THE TRUTH OF EL MOZOTE

In a remote corner of El Salvador, investigators uncovered the remains of a horrible crime—a crime that Washington had long denied. The villagers of El Mozote had the misfortune to find themselves in the path of the Salvadoran Army's anti-Communist crusade. The story of the massacre at El Mozote—how it came about, and why it had to be denied—stands as a central parable of the Cold War.

BY MARK DANNER

Heading up into the mountains of Morazán, in the bright, clear air near the Honduran border, you cross the Torola River, the wooden slats of the one-lane bridge clattering beneath your wheels, and enter what was the fiercest of El Salvador's zonas rojas—or "red zones," as the military officers knew them during a decade of civil war—and after climbing for some time you take leave of the worn blacktop to follow for several miles a bone-jarring dirt track that hugs a mountainside, and soon you will find, among ruined towns and long-abandoned villages that are coming slowly, painfully back to life, a tiny hamlet, by now little more than a scattering of ruins, that is being rapidly reclaimed by the earth, its broken adobe walls cracking and crumbling and giving way before an onslaught of weeds, which are fuelled by the rains that beat down each afternoon and by the fog that settles heavily at night in the valleys. Nearby, in the long-depopulated villages, you can see stirrings of life: even in Arambala, a mile or so away, with its broad grassy plaza bordered by collapsed buildings and dominated, where once a fine church stood, by a shell-pocked bell tower and a jagged adobe arch looming against the sky—even here, a boy leads a brown cow by a rope, a man in a billed cap and bluejeans trudges along bearing lengths of lumber on his shoulder, three little girls stand on tiptoe at a porch railing, waving and giggling at a passing car.

But follow the stony dirt track, which turns and twists through the woodland, and in a few minutes you enter a large clearing, and here all is quiet. No one has returned to El Mozote. Empty as it is, shot through with sunlight, the place remains—as a young guerrilla who had patrolled here during the war told me with a shiver—espantoso: spooky, scary, dreadful. After a moment's gaze, half a dozen battered structures—roofless, doorless, windowless, half engulfed underbrush—resolve themselves into a semblance of pattern: four ruins off to the right must have marked the main street, and a fifth the beginning of a side lane, while an open area opposite looks to have been a common, though no church can be seen—only a ragged knoll, a sort of earthen platform nearly invisible beneath a great tangle of weeds and brush.

Into this quiet clearing, in mid-October last year, a convoy of four-wheel drives and pickup trucks rumbled, disgorgeing into the center of El Mozote a score of outsiders. Some of these men and women—most of them young, and casually dressed in T-shirts and jeans and work pants—began dumping out into
the dust a glinting clutter of machetes, picks, and hoes. Others gathered around the hillock, consulted clipboards and notebooks and maps, poked around in the man-high brush. Finally, they took up machetes and began to hack at the weeds, being careful not to pull any, lest the movement of the roots disturb what lay beneath. Chopping and hacking in the morning sun, they uncovered, bit by bit, a mass of red-brown soil, and before long they had revealed an earthen mound protruding several feet from the ground, like a lopsided bluff, and barely contained at its base by a low stone wall.

They pounded stakes into the ground and marked off the mound with bright-yellow tape; they stretched lengths of twine this way and that to divide it into quadrangles; they brought out tape measures and rulers and levels to record its dimensions and map its contours. And then they began to dig. At first, they loosened the earth with hoes, took it up in shovels, dumped it into plastic pails, and poured it onto a screen large enough to require several people to shake it back and forth. As they dug deeper, they exchanged these tools for smaller, more precise ones: hand shovels, trowels, brushes, dustpans, screens. Slowly, painstakingly, they dug and sifted, making their way through the several feet of earth and crumbled adobe—remnants of a building’s walls—and, by the end of the second day, reaching wood-beam splinters and tile shards, many now blackened by fire, that had formed the building’s roof. Then, late on the afternoon of the third day, as they crouched low over the ground and stroked with tiny brushes to draw away bits of reddish dust, darkened forms began to emerge from the earth, taking shape in the soil like fossils embedded in stone; and soon they knew that they had begun to find, in the northeast corner of the ruined sacristy of the church of Santa Cararina of El Mozote, the skulls of those who had once worshipped there. By the next afternoon, the workers had uncovered twenty-five of them, and all but two were the skulls of children.

LATER that afternoon, the leaders of the team—four young experts from the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Unit, who had gained a worldwide reputation for having exhumed sites of massacres in Guatemala and Bolivia and Panama and Iraq, as well as in their own country—piled into their white four-wheel-drive vehicle and followed the bumpy, stony road out of El Mozote (the Thistle). Slowly, they drove through Arambala, waving to the smiling little girls standing on their porch, and out onto the calle negra—the “black road”—which traced its way up the spine of the red zone, stretching north from the city of San Francisco Gotera to the mountain town of Perquin, not far from the Honduran border. At the black road, the Argentines turned left, as they did each evening, heading down to Gotera, but this time they stopped in front of a small house—a hut, really, made of scrap wood and sheet metal and set among banana trees some fifteen yards from the road. Getting out of the car, they climbed through the barbed wire and called out, and soon there appeared at the door a middle-aged woman, heavyset, with high cheekbones, strong features, and a powerful air of dignity. In some excitement, the Argentines told her what they had found that day. The woman listened silently, and when they had finished she paused, then spoke.

“No les dije?” she asked. (“Didn’t I tell you?”) “Si sólo se oía aquella gran gritazón.” (“All you could hear was that enormous screaming.”)

For eleven years, Rufina Amaya Márquez had served the world as the most eloquent witness of what had happened at El Mozote, but though she had told her story again and again, much of the world had refused to believe her. In the polarized and brutal world of wartime El Salvador, the newspapers and radio stations simply ignored what Rufina had to say, as they habitually ignored unpalatable accounts of how the government was prosecuting the war against the leftist rebels.

In the United States, however, Rufina’s account of what had happened at El Mozote appeared on the front pages of the Washington Post and the New York Times, at the very moment when members of Congress were bitterly debating whether they should cut off aid to a Salvadoran regime so desperate that
it had apparently resorted to the most savage methods of war. El Mozote seemed to epitomize those methods, and in Washington the story heralded what became perhaps the classic debate of the late Cold War: between those who argued that, given the geopolitical stakes in Central America, the United States had no choice but to go on supporting a "friendly" regime, however disputable it might seem, because the alternative—the possibility of another Communist victory in the region—was clearly worse, and those who insisted that the country must be willing to wash its hands of what had become a morally corrupting struggle. Rufina's story came to Washington just when the country's paramount Cold War national-security concerns were clashing—as loudly and unambiguously as they ever would during four decades—with its professed high-minded respect for human rights.

In the United States, the free press was not to be denied: El Mozote was reported; Rufina's story was told; the angry debate in Congress intensified. But then the Republican Administration, burdened as it was with the heavy duties of national security, denied that any credible evidence existed that a massacre had taken place; and the Democratic Congress, after denouncing, yet again, the murderous abuses of the Salvadoran regime, in the end accepted the Administration's "certification" that its ally was nonetheless making a "significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights." The flow of aid went on, and soon increased.

By early 1992, when a peace agreement between the government and the guerrillas was finally signed, Americans had spent more than four billion dollars funding a civil war that had lasted twelve years and left seventy-five thousand Salvadorans dead. By then, of course, the bitter fight over El Mozote had largely been forgotten; Washington had turned its gaze to other places and other things. For most Americans, El Salvador had long since slipped back into obscurity. But El Mozote may well have been the largest massacre in modern Latin-American history. That in the United States it came to be known, that it was exposed to the light and then allowed to fall back into the dark, makes the story of El Mozote—how it came to happen and how it came to be denied—a central parable of the Cold War.

In the weeks that followed the discovery of the skulls of the children, as each day's work at El Mozote yielded up a fresh harvest, the initial numbers came to seem small. But in San Salvador, five hours by road to the west, where President Alfredo Cristiani and the generals and the guerrillas-turned-politicians were struggling with one another about how to put in place, or not put in place, a purge of the officer corps, which was proving to be the most difficult provision of the ten-month-old peace accord—struggling, that is, over what kind of "reconciliation" would come to pass in El Salvador after more than a decade of savage war—the first skulls of the children were enough to provoke a poisonous controversy. Those twenty-three skulls, and the nearly one hundred more that were uncovered in the succeeding days, were accommodated by the nascent Salvadoran body politic in two ways. Members of human-rights groups (those members, that is, who had survived the war), along with the politicians of the left (many of whom had been guerrillas shortly before), hailed the discovery as definitive evidence that a matanza—a great killing—had taken place in Morazán, and that what they had been saying for eleven years had at last been proved true. Members of the government, on the other hand, and various military officers found themselves forced to concede that something had indeed happened in Morazán, but they insisted that the situation was more complicated than it appeared. Dr. Juan Mateu Lloret, the director of El Salvador's Institute of Forensic Medicine, declared that the skulls themselves proved nothing, for "there were an abundance of armed children in the guerrillas." El Diario de Hoy, an influential right-wing daily, published a reconstruction according to which guerrillas had "barricaded themselves in what seemed to have been a religious center and from there opened fire on the troops, making the deaths of children, women and old people possible." President Cristiani's government, already under attack for stalling in the dismissal of senior officers, maintained its position that no records existed of any Army operation in Morazán in early December of 1981.

Yet on the ninth day of that month any reader of La Prensa Gráfica, one of San Salvador's major dailies, could have learned that "all the highways with access to Gotera and the other towns in the Department of Morazán are under strict military control... No vehicles or individuals are permitted to enter the zones of conflict in order to avoid accidents or misunderstandings... Neither was the entry of journalists or individuals permitted." The Department of Morazán had been sealed off from the rest of the country. Four thousand men, drawn from the security forces—the National Guard and the Treasury Police—and from regular units of the Salvadoran Army, were hard at work. The area north of the Torola River, the heart of the red zone, was alive with the thud of mortars, the clatter of small-arms fire, and the intermittent roar of helicopters. Two days before, Operación Rescate—Operation Rescue—had begun.

Many of the towns and villages were already empty; during and after Army operations of the previous spring and fall, thousands of peasants had left their homes and begun a long trek over the mountains to the Honduran border and refugee camps beyond. Of those who remained, many made it a practice, at the first sign of any Army approach, to leave their villages and hide in the caves and ravines and gullies that honeycombed the mountainous region. But El Mozote was crowded; in the days before Operation Rescue, people from the outlying areas had flooded into the hamlet.

"Many people were passing by the house, saying, 'Come on, let's go to El Mozote,'" an old peasant named Sebastiano Luna told me as he stood behind the yellow tape, watching the experts bent low over the brown earth of the sacristy of Santa Catarina. Between their feet lay an expanse of dark rubble, a miniature landscape of hills and ridges and valleys in every shade of brown. It took a moment or two to distinguish, among the dirty-brown hillocks, the skulls and parts of skulls, each marked with a bit of red tape and a number; and, beneath the skulls and skull fragments and the earthen rubble, scores of small brown bundles, heaped one on top of another, twisted together, the material so impregnated with blood and soil that it could
no longer be recognized as clothing.

Amid the nibble in the northeast corner of the tiny room that had been called el convento (though it was really a kind of combined sacricty and parish house, in which an itinerant priest, when he visited the hamlet, would vest himself, and sometimes, perhaps, stay the night), a dark-haired young woman in denim overalls was kneeling. She slowly drew a small bundle toward her—it had been labelled No. 59—and began, with almost agonizing gentleness, extracting the brown bits and placing them on a sheet of cardboard. “Left tibia, fragments only,” she sang out in a low monotone. “Vertebrae, one, two, three . . . six of them . . . Tibia, left, I think . . . Metacarpals . . .”

Now she disentangled the bits of ruined fabric: “Belt of brown leather, metal buckle . . . Pants, light in color, with patches of blue and green color in the posterior part . . . In the pants pocket . . . ah . . . um . . .” The strong voice took an odd slide downward and stopped. Over her shoulder, I saw her staring at something in her palm, then heard her swear in a low voice: “Hijo de puta!” She turned and opened her hand to reveal a tiny figure: a little horse of bright-orange plastic. No. 59 had been a lucky child, had had a family prosperous enough to provide a lucky toy.

After a moment, the anthropologist Mercedes Doretti said, “Ordinarily, we could use this for identification. I mean, even after eleven years, any mother would recognize this as her kid’s, you know?” She looked back at No. 59 and then at the brown rubble. “But here, here they killed all the mothers, too.”

BEHIND the yellow tape, Sebastiano Luna and his wife, Alba Ignacia del Cid, stood silent amid a knot of peasants, watching. They had walked from their small house, several miles outside El Mozote, where the dirt track joins the black road. Eleven years before, in early December, scores of people were passing by their house, pulling their children along by the hand, laboring under the weight of their belongings. “Come with us!” they had called out to the old couple. “Come with us to El Mozote!”

The afternoon before, the people of El Mozote had gathered, some fifty yards from the church, in front of the general store of Marcos Díaz, the richest man in town. He had summoned the townspeople, neighbors and customers all, and when they had assembled—perhaps a couple of hundred of them, the men in caps and straw hats and the women in bright-colored skirts, holding children in their arms—Marcos Díaz addressed them from his doorway. He had just come up the mountain from his regular buying trip to San Miguel, he said, and as he was waiting at the checkpoint in Gotera, at the entrance to the red zone, an officer in the town had greeted him—Marcos Díaz, an important man, had friends among the officers—and then pulled him aside for a little talk. Díaz would do well to stock up, the officer said, for soon the Army would launch a large operation in Morazán, and “nothing and no one” would be permitted to enter or leave the zone. But his friend Díaz needn’t worry, the officer assured him. The people of El Mozote would have no problems—provided they stayed where they were.

In the street that day, these words of Marcos Díaz’s set off a debate. Some townspeople wanted to head for the mountains immediately, for the war had lately been coming closer to the hamlet; only the week before, a plane had dropped two bombs near El Mozote, damaging its one-room school, and though no one had been hurt, the people had been terrified. “A lot of people wanted to leave—there was a lot of fear,” Rufina Amaya said when I visited her a year ago. “And a few people did leave. My godfather left, with his family. My children were crying. They said, ‘Mama, let’s go.’” But Marcos Díaz, a man of influence, had put his prestige on the line, and he insisted that his neighbors would be safe only if they stayed in their homes—that if they left the hamlet they and their families risked being caught up in the operation. “That was the lie,” Rufina Amaya told me. “That was the betrayal. Otherwise, people would have left.” In the end, Marcos Díaz’s prestige decided the issue. Though the debate went on that afternoon and into the following morning, most of the people of El Mozote finally accepted his assurances.

They had seen soldiers before, after all; soldiers often passed through on patrol and sometimes bought supplies in El Mozote. Only the month before, soldiers had come during an operation and occupied El Chingo and La Cruz, two hills over-
were still in El Mozote were afraid of us."

But the reason, apparently, was not only their fear—the frank terror that many villagers in the zone felt about exposing themselves to Army retribution—but their ideology. The guerrillas' support in Morazán had grown largely in soil made fertile by the work of Catholic liberation theology, but El Mozote had been uniquely unresponsive to such blandishments, for the hamlet was a stronghold of the Protestant evangelical movement. People had begun to convert as early as the mid-sixties, and by 1980 it is likely that half or more of the people in El Mozote considered themselves born-again Christians; the evangelicals had their own chapel and their own pastor, and they were known—as were born-again Christians throughout Central America—for their anti-Communism.

"Everyone knew there were many evangelicals in El Mozote, and these people wouldn't support us," Licho told me. "Sometimes they sold us things, yes, but they didn't want anything to do with us."

So, unlike many other hamlets of Morazán, El Mozote was a place where the guerrillas had learned not to look for recruits; instead, a delicate coexistence had been forged—an unstated agreement by both parties to look the other way. The guerrillas passed by El Mozote only at night, and when they did, Rufina says, "the people would hear the dogs barking and they'd be afraid." She remembers seeing guerrillas only once in daylight: a few ragged young people, unarmed and wearing civilian clothes, had come into the hamlet and tried to hold a meeting in the tiny church of Santa Catarina. Rufina didn't attend, nor did most of the other townspeople. "I remember people saying, 'Don't get involved. Let's just live and work and not get involved.' People just didn't want anything to do with it. I had four children to look after. You're worrying about feeding your family, and you try not to pay attention to these other things."

And so when Marcos Díaz brought his news from Gotera, when he conveyed the strong words of the officer and presented the choice as one of leaving the town and risking "getting involved" in the operation or of staying put and remaining safe, there was never much doubt about what the people of El Mozote would in the end decide. That very afternoon, at Marcos Díaz's urging, people began fanning out from the hamlet into the outlying districts to spread the word that one and all should come to El Mozote, and quickly, for only there would they be protected. Marcos Díaz helped matters along by letting it be known that he would offer on credit as much food and other supplies as the newcomers needed. Peasants poured into the hamlet, occupying every bit of space. "All the rooms in Marcos Díaz's house were filled with people," Rufina recalls. "Every house had people staying there from outside." Even the common in front of the church was crowded with people, for the few houses could not accommodate them all.

"'Come to El Mozote'—that's what everyone was saying," the old peasant Sebastiano Luna told me. He and Alba Ignacia del Cid had stood in front of their house, had watched the people pass. But they had decided not to go. "I had half an idea something bad might happen," Sebastiano said. "So I told her"—noding to his wife—"'You, you go if you want to. I'm staying.'" "And I," said Alba, "I said, 'No, no, I won't go without you, because they'll ask me where my husband is. They'll say he's not here because he's a guerrilla and then they'll kill me. Either we both go or we both stay.'" So Sebastiano and Alba hid in the mountains above their house. They saw soldiers pass by, and saw a helicopter hover and descend. And later they saw thick columns of smoke rising from El Mozote, and smelled the odor of what seemed like tons of roasting meat.

MONTERROSA'S MISSION

The Salvadoran Army was in shambles, but Washington found an officer it could count on in the charismatic commander of the Atlacatl.

FOUR miles south of El Mozote, outside the hamlet of La Guacamaya, the guerrillas of the People's Revolutionary Army also awaited the soldiers. From their agents in the capital, they knew that large shipments of American munitions had been arriving at Ilopango Airport, and that truckloads of troops had begun moving along the Pan-American Highway toward Morazán. On December 1st, Jonas, the most powerful comandante in the zone, had pulled aside Santiago, the director of the E.R.P.'s clandestine Radio Venceremos, and informed him that "an operation of great breadth, named Yunque y Martillo"—Hammer and Anvil—was being planned. Santiago recalls that "intelligence sources within the Army itself" had passed on a report of a key meeting at the High Command. According to the source's reconstruction, the Minister of Defense, Colonel José Guillermo García, declared to his officers that Operation Rescue must "wrest the offensive from the F.M.L.N."—the guerrilla umbrella group, of which the E.R.P. was one of five members. His Vice-Minister, Colonel Francisco Adolfo Castillo, added that the troops "must advance no matter what the cost until we reach the command post and Radio Venceremos." Then Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa Barrios, the dynamic commander of the elite Atlacatl Battalion, broke in, agreeing wholeheartedly that "so long as we don't finish off this Radio Venceremos, we'll always have a scorpion up our ass."

Colonel Monterrosa, who at the time
was the most celebrated field commander in the Salvadoran Army, was well known to have an obsession with Radio Venceremos. He was not alone: the station, which specialized in ideological propaganda,acerbic commentary, and pointed ridicule of the government, infuriated most officers, for its every broadcast reminded the world of the Army's impotence in much of Morazán. Even worse, the radio managed to be funny. "They actually acted out this daytime serial, like a soap opera, with Ambassador Hinton in it," a United States defense attaché of the time recalls. "They'd call the Ambassador 'this gringo who is marrying a Salvadoran woman'—Deane Hinton was about to marry a woman from one of the country's wealthy families—and at the end they'd say, 'Tune in again tomorrow.' And you couldn't do anything about it. Most people at the Embassy, including the Ambassador, wanted to hear it." The mortified Salvadoran officers maintained that the broadcasts originated in Nicaragua or Honduras.

Colonel Monterrosa was mortified by Radio Venceremos as well. but, unlike his colleagues, he had determined, in his rage and frustration, to do something about it. For Monterrosa, as American military advisers had come to realize, was a very different kind of Salvadoran officer. By late 1981, with Congress and the American public having shown themselves resolutely opposed to dispatching American combat forces to Central America, it had become quite clear that the only way to prevent "another Nicaragua" was somehow to "reform" the Salvadoran Army. "We were on our last legs," an American military adviser who was in the country at the time told me. "We had to reform or we were going to lose. And it wasn't because the guerrillas were so good; it was because the Army was so bad." Salvadoran troops were sent into the field virtually untrained, soldiers rarely left the barracks after five o'clock in the afternoon, and officers rarely left the barracks at all.

"The institution simply did not support people being good commanders," this adviser said. "I mean, who ever got relieved? You could surrender with eighty-five men and nothing at all would happen to you."

As the Americans soon realized, however, "reform" meant remaking an officer corps that had developed its own, very special criteria for advancement and reward. These had to do not with military competence but with politics: with showing unceasing loyalty to "the institution" and, above all, to one's military academy class—one's tanda, as it was called. A hundred teen-age boys might enter the Gerardo Barrios Military Academy, and from their number perhaps twenty toughened, hardened men would emerge four years later; throughout the next quarter century, these men would be promoted together, would become rich together, and would gradually gain power together. If among them there proved to be a few embarrassing incompetents, not to mention murderers and rapists and thieves, then these men were shielded by their classmates, and defended ferociously. Finally, perhaps two decades after graduation, one or two from the tanda—those who had stood out early on as presidenciables, as destined to become leaders of the country—would lobby within the officer corps to become the President of El Salvador.

Monterrosa had graduated in 1963, and though the records show him fourth in his class of nineteen, it is a testament to the respect he inspired that many officers now remember him as first. In the academy, he was a magnetic figure, charismatic from the start. Short, with the simple face and large nose of a Salvadoran peasant, he walked with the peasant's long, loping stride, which made his distinctly nonmartial figure recognizable from afar. General Adolfo Blandón, a former chief of staff, who was in his last year in the academy when Monterrosa was in his first, recalls that the young man "established himself immediately as the best in his class—the top rank in studies, physical conditioning, knowledge of the concepts of war."

Normally, of course, such prestige, such respect from his colleagues, would brand him presidenciable. But, unlike his fellows, Monterrosa was, as Blandón puts it, "that rare thing: a pure, one-hundred-per-cent soldier, a natural leader, a born military man with the rare quality of being able to instill loyalty in his men."

In the years after his graduation, Monterrosa taught at the academy, took courses from the Americans in Panama, traveled to Taiwan to study anti-Communist counter-insurgency tactics, and served in the paratroops as part of El Salvador's first free-fall team. After the controversial elections of 1972, in which a hard-line faction of the military stole the ballot from what looked to be a winning Christian Democratic ticket, led by San Salvador's Mayor José Napoleón Duarte, Monterrosa grew close to the new military President, Colonel Arturo Molina.

In the Army at this time, the key focus was on politics, and the struggle over El Salvador's stunted political development increasingly split the country, and the officer corps. By the late seventies, after Molina had given place to General Carlos Humberto Romero, in another dubious election, the situation had become even more polarized. On the far left, several tiny guerrilla groups were kidnapping businessmen, robbing banks, and, on occasion, assassinating prominent rightist leaders. Activists on the moderate left, having been denied an electoral path to the Presidential Palace by the Army's habitual ballot tampering, joined populist forces in organizing vast demonstrations, and managed to bring hundreds of thousands of people into the streets. The security forces generally responded to these demonstrations with unflinching violence, shooting down scores, and sometimes hundreds, of Salvadorans.

Within the Salvadoran officer corps, the country's political crisis had reopened a political fault line that had spread apart periodically throughout the century. Back in 1960, a faction of "progressive" officers had staged a coup, but it had been quickly reversed by a conservative counter-coup; in 1972, when Duarte's victory was stolen by conservative officers, the progressives attempted another, with the same result. Finally, in October of 1979, with at least tacit American support, a group of young "reformists" who called themselves the juventud militar—the "military youth"—overthrew General Romero and set in his place a "progressive" junta, which included politicians of the left. As had happened two decades before, however, the conservatives in the Army almost immediately regained the upper hand, and now, under cover of a more internationally acceptable "reformist" government, they felt free to combat the "Communist agitation" in their own particular
way—by intensifying the "dirty war" against the left.

The most visible signs of the "dirty war" were mutilated corpses that each morning littered the streets of El Salvador's cities. Sometimes the bodies were headless, or faceless, their features having been obliterated with a shotgun blast or an application of battery acid; sometimes limbs were missing, or hands or feet chopped off, or eyes gouged out; women's genitals were torn and bloody, bespeaking repeated rape; men's were often found severed and stuffed into their mouths. And cut into the flesh of a corpse's back or chest was likely to be the signature of one or another of the "death squads" that had done the work, the most notorious of which were the Union of White Warriors and the Maximiliano Hernández Martínez Brigade.

The latter was named for a general who had taken over the country in 1931, during a time of rising leftist agitation among the peasantry, and had responded the following year with a campaign of repression so ferocious that it came to be known simply as La Matanza. Throughout the western part of the country, where an abortive rebellion had been centered, members of the National Guard, along with civilian irregulars, lined peasants up against a wall and shot them. Before the purge was over, they had murdered well over ten thousand people.

Now rightist officers who proudly counted themselves heirs of Martínez determined to root out this new leftist infection with equal thoroughness. Drawing on money from wealthy businessmen who had moved to Miami to avoid kidnapping or assassination, and benefiting from the theoretical guidance of ideological compatriots in neighboring Guatemala, the officers organized and unleashed an efficient campaign of terror in the cities. The campaign intensified dramatically after the "progressive" coup of October, 1979. By the end of the year, monthly estimates of the dead ranged as high as eight hundred.

Against the urban infrastructure of the left—the network of political organizers, labor leaders, human-rights workers, teachers, and activists of all progressive stripes which had put together the enormous demonstrations of the late seventies—this technique proved devastating. "These people weren't organized militarily, which is what made them so easy to kill," William Stanley, a professor of political science at the University of New Mexico, told me in an interview in San Salvador. As the repression went on, month after month, it became less and less discriminating. "By the end, the killing basically outran the intelligence capability of the Army and the security services, and they began killing according to very crude profiles," Stanley said. "I remember, for example, hearing that a big pile of corpses was discovered one morning, and almost all of them turned out to be young women wearing jeans and tennis shoes. Apparently, one of the intelligence people had decided that this 'profile'—you know, young women who dressed in that way—made it easy to separate out 'leftists,' and so that became one of the profiles that they used to round up so-called subversives."

Some civilians were certainly involved, particularly on the funding end, but there can be no doubt that the "dirty war" was basically organized and directed by Salvadoran Army officers—and no doubt, either, that the American Embassy was well aware of it. "There was no secret about who was doing the killing," Howard Lane, the public-affairs officer in the Embassy from 1980 to 1982, told me in an interview. "I mean, you formed that view within forty-eight hours after arriving in the country, and there was no secret at all about it—except, maybe, in the White House." In public, the fiction was resolutely maintained that the identity of the killers was a mystery—that

BEFORE PERSEPHONE

An afternoon in my apartment—a cocoon, my mother said, padded with the white noise of air-conditioners. New York City, too brutal for her to inhabit.
And what does she inhabit?
A letter found twenty years ago and two terms of endearment—"champ" and "sunshine."
A discovery of makeup cases, card-store gifts, and pregnancy tests in a glove compartment.
Another stream beneath her stream of normalcy.
"He's robbed me of twenty years."
A theft we reconstruct, a myth we demythologize.
Facts I used not to want to know.
In my arms, she is my daughter, and I hold her, a younger self, at thirty, but I am not married.
I am not holding me to my breast. What can I give her when there is no hope of grace in old age?
She looks to me uncomprehending that a man's promises are not promises.
And I look at myself as she sleeps.
In the bathroom mirror my eyes are old, and she, buried in my pillows, is in the lost place of the young.

—JUSTINE COOK
the corpses were the work of “rightist vigilantes.” This campaign of lies was designed in part to accommodate the squeamishness of the Administration in Washington, which had to deal with growing concern in Congress about “human-rights violations,” particularly after several notorious cases, including the murder, in March of 1980, of Archbishop Óscar Romero while he said Mass; the rape and murder, the following December, of four American churchwomen; and the assassination, in January of 1981, of the head of the Salvadoran land-reform agency and two of his American advisers.

On the evening of December 1, 1981, Santiago, the director of Radio Venceremos, after learning from Jonás, the comandante, about the coming operation, set out on foot from the guerrilla base at La Guacamaya, four miles south of El Mozote. As darkness fell, Santiago hiked east over the hills and through the gullies, crossed the Río Sapo, and climbed down into a heavily forested ravine at El Zapotal. Here, dug into a rock niche half a dozen feet underground, was the “studio” of Radio Venceremos, which consisted of a small transmitter, an unwieldy gasoline generator, assorted tape recorders, microphones, and other paraphernalia, and a flexible antenna that snaked its way up through a forest of brush. Santiago gathered his handful of young staff members, and soon news of the coming operation was broadcast throughout the zone.

Back in La Guacamaya, in a rough encampment in the open air, perhaps two hundred young men and women, outfitted in a motley combination of peasant clothing and camouflage garb, were making preparations. Some cleaned their weapons—mostly old M1s and Mausers, along with a few captured American M16s. Many of the women bent over smooth flat stones, grinding corn, making the meal that would serve as the company’s fuel during the days ahead—for, confronted with the arrival of thousands of troops, the guerrillas of the E.R.P. were preparing not to fight but to flee.

Mobility and quickness had always been central to the guerrillas’ strength, along with their familiarity with the mountain terrain. Like El Salvador’s other radical groups, the People’s Revolutionary Army had been the brainchild of young urban intellectuals, who had founded the organization in Mexico City in 1972, funded it during the mid-seventies largely by robbing banks and by seizing and ransoming wealthy businessmen, and battled among themselves for its leadership, using high-toned abstract arguments of the left (which more than once deteriorated into violent schism).

“The revolutionary process started in Morazán around 1977 or ’78 with the consciousness-raising of Christian ‘base communities’ led by radical priests,” said Licho, the rebel commander, whose parents were campesinos living on the other side of the black road from El Mozote. “We young people would get together and read the Bible and apply it to our own situation, and gradually we became more politically aware.” When the young men came of age, the guerrilla leaders often urged them to join the Army—they had urged Licho to do so—in order to receive military training and gain firsthand knowledge of the enemy while providing useful intelligence until they could return to their home provinces to take up arms.

By 1980, small groups of young guerrillas were operating throughout northern Morazán, drawing food and support from sympathetic peasants, and launching raids from time to time against the National Guard posts in the towns. They would attack suddenly, kill a few Guardsmen and capture their weapons, then fade back into the bush. After the posts had been reinforced, the Guardsmen responded, as they had done for years, by beating or killing peasants they suspected of having been “infected” with Communist sympathies. This quickened the flow of able-bodied men and women into the mountains. Soon some villages were inhabited almost entirely by old people and mothers and their children. The Guardsmen abandoned some towns completely—in effect, ceding them to the control of the guerrillas. And the people abandoned other towns, either fleeing to the refugee camps beyond the Honduran border or joining the guerrillas, and thus forming, as time went on, a quasi-permanent baggage train of masas, or civilian supporters. “The people who supported us moved around as our rear guard, providing food and other help,” Licho told me. “In some areas, our supporters were in the majority, in others not.” The distinction between combatants and noncombatants, never very clear in this guerrilla war, was growing cloudier still.

The Salvadoran High Command had become increasingly alarmed by the situation in Morazán. “The military view the situation in the countryside as critical,” the United States Ambassador, Frank Devine, wrote in a 1980 cable. “Many feel there are ‘liberated’ areas where they dare not operate due to the concentration of leftist-terrorist strength.”

In January of 1981, the F.M.L.N. proclaimed a “final offensive”—the badly equipped guerrillas hoped to provoke a popular insurrection, as the Sandinistas had done in Nicaragua eighteen months before, and to do it in the days just before Ronald Reagan took power in Washington—but the people did not rise up, and the offensive ended in a costly defeat. After the collapse, hundreds of fighters streamed out of the cities and headed for the mountains. Having failed to overthrow the government, and having seen many of their civilian sympathizers liquidated in the past months by death squads, the guerrillas decided to focus their forces on a full-scale rural insurgency rooted in the northern mountains.

By November, General Fred F. Woerner, whom a worried Pentagon had sent to assess the Salvadoran war, was concluding in a secret report that the situation on the ground had so deteriorated that a primary aim of the Salvadoran Army had now become to “prevent the establishment of an insurgent ‘liberated’ zone in the Department of Morazán, which could lead to international recognition of the insurgents as a belligerent force.” (Three months before, France and Mexico had recognized the F.M.L.N. as “a representative political force.”) If the guerrillas were not dislodged from Morazán, the Salvadoran officers feared, they would risk seeing their country split in two.

On December 1, 1981, after Radio Venceremos broadcast word that the Army was coming, people throughout northern Morazán began talking among themselves, arguing, and coming to decisions about what to do next. Hundreds of people assembled outside the guerrilla camp at La Guacamaya, having packed up what tortillas and beans they
By the fourth day, investigators had found the remains of twenty-five inhabitants of El Mozote—all but two of them children.
had, and gathered their children, ready for the hard trek ahead.

On Monday, December 7th, the young men and women of Radio Venceremos began doing what they had practiced many times: rapidly dismantling the components, loading the generator aboard a mule, and hoisting the transmitter, the antenna, and the other equipment on one another's backs. Then they hiked off to join the fighters at La Guacamaya.

Around this time, according to Joaquín Villalobos, representatives of the guerrillas approached El Mozote and attempted to warn the campesinos there. "We always had rear-guard people, political people, behind the lines," he says. "So when the fighting was beginning in the south they advised people in the north to leave the zone." But the people in El Mozote had already made their decision. "Because they had little relation to us, and because they were evangelical, they decided they had little to fear from the Army," Villalobos says. More likely, they had decided, after listening to the words of Marcos Díaz, that the danger would be greater outside the hamlet than within.

"We told them what might happen," Licho says. "But they didn't believe that the Army would do anything to them." Perhaps they regarded the guerrillas' warnings—those who heard them, that is (Rufina, for one, heard nothing)—as attempts at recruitment. As the people of El Mozote well knew, in the view of the Salvadoran Army, to go with the guerrillas was to be a guerrilla.

By Tuesday morning, December 8th, the guerrillas at La Guacamaya could hear the sounds of battle, of mortars and small-arms fire, coming, it seemed, from all directions; they knew by now that perhaps four thousand soldiers had entered the zone, that troops had crossed the Torola and were moving toward them from the south, that others were approaching the Sapo from the east. The only way clear had seemed to be to the north, toward the Honduran border; but, even as the Radio Venceremos announcers were putting out their last broadcast, urging the people of the zone to join the guerrilla columns, the guerrillas heard the helicopters approach and saw them pass overhead, carrying the troops of Domingo Monterrosa's Atlacatl Battalion northward, to the mountain town of Perquín.

To reach Perquín from El Mozote, you turn right on the black road and begin to climb. Soon the grade grows steeper, the tropical brush gives place to mountain pine, and the air lightens and grows fresh. Here and there, a bit of sorghum or corn or maguey pokes out from among the trees, but, increasingly, from the red soil of the mountainside only great white rocks grow. The overpowering fragrance of freshly cut pine announces the hamlet of La Tejera and its sawmill, a low building of unstripped logs surrounded by stacks of new planks. Finally, a sign announces Perquín; the road tilts sharply upward and becomes a street of large cobblestones; and, after a few moments' jolting, the traveller comes upon a dramatically uneven town square, which, despite blasted buildings and damaged streets, remains an oddly beautiful, vaguely otherworldly place. At its heart is a bizarre park, which accommodates many wildly slanting levels of green grass, like lopsided terraces on a cultivated but dilapidated hillside. Bordering the park are a yellow-painted clinic, a rough-hewn little hut, and a remarkable church crowned by a bulbous steeple.

When Colonel Monterrosa set his helicopter down here in December of 1981, he found a town in government hands, but barely. Only four months earlier, in mid-August, the guerrillas had swept out of the surrounding hills and overwhelmed the local National Guard post, killing four men and capturing five. "There were many young ones, but some really old ones, too," children in Perquín told Alma Guillermoprieto, then a stringer for the Washington Post. "There were eight women. Some of them were in uniforms, but most of them wore raggedy clothes, like us. We knew some of them; they were from this town." The guerrillas had spent a week and a half digging defensive trenches, buying corn from the local cooperative, and marching about the streets shouting "Pueblo libre!" and other slogans. When the Air Force began bombing the city, ten days later, the guerrillas swiftly vanished, fading into the mountains and ravines they knew so well, and leaving behind the four dead men, buried in a bomb crater, and also the civilians who had been there all along—the civilians who, after playing host to the guerrillas for ten days, now gazed with all innocence into the faces of the National Guardsmen who had taken the places of their dead comrades.

Colonel Monterrosa had thought long and hard about civilians and guerrilla war, about the necessity of counter-insurgency, about the frustrations of the odd and bloody conflict that the overextended Salvadoran Army had been

For twelve years, Rufina Amaya told anyone who would listen about what happened at El Mozote, but the United States government refused to believe her.
fighting and losing. When the men of his Atlacatl Battalion touched down in Perquin that Tuesday morning in December, storming from helicopters in a crouch, gripping their helmets tightly against the backwash from the rotors, the officers had in their pockets lists of names to hand to the National Guardsmen. While the Atlacatl captains mustered their troops, the Guardsmen marched off through the town and pounded on doors. They were big men, well fed, and they looked even bigger than they were, outfitted in high black boots and uniforms of heavy greenish-brown cloth, with automatic rifles on their backs, and razor-sharp machetes hanging at their belts.

"In those days, if they came to your house to ask you to come with them to 'do something,' you’d end up dead," a Perquin man whom the Guardsmen visited that morning told me. When he heard the pounding and pulled open the door to find the Guardsmen there glaring down at him—they always glowered, for their business was, and had been since the early days of the century, to induce fear in the countryside and to stamp out rebellion from the moment it revealed itself as a lessening of fear in a campesino’s eyes—this man could only try to control his terror as the Guardsmen stared for a moment, then barked, "Hey, we have work to do! Come with us and help us do it!" The man came outside, watched as one of the Guardsmen ran his finger down the list that Monterrosa’s men had handed him, then looked up, exchanged glances with his partner, and murmured, "Ya vamos dándole." ("Now let’s get started.") The Perquin man knew what that meant—the killing was to begin—and, in a panic, he began to protest, digging an identification card out of his pocket and begging the Guardsmen to look at it carefully. Finally, after a terrible few minutes, he succeeded in convincing these impulsive men that the name on the list was not his—that one of the surnames was different.

Nonetheless, the Guardsmen hustled him along the streets with them, and as they moved through town they pounded on other doors and collected other frightened men. Those men numbered ten by the time they reached a field in front of the clinic, which was a blur of unaccustomed activity: helicopters landing and hovering and departing, and, amid the blast and the roar from the rotors, hundreds of men in green moving about, checking weapons, cinching the straps on their packs, and talking among themselves as officers marched back and forth shouting orders. By then, several hundred of the Atlacatl soldiers had stormed off the helicopters, most of them in olive green, and a few in camouflage garb above black jungle boots. On the shoulders of their uniforms they bore, in white or yellow, the figure of an Indian and the word "Atlacatl" (the name of a legendary Indian warrior who had led the fight against the conquistadores). To a practiced eye, they seemed a somewhat different breed from most Salvadoran soldiers—more businesslike, grimmer even—and their equipment was better: they had the latest American M16s, plenty of M60 machine guns, 90-mm. recoilless rifles, and 60- and 81-mm. mortars.

But it wasn’t their equipment that made them "the elite, American-trained Atlacatl Battalion" (as press accounts invariably identified them). It was their aggressiveness, their willingness to "do the job": a willingness that the rest of the badly led and badly trained Army generally lacked. In part, perhaps, this aggressiveness was instilled by American trainers—Special Forces personnel, who, beginning in March, had been coming over from Southern Command, in Panama, to show the Salvadoran recruits how to shoot and how to seize positions. Mostly, though, it came from Monterrosa. Among senior field commanders who in many cases, as one lieutenant put it to me, "don’t even own fatigues," Monterrosa seemed a soldier of the classic type: aggressive, charismatic, a man who liked nothing better than to get out in the field and fight alongside his troops. The Salvadoran grunts—mostly unlettered peasant boys, many of whom had been pulled from buses or off country roads and pressed into service, having received little training and less regard from their officers—loved Monterrosa for his willingness to get down in the dirt with them and fight. The press loved him, too: not only was he a natural story but he was only too happy to invite reporters to come along with him in his helicopter. And, of course, the Americans loved him as well: Colonel John Cash, a United States military attaché, speaks of "a hot-shot strategist like Monterrosa, whom I’d put up against any American hot shot."

As the war moved decisively to the countryside, the American government was no longer able to deny that it had a major problem on its hands. The Salvadoran officers were showing themselves utterly incapable of fighting a war of rural counter-insurgency. Not only was the Army, with a total of thirteen thousand men facing perhaps a third that many guerrillas, terribly overstretched, but its officer corps was burdened by a byzantine political structure and a perverse system of anti-incentives. The most important commands from the military point of view were from the point of view of most Salvadoran officers the least desirable, and the result was that those posts tended to be assigned to the politically least powerful, and often least talented, members of the officer corps. "The guys in the real combat commands tended to be the total incompetents," Todd Greentree, who was a junior reporting officer in the United States Embassy at the time, told me. "These guys would be sent out there to the end of the line, and they’d spend their days drinking in the cuartel."

Embassy officials recommended, cajoled, and finally urged realignments, but changes, when they came at all, came only after enormous effort. The explanation was not just the superior political and economic power of the right wing of the officer corps but the fact that the tanda system, in which classmates, no matter what their failings, were fiercely protected, appeared nearly impervious to outside pressure—including pressure from the Americans, who were now pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into the country. As the officers understood only too quickly, the ultimate sanction that the Americans could brandish—turning off the aid spigot—threatened to hurt the Americans themselves as much as it would hurt the Salvadorans, since the American fear of a Communist El Salvador taking its place alongside Sandinista Nicaragua had become overriding. Even during the final months of the Carter Administration, this underlying reality became embarrassingly evident, when President Carter, after cutting off aid in
response to the murder of the American churchwomen, rushed to restore it only a few weeks later, in the face of the rebels’ “final offensive.”

Ronald Reagan did not suffer from the same ambivalence. By the fall of 1981, Reagan had removed the outspoken American Ambassador, Robert White; had vowed, through Secretary of State Alexander Haig, to “draw the line” in El Salvador against Communist subversion in the hemisphere; had almost doubled economic aid for El Salvador, to a hundred and forty-four million dollars, and increased military aid, from twenty-six million dollars to more than thirty-five million; and, in November, had begun funding the Nicaraguan Contra fighters as a proxy force against the Sandinista government.

By late 1981, the priorities of American policy in El Salvador had become unmistakable.

The Americans had stepped forward to fund the war, but they were unwilling to fight it; it would be left to the Salvadorans to defeat the guerrillas. “The guerrilla always carries his masas into battle with him” was a famous Army saying of the era, a piece of received wisdom from that darkest period of the Salvadoran civil war, and its author was Colonel Monterroso himself. It was intended not only as a statement of fact but as a general affirmation of principle: in this bloody war, in the red zones, there was really no such thing as a civilian.

A large professional Army would have reoccupied territory and sent out aggressive patrols, all the while doing “political work” in the countryside to regain the loyalty of the people. Indeed, that was part of the rationale behind the search-and-destroy operations. “There are a lot of different names for counter-guerrilla fighting,” Colonel Castillo, then the Vice Minister of Defense, told me in an interview. “Whether they call it Hammer and Anvil, or the Piston, or something else, it’s all the same idea—to try to expel the guerrillas from the zone. After we managed to expel them, they would lose the support of all the people they had indoctrinated.”

But in those days, Castillo conceded, the Army “didn’t have enough equipment or forces to maintain operations there for a long enough time.” The result was that the Army would enter a zone in force; the guerrillas, after a few minor engagements, would flee; and the soldiers, after killing a number of supposed “subversives” (civilians who may or may not have been guerrilla supporters but hadn’t been quick enough, or smart enough, to get out of the way), would evacuate the zone, leaving a token force behind—which the guerrillas, when they flowed back in a few days later, would mauл and expel.

The Army’s tactic was not effective, and it made for great frustration. “When I arrived here, in June of 1982, the Salvadoran officers used to brag to me that they didn’t take prisoners,” Colonel Cash, the military attaché, said. “They said, ‘We don’t want to dignify them by taking prisoners.’ They wouldn’t even call them prisoners, or guerrillas. They called them terroristas—delincuentes terroristas.” (General Blandón, the former chief of staff, told me, “Before 1983, we never took prisoners of war.”)

As the guerrillas were reduced to the status of terrorist delinquents, all civilians in certain zones were reduced to the status of masas, guerrilla supporters, and thus became legitimate targets. North of the Torola, for example, it was believed that the civilians and the guerrillas were all mixed together, and were indistinguishable.

By late 1980, the Army had begun the tactic that William Stanley, the political-science professor, refers to as “killing by zone.” One of the first such operations took place in October, and began with a staff meeting in Perquin. “Colonel Castillo explained that it was necessary to stop the Communist revolution—that it was necessary to make an example of this place, so we wouldn’t have the same problems in other parts of the country,” an officer who had been present at the meeting told me. “He said we must take into account that the great majority of the people here are guerrillas. So the idea was to surround them all, to create this ‘hammer and anvil’ thing, push all the people down to Villa El Rosario, where a huge artillery barrage would be unleashed. The city would be totally destroyed. We were going to make an example of these people.”

The brutality of this operation provoked the first major exodus from Morazán, as entire populations fled their villages for the refugee camps in Gotera, or for the camps over the border in Honduras.

Despite the Army’s success in taking away the water, however, the fish continued to multiply and grow stronger. In November of 1980, a month after the Villa El Rosario operation, the guerrillas began to receive the first of a number of shipments of small arms from the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua—a mixture of FALs, M16s, and Uzis,” according to Stanley. After the collapse of the “final offensive,” in January, the guerrillas also benefitted from a fresh infusion of manpower, including not only the fighters who had fled the cities but a number of important deserters from the Army.

In front of the Perquin health clinic that Tuesday in early December, amid the backwash from the helicopters, the men of the Atlacatl mustered and made ready. The National Guardsmen, who by this time had collected the ten villages, pushed their reluctant charges forward through the troops until they reached a tall, green-eyed officer in combat fatigues, who was striding about amid the commotion, pointing here and there and issuing orders. One of the Perquin men, who had served in the Army several years before, recognized the officer as Major Natividad de Jesús Cáceres Cabrera, a legendary figure: sixth in his academy class, a born-again Christian, a fanatical anti-Communist, and now the executive officer of the Atlacatl Battalion. (Later, his legend grew: as a colonel in command of Chalatenango in 1986, he forced all the residents of that substantial city to “express their desire for peace... their purity, their soul, and also their cleanliness” by painting the entire city white; and in 1989, on a Salvadoran highway, Cáceres ordered his men to block the convoy of the American Ambassador, William Walker, and, when the Ambassador refused to emerge and offer proof of his identity, threatened to blow up his limousine with antitank weapons.)

On that Tuesday, Major Cáceres looked over the ten men and gestured to five captains who were organizing the companies under their command. “He put two of us with each company,” one of the Perquin men told me, “and he said, ‘We want you to come with us, to show us the area.’” They had been
Susan Meiselas's photograph appeared in the "Times Magazine" in February, 1982, as Congress debated aid to El Salvador.
The memorial at El Mozote is inscribed, “They did not die, they are with us, with you, and with all humanity.”