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Running Scared in the Valley Below: El Salvador's Role in the Creation of Central American Neoliberalism

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Abstract

When U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota) questioned Elliott Abrams about his involvement in the 1981 El Mozote Massacre – in which the Salvadoran Army brutally killed more than 800 civilians execution-style, many of them women and children – in front of the House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs in February 2019, she awakened a monster that had been sleeping away from the public's eye for nearly 40 years. The El Mozote Massacre, in which nearly one thousand Salvadorans were callously murdered –women and children included – helped to inaugurate the unprecedented and sadistic counterrevolutionary violence supported materially and ideologically by the Reagan administration. Through eyewitness accounts, political analysis and criticism of the state violence against rural leftists and villagers, the violent record of El Salvador and its biggest supporter – the Reagan administration in Washington – is brought under full question, the survivors of its many brutalities lifted up in a liberatory and long overdue history of the counterrevolutionary violence in Central America during the 1980s which shocked the largely rural and agrarian population into accepting economic violence under austerity and neoliberalism during the 1990s.

Keywords

Latin America, Central America, Neoliberalism, El Salvador, Reaganism, El Mozote, Capitalism, Salvadoran Civil War, Elliott Abrams

Running Scared in the Valley Below

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When U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota) questioned Elliott Abrams about his involvement in the 1981 El Mozote Massacre — in which the Salvadoran Army brutally killed more than 800 civilians execution-style, many of them women and children — in front of the House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs in February 2019, she awakened a monster that had been sleeping away from the public's eye for nearly 40 years. The El Mozote Massacre, in which nearly one thousand Salvadorans were callously murdered —women and children included — helped to inaugurate the unprecedented and sadistic counterrevolutionary violence supported materially and ideologically by the Reagan administration. Through eyewitness accounts, political analysis and criticism of the state violence against rural leftists and villagers, the violent record of El Salvador and its biggest supporter — the Reagan administration in Washington — is brought under full question, the survivors of its many brutalities lifted up in a liberatory and long overdue history of the counterrevolutionary violence in Central America during the 1980s which shocked the largely rural and agrarian population into accepting economic violence under austerity and neoliberalism during the 1990s.

Keywords: Latin America, Central America, neoliberalism, El Salvador, Reaganism, El Mozote, capitalism, Salvadoran civil war, Elliott Abrams

*“Suit and tie comes up to me
His face red like a rose on a thorn bush
Like all the colors of a royal flush
And he’s peeling off those dollar bills
Slappin’ em down
One hundred, two hundred.”*
- *Bullet the Blue Sky*, U2, lyrics by Bono

REVISITING THE LEGACY OF THE EL MOZOTE MASSACRE IN FEBRUARY 2019

“The U.S. policy in El Salvador was a fabulous achievement.”
- Elliott Abrams, 1991

When U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota) questioned Elliott Abrams about his involvement in the 1981 El Mozote Massacre—in which the Salvadoran Army brutally killed more than 800 civilians execution-style, many of them women and children—in front of the House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs in February 2019, she awakened a monster that had been sleeping away from the public's eye for nearly 40 years. Occurring less than a year into the Reagan administration, the El Mozote Massacre represented the first

of many horrifying escalations of violence against the working-class and their left-wing allies across Central America, a string of policy that Abrams himself called a “fabulous achievement” in a later interview. While Omar was drawing attention to a forgotten atrocity, a bygone moment of a Lost Decade, she was questioning the man who had just been appointed as U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela as the leadership of both American political parties was openly calling for regime change in that country. Her questioning of a moment in history that was immediately forgotten, swept under the rug by Abrams and his Reagan-era counterparts, reveals much about the modern history of a region consumed by complete and total violence and death squads in the 1980s before transitioning to economic violence and “violence to the spirit” under neoliberalism in the 1990s onward. The El Mozote Massacre, and the myriad of other military operations funded and sponsored by the United States, represent a concerted effort to wipe clean the political conscience of nations, robbing the working-class of any hope or decency, and paving the way for the indecency and inhumanity of austerity-driven neoliberal policies, a return to order for the capitalist class. Through case studies of El Salvador, including the infamous December 1981 El Mozote Massacre, the picture becomes clear; violent atrocities designed to shock and cleanse

the working-class manufactured the instability that was needed to justify the cruel economic doctrine of neoliberalism.

U.S. COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL AMERICA TAKES A VIOLENT TURN UNDER THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION

“Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States today.”

- Jeane Kirkpatrick, 1981

By the time Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, the United States had already authored a long history of imperial actions south of their borders. Even during Latin American administrations less favorable toward Uncle Sam, U.S. corporations were making all-time profits at the end of the Carter administration, investing \$3.8 billion from 1950 to 1965 and netting \$11.2 billion in profits, contrasting with the \$8.1 billion invested in Europe with \$5.5 billion in profits¹. Howard Zinn describes the relationship between the relatively newly minted “multinational corporations” (MNCs) and their poorer southern neighbors as “the classic imperial situation.”² Indeed, infrequent trade protections under more progressive populist administrations could not keep MNCs from massive profits at the expense of local ecosystems and the Latin American working-class. While the United States relied on imports from poorer Latin American and African nations for much of their luxury industries, they offered exports of their own: the School of the Americas located in the Panama Canal zone trained and funded counterrevolutionary guerrillas that attacked leftist governments and organizations during the 1980s. This balancing act of imports and exports was threatened when leftist forces eager to end American imperialism came aboard in Nicaragua just before Reagan’s election; the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan dynastic dictatorship had been ousted in 1979 after a year-long coup attempt by the leftist Sandinistas, named after Nicaraguan revolutionary hero Augusto Sandino. The end of the Somoza dynasty meant the

U.S. could no longer rely on Nicaragua, which had long been a reliable ally in the region, “a base for the projection of U.S. power.”³ It quickly became an infamous proxy zone for the Cold War, and sparked fears within the U.S. national security state apparatus that similar peasant rebellion could take hold in the surrounding El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.

The success of the Cuban Revolution two decades prior had reignited the hopes of revolutionaries across the region, prompting a rise in legitimacy for many leftist groups. First, the Somoza dictatorship fell, giving rise in legitimacy to the leftist Sandinista coalition, followed by a renewed threat to the Guatemalan military regime and the rising success of popular organizations in El Salvador, which Chomsky argues is what directly led to the Reagan administration’s increase in murderous violence in Nicaragua and El Salvador. It all ties together nicely in the administration’s United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick’s 1981 United Nations statement that, “Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States today.”⁴ It’s then no coincidence that the El Mozote Massacre, forgotten in public memory, but one of the most hideous atrocities in the history of the western hemisphere, occurred less than a year into the Reagan presidency, sponsored by the U.S. and with the support of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (a laughably ironic title) Elliott Abrams, who in 2019 was skewered by Ilhan Omar during testimony. Jeane Kirkpatrick is quoted in full below, in a 1979 interview with *Commentary*:

Traditional autocrats leave in place existing allocations of wealth, power, status, and other resources which in most societies favor an affluent few and maintain masses in poverty. But they worship traditional gods and observe traditional taboos... because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to

¹ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (Revised and Updated Edition) (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1995), 556

² *Ibid*, 556

³ Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 8

⁴ Walter Lafeber, “The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America,” *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (1984): p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150256>

ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope...⁵

In other words, the Reagan administration favored the preservation of the preexisting conditions of cancerous capitalism, spreading without hope of removal through the rural villages of Central America. Any operation to remove the cancer was unacceptable; its existence was to be terminal for the rural peasantry. Chomsky details the rapid increase in malpractice; “As Reagan took over in 1981, the massacres increased both in sadism and scale, with 12,501 cases [of civilian torture in El Salvador] documented by the Legal Aid Service for 1981.”⁶ Military aid, too, increased as Reagan became President; in the years between 1946 and 1979, when El Salvador could comfortably hold its own against insurgent leftist guerrillas, total U.S. military aid to El Salvador equaled \$16.7 million. Reagan’s first year in office alone saw the figure increase to \$82 million.⁷ Reagan national security adviser Richard Allen offered his own explanation for the escalation in 1980, before the administration assumed office: “U.S. military power has always been the basis for the development of a just and humane foreign policy,” adding that, “what we need is another Teddy Roosevelt.”⁸

The events in El Salvador will make clear that the Reagan administration — which ran on the Republican Party plank of combatting “Marxist destabilization of Central America” — intended to use the region as a laboratory for the economic reforms that would come to be known as neoliberalism across the world. By escalating violence against rural working-class populations, counterrevolutionary groups funded and trained by the United States could shock the population into accepting the political realities of austerity-driven neoliberal policy in the following decades. By cleansing society of leftists and their sympathizers, regimes in Nicaragua and El Salvador specifically could reclaim the region for right-wing and U.S.

imperial interests. This paper does not specifically address Reagan’s funding of the Contras in Nicaragua to account for length and readability, though this example proves the same point and illustrates the numerous violations of human rights by the administration.

*“From the firefly
A red orange glow
See the face of fear*

Runnin' scared in the valley below.”

- *Bullet the Blue Sky*, U2, lyrics by Bono

BULLET THE BLUE SKY: THE EL MOZOTE MASSACRE AND “VIOLENCE TO THE SPIRIT”

Numerous human rights organizations — including an Amnesty International trip to Nicaragua and El Salvador attended by Bono, vocalist of popular rock band U2, which inspired the lyrics to “Bullet the Blue Sky” — visited Central America throughout the 1980s to monitor the widespread allegations of human rights abuses by Salvadoran death squads, all with the same takeaway; a physician claiming that “the worst atrocities were carried out by U.S-trained elite battalions,”⁹; the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence reporting that “numerous Salvadoran officials in the military and security forces... have been involved in encouraging or conducting death squad activities”¹⁰; a medical mission of the US National Academy of Sciences reporting that “wherever we turned we found the chilling effects of... the repression of human beings by the systematic use of terror in ways that are hideous and frightful”¹¹; the International Committee of the Red Cross cabling that “perhaps as many as ninety percent of detainees are being tortured during interrogation”¹²; and in 1985, the Salvadoran Commission of Human Rights stating that “torture in El Salvador has become customary as a method

⁵ Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 11

⁶ *Ibid* 25

⁷ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (Revised and Updated Edition) (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1995), 578

⁸ Walter Lafeber, “The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America,” *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (1984): p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150256>

⁹ Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 9

¹⁰ *Ibid* 22

¹¹ *Ibid* 26

¹² *Ibid*, 33

of work, considered natural and necessary by those who practice it.”¹³ Across the board, human rights organizations and eyewitness accounts detail murder in the most brutal terms: following rape, dismemberment and humiliation, often while the victims’ families watched. *The Economist*, in 1985, wrote of the “ten of thousands of murders committed since 1979 by military-manned death squads, with many more tortured and arrested, in El Salvador alone.”¹⁴ All of these heinous acts escalated once the Reagan administration took office, and they are all contained within eyewitness accounts of the El Mozote Massacre, occurring in December 1981.

December 11, 1981, may well be the date of the worst massacre in the history of the western hemisphere, though it has been all but completely written out of history. Eyewitness accounts and human rights organizations charge El Salvador’s elite U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion with murdering more than 800 civilians in the rural El Mozote that day, many of them women and children, as part of the broader “Operación Rescate”. The gruesome details are even more haunting. Quoted in full below, Jon Schwarz of *The Intercept* details the most severe of eyewitness accounts that December day:

In one instance, a Catholic priest reported that a peasant woman briefly left her three small children in the care of her mother and sister. When she returned, she found that all five had been decapitated by the Salvadoran National Guard. Their bodies were sitting around a table, with their hands placed on their heads in front of them, “as though each body was stroking its own head.” The hand of one, a toddler, apparently kept slipping off her small head, so it had been nailed onto it. At the center of the table was a large bowl full of blood.¹⁵

Other survivors remember soldiers joking about raping children as young as 10, bragging that 12 year-olds were their favorite, and even seeing a soldier toss a 3 year-old into the air, catching and spearing it on his bayonet. Branko Marcetic and Micah Uetrecht for Jacobin summarize, “El Mozote showed what the Salvadoran regime was capable of, and what

the US government was willing to tolerate, excuse, and cover for in service of supposed anticommunism.”¹⁶

For the Salvadoran government — a patchwork military junta joined by the National Guard and security apparatus, under the collective ESAF title — this represented a possibility to attack villages that had yet to come under the representation of El Salvador’s guerrilla groups, hoping they could be violently shocked into obedience. They targeted Catholic-majority villages which practiced the “liberation theology” that guided the leftist insurgent groups, making easy targets of the Church and its followers. El Mozote was confirmed by both Salvadoran and outside sources to be one of the few protestant-majority villages, with no influence of liberation theology, but they were not spared. For the United States, as historian Greg Grandin so succinctly analyzes, preserving social and economic control over Central America through armed conflicts allowed the Reagan administration and the resurgent Right to claim clean hands, purport to support human rights, and reaffirm national purpose and military superiority after dispiriting defeat in Vietnam. And by calling what was essentially extrajudicial summary execution of leftists and any working-class peasants willing to stand with them the “Salvadoran Civil War,” they could claim to uphold democracy by supporting the military junta claiming leadership of El Salvador.

In fact, the United States could also claim ignorance when their support for Salvadoran war criminals went sideways and garnered national attention in the United States. Elliott Abrams’ first day as Assistant Secretary of State, the day after the El Mozote Massacre, was perfectly timed as the administration sought to cover up their involvement. It would become a pattern for Abrams, who was indicted by Congress on perjury charges after lying under oath about the Reagan administration’s involvement in the Iran-Contra affair, though he was later pardoned by George H.W. Bush and has

¹³ Ibid 33

¹⁴ Ibid 24

¹⁵ Jon Schwarz, “Elliott Abrams, Trump’s Pick to Bring ‘Democracy’ to Venezuela, Has Spent His Life Crushing Democracy,” *The Intercept*, January 30, 2019,

<https://theintercept.com/2019/01/30/elliott-abrams-venezuela-coup/>

¹⁶ Micah Uetrecht and Branko Marcetic, “Remember El Mozote,” *Jacobin*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/el-mozote-el-salvador-war-reagan-atlacatl-massacre/>

since served in three presidential administrations.¹⁷ A 1991 cable from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency titled “El Mozote After Ten Years”, recovered by the University of Washington in a 2017 FOIA request, perfectly encapsulates the attitudes that right-wing presidencies held toward the violent atrocities carried out by El Salvador’s 1980s military regimes in a primary source document. The recently declassified attache was seen by high-ranking members of both the Defense and State Departments (including, of course, Elliott Abrams) — likely holdovers in the preceding Bush administration that produced the document — and describe survivors of the “alleged El Mozote Massacre” as sounding “actually rather convincing — in a well-rehearsed sort of way,” and the eyewitness accounts as “the story of the alleged massacre passing into left-wing folklore.”¹⁸ Even worse, the authors of the document question whether or not El Mozote even existed, offering little more than “no further evidence of a town proper.”¹⁹ A declassified 1981 Defense Department Report of the United States Southern Command, obtained in the same FOIA request, reveals that the United States sold \$13.9 million in arms to El Salvador during 1981, the same year of the El Mozote Massacre, Reagan’s first in office.²⁰ It is reasonable to expect that these were the same weapons used to open fire on the 800 civilians in the El Mozote Massacre, though the machetes used in beheadings were most likely domestically manufactured, resolving the U.S. of some responsibility.

The United States government has long held two positions on violence in El Salvador and the El Mozote Massacre; 1) that eyewitnesses embellished numbers of combat deaths, or even

that the Massacre did not take place; and 2) that any violence occurring in El Salvador (as well as Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, and so on) was necessary in the struggle against communism and for democracy. And so, when the official policy of denial becomes impossible due to historical facts inconveniently revealing themselves, U.S. officials pivot to the second position: that violence was necessary. Jeane Kirkpatrick in 1982 praised the Salvadoran government’s “moral quality” and Elliott Abrams, in 1993, wistfully remembered the U.S. policy in El Salvador as a “fabulous achievement.” His testimony was given after a United Nations Truth Commission, which pressured the Salvadoran government to excavate El Mozote in 1992. They recovered the skulls of 143 individuals. Hauntingly, just 12 of them did not belong to children.²¹ The forensic anthropologists with the blessing of the commission concluded:

All these facts tend to indicate the perpetration of a massive crime, there being no evidence to support the theory of a confrontation between two groups... the physical evidence from the exhumation of the convent house at El Mozote confirms the allegations of a mass murder.²²

The same commission found that 95 percent of the more than 75,000 civilian deaths during the “civil war” could be attributed to the same Salvadoran forces that were armed, trained, and funded by the United States,²³ under the direct watch of Elliott Abrams, who in 1983 attributed U.S. Central American policy to “the simple fact that we believe the world

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ United States. Department of Defense, “El Mozote After Ten Years,” University of Washington Libraries ResearchWorks Service, December 17, 1991, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/42775>)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ United States Southern Command, “United States Southern Command 1981 Historical Report,” University of Washington Libraries ResearchWorks Service, August 1, 1982, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/45382>)

²¹ Sarah Esther Maslin, “Remembering El Mozote, the Worst Massacre in Modern Latin American History,” *The Nation*, December 21, 2016,

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/remembering-el-mozote-the-worst-massacre-in-modern-latin-american-history/>)

²² “From Madness to Hope: the 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador,” *The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador* (United States Institute of Peace, January 26, 2001), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf>)

²³ Jon Schwarz, “Elliott Abrams, Trump’s Pick to Bring ‘Democracy’ to Venezuela, Has Spent His Life Crushing Democracy,” *The Intercept*, January 30, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/01/30/elliott-abrams-venezuela-coup/>)

to be an exceedingly dangerous place.”²⁴ He amended the statement in 1985 for the *New York Times*, directly stating “the purpose of our aid is to permit people who are fighting on our side to use more violence.”²⁵

The victims of these atrocities are only just now having some justice served with the 1993 amnesty law — which prevented investigation into the Massacre, and thus reparations to the families — being overturned by El Salvador’s Supreme Court in 2012. In October of the same year, the Inter-American Court found El Salvador guilty of committing the massacre, covering it up, and failing to investigate, also ordering the government to re-open the investigation, punish the perpetrators, and compensate victims’ relatives — to the tune of \$2 million total over the next two years.²⁶ But justice delayed is justice denied, and no amount of reparations can ever account for the genocidal violence against the entire civilian working-class population of El Salvador throughout the 1980s.

THE MARCH TOWARD NEOLIBERALISM

“We asked for food; they gave us bullets.”

- Salvadoran church official, in Chomsky

The above quotation, taken from a Salvadoran church official during the 1980s, reveals much about the political realities set in motion by the cleansing violence of the ESAF and the economic doctrine that would be ushered in with U.S. support in the following decade. Chomsky writes, “when the country was sufficiently terrorized and any hope of independent politics was eliminated, the U.S. ran staged elections.”²⁷ The chief foreign correspondent of *The Guardian*, covering what was a momentous return to democracy for the embattled

Salvadoran state in 1984, commented that it was not “the hunger for democracy which made people push and shove frantically to get to the front of the voting line, but rather fear of army, police or death-squad reprisals.”²⁸ British historian Timothy Garton Ash offered the view that some voted in “the hope that this mysterious ritual would somehow bring them the one thing which they desire before all others: peace.”²⁹ This haunting anecdote squares with the motives behind violence in El Salvador during the first quarter of the decade, clearing the country of leftists before running elections which could only be won by the Christian Democrats, the political extension of the ESAF and the death squads. Aryeh Neier of Americas Watch and Helsinki Watch confirms that “gross abuses of human rights are not incidental to the way the armed forces of El Salvador conduct their war against the guerrillas,” adding, most crucially, that “the principal reason that those abuses continue at such a high rate... is that the murders instill terror, the means whereby the armed forces maintain their authority.”³⁰

So when Elliott Abrams claims that his “fabulous achievement” statement about El Salvador is justified by the democratic election of President José Duarte in 1984, he must be referring to the gunboat democracy of the early twentieth century. Voters therefore could then become participants in the American experiment of neoliberalism in Central America, with violence dying down (though not entirely ending) as Duarte’s government imposed massive austerity measures. Salvadoran labor leader Wilfredo Berríos describes the ensuing reforms as an end to the “war of bullets” but as the “the political, social, and economic war” beginning again “under the rules of the right, the rules of capitalism, and the rules of the United States.”³¹ The Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), “a development program that offered low tariffs and

²⁴ Stephen Kinzer, “HUMAN RIGHTS AIDE DEFENDS U.S. POLICY,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 20, 1983), <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/01/20/world/human-rights-aide-defends-us-policy.html>

²⁵ Robert Pear, “PUSH THE RUSSIANS, INTELLECTUALS SAY,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, November 25, 1985), <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/25/world/push-the-russians-intellectuals-say.html>

²⁶ Sarah Esther Maslin, “Remembering El Mozote, the Worst Massacre in Modern Latin American History,” *The Nation*, December 21, 2016,

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/remembering-el-mozote-the-worst-massacre-in-modern-latin-american-history/>

²⁷ Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 162

²⁸ *Ibid*, 163

²⁹ *Ibid*, 163

³⁰ *Ibid*, 36

³¹ Kevin Young, “WAR BY OTHER MEANS IN EL SALVADOR,” *NACLA*, March 16, 2015,

investment money in exchange for cooperation with U.S. policy aims in the region,”³² which had been introduced by the Reagan administration in 1982, was extended to the newly formed Duarte government and “Central America became home to one of the earliest efforts to tie market-driven growth to curbing leftist forces in Latin America.”³³ The Duarte regime further cut government spending (except for the armed forces), privatized state-owned enterprises (including banks), and adopted the dollar as official currency. El Salvador implemented the most extensive neoliberal reforms of any Central American country, with newly privatized banks securing loans from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank. The World Bank and Heritage Foundation glowingly praised El Salvador for ranking at the top of Central American free-market reforming countries, becoming one of the most open economies in the world by the 2000s, though sociologists place direct blame on these neoliberal reforms for causing El Salvador to become one of the most violence-ridden countries in the world.³⁴ In many ways, from the widespread violence to the absence of hope among the working-class and repression of leftists, the legacy of neoliberalism in El Salvador does not differ from the period of brutal violence intended to pave the way for its implementation.

CONCLUSIONS ON VIOLENCE

*“See the rain comin’ through the gapin’ wound
Pelting the women and children
Who run into the arms
of America.”*

- *Bullet the Blue Sky*, U2, lyrics by Bono

Salvadorans experienced a period of unprecedented state violence from 1979-1992 popularly known as the Salvadoran Civil War, though can a one-sided period of repressive brutalities brought against civilians and patchwork guerrilla forces really be known as a civil war? Is it a civil war when one side perpetrates 95 percent of atrocities, violence designed

<https://nacla.org/news/2015/03/16/war-other-means-el-salvador>)

³² Lawrence A. Clayton, Michael L. Conniff, and Susan M. Gauss, *A New History of Modern Latin America* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 602

to shock the population into accepting elections masquerading as democracy but transparently in the interests of an imperial neighbor? Or does any of it matter when the legacy left behind was enveloped by more violence, this time economic and social, in the immediate aftermath of the 1992 peace accord?

The legacy of El Salvador’s dirty war is one that was crafted in Washington, in closed-door meetings involving State and Defense Department officials, trained in the School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone, and installed into practice with the support of the highest U.S. officials. The Reagan administration came into office with clear goals that were made so during the 1980 presidential election. A right-wing presidency which forever changed the course of politics steadfastly pursued anticommunist allies in regimes around the world, with Latin America — Central America, specifically — receiving the brunt of American force. Unable to sell direct armed conflicts to the American public, Reagan and Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams created sophisticated systems of uncivilized violence to be rained down upon leftist insurgents in rural El Salvador and the peasants that dared to hope for a better quality of life. With unceasing military and economic aid — which at one point soared to \$1 million a day — the United States was able to fight back the hope of the Central American working-class, which had been boosted by the success of Cuban revolutionaries in 1959 and by the ousting of the Somoza dictatorship by Sandinistas in 1979. By eradicating the leftist threat, Reagan was able to make El Salvador into a sandbox for neoliberalism, the economic doctrine which would reign supreme in the United States — and across the world — for the foreseeable future.

Of course, it was not the United States alone which brutalized the civilian population of El Salvador. José Duarte and the ESAF — and their many death squads — assured the success of neoliberal reforms by removing the threat of revolutionaries and anyone who had ever come across them. In rural El Salvador that meant torching entire villages and raping their civilian inhabitants, both literally and

³³ *Ibid*, 601

³⁴ Garni, Alisa, and L. Frank Weyher. “Neoliberal Mystification: Crime and Estrangement in El Salvador.” *Sociological Perspectives* 56, no. 4 (December 2013): 623–45.

metaphorically. It's no coincidence that the Church was one of the first targets of the death squads, as surely no Salvadorans could believe in the grace of God after being subjected to such atrocities. The details of these crimes against humanity — there is no other term harsh enough — are enough to compel tears; women raped — regardless of age — children speared on bayonets, men shot execution-style before being beheaded, the atrocities defy the limits of imagination and demonstrate the extent to which counterrevolutionary forces will go to preserve traditional allocations of wealth and power. All of it leading to the imposition of neoliberal economic reforms on shocked populations desiring nothing more than peace. Within the context of Central American counterrevolutionary campaigns, El Salvador's was the most brutal in its murder.

To those who have studied any period of United States history, the application of violence through imperialism comes as no surprise. And by all accounts of eyewitnesses and historians of the atrocities committed by the ESAF and Duarte military regime in El Salvador during the 1980s, there was nothing remarkable or unique about the violence. Even the El Mozote Massacre — a blood-chilling military execution of nearly one thousand unarmed civilians; women and children the recipients of the worst abuses — is rarely mentioned in history textbooks, with no mention in Clayton et. al.'s *A New History of Modern Latin America*. The willful amnesia of American empire is one of the greatest crimes in existence, and decades of denial by the Salvadoran government has precluded the families of victims from ever receiving justice. Anyone outside of a twentieth century Latin American history course will likely never know the El Mazote Massacre, will never read the horrifying accounts of the few survivors. The Lost Decade that is the 1980s in Latin American history should someday be found by all, the crimes of genocidal right-wing regimes exposed to public consciousness, and the perpetrators held accountable.

I have little faith in this ever happening.

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