1979, the U.S. sent only \$7,000 through MAP to El Salvador, and no IMET funds or FMS credits.⁵²

Fiscal year 1980 saw a rapid growth in the amount and distribution of military aid. This included \$338,000 in IMET grants, \$11,000 in MAP funds, and \$7.8 million in FMS credits. In addition, \$80.6 million in economic and developmental aid accompanied the \$8.1 million dollars of military aid in 1980, and the military aid represented 9 percent of the overall aid package to El Salvador. This was double the percentage of military aid provided in the fiscal year of 1979, and one must keep in mind that overall aid to El Salvador in 1980 increased nearly six-fold from 1979.⁵³

Fiscal years 1981 and 1982 continued the trend of increased assistance. In 1981, military support included \$612,000 in IMET funds, a staggering \$31.1 million in MAP assistance, and \$12.4 million in FMS credits. The total military aid package consisted of \$44.1 million through the three component programs, and thus represented 22 percent of the overall aid for that year. In 1982, the military aid package totaled over \$95 million, which comprised 27 percent of the entire aid package.

⁵¹ *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 31-2, Sanford, 49-51.

⁵² *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 26, 41; Sanford, 48-50.

⁵³ *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 26; Sanford, 49-50.

Although the percentage of military aid within the entire appropriation only increased marginally from 1981 to 1982, the actual amount of military aid more than doubled.⁵⁴

From 1980 to 1990, the United States endowed El Salvador with \$996 million in Foreign Military Financing funds and \$24 million for the International Military Education and Training Program. In addition, since 1980 the United States provided over \$3 billion in economic aid. According to the Congress Research Service, El Salvador received in excess of four billion dollars. Over one billion of that was explicit military aid, but when unsubsidized credits and estimated CIA investment are included, the total approached six billion.⁵⁵

In fiscal year 1990, El Salvador ranked first among Latin American recipients of American military aid, and eighth in the world.⁵⁶ Over the decade from 1980 through 1990, U.S. military assistance transformed the Salvadoran military into a larger, more competent, armed force. This period saw the Salvadoran ranks swell from 11,000 to 45,000 men. In addition to the expansion of the military, the billions of dollars in aid modernized and sustained weapons and equipment, and, according to U.S. military sources, American training and tactics helped improve the quality of the Salvadoran soldier.⁵⁷

The size of the U.S. aid program increased sharply during the 1980s. In fiscal year 1980, American aid amounted to \$13.37 per capita in El Salvador; by fiscal year 1985 American aid rose to a peak of \$114.65 per capita, certainly a significant boost since the Salvadoran GNP during this same period was approximately \$800 per capita.⁵⁸ In fiscal 1980, Salvadoran aid accounted for 1 percent of all American foreign aid, and increased to 3.3 by 1982.⁵⁹ In terms of ranking among other American aid recipients, El

⁵⁴ *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 26; Sanford, 50.

⁵⁵ Charles Lane, "The War That Will Not End," *New Republic*, October 16, 1989, 22; *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 25-68; Schwarz, 2.

⁵⁶ Edward M. Kennedy and General Accounting Office, *El Salvador: Military Assistance Has Helped Counter but Not Overcome the Insurgency: Report to the Honorable Edward M. Kennedy, U.S. Senate* (Washington, D.C.: GAO, 1991), 9; *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁸ *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 27-8; *Report to the Honorable Edward M. Kennedy*, 26-7.

⁵⁹ *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 28; *Report to the Honorable Edward M. Kennedy*, 27.

Salvador, a country roughly the size of Massachusetts and with a population then of around five million, was the sixteenth largest in 1980 and fifth largest in 1982.⁶⁰ Undeniably, the U.S. made a tremendous investment in the Salvadoran military and economy.

⁶⁰ *El Salvador, 1979-1989*, 27-8, 29.

CHAPTER 5: ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE AND AMERICAN SILENCE

Having described the Salvadoran state security apparatus including the military and American encouragement through training and aid, the focus shifts to the actual circumstances and events in El Salvador and the United States that eventually culminated in the massacre at El Mozote. Trends will emerge from the following chronology that will demonstrate American military indifference towards the loss of civilian life. Ignoring the historical indications of an indigenous uprising against an entrenched authoritarian state apparatus secured by violence and paternalism, the United States resolved during the Carter and Reagan administrations to subvert communism in Central America at any cost.

The main objective of American policy in El Salvador during the last of the Carter years was “to bolster the [government of El Salvador] by ourselves and with multilateral support.” The provision of military aid and training to El Salvador in late 1980 sent the message that the Carter administration was willing to back the Junta at all costs.⁶¹ General David Jones, ranking member of the Joint Chiefs, at a February 1980 meeting of the Special Coordination Committee, echoed American fears in the region. “[I am] very concerned that this may be too little and too late.” He said, “Next in line after El Salvador are Honduras and Guatemala—perhaps Panama.”⁶² Clearly, the implication from General Jones was that action was necessary at once.

As one of his last major foreign policy decisions on January 14, 1980, President Carter announced \$5 million in non-lethal and lethal military aid to El Salvador. The country had received no lethal aid from the United States since 1977 due to reports of human rights abuses. In reversal of previous policy, the Carter administration cited evidence of Nicaraguan support for the Salvadoran rebels as a reason for renewing aid.⁶³

⁶¹ National Security Council, Special Coordination Committee, 15 February 1980, EL01349, DNSA, 2

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶³ The Washington Post reported an inter-agency dispute over resuming non-lethal military aid to El Salvador. William Bowdler led a Pentagon-NSC-DOS/ARA group favoring resumed aid, while Secretary of State Edmund Muskie and the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador opposed it. The \$5 million proposal covered military transport, communications equipment and, under a no-cost lease, six helicopters. Karen

Two weeks later, during a meeting of the National Security Council on Central America, the CIA presented a report describing the "extraordinarily rapid growth of guerrilla groups and their popular front organizations" in El Salvador and the role played by Fidel Castro in helping the rebels to consolidate their strength.⁶⁴ While efforts to increase military aid to El Salvador gained credence with these reports, other dissenting voices decried the appropriation of more funding to the regime. In a letter written on February 19, Archbishop Oscar Romero urged President Carter to withdraw the approximately \$50 million aid package offered to El Salvador, stating that instead of promoting peace in El Salvador the proposal "undoubtedly [would] sharpen the repression." Romero was the best known advocate of the poor in the country, and his homilies deplored government repression in all forms. In his mind, the only way the U.S. could help El Salvador was "to condition its aid to [the] purification of the security forces." Otherwise, American military assistance would "only be strengthening those who oppress the people."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, later the same day the State Department announced that it would proceed with its aid plans.⁶⁶

During a March 14 meeting between Salvadoran Defense Minister Jose Guillermo Garcia and Ambassador Robert White, Garcia admitted that 1 percent of the Salvadoran military "might conceivably be involved" in human rights abuses, but he was convinced "that the military was ninety-nine percent pure." White pointed out that 1 percent of the Salvadoran army at that time equated to 160 men. This was official confirmation, albeit drastically understated, that the armed forces participated in violations of human rights. White informed Defense Minister Garcia that he could not in

DeYoung, "State's Latin American Department Urges Resumption of Arms Aid to Salvador," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1981; "U.S. Giving Salvador Combat Equipment." *New York Times*, Jan 19, 1981; Keogh, 154.

⁶⁴ Policy Paper, White House, 28 January 1980, US Policy to El Salvador and Central America, EL01340, DNSA, 2.

⁶⁵ Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean, *Condoning the Killing: Ten Years of Massacres in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: EPICA, 1990), 6; Report by Cynthia Arnson, Institute for Policy Studies, Background Information on the Security Forces in El Salvador and Military Assistance, 1 March 1980, ES00477, DNSA, 9.

⁶⁶ Cable, Embassy San Salvador, *Text of Archbishop's Letter to President Carter*, 19 February 1980, ES00444, DNSA; *New York Times*, "U.S. Aid Plan Opposed," February 19, 1980; Christopher Dickey, "U.S. Warned On Assisting El Salvador," *Washington Post*, February 19, 1980.

“good conscience” recommend that Carter provide military training teams. News of the brutal assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero arrived only ten days later.⁶⁷

On September 29, the U.S. Embassy began weekly statistical reports detailing human rights abuses in El Salvador called "Violence Week in Review."⁶⁸ The embassy acknowledged the "serious limitations" on the accuracy of this and "subsequent reports."⁶⁹ Two months later, on November 4, the United States elected Republican candidate Ronald Reagan, to president; in El Salvador, residents of the capital's wealthiest and most conservative neighborhoods celebrated the victory.⁷⁰

Jeane Kirkpatrick and Roger Fontaine of the American Enterprise Institute and James Theberge and Constantine Menges of the Hudson Institute, all members of the Reagan transition team, informed members of the Salvadoran Productive Alliance (AP) on November 28 that the Reagan administration planned to increase military aid to El Salvador.⁷¹ This represented a major shift from the policies of the Carter administration, which had conditioned assistance on the maintenance of respect for basic human rights. Admittedly, one of the last actions of the Carter administration was the appropriation of a military aid package to the government of El Salvador, but the Reagan administration used the opportunity to argue that the previous administration was soft on communism. Tragically, on December 2, news arrived of the abduction, rape, and

⁶⁷ More than 18 months after Archbishop Romero's assassination on December 21, 1981, a secret cable to Washington, released only in a heavily redacted version, described a source telling the embassy of "a meeting chaired by Major Roberto D'Aubuisson during which the murder of Archbishop Romero was planned. . . [redacted] . . . During the meeting some of the participants drew lots for the privilege of killing the Archbishop. . . [redacted] . . . The winner of the drawing (Romero's assassin) [redacted] . . . identified [redacted] as Walter Antonio Alvarez." According to press reports, gunmen took Alvarez away from a September 27 football game, shot him several times, and left his body on a road. Cable, Embassy, San Salvador, *Assassination of Archbishop Romero*, 21 December 1981, ES02308, DNSA, 1-2; Cable, Embassy San Salvador, Discussion with Colonel Garcia, 15 March 1980, ES00528, DNSA, 1-6.

⁶⁸ Referred to as "Grim Grams" by those in the State Department.

⁶⁹ Cable, Embassy San Salvador, Violence Week in Review, 29 September 1980, ES00790, DNSA, 1-5.

⁷⁰ *Boston Globe*, "Military Regimes in Latin America Have Expressed," November 7, 1980; *New York Times*, "Reaction in Central America," November 6, 1980; Whitfield, 142.

⁷¹ Juan Onis, "Reagan Aides Promise Salvadorans More Military Aid to Help to Fight Rebels," *New York Times*, November 29, 1980; *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), "Advisers to Reagan Pledge Arms," December 1, 1980.

murder of four U.S. churchwomen in El Salvador, and rumors of government involvement further complicated an already-tense situation.⁷²

One day later, Reagan transition team members Pedro San Juan and John Carbaugh published a report recommending major changes in U.S. foreign policy. The plan included making the State Department Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs responsible for coordinating policy toward the region. Calling for Ambassador White's removal, they questioned his support for Salvadoran agrarian and banking reforms, and criticized the human rights bureau of the State Department for allowing its agenda to overshadow other vital U.S. concerns.⁷³ Two days later, on December 5, Carter suspended aid to El Salvador in response to the murder of the four American churchwomen.⁷⁴

On December 11, the "Bowdler Mission" briefed President Carter and the members of the Special Coordinating Committee, concluding, "there is a high probability that an attempt was made to conceal the deaths." Salvadoran authorities knew "that four women were brutally murdered" and believed that they were Americans, yet they provided no information to the American Embassy. The State Department announced on December 12 that resumption of aid to El Salvador required progress in the investigation of the murders, government efforts to reduce political violence, initiation of a dialogue between the government and democratic opposition leaders, and a pledge by the junta to continue agrarian and banking reforms.⁷⁵

Twelve days after suspending American aid, citing the Salvadoran government's "commitment to a thorough, professional and expeditious investigation" of the churchwomen's murders, the State Department announced the resumption of \$20 million in ESF aid to stabilize the war-torn Salvadoran economy and "avoid food

⁷² United Nations, 62-6.

⁷³ Juan Onis, "Reagan's State Dept. Latin Team Asks Curbs on 'Social Reformers'" *New York Times*, December 4, 1980.

⁷⁴ Schwarz, 45.

⁷⁵ Memo, Special Coordination Committee, SCC Meeting on El Salvador, 11 December 1980, EL01360, DNSA, 3; Report, Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, *A Report on the Investigation into the Killing of Four American Churchwomen in El Salvador*, 1 September 1981, ES02005, DNSA, 5, 7.

shortages.”⁷⁶ The following day, Washington instructed Ambassador White to meet with Duarte as soon as possible to communicate the restoration of the "full range" of economic aid and that the U.S. would continue to “deliver [military] equipment in the pipeline” that had not been subject to hold.⁷⁷

On December 31, the State Department agreed with the National Security Council and the Pentagon on the need to resume military aid to El Salvador. Excluded from the decision-making meeting, Pat Derian, head of the State Department’s Human Rights Bureau, wrote Secretary of State Edmund Muskie that there was "no military exigency which requires us to resume military assistance now . . . [instead there are] compelling reasons to maintain the suspension." She continued that the resumption of economic aid "served to exonerate the military of responsibility for the nuns' death" and resumed military aid "render[ed] Duarte irrelevant."⁷⁸

Though official policy dictated that America publicly back the junta, internal reports surfaced implicating the Salvadoran army as the principal violators and instigators of many of the human rights abuses. Secretary of State Muskie acknowledged that violence in El Salvador was widespread, but “there is a general agreement . . . that elements of the security forces bear significant responsibility.”⁷⁹ A CIA briefing paper also admitted that the *Washington Post* article on El Mozote “containe[d] some elements of truth” and that government forces had killed numerous civilians there. The Salvadoran troops in Morazán numbered close to four thousand and “numerous civilians” would have been victims of “both accidental” and “pre-meditated killings on the part of the armed forces.”⁸⁰

In a speech before the American Chamber of Commerce in San Salvador, Ambassador Deane Hinton broke with the U.S. policy of quiet diplomacy, decrying the

⁷⁶ Cable, Edmund Muskie to Embassy san Salvador, Resumption of U.S. Economic Assistance to El Salvador, 18 December 1980, ES01019, DNSA, 2-4.

⁷⁷ Cable, Edmund Muskie to Embassy San Salvador, Instructions for Ambassador, 18 December 1980, ES1018, DNSA.

⁷⁸ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, 222.

⁷⁹ Letter, Sec. of State Edmund Muskie to All Diplomatic Posts, 20 December 1980, ES1032, DNSA, 3.

⁸⁰ CIA Briefing Paper, *El Salvador: Mozote Massacre*, 27 January 1982, EL00070, DNSA, 2.

failure of El Salvador's criminal justice system to deal with human rights abuses. "If you are not convinced that I am talking about a fundamental and critical problem," he told the audience, "consider these facts. Since 1979 perhaps as many as 30,000 Salvadorans have been murdered, not killed in battle, murdered."⁸¹

An August 1981 paper from the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs is one of the more striking pieces of evidence to bolster the claim that Salvadoran security forces were the main violators of human rights. The paper described "notorious cases" of violence by government forces against "non-guerilla elements." It explored four different episodes of murderous excess by the Salvadoran forces, in particular, the abduction of six leaders of the Revolutionary Democratic Front before a planned press conference at San Jose High School in San Salvador. The perpetrators kidnapped and murdered all six, dumping their bodies at a lake near the international airport. According to the bureau, the bullet-ridden corpses showed signs of "torture, dismemberment and strangulation."⁸²

As a logical extension of his administration's worldview, upon taking office, Reagan initiated a massive aid campaign to assist the government of El Salvador. His administration viewed the situation in Central America as a political struggle between the free democratic West and the Soviet East. One of Reagan's main foreign policy advisors was Jeane Kirkpatrick whose elucidation of the conflict appealed to the president so much that he appointed her the American ambassador to the United Nations. Kirkpatrick believed that deteriorating American influence in the region had caused major vulnerabilities and threatened American hegemony and stability. She openly worried about American confrontation with a ring of Soviet bases around its southern and eastern borders.⁸³

⁸¹ Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the Reagan Administration, and Central America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 104; Whitfield, 156, 444.

⁸² State Department, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, *Paper on Government Violence Against Non-Guerilla Elements*, 1 August 1981, ES01912, DNSA, 1-2.

⁸³ Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 130-1.

From an ideological standpoint, Reagan was not willing to “lose” El Salvador in the way Carter had “lost” Nicaragua, and Reagan vowed to “draw the line” against communism in El Salvador. There was a palpable fear among those in the State Department that failure to act decisively would signal to the Soviets a lack of American determination. Viewed through this political prism, El Salvador became a surrogate battleground for the test of American resolve in the region.⁸⁴

Rather than risk the loss of El Salvador to leftist guerillas, Reagan resolved to sustain the Salvadoran government with massive amounts of aid. The Reagan administration adhered to a Cold War view of the Salvadoran conflict, seeing it not as an indigenous conflict born of inhuman living conditions and appalling human rights abuses but rather as a “textbook case of indirect armed aggression by Communist powers through Cuba,” as a State Department white paper put it.⁸⁵ Reagan’s first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, succinctly described the American view: “First and foremost, let me emphasize . . . that our problem with El Salvador is external intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation in this hemisphere – nothing more, nothing less.”⁸⁶ Assistant Secretary Thomas Enders urged the continuation of funding to the regime lest “in four or five years we’ll be fighting along the banks of the Panama Canal and the Mexican border.”⁸⁷ The Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, Richard Fairbanks, confirmed, “The Duarte government is being challenged by terrorist insurgency supported from the outside.”⁸⁸ It was clear to everyone in the American administration that Cuba and other communist enclaves had financed and encouraged

⁸⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁸⁵ Americas Watch, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 10.

⁸⁶ Marvin E. Gettleman, *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War* (New York: Grove Press, 1981), 3.

⁸⁷ *Miami Herald*, “American Legion Hear Hard Line on El Salvador from U.S. Official,” February 22, 1983.

⁸⁸ Letter, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations Richard Fairbanks to Senator Alfonse D’Amato, 13 March 1981, ES01461, DNSA.

the Salvadoran rebels in an attempt "to overthrow the government and establish a Marxist-Leninist state."⁸⁹

After the inauguration on January 20, 1981, the Reagan administration removed Ambassador Robert White from his post in San Salvador after less than one year of service. The firing of White was representative of the growing rift between White and the advisors in Reagan's new State Department.⁹⁰ On March 11, in testimony before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, White stated that the Reagan administration eliminated him because he challenged its preconceived ideas for dealing with the Salvadoran situation through increased military aid. Referring to his public statements on the U.S. churchwomen case, he stated, "If the price of keeping a job is to participate in the continuing cover-up of those responsible for the barbaric act, that price is too high for me to pay."⁹¹

As justification for increased aid expenditures, American policy-makers pressed for proof of international communist collaboration in El Salvador. On January 14, 1981, U.S. newspapers reported the landing of one hundred rebels of unknown origin at El Cuco, a beach in eastern El Salvador, in thirty-foot boats. The alleged landing caused a stir in Washington and served to bolster claims that Nicaragua, which denied launching the boats from its territory, was arming Salvadoran rebels.⁹² Reagan issued a formal presidential finding on March 9, authorizing CIA "covert activities" against Nicaragua, for which over \$19 million was allocated. CIA Director William Casey presented the finding to Congressional intelligence committees, offering a limited outline of the plan as an effort to interdict arms supplies from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran rebels.⁹³

⁸⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁰ *New York Times*, "Haig Said to Remove Ambassador to Salvador in Signal of New Policy," February 22, 1981; *Boston Globe*, "President Ronald Reagan's Decision to Dismiss," February 3, 1981.

⁹¹ United States. House of Representatives, *U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session, March 5 and 11, 1981*. (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1981), 137.

⁹² Karen DeYoung, "Carter Decides to Resume Military Aid to El Salvador," *Washington Post*, January 14, 1981.

⁹³ Patrick E. Tyler, "Senate Panel Compromises on Nicaragua," *Washington Post*, March 8, 1983; Don Oberdorfer and Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S.-Backed Nicaraguan Rebel Army Swells to 7,000 Men," *Washington Post*, May 8, 1983.

In an attempt to associate the Salvadoran insurgency with international leftist forces, the Reagan administration issued a controversial white paper titled "Communist Interference in El Salvador." The report presented "definitive evidence of the clandestine military support given by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and their communist allies to Marxist-Leninist guerrillas now fighting to overthrow the established government of El Salvador."⁹⁴ Reporters quickly disputed the administration's interpretation of the captured FMLN documents that provided the basis for the white paper. The State Department admitted to "misstated detail," but stood by its conclusions. Nevertheless, the report proved to be a public relations success.⁹⁵

Another interagency paper from January 1981 described the desperate need for aid by pointing out that in the decade from 1970 to 1979 the Salvadoran government spent little more than 1 percent of its GNP on its armed forces. Moreover, it had only received \$8.4 million in total U.S. military aid for the decade, mostly for training. According to the report, "[The Salvadoran Government] was not prepared for a major communist insurgency, equipped, financed and directed from outside the country."⁹⁶

The American State Department also backed the Salvadoran government under the pretext of the proposed reforms, and economic, agrarian and political reforms supplied momentum and justification for American action. A February 1981 report by the State Department confirmed the American commitment to these reforms, stating in the fiscal years of 1980 and 1981, the American government "provided over

⁹⁴ Report, State Department, "Communist Interference in El Salvador," 23 February 1981, ES01388, DNSA, 1.

⁹⁵ William M. LeoGrande, "A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador," *International Security* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1981): 27; Cable, State Department, *Text of Special Report on Communist Military Intervention in El Salvador*, 22 February 1981, ES01382, DNSA; Report, State Department, *Communist Interference in El Salvador*, 23 February 1981, ES01388, DNSA; *Boston Globe*, "Salvador: Soviet Aid Cited; US Releases Captured Papers on Communist Interference," February 23, 1981; Juan De Onis, "U.S. Says Salvador Is Textbook Case of Communist Plot." *New York Times*, February 20, 1981; *The Globe and Mail*, "El Salvador Arms Issue Soviets Deny U.S. Allegations," February 26, 1981; Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, 255-61.

⁹⁶ National Security Council, Inter-Agency Group for Inter-American Affairs, Paper on U.S. Policy in El Salvador, 26 January 1981, ES01264, DNSA, 11.

\$123 million in economic assistance, primarily to help the Government of El Salvador implement [the proposed] reform programs.”⁹⁷

While Washington touted the land reform proposals as signs of improvement, some of the Salvadorans charged with implementing the reforms did not share the same optimism. The number two official for the Salvadoran agency responsible for the administration of the land reforms, Leonel Gomez, offered testimony in January 1981 to a congressional subcommittee that offered a different view of the viability of the reforms. He had fled El Salvador on January 14, ten days after the assassination of Rodolfo Viera, the head of land reform, and after a death squad had come for him. In his testimony, he commented on the status of the military in El Salvador and on certain “myths” of the American State Department. When Gomez and Viera took office, “[they] found that there was no bookkeeping to speak of. We quickly discovered that ISTA (the Institute of Agrarian Transformation) [had] a building that did not exist.”⁹⁸

According to Gomez, the main reason men joined the army in El Salvador was to get rich. Young men entered the officers’ corps to acquire the power and the spoils of military service. Unlike the “myth” prevalent in the American State Department that the Salvadoran military was held together by an ideology of anticommunism, Gomez contended that “[the military was] held together by a vast network of corruption.”⁹⁹

Gomez rhetorically asked:

Is this the kind of government you want to support? I ask you to think about the corruption, the bloodshed, [and] the killings that have been perpetuated by the Salvadoran army time after time. This is the same army that once tried to sell 10,000 machine guns to the American mafia. What more do you need to know? How long will you have to wait until the American people rise up and tell you what everyone already knows?¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Cable, State Department, *U.S. Policy Statement on El Salvador*, 18 February 1981, ES01365, DNSA, 1.

⁹⁸ United States, House of Representatives, *Presidential Certification on El Salvador: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Ninety-seventh Congress, Second Session*. (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1982), 190-1.

⁹⁹ Responding to perceived differences among the Salvadoran security forces Gomez stated, “They say there is a difference between the army, which is good, and the security forces, which are bad. This is a lot of bovine intestinal effluvia.” *Ibid.*, 191, 196.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

Representative Gerry Studds, a Massachusetts Democrat, reminded the members of the subcommittee that the land reform program was at the center of the rationale behind the policies of the president justifying military assistance. Studds offered an alarming assessment: "Its director has been killed and its No. 2 person has barely escaped with his life because he was arrested and presumably pursued directly by the military [that] we are now arming."¹⁰¹

The testimony of Gomez firmly placed blame for the strife in El Salvador at the feet of the army. Although some in Congress, including Studds, pushed for a mediated political solution to end the conflict, Gomez questioned the viability of politics at this point. He said, "Political solution with whom if this army is killing anybody that dares speak against them . . . [including] the four American missionaries that were raped and killed by the Salvadoran Army."¹⁰² President Duarte and the Christian Democrats "have only given a façade to the military dictatorship," and Gomez declared that Duarte represented a "1981 [Salvadoran] version of Hindenburg."¹⁰³

On February 25, in testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, former Ambassador White strongly opposed military aid to El Salvador, stating that "the chief killer of Salvadorans is the government security forces" and insisting that the aid would undermine "a fledgling government headed by civilians who are desperately trying to bring a recalcitrant military under control."¹⁰⁴ Regardless of White's reservations, on March 2, the Administration requested \$25 million in military aid and approximately \$100 million in emergency economic aid to El Salvador. Senior U.S. officials admitted in public statements and testimony that they would not link this aid to human rights.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 206.

¹⁰² Ibid., 192.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 198.

¹⁰⁴ Art Buchwald, "All's Fair in Warfare," *Washington Post*, February 26, 1981, accessed September 26, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ *New York Times*, "El Salvador Reported to Ask U.S. for Emergency Aid of \$200 Million," March 3, 1981, accessed September 26, 2011.

Aside from military aid, the presence of American military trainers in El Salvador was always a perplexing facet of U.S. involvement. Although the State Department self-imposed a fifty-man limit on American military personnel in the country, that limit excluded certain personnel, including Marines stationed at the embassy and members of the Defense Attaché's office. The result was a confusing situation in which few, if anyone, really knew how many American trainers worked in the country. For example, on March 12, Department of Defense Deputy Secretary Frank Carlucci told the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) chairman Clement Zablocki that seventy American military personnel were in El Salvador.¹⁰⁶ On March 21, the Pentagon announced its plans to withdraw a third of fifty-six military advisers assigned there, stating that it should take six months or less. Meanwhile, a State Department "Fact Sheet" identified seventy-eight U.S. military personnel on active duty in El Salvador.¹⁰⁷

The Americans were aware of the position of the Salvadoran Army and knew they ruled the country. In a surprisingly candid internal memo from March 1981 to Secretary of State Haig, the Human Rights Bureau wrote that senior military commanders Gutierrez, Garcia, Vides Casanova, Carranza, and Moran, not junta President Duarte, ran the Salvadoran government. The memo claimed that these men "control[led] the security forces" and "have resolved upon a policy of repression not only against the guerrillas and their active sympathizers but against those who challenge the military's pre-eminence or criticize their conduct."¹⁰⁸ Calling the abuses the work of a "mafia," Ambassador Deane Hinton proclaimed that "this mafia, every bit as much as the guerrillas of Morazán and Chalatenango, are destroying El Salvador."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Letter, Department of Defense, Frank Carlucci to Clement Zablocki, *Applicability of Arms Export Control Act to Situation in El Salvador*, 13 March 1981, ES01460, DNSA, 2-3.

¹⁰⁷ Internal Paper, State Department, U.S. Assistance to El Salvador: Fact Sheet, 1 April 1981, ES01512, DNSA, 1-9.

¹⁰⁸ Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, 243.

¹⁰⁹ In response, the group runs a full-page newspaper advertisement calling his remarks "a slap in the wounded and bloodied face of our country. Bernard Weinraub, "Envoy of U.S. Warns Salvador of Aid Cut If 'Abuses' Continue: U.S. Envoy Warns Salvador of Cut in Military Aid," *New York Times*, November 3,

While there was a consensus within the American government toward military funding on a massive scale to El Salvador, several members of Congress openly questioned American intentions in the region. Gerry Studds sponsored House Resolution 1509 aimed at ending all military assistance to the junta in El Salvador. "The United States is currently providing El Salvador with the largest U.S. military aid program we have ever bestowed upon any nation in Latin America," Studds wrote in a letter to House colleagues. He insisted that, ". . . the basis of El Salvador's military problem is political." Rather than encourage peace, "[military funding] has, instead, encouraged the continuation of a bitter, brutal, savage war." Amendments sponsored by Representative Studds, however, failed in subcommittee on a 4-4 tie vote.¹¹⁰

Approving \$25 million in Fiscal Year 1982 military aid to El Salvador on April 30, the HFAC voted, 26 to 6, to require assurance that "indiscriminate torture and murder" by security forces be controlled.¹¹¹ In 1981, fully 80 percent of U.S. military aid for El Salvador originated from a discretionary fund for military emergencies, section 506(a) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, effectively avoiding Congressional scrutiny or approval. Used only six times since 1961, President Reagan invoked this section twice for El Salvador.¹¹²

Late in September, the U.S. Senate voted to require biannual presidential certification of Salvadoran progress on human rights and political reforms. In the HFAC, similar requirements passed and proceeded to the full House. In December, after much haggling, the U.S. House and Senate reached a compromise requiring biannual

1982; Arnson, 104; Whitfield, 156, 444; American Foreign Policy, Current Documents: 1982, document 701, 1479-1481.

¹¹⁰ Amendments sponsored by Representatives Gerry Studds -- to eliminate all FY82 Salvadoran military aid -- and Michael Barnes -- to force withdrawal of U.S. military advisers from El Salvador -- both fail in subcommittee on 4-4 tie votes. Letter, Gerry E. Studds to Congress Requesting Support of Bill Halting Military Assistance to El Salvador, 1 July 1981, DNSA, 1.

¹¹¹ *Boston Globe*, "Panel Sets Restrictions on Aid to El Salvador," April 30, 1981.

¹¹² Section 502 (a) (2) of the US Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, "Except under circumstances specified in this section, no security assistance may be provided to any country which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights." James W. Moeller, "Human Rights and United States Security Assistance: El Salvador and the Case for Country-Specific Legislation," *Harvard International Law Journal* 24 (Summer 1983): 75-6; Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador*, 271.

presidential recertification of El Salvador's progress on human rights and political reforms. The bill had begun its journey through Congress in early April.¹¹³ On December 1, President Reagan issued a second presidential finding on Nicaragua, authorizing under the National Security Act "covert activities" approved at a November 16 National Security Council (NSC) meeting. The finding informed the House and Senate intelligence committees that the CIA would create a paramilitary force of 500 men to interdict alleged arms traffic from Nicaragua to Salvadoran rebels and to strike alleged Cuban military installations in Nicaragua.¹¹⁴

With justifications and funding in place, the stage was set for intensification of the Salvadoran military's counterinsurgency campaign. With American training, equipment, and money, the Salvadoran army formed smaller, quick-reaction battalions. They developed these groups under explicit American encouragement, and they sought to take the fight to the insurgents. Rather than sweeping out rebels, the battalions quickly became symbols of the army's unrelenting repression against the general population.¹¹⁵ In fact, the Atlacatl Battalion conducted Operation Rescue (Rescate) in the Morazán department from December 6 to December 17, and there they carried out the most egregious and gruesome acts of the entire war.

¹¹³ Eventually, on December 29, 1981, President Reagan signed the Foreign Assistance Act of 1981, requiring him to certify within 30 days that the Salvadoran government: " (1) is not engaged in consistently violating internationally recognized human rights; (2) has achieved substantial control over its armed forces; (3) is making progress in implementing essential economic and political reforms; (4) is committed to holding free elections; and (5) has demonstrated its willingness to negotiate a political resolution of the conflict." Law, United States Congress, *International Security & Development Cooperation Act of 1981*, 29 December 1981, ES02339, DNSA, 1; Richard B. Nash, *Certifying Human Rights: Military Assistance to El Salvador and the International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1981* (New York: Columbia University School of Law, 1983), 15; *New York Times*, "Around the World," September 24, 1981; Bill Peterson, "Reagan Plea Rejected, Senate Votes Terms for Salvadoran Aid," *Washington Post*, September 25, 1981.

¹¹⁴ Patrick E. Tyler, "Nicaragua: Hill Concern on U.S. Objectives Persists," *Washington Post*, January 1, 1983; *Boston Globe*, "Globe Staff," December 4, 1981.

¹¹⁵ Howard L. Berman et al., *Barriers to Reform: A Profile of El Salvador's Military Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Caucus, 1990), 6.

CHAPTER 6: THE MASSACRE

On December 10, 1981, a two-phase, 4,000-man counterinsurgency action executed by the Salvadoran army swept into Morazán. During the operation, the U.S.-trained Atlacatl rapid-reaction battalion rounded up hundreds of residents in the town of El Mozote, most of them women and children, and systematically slaughtered them. Beginning with the men, followed by the women, and finally the children, the victims were tortured and executed. The number of identified victims was over two-hundred, and the figure is higher if one includes the unidentified remains found at the site.¹¹⁶

The massacre was just one of several that took place during the military's sweep through Morazán. Other killings occurred in the nearby villages of La Joya, La Rancheria, Los Toriles, Jocote Amarillo, and Cerro Pando.¹¹⁷ The Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean, through the Commission for the Defense of Human Rights in Central America, documented thirty-two different massacres during the civil war by Salvadoran government forces. According to its report, the military murdered 12,000 Salvadorans in 1980 and 16,000 in 1981.¹¹⁸ In all instances, the Salvadoran troops acted in the same manner: they killed everyone they came across, including men, women, and children, and then set fire to their houses.¹¹⁹

El Mozote constituted the largest civilian death toll in a single episode of the entire war.¹²⁰ Nine of the eleven Salvadoran officers cited by the United Nations as participants in the massacre trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas at Fort

¹¹⁶ Despite the agrarian crisis in Northern Morazán, the Salvadoran government and its sponsors in the U.S. could well have portrayed El Mozote as a model village of successful commercial farmers who welcomed counterinsurgent reform. From its founding in 1945, El Mozote had a well-ordered chapel and accompanying sacristy, or convent, obtained a three-room brick schoolhouse from the government, constructed a community center, elected local representatives, and participated in an agricultural cooperative that developed projects in beekeeping, cattle raising, and henequen-fiber extraction. Binford, 69-70, 77, Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford, *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 109.

¹¹⁷ Cable, Central Intelligence Agency, *Status of the Armed Forces Major Sweep Operation in Morazán Department*, 17 December 1981, EL00068, DNSA, 1-3; UNTC, pp. 347-51

¹¹⁸ Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean, 3-4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹²⁰ Americas Watch, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*, 49.

Gulick in the Panama Canal Zone.¹²¹ In addition to soldiers from the Atlacatl Battalion, units from the Third Infantry Brigade and the San Francisco Gotera Commando Training Center took part in the operation.¹²²

In the course of “Operation Rescue,” extrajudicial killings of civilians took place on December 11, with the killing of more than twenty people in La Joya canton. Again, on December 20, over thirty people in the village of La Rancheria, and later the same day the same Atlacatl Battalion slaughtered all of the inhabitants of Los Toriles. Finally, on December 13, they ravaged the villages of Jocote Amarillo and Cerro Pando canton. In sum, more than five hundred identified victims perished at El Mozote and the other villages.¹²³

After thirteen years of brutal civil war, both sides signed peace agreements in Mexico in 1992. The U.N. sponsored peace accords established a Truth Commission to hear complaints against both government and rebel soldiers accused of human rights violations. The truth commission gathered accounts on the massacre from eyewitnesses and other witnesses who saw the unburied bodies in the aftermath of the disaster. It corroborated the multitude of testimonies and accounts with the 1992 exhumation of the remains. Despite public outcries and the “ease with which they could be verified,” the Salvadoran authorities never ordered an investigation and vehemently denied that the massacre ever took place. The victims at El Mozote were left unburied, and during the weeks after the massacre the bodies were seen by many people who passed by there.¹²⁴

The minister of defense and the chief of the armed forces joint staff “denied to the Commission on the Truth that they [had] any information that would make it possible to identify the units and officers who participated” in the operation. They claimed that there were no records for that period. Furthermore, according to the commission, the president of the Salvadoran Supreme Court “interfered in a biased and

¹²¹ United Nations, 114; Binford, 47.

¹²² United Nations, 114.

¹²³ Ibid., 114.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 114.

political way” in the judicial proceedings on the massacre instituted in 1990.¹²⁵ The investigation of the 1981 massacre in El Mozote actually began well before the U.N. commission when peasant farmer Pedro Chicas Romero of La Joya filed a complaint against the Atlacatl Battalion for the massacre. Judge Federico Ernesto Portillo Campos heard testimony in the case from Romero, Rufina Amaya Marquez, the sole survivor of El Mozote, and others.¹²⁶

The first mention of fighting in and around El Mozote appeared in a heavily redacted cable dated December 17, 1981. The cable detailed a military operation in the Northern Morazán Department of El Salvador and noted that “the heaviest fighting had occurred at El Mozote where 30 to 35 insurgents and four Salvadoran soldiers were killed.” This cable was composed roughly a week after the massacre at El Mozote occurred, and ironically makes no mention of civilian casualties. It would take until early January 1982 for the rumblings of the massacre to reach American foreign policy personnel.¹²⁷

On January 8, the American Ambassador to El Salvador, Deane Hinton, informed the State Department about a letter he received alleging a massacre in the Morazán area. The letter from Eugene Stockwell, a representative of the National Council of Churches, related how reliable reports “indicate[d] that between December 10 and 13 a government . . . operation took place in Morazán.” Stockwell’s letter claimed that reports had surfaced of a military operation “which resulted in over 900 civilian deaths.”¹²⁸

Ambassador Hinton responded that, “[He] certainly [could not] confirm such reports nor [did he] have any reason to believe they [were] true.” Hinton noted that embassy sources had not mentioned anything about an alleged massacre, and he admitted that the only source that had commented on the massacre was the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 114.

¹²⁶ Danner, 156.

¹²⁷ Cable, CIA to State Department, Status of the Armed Forces major Sweep, 17 December 1981, EL00068, DNSA, 6-7.

¹²⁸ Cable, Deane R. Hinton to State Department, Alleged Morazán Massacre, 8 January 1982, ES02387, DNSA, 1, 2-4.

clandestine Radio Venceremos. "I do not consider Radio Venceremos to be a reliable source," explained Hinton. Clearly, in his estimation the story of El Mozote was a propagandistic fabrication of the left.¹²⁹

University of Arkansas physician Victor Snyder wrote a letter dated January 11, 1982, to Senator David Pryor in which he related how he had been working in a refugee camp in Honduras where he heard stories of the massacre from families fleeing the violence in the Morazán province. His letter asked for further information on the matter.¹³⁰ Pryor forwarded the doctor's letter to Thomas Enders along with the request that Enders determine the validity of the story.¹³¹

On January 27, 1982, simultaneous front-page stories appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* about a December 1981 massacre of hundreds of civilians by the Atlacatl Battalion in El Mozote and neighboring towns. Although the stories cited eyewitnesses and included graphic pictures of the scene, Salvadoran and U.S. officials denied any massacre and characterized the stories as attempts to discredit the Atlacatl Battalion. Both governments conceded that a confrontation did occur, but stated that any dead were guerrilla fighters or unfortunate civilians caught in the crossfire.¹³²

Ironically, the next day on January 28, President Reagan certified that the Salvadoran government was progressing on human rights, investigating the churchwomen and Sheraton murder cases, and continuing progress toward implementation of the land reform. This contradicted a January 26 human rights report by the American Civil Liberties Union and Americas Watch, which estimated the murder of 12,501 persons in 1981.¹³³ Reagan reported that the "Government of El Salvador

¹²⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

¹³⁰ Letter, Victor Snyder to Senator David Pryor, *Account of Mozote Massacre from U. S. Physician at Refugee Camp on the Honduran Border*, 11 January 1982, ES02394, DNSA, 1-2.

¹³¹ Letter, Senator David Pryor to Thomas Enders, *Mozote Massacre*, 22 January 1982, ES02452, DNSA, 1-2.

¹³² Raymond Bonner, "Massacre of Hundreds is Reported in El Salvador," *New York Times*, 27 January 1982; Alma Guillermoprieto, "Salvadoran Peasant Describes Mass Killing," *Washington Post*, 27 January 1982; Danner, 96-102, 124-33.

¹³³ *Washington Post*, "Certifying El Salvador," January 29, 1982.

[was] making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights.” The ambiguity of the certification process lent itself to exaggeration by the State Department. Reagan certified the newest aid package to El Salvador a little over a month after the massacre occurred at El Mozote.¹³⁴ The administration had a stake in the continuation of aid to the junta and this led to a misrepresentation of the facts, which led to a preponderance of misinformation. In a six-page justification that accompanied his determination, Reagan claimed, “statistics . . . indicate a declining level of violence over the past year and a decrease in alleged abuses by security forces.”¹³⁵

A report released by Amnesty International during the same period described the situation in El Salvador as a “systematic and brutal policy of government-sponsored intimidation and repression.” Amnesty International investigated many of these reports and found in the majority of the reported cases that “official security forces have been implicated.”¹³⁶ The administration’s assertion about declining levels of violence and security force abuses was “simply not true,” concluded Democratic Representative Tom Harkin of Iowa.¹³⁷

Upon certification of the newest round of military aid packages to the junta, Representative Studts offered a scathing and sardonic critique of American actions. “The President has just certified that up is down and in is out and black is white,” he said, “and I anticipate his telling us that war is peace at any moment.”¹³⁸ Studts believed exerting political pressure on the junta to improve human rights was the best approach. In his mind, the design of the certification allowed the administration the “leverage to compel the military junta to clean up its act,” but the certification had told

¹³⁴ The White House, Presidential Determination No. 82-4, Memorandum for the Secretary of State, Determination to Authorize Continued Assistance for El Salvador, 28 January 1982, ES02497, DNSA, 1-2.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁶ Amnesty International, *Current Assessment of the Human Rights Situation in El Salvador*, January 1982, ES02481, DNSA, 1.

¹³⁷ Tom Harkin (IA), “U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador,” Congressional Record 128 (1982), 696, (Congressional Record Permanent Digital Collection).

¹³⁸ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, *Presidential Certification on El Salvador*, February 2, 23 and 25, March 2, 1982, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982, (1982 CIS microfiche H381-45), 43.

the junta “they can do virtually anything” they decided and U.S. would “continue to support them.”¹³⁹

Representative Studds was not alone in his consternation about the continuation of funding to the junta. The Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Charles H. Percy an Illinois Republican, personified the acerbic reception that the certification received in the Senate when he said, “Public confidence in the Administration’s certification was shaken by the recent report . . . of alleged massacres from 200 to 950 people reported in the remote village of Mozote.”¹⁴⁰ For the Senators and Representatives who believed human rights and aid organizations like Amnesty International and the International Red Cross, the characterization of the killings by the administration amounted to a cover-up. Representative Michael Barnes, a democrat from Maryland, succinctly described the frustration when he admitted that while he knew that the Administration would not stop funding the junta, he was “concerned about the signals being sent by the certification.” Namely, “that the United States condone[d] these abuses.”¹⁴¹

Representative Don Bonker from the state of Washington also weighed in on the certification. “The State Department has not offered any compelling evidence to support its determination,” he said. No “reputable human rights organization in the world supports” the State Department’s contentions, and assurances continue that the violence of the security forces is being controlled, “but the massacres of civilians continue unabated.”¹⁴²

Representative Studds openly wondered, “Why it [was] in the best interests of [his] country to associate itself with acts of terrorism of this sort. Whose guns, whose bullets killed those people in [El Mozote] and San Salvador?” Studds continued,

¹³⁹ Ibid., 11, 44-45, 53-54.

¹⁴⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Certification Concerning Military Aid to El Salvador*, Hearings, February 8 and March 11, 1982, 97th Cong., 2nd Sess., Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982, (1982 CIS microfiche S381-42), 2; hereafter SFRC.

¹⁴¹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Presidential Certification on El Salvador*, 11.

¹⁴² United States. Presidential Certification on El Salvador: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-Seventh Congress, Second Session. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1982, 13-4.

“Chances are they were paid for by our own taxpayers.” He then attacked the State Department’s notion that, if left to its own devices, a violent minority would control the country. Studs sarcastically stated, “Mr. Secretary, you must know that El Salvador is at the moment captured by a violent minority. It has been run by a violent minority for the duration of this century, and unfortunately a violent minority supported by our own government.” If the Salvadoran army and government were told that their recent past performance was acceptable, “you have told them they can do virtually anything they choose to do and the United States will continue to support them.”¹⁴³

On November 30, 1983, President Reagan pocket vetoed a bill to continue the human rights certification requirements for Salvadoran military aid.¹⁴⁴ He suggested the Salvadoran left might be committing some murders attributed to rightist death squads to discredit the right and jeopardize aid. Reagan claimed that he vetoed the human rights certification bill because it might have tempted the left or right to step up violence to cause an aid cut-off.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Ibid., 44-5; Barbara Mikulski, representative from Maryland, “In these meetings I learned that the uninformed military forces of El Salvador are using American equipment to carry out a deliberate policy of terror against an unarmed civilian population. The soldiers of El Salvador arrive in American helicopters to kill and torture men, women, and children. They use rape as a weapon of terror. They carry out particular atrocities against pregnant women and very young children, using the young children as target practice and doing the most brutal things to pregnant women. I have said that I believe that our policy in El Salvador is morally wrong. It is morally wrong for this country to lavish arms on a government that cannot or will not stop its own troops from making war against its own people. It is morally wrong to offer U.S. helicopters that will be used to gun down peasants fleeing a church after mass. It is morally wrong to use a small helpless country in our own backyard to send a message of toughness to Moscow no matter what the cost to the citizens of Central America. It is wrong and it will be self-defeating.” United States. U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-Seventh Congress, First Session, March 5 and 11, 1981. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1981, 4; Former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, “Providing arms is one thing and providing military advisers is clearly another. That is to me compounding the error. It associates us with a repressive military. It points that repressive military toward a military solution when a political solution is what is required.” White continued, “The Pentagon has been crying wolf so often the past two years about the requirement for military assistance, for military aid when it was not justified, when there were constant reports of large quantities of armaments coming in. None of those reports ever proved out.” Ibid., 146.

¹⁴⁴ *New York Times*, “President Kills A Salvador Bill Tied to Rights: BILL ON SALVADOR KILLED BY REAGAN,” December 1, 1983; Joanne Omang, “President Vetoes Bill Tying Aid to Salvadoran Rights,” *Washington Post*, December 1, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Juan Williams, “Salvadoran Rebels Imitate Rightists, President Suggests,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 1983; *Miami Herald*, “Reagan Kills Bill Tying Salvador Aid to Rights,” December 1, 1983.

In addition to making a mockery out of the certification process, the articles by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* about El Mozote had another effect. They prompted the State Department to begin its own investigation into the massacre. The State Department dispatched an American human rights officer and a Defense Department attaché to the area. By the time the two were set to depart in late January 1982, the rebels had succeeded in taking back the area around El Mozote. The two investigators flew over the area in a helicopter and interviewed people in the vicinity.¹⁴⁶ On January 30, 1982, U.S. Embassy officers Todd Greentree and Maj. John McKay left San Salvador to investigate reports of a massacre in the Department of Morazán. Although they flew over the area and interviewed refugees in a nearby town, they decided not to visit El Mozote when their Salvadoran army escorts refused to accompany them.¹⁴⁷

A State Department telegram dated January 31, 1982, reported on the investigation of the alleged massacre at El Mozote conducted by the American embassy. The report admitted that “it [was] not possible to prove or disprove excesses of violence against the civilian population of El Mozote by government troops.” The majority of the countryside, at the time of the investigation, was under rebel control. Furthermore, the embassy estimated the population of El Mozote to be no more than 300 persons at the time of the December operation.¹⁴⁸

Although technically true, the reports that surfaced in the press and among the refugees did not strictly confine the violence to El Mozote. The report stated that the guerillas made no effort to remove civilians from the path of the battle, and the report acknowledged that civilians died, but found no evidence to confirm that Salvadoran

¹⁴⁶ Cable, Deane Hinton to State Department, *Report on Alleged Massacre*, 31 January 1982, EL00735, DNSA, 1-9; U.S. Congress, House, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Subcommittee on Oversight and Evaluation, *U.S. Intelligence Performance on Central America: Achievements and Selected Instances of Concern*, Staff Report, September 22, 1982, 97th Congress., 2nd Session, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982, (Y 4.In 8/18:In 8/4:S.PRT.97), 17-19.

¹⁴⁷ Danner, 104-109.

¹⁴⁸ Cable, Deane Hinton to State Department, *Report on Alleged Massacre*, 31 January 1982, EL00735, DNSA, 7.

forces systemically massacred civilians in the operation zone.¹⁴⁹ The rebels retook El Mozote on December 29, 1981, killing the government troops that were there, and the canton remained in rebel hands until the publication of the embassy's report. It was during this reoccupation that the rebels brought reporters into the Morazán department.¹⁵⁰

Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders testified before the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs "that the human rights situation in El Salvador [was] deeply troubled."¹⁵¹ However, the State Department maintained that it was impossible to determine who was doing the killing.¹⁵² Enders elaborated on this ambiguity: "There are indeed incidents in which the noncombatants have suffered terribly at the hands of the guerillas, rightist vigilantes, government forces, or some or all of them."¹⁵³ Although Enders admitted that the government of El Salvador was involved to a certain extent, he described the tendency of the left to repeatedly fabricate and inflate alleged mass murders as a "means of propaganda."¹⁵⁴ In testimony before the House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, Enders denied that a major massacre occurred in El Mozote in December 1981. Enders told the subcommittee, "the town of El Mozote is now in insurgent hands. We have not been able to visit it . . . civilians did die during the operation, but no evidence could be found to confirm a massacre."¹⁵⁵

On May 7, the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador cabled Washington, London, Madrid, Mexico and Central America that it "[had] attempted to establish a database" to determine whether civilians were massacred at El Mozote in December 1981 and had

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁵¹ *Presidential Certification on El Salvador*, 22.

¹⁵² Cable, Deane Hinton to State Department, *Attempt to Confirm Data on El Mozote*, 7 May 1982, EL00754, DNSA, 2-3.

¹⁵³ State Department, *Report of the Secretary of State's Panel on El Salvador*, July 1993, EL01324, DNSA, 61.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵⁵ *New York Times*, "U.S. Disputes Report of 926 Killed in El Salvador: MASSACRE REPORT IS DISPUTED BY U.S.," February 2, 1982; *New York Times*, "Victims' Relatives Fear Reprisals in Salvador," February 2, 1982; Danner, 124-7.

acquired voter registration lists to compare against lists of alleged victims. The Embassy reported that it "[was] unable to reach a definite conclusion regarding civilian deaths in El Mozote during the December 1981 operation." The January 1982 Embassy investigation concluded that civilians did die in and around El Mozote as a result of military operations, but not "as a result of systematic massacre."¹⁵⁶ In preparing for the required presidential certification to Congress on El Salvador, the Embassy noted that human rights violations continued but blamed lower-echelon military and civil defense members and attributed the problem to poor communication with field units, dispersed authority of the various military branches, and autonomous acts by local civil defense units.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Cable, Embassy San Salvador, Attempt to Confirm Data on El Mozote Massacre, 7 May 1982, ES03004, DNSA, 1.

¹⁵⁷ Memo, State Department, Office of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Theresa Tull to Elliot Abrams, El Salvador Certification, 9 July 1982, ES03232, DNSA, 1.

CHAPTER 7: U.N. TRUTH COMMISSION AND THE SITE EXHUMATION

Based on the testimony of over two thousand individuals testifying to twenty-two thousand human rights violations, the U.N. Truth Commission found that government forces committed 85 percent of the violations, including El Mozote, compared to 5 percent by the FMLN. Although the complaints did not cover every act of violence, the commission concluded that the reports were illustrative of patterns of violence, which involved systematic practices “attested to by thousands of complaints.”¹⁵⁸ The report does not dispute that state officials in El Salvador used violence to exercise official authority. Violence formed a “pattern of conduct within the Government of El Salvador and power elites” as a means of controlling society. Over the past one-hundred and fifty years, both “State and civilian groups armed by landowners” violently suppressed several uprisings and campesino revolts.¹⁵⁹

A consistent pattern of violence by agents of the State and their collaborators in El Salvador originated in a “political mind-set that viewed political opponents as subversives and enemies.” Anyone unfortunate enough to express views that differed from those of the government of El Salvador “ran the risk of being eliminated as if they were armed enemies on the field of battle.” According to the truth commission, the situation “was epitomized by extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, and murders of political opponents.”¹⁶⁰

The counterinsurgency policy encouraged by the United States found its most repressive expression in the euphemisms used by the Salvadoran forces to describe military maneuvers. Statements like “cutting the guerillas lifeline,” or “draining the rebel sea,” are evidence of the military’s inherent hostility towards the working poor of El Salvador. The army automatically suspected rural inhabitants of areas where concentrations of guerillas were the highest of “belonging to the guerilla movement” or “collaborating with it.” Campesinos in these areas constantly ran the risk of death, and

¹⁵⁸ United Nations, 43.

¹⁵⁹ Bosch, 14; United States, 133.

¹⁶⁰ United Nations, 43.

“El Mozote [was] a deplorable example of this practice, which persisted some years.”¹⁶¹
In the early years of the Salvadoran civil war, violence in the countryside was
“indiscriminate in the extreme.” Roughly, three quarters of the over twenty-two
thousand reports of violence reviewed by the committee occurred during the first four
years of the war.¹⁶²

The commission reported, “A kind of complicity developed between
businessmen and landowners, who entered into a close relationship with the army and
intelligence and security forces.” The purported aim of these coalitions was to rid
Salvadoran society of alleged subversives among the civilian population in order to
defend the nation “against the threat of an alleged foreign conspiracy.” In other words,
the commission concluded, “from virtually the beginning of the century,” the
Salvadoran state security forces, “through a misperception of its true function, was
directed against the bulk of the civilian population.”¹⁶³

According to the report, “More than 500 identified victims perished at El
Mozote and in other villages.”¹⁶⁴ The commission based its conclusions largely on the
findings of a group of Argentine forensic anthropologists who exhumed the bones of the
victims. The report concluded that the American-trained Atlacatl Battalion perpetrated
the attack on El Mozote and the surrounding areas.¹⁶⁵ These two facts, not fully
accepted until after the release of the truth commission hearings, are important
because the American State Department initially disputed their veracity. According to
the report,

There is full proof that on December 11 1981, in the village of El Mozote, units
of the Atlacatl Battalion deliberately and systematically killed a group of more
than 200 men, women, and children, constituting the entire civilian population
(at least those that were in the hamlet) that they had found there the previous
day and had since been holding prisoner.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶² Ibid., 44.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 133-34.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 348.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 348-349.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 120.

In addition, the commission concluded that there is sufficient evidence that in the days preceding and following the El Mozote massacre, troops participating in "Operation Rescue," "massacred the non-combatant population of La Joya canton, and the villages of La Rancheria, Jocote Amarillo, Los Toriles, and in Cerro Pando canton."¹⁶⁷

There was full proof that General Jose Guillermo Garcia, then Minister of Defense, initiated no investigations that might have enabled the facts to be established, and there was sufficient indication that General Rafael Florez Lima, Chief of the Armed Forces Joint staff at the time, was aware that the massacre had occurred and failed to undertake any investigation. The high command of the Salvadoran military also took no steps whatsoever to prevent the repetition of such acts, "with the result that the same units were used in other operations and followed the same procedures."¹⁶⁸

As part of the accords, the truth commission exhumed and examined the massacre site using professional excavation teams. The exhumation began in October 1992, carried out by experts in forensic anthropology from Argentina. Within several days, they unearthed twenty-five skulls from the ruins of the town's church. By the time the team finished its work in November, it had identified the remains of one hundred and forty-three people, and all but twelve were children.¹⁶⁹

The excavation of the small convent building adjacent to the church at El Mozote took place from November 13 to 17, 1992. The team of forensic anthropologists completed the first examination of the material unearthed during the excavation, and the laboratories of both the Santa Tecla Institute of Forensic Medicine and the Commission for the Investigation of Criminal Acts carried out subsequent examinations. The exhumation and examination teams were able to make numerous conclusions about the massacre based on the physical remains.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 120.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 121.

¹⁶⁹ Danner, 4-5, 158-59.

¹⁷⁰ Douglas D. Scott, "Firearms Identification in Support of Identifying a Mass Execution at El Mozote, El Salvador," *Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 1 (2001): 79-86; United Nations, 117-18.

The depositing of all the skeletal material occurred during the same event and some critics of the massacre argued that the convent was a clandestine cemetery. This finding excluded that possibility. In addition, the events happened during, or prior to, 1981. Of the coins and cartridge cases located at the site, their dates of manufacture were no later than 1981. In the convent, examiners found the skeletal remains of 143 persons, but laboratory analysis indicated that there might have been a greater number. The extensive fragmentation of body parts and the total cremation of very young infants could account for many more victims.¹⁷¹

The skeletal remains found showed signs of damage caused by crushing and fire, and the majority of the victims were minors. Of the 143 bodies identified, 131 were children under the age of twelve, five were adolescents, and seven were adults, and one of the victims was a pregnant woman. Examiners noticed large quantities of bullet fragments inside the convent. They observed that virtually all of the ballistic evidence was in direct contact with or imbedded in the bone remains, clothing, household goods, and the floor. In addition, spatial distribution of the bullet fragments coincided with the area of greatest concentrations of skeletal matter.¹⁷²

Of the identified skeletal remains, examiners were able to associate sixty-seven with bullet fragments. They detected fragments in the areas of the skull and thorax in forty-seven victims. The arrangement and wounds on the bodies suggested that they were lying facedown on the ground as they died. This was a blow to the argument that the children were enemy combatants, actively resisting the government forces. There was no evidence that the victims had been involved in combat: "Rather the evidence strongly support[ed] the conclusion that they were intentional victims of a mass extra-judicial execution."¹⁷³

The forensic team conducted firearms analysis on the material recovered at the Medical Legal Institute at Santa Tecla. A 5.56 mm NATO-caliber firearm fired all but

¹⁷¹ Scott, 80-1; United Nations, 117.

¹⁷² Scott, 80-2; United Nations, 117-8.

¹⁷³ Scott, 82; Danner, 350.

one of the cartridges found, the lone exception being a 7.62 mm NATO case, possibly fired from an American M-14. By examining the firing pin imprint, extractor marks and location, and bolt face marks, the investigators determined that the cases originated from American M-16s.¹⁷⁴ The team removed ammunition from the bodies of the victims, the same ammunition provided to the Atlacatl Battalion by their American trainers. The ballistics analyst recovered 245 cartridges of which 184 had discernable headstamps labeled “L. C.,” identifying the ammunition as having been manufactured for the United States Government at Lake City ordnance plant near Independence, Missouri.¹⁷⁵

The evidence indicated that at least twenty-four people took part in the shooting. At least eleven fired in the interior of the building, and of those, at least two fired on the interior and exterior of the building. Given the large number of individuals and the small size of the structure, the examiners postulated that small groups of perpetrators brought the victims to the location in turn.¹⁷⁶ There was no formal execution-style squad, rather a much larger group of persons responsible for the shootings. The forensic experts concluded that the evidence “confirm[ed] the allegation of a mass murder” and implicated units of the Atlacatl Battalion in the deliberate and systematic killing of “a group of more than 200 men, women and children, constituting the entire civilian population [of El Mozote].”¹⁷⁷

Following the publication of the findings from the truth commission, on July 15, 1993, a panel appointed by Secretary of State Warren Christopher released its report evaluating the State Department's conduct during the civil war in El Salvador. In particular, the panel, headed by retired Foreign Service officers George Vest and Richard

¹⁷⁴ Scott, 82-4.

¹⁷⁵ All 184 discernable headstamps also contained dates, the earliest of which was 1973, with six cases sharing this distinction. Next, the single 7.62 mm NATO case with a 1974 date, and two others with a 1975 date. The majority of the cases, 172, carried a 1978 date, and three cases carried the most recent date, 1981. The firearms analysis indicated the presence of at least twenty-four weapons. One gun had four matched cases, one had three, five had two matched cases, and the remainder had only a single case. Examiners recovered five fragments of an explosive device from the interior of the building. The device was not positively identified, but appeared to be part to a rocket-propelled grenade. Ibid., 82-4, 83-5.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 84-6.

¹⁷⁷ Danner, 348-349, 350-351.

Murphy, examined whether political considerations influenced the U.S. embassy in El Salvador's human rights reporting. The report concluded that "mistakes were made," particularly in the handling and investigation of the 1981 El Mozote massacre, but generally praised the performance of the department. Embassy and State Department officials, wrote the panel, "devoted an extraordinary amount of attention to human rights cases" and "pursued [them] aggressively."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Memo, Antonio J. Ramos to Joint Chiefs, *Congressional Inquiry Regarding U.S. Training of the Atlacatl Battalion*, 25 June 1993, EL00611, DNSA; Report, State Department, Report of the Secretary of State's Panel on El Salvador, July 1993, EL01324, DNSA, 12, 33, 45; Whitfield, 390-1.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Professor and journalist Mark Danner called the massacre at El Mozote a “parable of the Cold-War,” with the U.S. torn between two mutually exclusive objectives. On the one hand, the American government publicly proclaimed that it valued and respected human rights, but on the other, it wanted to prevent a communist takeover in El Salvador. After reading the correspondence of ambassadors and department heads, it is clear that the main goal of American foreign policy in the region was the expulsion of communism. Unfortunately, because of the fixation on subverting communist influences, policy makers minimized human rights.

The massacre at El Mozote was the direct result of a joint U.S.-Salvadoran push to expel rebels from the northern Morazán district. The Americans supplied the training and ammunition, while the Atlacatl Battalion and the Salvadoran military supplied the repression. They stormed into El Mozote around December 9, summarily executed all of the inhabitants including women and children, and left the village a charred mass of rubble two days later.

Rather than reprimanding the commanding officers, American advisors praised commanders like Domingo Monterossa, the infamous leader of the Atlacatl Battalion. In fact, four American lieutenant colonels in a 1988 report on American military performance in El Salvador stated, “The Salvadoran Army produced a number of exceptional combat leaders – men like Domingo Monterossa.”¹⁷⁹ To be sure, extra-judicial massacre and rampant corruption were tools in the counterinsurgency arsenal, and the sheer number of incidents proved that this was policy, and not the workings of a repressive fringe.

It would not be until January 27, 1982, that word would come to the world from the reports of Raymond Bonner and Alma Guillermoprieto. The subsequent intelligence from the American embassy and State Department, while conceding that they had no real proof either way, placed doubt on the veracity of the massacre reports.

¹⁷⁹ Bacevich, 27.

The State Department assertion that there were fewer than three hundred persons in Mozote was a spurious misinterpretation of the facts. The newspaper reports from Bonner and Guillermprieto, and the letters from Eugene Stockwell and Victor Snyder all referred to El Mozote and the area around it, not simply El Mozote. The operation lasted for nearly three weeks and the massacre at El Mozote was but the largest of several.¹⁸⁰ This reductionist view from the State Department was an attempt to discredit the stories within the press, and the letters from other observers. The area had a large refugee population and the opposite was the case; the amount of persons within El Mozote was higher than normal due to regional displacement because of the war.

In addition, American foreign policy personnel conducted only a token investigation to verify the claims of myriad journalists and relief agencies, but even this was more than the Salvadorans who never considered an investigation. Only after the exertion of public pressure because of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles did the State Department mount its investigation. American ambassador to El Salvador, Deane Hinton, sent political officer Todd Greentree and military attaché Major John McKay to investigate the stories of the massacre. Since the area was once again under rebel control, the two men did not even visit El Mozote. They simply flew over the area in a helicopter.

Once on the ground, the investigators interviewed residents from the surrounding areas, but they conducted most of the interviews in the presence of Salvadoran soldiers. As we have seen, the military had little tolerance for criticism and it would be naïve to think that the refugees felt the freedom to discuss the events openly. Thus, it is not surprising that the report found no evidence of a government sponsored massacre in the region and concluded that most of the inhabitants of El Mozote were at least passive members of the rebel resistance. It would take eleven years of war and a

¹⁸⁰ Americas Watch cited six massacres perpetrated by the Atlacatl Battalion alone from 1981-89. Americas Watch, "The Massacre at El Mozote: The Need to Remember," 13-16.

group of forensic anthropologists to prove this conclusion wrong.¹⁸¹ American fear of the ideological encroachment of communism forced its foreign policy leaders to back a government and military that denied basic human rights to the inhabitants of El Salvador. The military problem in El Salvador was a political one, a problem exacerbated by the appropriation of huge foreign subsidies from the U.S.

The residue of American involvement in El Salvador is visible today. Besides the huge craters made by American bombs that scar much of the eastern half of the country, the small plaque that resides inside the town square of El Mozote is a testament to American foreign policy initiatives. Innocent men, women and children made little difference; the U.S. was determined to support a corrupt, murderous regime because it represented the only viable alternative to communism. Collateral damage was just that, and as long as it prevented the formation of another Cuba or Nicaragua, the U.S. would endure the consequences.

It seems unreasonable to martyr innocent Salvadorans to a reactionary regime simply to establish American regional hegemony, and according to scholar Enrique Baloyra, those who claim otherwise are making the same racist, patronizing, and imperialist argument of those formerly in the American State department.¹⁸² Supporting the appropriation of military aid to a government based around the repression of its own people is to support such repression of human rights, and any government sustained principally by threats of violence is counter to the American system.¹⁸³

Even though much of the evidence for American sanctioning of violence is circumstantial, the collected amount is compelling. The exponential growth in American funding to the regime after El Mozote provided the means and material that the regime required to oppress the people, and carry out massacres like Mozote. Without

¹⁸¹ Ibid., Cable, Deane Hinton to State Department, *Report on Alleged Massacre*, 31 January 1982, EL00735, DNSA, 1-9.

¹⁸² Enrique A. Baloyra, *El Salvador in Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 142.

¹⁸³ Schoultz, *Human Rights and United States Policy Toward Latin America*, 247.

American assistance, the regime would have withered by the mid-1980s; the main achievement of American intervention was the extension of the war. The American stance against communism provided a reasonable rationale for intervention, and the Salvadoran military, which cooperated for monetary gain, created a horrible situation for the majority of Salvadorans. The mountain of evidence from multiple sources on corruption, ineptitude, and a blatant disregard for human rights from both the Salvadoran military and American policy makes it clear that humanitarian concern was near the bottom of the list.

At a certain point, the lack of initiative in preventing the violence becomes a tacit sanctioning of the violence. U.S. policies and actions were incongruent, and in the case of El Mozote, they were in direct opposition. While American politicians scolded other countries for perceived shortcomings in human rights, the American administration was abhorrently funding what some considered genocide in El Salvador.¹⁸⁴ American foreign policy showed little concern with the spread of democracy, and even less towards the respect of human rights. The main concern was the subversion of communism, and for that goal, the U.S. government was willing to tolerate the indiscriminate murder of innocent civilians.

¹⁸⁴ Porpora, 132; Enrique A. Baloyra, "Central America on the Reagan Watch: Rhetoric and Reality," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 27, no. 1 (February 1985): 36.

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