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## A War Against the Facts and the Press

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# A War Against the Facts and the Press

Héctor A. Navarro

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## **Introduction**

El Salvador's Civil War, which lasted from 1979 to 1992, grew from a history of military coups oppressing and terrorizing the country's peasant population. Left-wing guerrilla rebels, inspired by Marxist ideologies and Catholic Liberation Theology, formed the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and waged a bloody 12 year rebellion against the military juntas. El Salvador's close proximity to Cuba and Nicaragua made the war a political issue for the United States. Although the conflict was internal, President Ronald Reagan saw the civil war through a Cold War lens. Consequently, the first Reagan Administration funded El Salvador's Duarte Junta regime to quell the FMLN rebels, who the administration labeled as communist insurgents.

President Reagan employed hardline rhetoric to depict the United States as El Salvador's protector amidst the alleged threat of a communist movement. Furthermore, the State Department stressed the administration's role of protecting democracy and security in El Salvador. Secretary of State Alexander Haig stated that the U.S. government's role in aiding the Duarte military coup was, "first, to reaffirm and promote democracy; second, to create new economic opportunity; and third, most urgently, to oppose

interventionism.”<sup>1</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Enders described the U.S. aid as equipping its ally with proper defense; doing so supposedly furthered democratic ideals, but the junta’s military and paramilitary murders demonstrated neither defense nor democracy.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Salvadoran Army used much of its U.S. training and funding to kill thousands of noncombatants. However, to maintain the Reagan Cold War doctrine, the State Department and the U.S. Embassy argued that no evidence could prove the junta’s massacres, and any sources that said otherwise were not to be trusted. This paper argues that the Reagan Administration worked this message through Congress and the American public by denying or hiding the facts and manipulating the press. It will examine the Salvadoran Army’s largest orchestrated killing of the civil war at El Mozote. It will then analyze the conflict between reports by the free press and human rights organizations versus the reports by the U.S. Embassy and State Department.

### **The El Mozote Massacre and its Press Coverage**

On December 11, 1981, the Salvadoran Army’s U.S. trained Atlacatl Battalion ravaged the town of El Mozote, torturing and slaughtering between 700 and 900 peasants, including women and children. About 500 of the victims were residents of El Mozote proper, and the rest were civilians from nearby villages, such

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<sup>1</sup> Enrique A. Baloyra, “Central America on the Reagan Watch: Rhetoric and Reality,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 27, no. 1 (February 1985): 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 36-37.

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as La Joya and La Ranchería.<sup>3</sup> Those who left their homes and fled to El Mozote tried to escape the Salvadoran Army's winter military sweep, misleadingly titled *Operación Rescate*, "Operation Rescue."

On January 27, 1982, Raymond Bonner and Alma Guillermoprieto published articles on El Mozote for the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, respectively. They had traveled to Mozote via FMLN escorts on January 6 of 1981. The trip commenced after the FMLN guerrillas had regained control of El Mozote's surrounding Morazán province. Consequently, the two journalists witnessed and photographed the charred skulls, decaying bodies, and rotting animal flesh that smothered the ground at Mozote. In her article, Guillermoprieto wrote, "Here, the houses also were gutted and looted, but the overwhelming initial impression was of the sickly sweet smell of decomposing bodies. This was Mozote... inside, the stench was overpowering, and countless bits of bones –skulls, rib cages, femurs, and a spinal column –poked out of the rubble."<sup>4</sup> Bonner also interviewed a survivor of the carnage, Rufina Amaya, who provided valuable insight into the Salvadoran Army's systematic torturing and killing of the villagers. Residents from outlying towns, who lost friends and relatives in the attack, put the number dead at 733.<sup>5</sup> The massacre proved to be one of the army's most atrocious crimes committed during

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<sup>3</sup> Alma Guillermoprieto, "Salvadoran Peasants Describe Mass Killing; Woman Tells of Children's Death" *Washington Post*. January 27, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit*, (New York: Times Books, 1984), 343

the Salvadoran Civil War; but the Reagan Administration would deny the reliability of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other institutions that reported on such war crimes.

Raymond Bonner and Alma Guillermoprieto published evidence of the Mozote slaughter at a pivotal moment for the administration, as their articles appeared one day before President Reagan certified military aid before Congress. The certification was based on the 1981 Congressional amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.<sup>6</sup> The reason why Congress had amended the act was to curtail the Duarte Junta's noncombatant killings that occurred as early as 1980. The murder of 4 American nuns on December 6, for instance, had raised concerns about the U.S.'s "friendly," ally Salvadoran government.<sup>7</sup> The aid amendment allowed military funding to El Salvador every six months only if the president certified that the government was improving on human rights.<sup>8</sup> The Mozote incident indicated that human rights did not improve, but pressure from the Reagan Administration swayed the U.S. Embassy to deny that a massacre occurred.

### **Ambassador Hinton's Version**

On December 15, 1981, Reverend William L.

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<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976-1993*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 12-13

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Krauss, "How U.S. Actions Helped Hide El Salvador Human Rights Abuses," *The New York Times*, (March 21, 1993), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bonner, 343.

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Wipfler, Director of Human Rights of the National Council of Churches in New York, received word of the El Mozote incident from San Salvador's Archbishopric and human rights institutions. Wipfler messaged Deane Hinton, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, on December 15, 1981 asking for a confirmation of the massacre. Hinton then messaged a copy of his response to Wipfler's telegram and Wipfler's original text to the U.S. State Department. Wipfler's text stated that military and security forces had killed about 900 civilians in the Morazán province. Additionally, Wipfler desired Hinton to "confirm or otherwise" the claim.<sup>9</sup> In response, Hinton claimed that he could not confirm the assertion and questioned the validity of Wipfler's sources, which are not identified in Wipfler's original message. Moreover, Hinton identified the embassy's only sources of the incident as testimonies from Radio Venceremos, the revolutionary, underground, and pro-guerrilla radio network that accompanied the FMLN rebels. The network was known for reporting government war crimes and criticizing the U.S. for its involvement in the war. Consequently, Hinton discredited Radio Venceremos to maintain the administration's portrayal of its ally, the Salvadoran government. Acknowledging the massacre would have challenged its image, potentially heightening public disapproval of U.S. military funding. After all, Reagan had removed

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<sup>9</sup> Deane Hinton, "TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7346: Alleged Morazan Massacre", U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, (January 8, 1982); obtained from the National Security Archive, <https://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>  
<http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.scu.edu/docview/1679131991?accountid=13679>.

Robert White, Hinton's predecessor, from El Salvador because White actually reported on the military and paramilitary's human rights abuses; he did not fit the administration's framed foreign policy agenda.<sup>10</sup>

The January 27 *Times* and *Post* articles contradicted Hinton's message; with their vivid images and testimony reaching the eyes of the American public, the State Department would have to defend Reagan's aid certification to Congress on February 2, 1982. The House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, chaired by Democratic Representative Michael Barnes, asked for an explanation for certifying military aid to the junta in light of recent accounts of a massacre.<sup>11</sup> Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Thomas Enders, would speak to the committee in defense of the certification.

### **An Unsuccessful Investigation**

As of January 27, the State Department had no immediate data on Mozote to counter the *Times* and *Post* reports. Since Ambassador Hinton lacked any factual accounts of his own, the State Department sent two military officers, Todd Greentree and John McKay, to Morazán on January 30, 1982. There, they were assigned to question Colonel Domingo Monterrosa's Atlacatl Battalion, which was responsible for the alleged massacre.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the Americans were to enter Mozote and investigate to provide the State Department with more facts. Expectedly, the Atlacatl

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 116.

<sup>11</sup> Arnson, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Danner, 111-112.

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Battalion's soldiers and commanding officers dodged the Americans' questions regarding the incident. The only substantial response was that rebels had established a defensive position to combat the government troops, which possibly caught nearby civilians in a crossfire. As a result, Greentree and McKay gathered no firsthand information that explained who conducted the military operation in Mozote or how many civilians died.

After the failed interviews, Greentree and McKay traveled with one of the battalion's squads into neighboring villages, including Jocoaitique and La Joya, to question the locals about El Mozote. In an interview with Mark Danner, author of *The Massacre of El Mozote* (1994), McKay explained, "You could observe and feel this tremendous fear. I was in Vietnam, and I recognized the ambience. The fear was overriding and we sensed it and could tell that that fear was not instilled by the guerrillas."<sup>13</sup> The villagers dreaded the army and refused to speak about El Mozote, fearing for their lives. Danner also interviewed Greentree, who added, "Each person I talked to confirmed the impression that something bad had happened, but nobody was willing to go ahead and give the exact story."<sup>14</sup> Lastly and most importantly, when the two officers and Salvadoran soldiers drove towards El Mozote proper, the soldiers refused to take the Americans into the town's limits. The reason was that FMLN rebels had retaken the village after the Atlacatl Battalion finished its gruesome military operation.<sup>15</sup> Monterrosa's troops

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 107-109.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

feared they would encounter enemy combatants. As a result, Greentree and McKay had to choose between entering Mozote without protection or heading back without an actual investigation; they chose not to enter and they returned to the U.S. Embassy.

McKay informed Mark Danner that he and Greentree “didn’t want to find that anything horrible had happened.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, McKay explained how avoiding a Mozote investigation proved detrimental to their reporting.<sup>17</sup> Had the officers discovered evidence of a killing, they would have had to present contentious information before Deane Hinton and then the Department of State. In his interview with Mark Danner, Greentree explained that “what the Embassy had to say about that event had to be very carefully phrased and controlled, to get as close as possible to what happened and as far away as possible from propaganda on either side.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the purpose of sending the officers to investigate was to provide the Embassy and the State Department with facts to back up Thomas O. Enders’s certification defense to Congress. However, information confirming a massacre would have exposed the disingenuousness of the administration’s human rights statement, thereby weakening Enders’s defense. Therefore, Hinton had to omit such evidence yet explain to some degree what happened at El Mozote. Ultimately, Hinton felt pressure to present a story compatible with the Administration’s portrayal of the Salvadoran military. Reagan sent a clear message not to smear the administration or the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

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Duarte Junta when he replaced Ambassador White with Hinton in early 1981. White had spoken against the military's dirty murders, most notably the deaths of the American churchwomen in 1980, so removing him set a precedent for Hinton to stay relatively quiet.<sup>19</sup>

One day after the "investigation," Ambassador Hinton revised Todd Greentree's report before cabling it to the State Department. The report stated that in light of the McKay-Greentree "investigation", the embassy could not confirm or disconfirm that the Atlacatl Battalion employed excessive violence against El Mozote's civilian population.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the report asserted that civilian death figures did not approach numbers cited by independent sources, such as the National Council of Churches and the articles by Bonner and Guillermoprieto. Ultimately, the Embassy cited no conclusive evidence; and no "investigation" of Mozote took place. In this context, a lack of adequate evidence was sufficient to say that nothing happened. Additionally, omitting the fact that the officers never entered Mozote proved essential for discrediting other sources that cited high death tolls at El Mozote.

### **Manipulating the Facts and Defending Military Aid**

The Greentree cable report formed the core of the

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<sup>19</sup> Arnson, 42-43

<sup>20</sup> Todd Greentree and Deane Hinton, "TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 7665: CONFIDENTIAL", U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, (January 30, 1982); obtained from Danner, 195

State Department's framing of the Mozote massacre. On February 2 1982, the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs questioned Thomas Enders, Assistant Secretary of State, seeking an explanation for the administration's certification of military aid to El Salvador in light of the government's human rights abuses. The amendment to the Foreign Assistance Law permitted military funding only if El Salvador was "making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Thomas Enders commenced the hearing by acknowledging the generally poor human rights situation in El Salvador, but added that the law did not require that human rights problems be eliminated. He added that the law required "progress." By stressing the word of the law, Enders set safe parameters in which his argument against the massacre, which lacked hard evidence, could fare somewhat well. Next, Enders stated that accurate facts were "hard to establish," yet claimed,

Seventy percent of the political murders known to our embassy were committed by unknown assailants. And there is much special pleading going on also in this. For example, many of you have read about something called the Legal Aid Office of the Archbishopric –Socorro Judico is its Spanish name; it is often cited in the international media. It strangely lists no victims of guerrilla and terrorist violence. Apparently they do not commit violence.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Foreign Assistance Act of 1961; obtained from Arnson, 86.

<sup>22</sup> Danner, 209.

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The fact that seventy percent of murders had unknown culprits could not be confirmed because accurate facts were “hard to establish”. The point of the arbitrary figure was to dissuade any suspicions that El Salvador’s military and paramilitary troops had committed a large number of atrocities in 1981. Downplaying the Duarte Government’s violence supported the State Department’s argument that the civil rights situation would be worse if the junta fell to leftist rebels. According to the Reagan Administration, the FMLN insurgents posed the true threat to security and were therefore more guilty of war crime. Enders also criticized the Human Rights Commission for having “no independent information-gathering capacity” just because its reports matched closely to the figures of Raymond Bonner, Alma Guillermoprieto, Radio Venceremos, and the National Council of Churches.<sup>23</sup> Since the embassy and the State Department labelled these sources “guerrilla friendly,” Enders argued that any casualty numbers resembling figures from such sources were unreliable.

Enders presented more fabrications to the committee, including a claim that the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*’s death counts, 733 and 926 respectively, were exaggerated because Mozote contained only 300 residents during the military operation. Therefore, although some misdemeanor occurred at Mozote, the event could not have resembled a significant killing. In a letter to Representative Richard L. Ottinger, the State Department went further by arguing that Bonner’s list of 733 casualties was compiled

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<sup>23</sup> “Report of the Secretary of State’s Panel on El Salvador,” July 1993, p. 59-60; obtained from Danner, 222.

of names stolen from civil registries of Jocoaitique, a nearby town.<sup>24</sup> The letter asserted that when FMLN rebels captured Jocoaitique on February 12, they took the names from its civil registries and created a list of alleged victims of a massacre. In reality, Bonner received the list of the 733 victims from local villagers days before the Jocoaitique raid, ruling out State Department's claim completely.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the State Department outright lied to Ottinger, a faulty tactic, but a tactic nonetheless.

Enders continued proposing vague, and even contradictory information regarding levels of noncombatant violence in El Salvador. To prove general progress in human rights he proclaimed,

The figures show it. We have September, October, November, December figures for 1980 which show something on the order of 800, 779, 575, 665 political murders. That is for 1980. We have the same figures for this year [1981] which show September 171, October, 161, November, 302. It shows December, 200. Our returns are showing markedly different numbers on the same methodology.<sup>26</sup>

In this statement, Enders failed to cite any sources the State Department used to confirm the decline in political murders from 1980 to 1981, and if this testimony included the more accurate number of dead

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Bonner, 343.

<sup>26</sup> "Report of the Secretary of State's Panel on El Salvador," obtained from Danner, 212.

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at Mozote, the December figures would range closer to between 700 and 900. Furthermore, the State Department's proclaimed "methodology" was unclear. No wonder Enders's subsequent statement held that nobody had a "complete report," reflecting the Embassy and State Department's failure to find concrete, qualified evidence that could challenge the alarming press releases and reports by human rights organizations.

Representative Gerry E. Studds quoted from one of these reports written by Amnesty International. The report stated that Salvadoran security forces had been conducting human rights abuses on a "massive scale." Furthermore, the abuses constituted a "gross and consistent pattern of human rights abuses."<sup>27</sup> Studds then contrasted this warning with President Reagan's certification reassurance: "Statistics compiled in El Salvador indicate decreased abuses by security forces."<sup>28</sup> In response, Enders said that the presidential certification was not an "expression of satisfaction"<sup>29</sup>; moreover, Enders admitted that there was a substantial amount of violence, yet insisted that El Salvador was improving its human rights record. Again, he was trying to defend the Administration's certification on the basis that civilian casualties persisted, but in smaller numbers, which apparently defined progress.<sup>30</sup> Enders still rested on the assumption that atrocity reports about El Mozote were unreli-

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Danner, 214.

<sup>29</sup> "Report of the Secretary of State's Panel on El Salvador," 59-60.

<sup>30</sup> Arnson, 88.

able.

Finally, Representative Solarz demanded a list of the embassy's sources to support the supposed drop in civilian casualties from 1980 to 1981. Enders replied, "Each week the Embassy does collect evidence which comes from a number of sources. Radio Venceremos is one. Local press reports of deaths are another. Local radio reports, other reports that are available through the Government sources."<sup>31</sup> The Embassy and State Department had previously declared Radio Venceremos untrustworthy because of its association with the communist labeled FMLN rebels, yet Enders referred to the radio station as an Embassy source. He resorted to it because he had no other facts, except for rightist Salvadoran government sources, which typically hid or under calculated peasant death tolls.<sup>32</sup> When confronted, Enders dodged Solarz's questions, and Solarz reminded him that Amnesty International, the Archbishopric of San Salvador, the Central American University, and every other organization that reported on El Salvador's human rights situation held that the country's killings were above the level that existed in 1980; whereas the Embassy and State Department claimed it had declined.

Ender's last resort to prove a decline in murders was to frame a misleading interpretation of human rights sources. He maintained that even their facts confirmed a reduction in abuses. He said,

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<sup>31</sup> "Report of the Secretary of State's Panel on El Salvador," 59-60.

<sup>32</sup> Bonner, 342.

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The totals are different, but the trends are the same. If you look at the trends in the legal aid office, and I pointed out to you earlier something about its own tilt, you will find the same downward trend. That is true of the statistics collected by the Central American University, but again it has a particular prejudice. They all show this downward trend during the year.<sup>33</sup>

The “particular prejudice” was that the Central American University, like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, San Salvadoran Archbishopric, and Amnesty International, was not affiliated with the Reagan Administration or the Salvadoran government. Moreover, arguing that the Central American University was biased only emphasized that its figures (and those of the other mentioned human rights institutions) did *not* indicate a decrease in noncombatant deaths. When Congressman Solarz asked what percentage of killings were actually conducted by El Salvador’s armed forces, the Assistant Secretary of State replied, “We are not able to attribute very many of those deaths to one side or the other, and we are not sure even of those that are attributed whether they make sense or not.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the State Department did not know how many murders were performed by government forces, and therefore could not have been able to confirm a reduction in human rights misconduct. Ironically, Enders assigned a bias to every source except for the State Department, which presented the vaguest and least

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<sup>33</sup> “Report of the Secretary of State’s Panel on El Salvador,” obtained from Danner, 212-213.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

dependable information. In view of numerous, publically available human rights accounts, the Reagan Administration would need some help from the press to combat the reports that revealed the junta's brutal murders.

### **Right Wing Media Steps In**

On February 10 of 1982, the administration friendly *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial titled "The Media's War," in which it attacked Raymond Bonner for being "overly credulous" in accepting the peasants' accounts of a slaughter in El Mozote.<sup>35</sup> The *Journal* also quoted Guillermprieto, who wrote that she and Bonner had been escorted by FMLN rebels with the purpose of showing their control of the region and showing evidence of a massacre. Therefore, according to the *Journal*, the point of showing remains to the journalists was to spread leftist, pro-guerrilla propaganda. This assertion implied that the *Times* and *Post's* journalists, the only Americans who actually reported on the scene in Mozote, could not be trusted. The editorial closely followed the administration's language on El Salvador's violence. For example, it criticized Bonner and Guillermprieto for a having a left leaning bias, the same bias, or "prejudice" that the State Department referred to when discrediting sources on El Mozote and other massacres. In fact, it specifically defended Assistant Secretary of State Enders, confirming that El Mozote's population was only 300 before the massacre.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the

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<sup>35</sup> George Melloan, "The Media's War", *Wall Street Journal*, (February 10, 1982).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

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Journal restated confidently that Mozote witnessed no systematic killing of its population, but instead a “military operation,” which matched the testimonies of the Atlacatl Battalion soldiers and the embassy.<sup>37</sup>

The *Wall Street Journal*’s pro-administration support suggested that the Reagan Administration pressured its ally newspaper into denouncing Bonner and Guillermprieto; for example, the *Journal* attacked Bonner’s supposed bias by smearing the reputation of the *New York Times* as a whole:

Realistically, neither the press nor the State Department has the power to establish conclusively what happened at Mozote in December, and we’re sure the sophisticated editors of the *Times* recognize as much. Yet as an institution, their paper has closed ranks behind a reporter out on a limb, waging a little campaign to bolster his position by impugning his critics. A news analysis charged the government of sowing confusion by questioning press reports without presenting detailed evidence to support its position. The analysis posed the question of how American diplomats gather information abroad, but not the same question about American reporters.<sup>38</sup>

Arguing that the State Department and the press were equally incapable of confirming what occurred suggested that they both cited equally inconclusive information. However, *The New York Times* and *Wash-*

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

*ington Post* correspondents wrote more plausible accounts using onsite evidence. In Mozote, Bonner and Guillermprieto saw the corpses firsthand and included photographs of them in their respective articles. Yet the *Journal* editorial contended that the reporters' method of gathering information abroad was fraudulent. Furthermore, claiming that Bonner went "out on a limb" suggested that he was practically alone in defending his evidence of the massacre. On the contrary, Radio Venceremos, Amnesty International, the Archbishopric of San Salvador, the National Council of Churches, and the other reporting organizations not affiliated with the Reagan Administration presented figures compatible, if not larger than those of Bonner.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the State Department stood "out on a limb" trying to defend itself against the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, which referred to these organizations' reports. The State Department and U.S. Embassy stood alone, which was all the more reason to entreat the *Wall Street Journal* to defend the administration's stance.

*Time* magazine joined the criticism on March 29, 1982, calling Bonner "the most controversial reporter on the scene" in its article titled "War as a Media Event."<sup>40</sup> On June 18, two representatives from the conservative media-watch organization called *Accuracy in Media (AIM)* met with the publisher of the *New York Times* to file a complaint on Bonner's reporting. Additionally, it dedicated almost an entire issue of its twice-a-month *AIM* Report to criticizing Bonner. The

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<sup>39</sup> Danner, 125.

<sup>40</sup> William A. Henry III, "War as a Media Event," *Time*, 29 March 1982, 75.

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report noted that *AIM* representatives,

focused especially on the January 28 story alleging that government troops had massacred either 733 civilians or 926, depending on whose figures you accepted. We noted that these were uncorroborated claims made by the guerrillas. The State Department had pointed out that the population of the village where the massacre allegedly occurred was only 300, and many of them were still there, alive and well. This was covered in the *AIM* Report of February-II.<sup>41</sup>

Like the *Wall Street Journal*, *AIM* reiterated what the State Department told Congress and supported Enders's false assertions. For instance, Bonner did not receive the "uncorroborated claims" (the death figures) from guerrilla rebels, but instead from local villagers living in nearby towns like La Joya and La Ranchería. Additionally, the State Department's claim that Mozote had only 300 residents was misleading because Rufina Amaya, the lone survivor from Mozote proper, stated that about 500 people lived there.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the massacre included the deaths of peasants who fled to Mozote from nearby hamlets. Equally misleading, "alive and well" implied high morale and an absence of civilian casualties; but in the nearby hamlets, John McKay and Todd Greentree had tried questioning individuals, whose reluctance to disclose any knowledge about Mozote reflected a general fear of an

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<sup>41</sup> Reed Irvine, "The Ray Bonner Division," *Accuracy in Media*, July 1982, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Guillermprieto, 2.

oppressive military. The *AIM* Report also used President Reagan's hardline, anticommunist language. The organization said that one of Bonner's goals was to "discredit the government and the military forces that were standing in the way of a communist takeover of El Salvador."<sup>43</sup> Similar rhetoric hinted that Reagan and his administration officials were working directly or indirectly with the supportive right wing press to counter reports of human rights abuses.

Ambassador Hinton also contributed to the Bonner attack when he met with Abraham M. Rosenthal, who was the executive editor of the *New York Times*, in April. Ambassador Hinton expressed his disapproval of Bonner's aggressive journalism.<sup>44</sup> Hinton also met with reporters and accused Bonner of being an "advocate journalist" for the rebel cause. Hinton's complaints gave the final blow to Bonner and *The New York Times's* reputation.<sup>45</sup>

### **Bonner Put at Odds with *The New York Times***

Six months after the Wall Street Journal opened the criticism of Bonner, A. M. Rosenthal removed Bonner from El Salvador, instructing him to return to the Metro desk in New York. The *Times* seemed to have succumbed to government pressure, explaining Bonner's withdrawal. Rosenthal's public excuse for removing Bonner was that he apparently had never

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<sup>43</sup> Irvine, 2.

<sup>44</sup> John F. Kirch, "Raymond Bonner and the Salvadoran Civil War: 1980 to 1983", *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Toronto, Canada*, August 2004, 3-4

<sup>45</sup> Bernard Weinraub, "Envoy Says Salvadoran Plan Is Intact," *New York Times*, 12 June 1982, 3.

completed full training in the *Times*' reporting methods.<sup>46</sup> More specifically, Rosenthal explained that Bonner "didn't know the techniques of weaving a story together."<sup>47</sup> However, Seymour Topping, who was the managing editor at the time, maintained that Bonner performed top tier investigative journalism in El Salvador.<sup>48</sup> Topping's issue with the correspondent was that he needed more experience and better technique in writing and qualifying his stories. Criticizing Bonner's technical qualifications echoed the State Department and *Wall Street Journal*'s attack; and considering that Bonner successfully provided writing on the physical evidence and civilian testimonies from Mozote, the *Times* most likely moved him for political reasons. Bonner entered Mozote using the wrong people (the FMLN) and reported the wrong side of the story. He reported well but also exposed dangerously controversial evidence on a massacre performed by U.S. funded and trained Salvadoran soldiers.

Raymond Bonner eventually left the New York Times in 1984. Despite his profound reporting on the El Mozote Massacre (in conjunction with Alma Guillermoprieto), *Times* correspondents reported less critically on U.S. involvement in the civil war after Rosenthal removed the reporter "out on a limb." The withdrawal sent a clear message as to how the Reagan Administration dealt with outspoken critics. When confronted with discordant information on El Salvador's murders, such as the El Mozote Massacre, the Reagan Administration argued against sources' reli-

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<sup>46</sup>Danner, 138.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*, 138.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid*, 138.

ability, typically labelling them as leftist. Since the State Department lacked evidence to support its own claims, it resorted to dodging the facts and reinforcing the Reagan Cold War doctrine. Additionally, the administration called upon Reagan-friendly press to reinforce a pro-Salvadoran government image and smear more critical media. Together, the Reagan Administration and right wing newspapers pressured the New York Times into removing Raymond Bonner, a critical reporter on Salvadoran human rights.

### **The Reagan Administration's Continued Role in El Salvador**

The Reagan Administration continued funding the Salvadoran government for the remainder of the civil war. Congress would not reject the succeeding aid certifications even though many members, like those in the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, opposed funding a regime that eventually murdered a total of about 75,000 innocent civilians by 1992.<sup>49</sup> The FMLN, which also killed noncombatants, was found guilty of 400 murders by the UN Truth Commission of 1993.<sup>50</sup> Even though Mexico and France had recognized the FMLN as a political entity capable of negotiating peace in 1981, the U.S. government chose to prolong the war with military aid.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, the fear of an FMLN victory restrained Congress from rejecting President Reagan's aid approvals. A "communist"

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<sup>49</sup> Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan, "In Central America, Reagan Remains A Polarizing Figure" *Washington Post*, (June 10, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Baloyra, 38-39

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victory could have undermined the Reagan Administration's policy of spreading democracy by funding the rightest Duarte Junta. Furthermore, an FMLN victory could have demonstrated that a Marxist-inspired movement was capable of defeating a U.S. backed military and establishing its own independent government. Moreover, in the event of a rebel victory, Congress members who opposed funding El Salvador's military coups would have taken a heavy blame. Consequently, the war continued, and the Reagan Administration continued discrediting evidence of its ally's human rights violations; and atrocities like the El Mozote Massacre would conveniently slip out of recent memory.

**Conclusion**

The Mozote incident demonstrated how the Reagan Administration discredited evidence that contradicted its framing of the war. When newspapers and human rights organizations criticized the military coup or the U.S. government, the U.S. Embassy and State Department downplayed human rights abuses and denied the credibility of the reports. When Congress used such reports against the Reaganites, the State Department altered the facts and even fabricated figures that were more compatible with its own portrayal of El Salvador's human rights record. In attempts to sway Congress, State Department officials argued that reporters who proposed discordant information were leftwing rebel sympathizers and therefore unreliable. Moreover, the administration influenced the right-leaning press to criticize newspapers, such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, since they revealed evidence of government violence. Ultimately, the Reagan Adminis-

tration's shrewd and persistent actions against its critics reflected its preoccupation with suppressing the perceived communist threat in El Salvador. False reports and press manipulation were employed to preserve "democracy" or political hegemony in Central America even if the regimes supported by the United States oppressed their civilian populations.

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