The Mainstream Media and United States’ Policy in El Salvador

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ABSTRACT

As far as the press of such a democratic political system is concerned, one would expect the American mainstream media to act independently of the government's will by putting the official pretexts and objectives for interference abroad under serious questioning -before accepting or rebutting them- looking for alternative sources of information, and instituting the conditions for a fair debate -by offering the opportunity to several conflicting opinions to argue and debate and then come out with the most convincing conclusions. In order to check if the US mainstream media acted as an independent organ during U.S. interference in El Salvador, I will examine their treatment of the official objectives for intervention as well as the most prominent themes and methods they applied during their coverage of a typical case study of American Global Realism.¹

KEYWORDS: Media and Foreign Policy / El Salvador / Propaganda Themes and Methods

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES: Cultural Studies / Media Studies / Political Science / International Relations / History

INTRODUCTION

With the crucial crises of the 1980s, the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam media would have the opportunity to put their new status under serious testing. The US government’s interventions in Latin America would offer the American newsmakers a nice opportunity to demonstrate their independence vis-à-vis Washington’s news management machine. The US reporters’ significant presence in countries like El Salvador and Nicaragua was destined to offer a direct and independent coverage of events, and to secede from the traditional reliance on official information sources. Now, I will rely on various “propaganda” themes and methods regularly used by the mainstream press while covering events taking place in the developing world countries in order to offer an analysis of the prestige media’s treatment of the Salvadoran 1979-1992 crisis. This analysis will help us determine if the major papers offered clear alternative interpretations of the Salvadoran events or if they followed the official line with a bulk of coverage reflecting the US government's view of events.

PROPAGANDA THEMES

“American virtue and anti-Americanism”

One of the main themes of the propaganda model deals with the motives behind the American continual interventions in several Third World countries. With very few sporadic exceptions, the major papers do not challenge the official arguments for intervention. The press generally depicts the US government’s actions as necessary for the ‘national security’ and the ‘national interest’. In El Salvador, the media generally accepted the official Cold War strategy and so downplayed the roots of the conflict. Most of the media outlets did not focus on the chronic socio-economic injustices, which had progressively paved the way for social revolution, nor did they focus on the US role in supporting its client-state government and in financing and guiding its repressive military apparatus. Adopting Washington’s geopolitical explanations, the media perpetuated the belief that communist-inspired guerillas were the cause of El Salvador’s social turmoil, rather than the country's real enemy -social and economic inequality.

Launching a well-orchestrated disinformation campaign, the White House began in early 1981 to leak stories portraying Cuba and the Soviet Union as the source of revolution and upheaval in Central America, and especially in Nicaragua and El Salvador. One of the fruits of such a campaign was a February 6, 1981 New York Times article reporting that “the Soviet Union and Cuba agreed last year to deliver tons of weapons to Marxist-led guerillas in El Salvador”. The Times based its charge on “secret documents reportedly captured from the insurgents by Salvadoran security forces” and placed the story on the front page.² Such prominent placement in the nation’s leading newspaper ensured that the story would be widely picked up in the rest of the American media. On February 12, for example, CBS announced that “officials say the evidence is

¹ For a detailed analysis of the role of the mainstream media in American foreign policy, see Wassim Daghrir, The Media and Foreign Policy (Saarbrucken, Germany: Scholars' Press, 2015).
unmistakable that the Cubans are supplying the guerillas in El Salvador under the direct sponsorship of the Soviet Union”. Similarly, an NBC documentary on El Salvador closed with the following comment:

In the long run only American aid will allow Salvadorans to stop the guerillas... If we and our democratic friends in El Salvador can’t change things our way, the admirers of Fidel Castro will change things their way. Such geopolitical opinions, fashioned by the country’s main information vehicles at the early stages of the conflict, placed the Salvadoran revolution within a Cold War frame. Thus, by adopting the ideological explanations, the media left no room for a serious questioning of the necessity of a US intervention. The US would have to get deeply engaged in El Salvador, not to back up a repressive regime, but to oppose Cuban and Soviet-inspired defiance. Criticizing the wisdom behind such national security measures would be evidently unpatriotic.

“The non-existence of imperialism”

According to the mainstream media, the US does not go abroad to back up its business allies and to defend the status quo. The US intervenes to “protect national security”, “to put an end to terrorist threats”, and “to defend the national interest”, without providing clear definitions of such interests. Occasionally, the press deals with social and economic inequalities as among the causes of the conflict, but the US corporate hand is rarely treated as one of the sources of such inequalities. While covering El Salvador, very few editorials focused on the historical alliance between the Salvadoran government, as the voice of the military and the oligarchies, and the American business elite. Actually, a few reports mentioned that a large number of American companies, including US Steel, United Brands, Standard Fruit, Chase Manhattan, Bank of America, First National Bank, and Texaco, were obtaining large profits by paying Salvadoran workers subsistence wages. Of the hundreds of reports about El Salvador, few uncovered the close alliance and the mutual-interest cooperation between the US business class and the Salvadoran ruling minority. Nor was much said about how US economic and military aid was used to maintain the status-quo and secure the privileges of the Salvadoran socio-economic elite. These facts being concealed, the US intervention in the conflict was described as necessary for a ‘national interest’ rationale.

“Moderate authoritarian regimes”

The media regularly describe US-backed leaders as ‘moderates’ and purveyors of order and stability. Violence is often portrayed as the result of left and right extremism. So, by depicting a military-backed civilian junta as striking a course between the violent extremes of left and right, the press exonerates it from any complicity in the government-sponsored abuses. Thus, in 1980, NBC News described the government of El Salvador, which was famous for its regular acts of repression and torture, as “moderate”. Similarly, in July 1980, the Christian Science Monitor cleared the Salvadoran junta of any guilt:

The country’s buffeted junta, weathering almost daily disorders and vicious verbal attacks from both the left and the right, faces its most serious tempest to date. Whether through willful misinformation or ignorance, the prestige media promoted the view that the Salvadoran junta, which was in the commands before Duarte’s 1984 election, was a ‘moderate’ body struggling to maintain order in the face of left and right-wing extremist minorities. Nevertheless, various observers rejected the right/left depiction. Former US ambassador to El Salvador Murat Williams, for example, put it this way:

The ‘left’ was more accurately a heterogeneous mix of peasants, students, teachers, priests, nuns, and middle-class businessmen, comprising about eighty percent of the population. What remained was less ‘center’ than ‘right’, comprised chiefly of the military and the oligarchy.

Similarly, reporter Raymond Bonner explained the inaccuracy of the myth of a Salvadoran ‘moderate’ junta as follows:

The young, progressive officers who carefully plotted the [1979] coup lost control of it as swiftly as they had executed it. Their ideals and objectives were subverted by senior, more conservative officers who had the backing of

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3 Cited in Ibid, p. 110.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p. 178.
The Salvadoran government was then not centrist. It was a regime of the right closely linked to the death squads. For the New York Times' editorialists, however, the junta was a “weak, centrist government...beset by implacable extremes”\(^\text{12}\). On March 29, 1980, the New York Times announced the resignation of three high Salvadoran officials, who, according to the article, “resigned last night in protest against the junta’s inability to halt violence by leftist and rightist forces”\(^\text{13}\). One of the resigning officials, Undersecretary of Agriculture Jorge Alberto Villacorta, issued a public statement declaring that

> I resigned because I believed that it was useless to continue in a government not only incapable of putting an end to the violence, but a government which itself is generating the political violence through repression.\(^\text{14}\)

The readers of the New York Times were offered an incomplete picture. They were directed to believe in the US official view of a Salvadoran government that was struggling “to halt violence by leftist and rightist forces”, not of that of a regime that was “itself generating the political violence through repression”. Such selected quotations were intended to support the theme of a Salvadoran ‘moderate authoritarian regime’ and so to stick to the official line.

In order to legitimize the US-backed government, public relations efforts, even though sophisticated ones, were obviously not enough. Elections were essential for the Reagan Administration’s campaign to portray El Salvador as a ‘fledgling democracy’. Traditionally, the US media expose US-orchestrated elections as a ‘triumph for democracy’, and El Salvador’s 1982, 1984, and 1989 elections offered clear examples of the US media’s biased treatment of US-sponsored elections. With very few exceptions, the Salvadoran elections received enthusiastic coverage in the US media and were considered as a clear advance towards democracy. On a CBS election special, for example, Dan Rather pronounced the 1982 election “a triumph”. Frank Reynolds of ABC called it a “gratifying, even inspiring exercise in democracy”.\(^\text{15}\) “Is the military playing any role in the elections?”, New York Times correspondent Warren Hoge asked in March 1982. “Members of the military are not allowed to vote, and the armed forces are pledged to protect voters from violence and to respect the outcome of the context.”\(^\text{16}\) Hoge failed to mention the terror of the prior 30 months that had killed opposition leaders, demobilized and destroyed virtually all popular organizations, and kept the main opposition off the ballot.\(^\text{17}\)

The US media and the European media gave different accounts of the Salvadoran elections. Analyzing the comparative coverage, media analyst Jennifer Schirmer concluded that the enthusiastic US coverage was “remarkably different” from the reaction of the European press, which focused on the circumstances of terror, coerced voting, and other crucial factors suppressed in the euphoric US commentary.\(^\text{18}\) In effect, whereas the European press referred to El Salvador’s ‘demonstration elections’\(^\text{19}\), the bulk of US mainstream coverage reflected the US official view of the elections. Actually, in the mind of most US journalists, elections equaled democracy. But, such formulation did not necessarily hold in El Salvador. Meaningful elections were impossible when the country was literally under a state of siege, and when freedom of speech and of press were almost nonexistent.\(^\text{20}\) We will later offer a detailed analysis of the US media treatment of the Salvadoran elections and compare it to their handling of the Nicaraguan elections. For now, we would just mention that many analysts agreed that the mainstream media cooperated in portraying the Salvadoran elections in accordance with the US government’s agenda, that the media’s analysis of the elections paralleled that of the White House, and that the post-election coverage failed to highlight the failure of the election to substitute ballots for bullets.

When the US-backed José Napoleon Duarte won the 1984 elections, the US newsmedia considered it a victory for democracy. Although political assassinations continued under his rule, the media portrayed Duarte as a neutral, moderate element caught between extremists on the left and right. Such portrayals downplayed the fact that most killings were committed by death squads connected to Duarte’s government. Analyzing over 800 articles taken from the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, the Christian Science Monitor, and the Miami Herald, journalist Marc Cooper found that the Salvadoran story was not “being reported as one of repression, escalating war, and massive human rights violations, but rather as one of hope for peace and democratic renaissance”.\(^\text{21}\) According to Marc Cooper,

> Duarte’s inauguration...brought to a crescendo the volume of news reports characterizing El Salvador as a budding democracy. Duarte was celebrated

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{15}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) *BBC*’s summary report, for example, commented that a fair election under the circumstances of state terror that *BBC* had reviewed was completely out of the question (Ibid).
as a ‘moderate’, a ‘moderate centrist’, and as the country’s ‘first democratically elected president’.22

As a proof that the US had found its long-sought-after democratic center, the Washington Post wrote that Duarte was being hamstrung because he had to operate with “one eye on extreme rightists maneuvering to lure the army back into government and another on leftist rebels fighting to make a revolution”.23 The Post’s editors explained their support for the Duarte government in this way:

Duarte has worked hard, governing in a democratic manner, starting to tame the criminal right and to subordinate the armed forces, prosecuting a war and a social revolution, and cushioning as best he can the cruel economic effects of war, backwardness and social change. […] The US has a firm obligation to support an imperfect but striving democracy in El Salvador.24

Long after his inauguration, Duarte was still not charged with complicity in the retrograde policy, but portrayed only as a victim of it. In fact, there were hundreds of articles lauding Duarte’s promises to curb human rights abuses, but “not a single article analyzing the nature of Duarte’s alliance with the military establishment”25, the real rulers.

After his analysis of the major dailies’ treatment of President Duarte, Marc Cooper concluded that the press was faithfully following the US official line:

US press reporting on El Salvador in the 19-month period beginning with José Napoleon Duarte’s campaigning for the presidency, has veered closer to the Reagan Administration’s position than ever before. President Duarte was uncritically accepted as a centrist, a democrat, a last grasp for peace. His promises to curb human rights abuses were taken at face value, rarely challenged, followed up or researched. That Duarte had presided over the governing junta during the bloodiest period of state terror in Salvadoran history was not seen as a possible impediment to his self-proclaimed role as reconciler and reformer.

In whatever context Duarte was viewed, the focus was always on him as the force for reason, moderation and progress. The glaring deficiencies of his regime were shrugged off as matters beyond his control. As Duarte solidified an obvious political pact with the military right, by whose good graces he is allowed to govern, the press still saw him as a fiercely independent ‘third force’.26

The 1989 elections brought Alfredo Cristiani, the representative of the right-wing party ARENA, into power. The US press described Cristiani, who was a close friend of his party’s president Roberto D’Aubuisson - an admirer of Adolf Hitler - as a ‘moderate’. Prior to the elections, Newsweek called Cristiani “the pleasant, democratic candidate”.27 Similarly, the New York Times argued that “Arena’s leaders now include far-rightists like Mr. D’Aubuisson and moderates like Mr. Cristiani”.28

Former US Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White described Arena as a “fascist party modeled after the Nazis”.29 Yet, after the Arena candidate’s electoral victory, Associated Press leaned heavily on the past tense in reporting that Arena “was once linked to human rights abuses”30 and Newsweek described Cristiani’s government as a “democracy, or at least a pretty good approximation of it”.31

In a word, news reports in the US media regularly used euphemisms to describe El Salvador. The US-backed government was referred to as a ‘democracy’ or a ‘fledgling democracy’ and the US-supported leaders were termed ‘moderates’. Having described the Salvadoran government as a moderate democracy, the media left no room for a serious questioning of the US infinite support for its Salvadoran ally.

“Evil, power-hungry leftists”

The media often treat leftist revolutionary struggles as dangerous conspiracies, not as the outgrowth of popular injustice. Social revolutions are generally seen as being by their very nature disruptive, destabilizing, violent, and undemocratic.32

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 10.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
Dealing with El Salvador’s opposition movement, the US media labeled the FMLN members as ‘extremists’, and ‘aggressive Marxists’. Actually, designations like ‘Marxist’, ‘communist’, and ‘leftist’ create an automatic negative framing and bring about the US public’s automatic rejection of such movements.

Discussing the popular struggles in El Salvador, Washington Post editor (and former CIA agent) Philip Geyelin referred to “communist exploitation of grievances”, and “communist contribution to instability”. The mainstream newspapers’ readers learn that leftists try to “gain strength”, “create chaos”, “take advantage of turmoil”, and “destabilize”, as if such revolutionaries were not motivated by the yearning for more justice and equality, but by a nihilistic pursuit of power. Portraying the Salvadoran opposition movement as “communist” and “power-hungry” devoiced such movement of its popular base and of its legitimate requests and, so, offered an excuse for its destructors.

PROPAGANDA METHODS

Selectivity and deliberate omissions

Manipulations often hide in the information left unmentioned. While covering events going on in a friendly state, the media omit thousands of ‘details’ that would be newsworthy if they occurred in an unfriendly country. As far as El Salvador was concerned, the media regularly omitted details about the government’s alliance with the military establishment. Moreover, the details of the massacres carried out by the US-equipped security forces were often ignored by US correspondents.

In the mid-1980s, the US provided the Duarte government with the largest air force in Central America. In 1984 and 1985, the Salvadoran Air Force dropped over 3,000 US-made bombs on civilian populations causing more than 2,000 deaths, with no convenient coverage in the US major papers. Accordingly, investigative journalist Alexander Cockburn speculated in June 1985:

> How is it that over the past two years the US has been organizing, supplying, overseeing and in many cases actually executing the heaviest bombing and most ferocious aerial war ever seen in the Americas, and not one coherent report of the extent, viciousness, or consequences of this campaign has ever appeared in any US major newspaper or magazine?

At a time when Americas Watch claimed that “indiscriminate Air Force attacks were causing many civilian deaths”, a number of US journalists reported the opposite. On June 2, 1985, for instance, a Washington Post report indicated that a number of government political and military moves “had combined to calm the turmoil” in El Salvador. “The armed forces”, the Post’s report continued, “gradually have curbed the use of brutal tactics”. Similarly, the New York Times asserted: “El Salvador’s armed forces have moved away from methods that gave them a reputation as a corrupt and repressive institution.” It was not until three years after the Salvadoran army turned to frequent aerial bombardment that a coherent major article appeared attempting to sum up the effects of the air war. On July 18, 1985, the New York Times indicated that the Salvadoran Air Force had assumed “an essential role” in the war and had “almost doubled in size” since the election of Duarte. Had the Times published such information, in such a coherent manner, three years earlier, the US Congress would maybe not have agreed to finance the Salvadoran government’s military operations. Had the press clearly explored how the human rights record would have been if the Salvadoran military had not been provided for by Washington with an inexhaustible supply of weapons, thousands of civilians might not have disappeared under US-made bombs.

The manipulative handling of foreign policy news does not only fall back on deliberate omissions, but also on a selective handling of information. Actually, the US major papers treated the reports issued by the international human rights organizations in a very selective manner. In the Washington Post’s op-ed page –which is one of the most important places to debate US foreign policy- there was little room for the respected Americas Watch organization which scrutinized human rights abuses in El Salvador. The Post’s editors deemed Americas Watch too biased. Yet, they published several articles by Helsinki Watch, its sister group that scrutinized abuses in the Eastern bloc.

The human rights organizations’ reports about human rights violations in El Salvador were systematically ignored by the mainstream media. In October 1988, for instance, Amnesty International released a document entitled El Salvador’s Death Squads: a Government Strategy reporting that the right-wing death squads had tortured and killed hundreds of Salvadorans in the preceding 18 months:

> There can be no recourse to the police or military when they themselves carry out death squad killings... The Salvadoran death squads are simply

33 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
This report received no notice in the New York Times. Indeed, the numerous human rights groups’ reports that linked death squad atrocities to the Salvadoran government were constantly ignored by the US press for the reason that they were at odds with the image of a moderate centrist government that Washington had been trying to maintain. Reporting on death squads as an independent force allowed the US government to continue providing massive military aid to the Salvadoran ‘moderate’ government.

Lies and face-value transmission

Because omissions are sometimes not sufficient, the government designs the kind of information that would support its interpretation of events. The media often disseminate such information without serious investigation. By treating as face-value the information that they are not able to confirm, the media can but stand up for the government’s agenda. One of the most telling examples of the media’s face-value transmission of official information was its response to the State Department’s February 1981 White Paper on ‘Communist interference in El Salvador’. Most journalists did not bother to examine the documents released in support of the paper (in Spanish) and chose instead to file reports based on the summary provided by the State Department (in English). Typical was NBC News’ State Department correspondent Bernard Kalb who, brandishing the White Paper on camera, announced that:

> It contains almost two hundred pages of what are described as documents demonstrating Communist support of the Salvadoran insurgency. A second document refers to 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.

To NBC, the key question was not whether all this was true but what the US was going to do about it:

> Is the Reagan administration contemplating any military action against Cuba, including a naval blockade to try to cut off military hardware going to the guerrillas? At the tender age of $65 million in emergency aid to the Salvadoran government. And after the White Paper coup, the issue was no longer if the US should intervene but how.

Months in the future, the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post would expose the White Paper as disinformation, but that was long after Congress had accepted the Reagan Administration’s request for aid to El Salvador. Moreover, such exposure would be given far less prominence in the media than the White Paper itself.

The US media did not act as transmission belts exclusively for the American government’s disinformation but also for the Salvadoran’s. In February 1988, for example, a New York Times story on pre-electoral violence in El Salvador asserted:

> Villagers say guerrillas publicly executed two peasants in the town of Guatajagua in Morazán department three weeks ago because they had applied for and received new voter registration cards. According to villagers, the guerrillas placed the voting cards of Juan Martín Portillo and Ismael Portillo in their mouths after executing them as a warning to others not to take part in the elections.

This incident, as reported by Times correspondent James LeMoyne, never happened. It was rather invented by a Salvadoran army propaganda specialist who placed it with one of his contacts in the local Salvadoran media. Having deemed it not necessary to investigate the story, US reporters faithfully transmitted official Salvadoran disinformation. Thus, they assisted the Salvadoran army in its efforts to justify its anti-leftist operations.

Leaving official disinformation uncorrected was the most common pattern of helping the official line. By treating as face-value official disinformation, the media could but take significant part in the US/Salvadoran huge public relations campaign.

False balancing

The stories that challenge the official version are not totally excluded, but they are not given equal coverage in matter of space, position, and frequency. As far as the US media’s coverage of the Salvadoran conflict was concerned, the
government's brutality did not pass entirely unnoticed. But, critical reports received a sporadic coverage - versus saturation coverage for the supportive reports. In fact, unfavorable news was given none of the coherent repetition needed to create a climate of opinion on the issue. There were some reports which covered the atrocities performed by governmental forces. Nevertheless, such reports were balanced with information about 'guerilla terror'. The message was the following: the US-backed government may not have been perfect, but its deficiencies were a response to guerilla atrocities. News accounts referred to 'human rights abuses on both sides', when the records of the legal aid office of the Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador showed them running 30 to 1 toward the government.47

Furthermore, the media made use of various manipulative techniques in order to balance an unbalanced reality. In effect, the press regularly disseminated the belief that the bulk of El Salvador's thousands of assassinations were the work of Marxist-inspired guerillas or reactionary right-wing extremists, when most of the atrocities were perpetrated by rightist death squads linked to the military.

As part of their efforts to offer a balanced representation of an unbalanced reality, the mainstream media misrepresented Father Oscar Romero's views. Archbishop Romero was a fervent opponent of the Salvadoran government's human rights abuses. He was unequivocal in laying the blame for the violence on the army, and he viewed the left and popular groupings as victims provoked into self-defense by violence and injustice.48 The people's organizations, Romero told Carter, "are fighting to defend their most fundamental human rights" against a military establishment that "knows only how to repress the people and defend the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy".49 Yet, a March 31, 1980 New York Times front-page article stated that "Romero had criticized both the extreme right and the extreme left for widespread killing and torture in El Salvador".50 Such a heavy reliance on false balancing served to create a false impression: a large campaign of state-sponsored terror was reduced to a violent confrontation between leftist and rightist extremists.

**Framing and labeling**

One of the most obvious methods of misrepresentation is the way the information is framed. The amount of exposure, the placement, the auxiliary embellishments, and the labeling can direct the information’s recipients towards a chosen direction. The newspapers’ reader would then be reading information with the glasses that have been chosen for him by the ‘news framers’.

The use of selected headlines can be highly manipulative, especially when they are poorly connected to the text. Consider the headline of a December 1988 New York Times article: "Salvadoran Rebels Step Up Terrorism". The lead reported on the leftist’s use of terrorism. One learned only in the last paragraph of a 22-paragraph story that Americas Watch found the Salvadoran government was responsible for two out of every three civilian deaths in El Salvador.51

Labeling the Salvadoran opposition as ‘leftist guerillas’ and sometimes as ‘terrorists’ reduced their status and their effort to an armed struggle. Labeling them as the Salvadoran ‘opposition’ would have given a political sense to their engagement. Similarly, the Washington Post’s description of a Salvadoran province as "guerilla-infested" rather than "guerilla-controlled" or "pro-Revolutionary", reduced the insurgent populace to a kind of lice.52

The media’s careful selection of labels and other vocabulary was designed to convey politically loaded images. Indeed, labeling Duarte as a ‘moderate’, the government as a ‘fledgling democracy’, and the opposition as the ‘extremist guerillas’ served to convey positive cues on US allies and negative cues on their foes, without departing too far from the appearance of objectivity.

**-The Bonner and Guillermoprieto cases**-

There is no doubt that the propaganda themes and misinformation methods analyzed above were not strictly followed by all reporters and all editors at all times. There was, for sure, some journalistic dissent from the administration line - even though this dissent remained the exception rather than the rule. In early 1982, New York Times journalist Ray Bonner issued a series of reports which contradicted the official line. On January 26, 1982, for example, Bonner explained the inaccuracy of Washington’s Cold War approach as follows:

El Salvador’s political and military call them [the FMLN] ‘terrorists’ and blame communist subversion for the war here. US officials agree with what those leaders say: that Cuba and Nicaragua are supplying weapons, training and men. But the peasants and their leaders here in Morazan, where the anti-government movement is the strongest, contend that theirs is an indigenous revolution spawned by decades of political and social injustice.53

The raison d’etre for such dissenting articles was simple: with more disagreement over foreign policy, there were more people willing to leak information or to give dissenting opinions. There was also more determination by post-Vietnam, post-

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47 Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon, Adventures in Medialand, op. cit., p. 179.
48 Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, Manufacturing Consent, op. cit., pp. 53-54.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 The NYT, December 1988. See also Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, Unreliable Sources, op. cit., p. 88.
52 The WP, August 18 and September 16, 1990. See also Michael Parenti, Inventing Reality, op. cit., p.201.
Watergate reporters to look for dissident sources, and more willingness on the part of editors to put leaked information into print.\textsuperscript{54}

In January 1982, \textit{Washington Post}'s reporter Alma Guillermoprieto and \textit{New York Times}' reporter Ray Bonner reported the massacres committed by the Salvadoran military in Morazan. The stories by Bonner and Guillermoprieto were published on the front-pages of the \textit{New York Times} and the \textit{Washington Post} on January 27, 1982 -one day before President Reagan certified to Congress that the US-backed government in El Salvador was making “a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights” and was “achieving substantial control over all elements of its own armed forces, so as to bring an end to the indiscriminate torture and murder of Salvadoran citizens”\textsuperscript{55}. The Bonner and Guillermoprieto stories complicated the Reagan Administration’s efforts to secure congressional approval of additional military aid to the Salvadoran junta. They also opened up new political space, so that the rest of the press could feel free to report information at odds with the official version of events. Yet, this space often went unfulfilled.\textsuperscript{56}

Bonner and Guillermoprieto were severely attacked, not only by the White House, but also by their colleagues in the mainstream media and by various media groups [Accuracy in Media, for example]. Since Bonner and Guillermoprieto’s stories contradicted the official line, the Reagan Administration as well as its political allies responded by attacking the reporting as biased and the reporters as ‘communist sympathisers’. The administration expressed serious doubts about the reporters’ professionalism and patriotism. It accused them of being heavily influenced by the Salvadoran left and severely biased against the US government and its allies.

Various media groups expressed similar criticism of Bonner and Guillermoprieto’s reporting. In effect, a few days after the controversial articles were published, there appeared a storm of conservative criticism, which centered around the charge that the press was “romanticizing revolution”\textsuperscript{57}. The \textit{Wall Street Journal}, for instance, published an editorial on February 10, 1982 blasting the press, and Bonner in particular:

> Much of the American media... was dominated by a style of reporting that grew out of Vietnam -in which communist sources were given greater credence than either the US government or the government it was supporting [...] Are we going to have to watch this script replayed again in El Salvador, or can we in the press succeed in bringing some perspective to the story?\textsuperscript{58}

Under intense pressure, the \textit{New York Times} and the \textit{Washington Post} pulled their reporters out of El Salvador. Bonner and Guillermoprieto’s removal had a ‘chilling effect’ on news coverage. It sent a powerful message to the other mainstream journalists who stayed behind reporting on El Salvador: Reporting the facts -when they conflict too much with the official version- can cost you your job. Raymond Bonner, himself, noted that his experience had a chilling effect on many other reporters who told him: “I don’t want the same thing to happen to me. I’m going to be careful”.\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, the other journalists were warned against reporting too frankly about US policy in Central America, and the American public was thus deprived of a complete accounting of events in the field. A few years later, Ray Bonner declared:

> I don’t think I got transferred from El Salvador because of administration pressure. The administration didn’t like it, but I think the real problem was that my reporting didn’t fit the tenor of the \textit{Times}.\textsuperscript{60}

Bonner was a gifted reporter, but he was inexperienced in the ways of the \textit{New York Times}. It took him some time to realize that dissenting too much from Washington’s version of reality was not within the \textit{Times}’ functioning habits.

Why US coverage of a place like El Salvador tended to be so supportive of official positions could be explained by the following grounds: First, reporters were under a myriad of pressures. Their editors were not familiar with the complexities of Latin America and were eager to favor readily digestible formulas [East vs. West, democracy vs. communism, moderation vs. extremism,...]. There was also a lot of pressure on reporters to cover the day’s drama at the expense of historical analyses.\textsuperscript{61} In fact, reporters in the field did not have enough time to deal with the roots of the conflict, and tended rather to simplify the events. Second, the reporters were dependent on some subjective sources [the State Department, the US Embassy, the Salvadoran government]. To keep access to the US Embassy in San Salvador, the reporters were fully aware that they could not diverge a lot from the official line. Third, foreign reporters in El Salvador were constantly under pressure from the Salvadoran military. Journalists who were deemed pro-revolutionary and biased against the Salvadoran government were expelled. Finally, most US reporters and editors shared the same worldview as the American political elite [Free World vs. Communist Bloc]. This ideological conformity, based on a common suspicion of leftist groups and revolutionary movements, was unconsciously reflected in the reporters’ interpretation of the Central American events.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Joel Millman, “How the Press Distorts the News from Central America”, \textit{The Progressive}, October 1984, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{61} Marc Cooper, “Whitewashing Duarte”, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 10.
 Needless to say, not all journalists were confused by the political situation, manipulated by the State Department and the US Embassy, intimidated by the Salvadoran military, nor called back home by their editors. Various investigative reporters, most of whom belonged to the alternative press, managed to send excellent reports which were immediately published by their newspapers. Journalist Peter Fox from the *Billings Gazette*, for example, reported in summer 1983:

> What we saw and learned during our time in Managua and the country-side was alarming because it did not correspond with what we had been reading in US newspapers, seeing on US television, and hearing from our government.  

It was not until the beginning of the 1990s that the US mainstream media reported what the alternative press had been publishing for more than a decade: the government of El Salvador and the Salvadoran army, with the support of the Reagan-Bush administrations and the funding of US-taxpayers, were responsible for most of the atrocities during the 12-year conflict.

**REFERENCES**


**Author’s Biography**

Dr. Wassim Daghrir, PhD in American History, Politics and Cultural Studies from the University of Paris in 2003 and a Post-Doctorate in American Civilization from New York University in 2009. Professor with over 16 years of experience at Tunisian, French, American and Saudi universities. Fulbright Scholar in Villanova University, Philadelphia. Guest speaker in Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C. He is also the author of 2 books and several international articles dealing with several Cultural Studies, American Studies, and American History topics.

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63 Ibid.