

LOST HISTORY: DEATH, LIES AND BODYWASHING

The USA's secret war in El Salvador 1981-1992

By Robert Parry

On Sunday, May 5, a solemn ceremony took place in an open grassy space at Arlington National Cemetery. A small memorial stone was unveiled to honor 21 American soldiers who died in secret combat against leftist guerrillas in El Salvador. As family members wiped tears from their eyes, Salvadoran children placed tiny American flags next to the soldiers' names, unknown casualties from the 1980s. "For too long, we have failed to recognize the contributions, the sacrifices, of those who served with distinction under the most dangerous conditions," said former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, William G. Walker.

The next day, The Washington Post focused on the human interest side of the story in a front-page piece entitled "Public Honors for Secret Combat." But what received short-shrift amid the honors and the tears was the remarkable confirmation that for much of a decade, the Reagan-Bush administrations had conducted a secret war in which American soldiers engaged in not-infrequent combat. The 21 dead surpassed the number who died in the 1989 invasion of Panama. Yet, the war in El Salvador was waged with hardly anyone in Congress or the national news media catching on to the U.S. combat role. Indeed, throughout the 1980s, the White House and Pentagon routinely denied that U.S. soldiers were in combat in El Salvador -- and few reporters challenged the official story.

Shortly after taking office in 1981, President Reagan dispatched 55 Green Beret trainers to El Salvador to teach the Salvadoran army better techniques for defeating a resilient band of Marxist-led guerrillas. For years, the Salvadoran military had been more adept at running death squads against civilian targets than at cornering an armed enemy in the country's mountainous terrain. To allay public fears about another Vietnam War, however, Reagan limited the number of Green Berets to 55 and ordered them to avoid combat zones. They were to train only, not advise the Salvadorans in combat situations as Green Berets had done in Vietnam. They also were forbidden to carry M-16s. They were to have only side arms, for self-defense.

MISSING THE STORY

All of these U.S. government pronouncements, the Arlington ceremony made clear, had been lies. But the Post story made only a passing attempt to explain why so little was known about these years of classified combat and why the government cover-ups had been so successful. "Reports of firefights involving U.S. troops were closely held, and field commanders were told in no uncertain terms not to nominate soldiers for combat awards," the Post reported. It then quoted Joseph Stringham, a retired one-star Army general who commanded U.S. military forces in El Salvador in 1983-84. "It had been determined this was not a combat zone, and they were going to hold the line on that," Stringham said. "I've puzzled over why. It may be something as fundamental as the bureaucracy not wanting to reverse itself."

The Reagan administration also might have been surprised how easy it was to gull the Washington press corps and the Congress. No matter how obvious the lies or how illogical the administration's arguments, the media and the Democrats couldn't sustain any serious pursuit of the truth. But the lies did not go completely unchallenged. As early as 1981-82, a few American reporters in Central America were stumbling over the reality of secret U.S. combat operations. One top U.S.

military adviser told me about an incident in which he was on patrol with a Salvadoran army unit and was spotted by New York Times correspondent Raymond Bonner. Bonner, renowned for his tough reporting on the early years of the war, was not easily intimidated into doubting his own perceptions. To head off a possible embarrassing disclosure, the Green Beret told me that U.S. officials quickly lined up the Salvadoran soldiers and gave them false affidavits to sign, declaring that there was no American with them. The adviser said the strategy for discrediting honest journalists, such as Bonner, was always an important part of the embassy's strategy for keeping secret the reality on the battlefield.

In early 1982, Bonner also exposed the Salvadoran government's massacre of nearly 1,000 men, women and children at the town of El Mozote in December 1981. After that disclosure, Bonner was targeted by right-wing press "watchdog" groups, such as Reed Irvine's Accuracy in Media, and the Wall Street Journal's editorial page. In congressional testimony, assistant secretaries of state Thomas Enders and Elliott Abrams disputed Bonner's stories. They insisted that an investigation of the incident had concluded that the El Mozote massacre had never happened. As pressure built on The New York Times, then-executive editor Abe Rosenthal flew to El Salvador to assess the complaints about Bonner first-hand. Sympathetic to Ronald Reagan's anti-communist foreign policy, Rosenthal began limiting Bonner's role in the Times' bureau in Central America. Word soon spread that Bonner would be removed.

When I was in El Salvador on a reporting assignment in fall 1982, two senior U.S. officials boasted to me about the embassy's success in discrediting Bonner and orchestrating his departure. In early 1983, Rosenthal did recall Bonner from El Salvador and put him on the business desk in New York. Not long after that, Bonner resigned from the Times. Another case of gutsy reporting was a long investigative article by Frank Greve and Ellen Warren of the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain on Dec. 16, 1984. The piece brought to light the term "bodywashing," the disturbing practice of reporting false details about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of U.S. soldiers involved in secret operations.

BODYWASHING

The Knight-Ridder story focused on an elite Army helicopter unit, the 160th Task Force of the 101st Airborne Division stationed at Fort Campbell, Ky. The article quoted family members who suspected that their loved ones had died in combat in Central America and that cover stories had then been concocted about the pilots' fate. "If downed or captured, the soldiers, who wore civilian clothes and flew at night, were told to expect no U.S. government acknowledgement or intervention, the relatives said," according to the Knight-Ridder article.

In 1984, the Reagan administration insisted that it had no knowledge about any casualties from secret fighting in Central America. But the Knight-Ridder story ended with a chilling quote from a former covert military specialist who explained the practice of "bodywashing." "If a guy is killed on a mission," the former officer said, "and if it was sensitive politically, we'd ship the body back home and have a jeep roll over on him at Fort Huachuca," a remote Army intelligence base in Arizona. "Or we'd arrange a chopper crash, or wait until one happened and insert a body of two into the wreckage later. It's not that difficult."

Also in December 1984, I wrote an article for The Associated Press describing how American helicopter crews assigned to the CIA had fired on Nicaraguan troops earlier that year. The first incident occurred on Jan. 6, 1984, during a raid on the Nicaraguan port of Potosi. The second clash occurred on March 7, 1984, at the southern port of San Juan del Sur in support of CIA operations which mined Nicaraguan harbors. The administration did not even bother to deny the AP story. White House spokesman Larry Speakes simply declared that "I think the CIA is probably checking to see what the facts are."

Though the two stories pulled back the veil on the secret Central American conflicts, neither the AP nor the Knight-Ridder article generated much follow-up by other Washington journalists. The administration continued to insist publicly that U.S. soldiers in the region were avoiding combat situations -- and the national media accepted the White House word. By 1984, lying about Central America had become a well-established administration practice.

THE SKELETONS OF TRUTH

Bonner's courageous reporting on the El Mozote massacre would not be corroborated until 1991. Then, a United Nations forensics team excavated the village and found hundreds of skeletons, including those of little children who had been butchered by the Salvadoran army along with their mothers and fathers. But this El Mozote war crime, like so many others in El Salvador, went unpunished, not only there but in Washington. No American official was held accountable for giving misleading testimony to Congress or covering up the atrocity. Nor did any of those who took part in undercutting Bonner pay any price. Rosenthal remains a regular columnist for the Times. Reed Irvine continues to receive national attention in his well-financed role as a press "watch dog." Wall Street Journal editor Robert Bartley still heads the paper's right-wing editorial page, which continues to attack journalists who don't toe the conservative line. Only after the United Nations released its findings about El Mozote was Bonner rehired by the Times. He now reports for the paper from Eastern Europe.

MOSCOW ON THE BORDER

What drove these recurring deceptions of the 1980s was the Reagan administration's zealous opposition to leftist movements anywhere in the Third World. Though many experts on Central America saw the peasant uprisings as rebellions against corrupt oligarchies, President Reagan and CIA director William J. Casey detected instead an insidious Soviet plot to surround and conquer the United States. In one memorable formulation of this theme, Reagan conjured up the image of Harlingen, Texas, under threat from Central American peasant armies. At another point, a top Pentagon official warned that there was nothing to stop Nicaragua's Sandinista army from marching south, conquering Costa Rica, invading Panama and seizing the Panama Canal. (I asked at that Pentagon briefing if the 82nd Airborne might not show up.)

One U.S. government pamphlet from the mid-1980s even suggested that Nicaragua, with its navy of a few river patrol boats, might somehow bottle up the U.S. fleet in New Orleans as it tried to resupply American troops in Europe during a hypothetical World War III with the Soviet Union. As farfetched as these scenarios were, these apocalyptic visions justified to the Reagan team almost any action, even countenancing atrocities against civilian populations in Central America and deceiving the American people at home. The Washington press corps, cowed by Reagan's effective attacks on reporters, either kept silent about the absurdities of the policy or joined in advancing the bizarre arguments. Journalists who sided with Reagan's foreign policy -- the likes of Fred Barnes and Charles Krauthammer -- saw their careers soar. Suddenly, they were pundits on weekend TV shows and were in demand on the lucrative lecture circuit.

So, even after the 12-year Reagan-Bush reign ended, there was little interest in Washington to correct the bogus historical record. Too many powerful individuals, both in and out of government, had profited off the lies. Ironically, conservatives were the ones who led the belated fight to gain recognition for the U.S. soldiers who fought and died in El Salvador. F. Andy Messing Jr., a former Special Forces major who worked closely with Lt. Col. Oliver North on Central America in the 1980s, was one of those who insisted on the historical correction. After a CBS "60 Minutes" broadcast on the issue a year ago, Rep. Robert K. Dornan, R-Calif., pushed through legislation mandating that the Pentagon give Armed Forces Expeditionary Medals to soldiers who served in El Salvador from January 1981 until February 1992.

BLURRED HISTORY

"The U.S. government was going to allow a clever blurring of the history of the civil war to go unchallenged," commented former Special Forces Sgt. Greg Walker. "We wanted to correct the history. ... We wanted to honor our dead and bring closure to their families."

The little monument to the secret warriors now sits next to a newly planted tree in an otherwise vacant sector of Arlington National Cemetery. Like the war it commemorates, it is barely noticeable to passers-by visiting the rows of white headstones that cover the cemetery's rolling hills. Normally helpful cemetery employees were nonplussed when asked about the location of the marker several days after the ceremony. One cemetery employee had no idea where it was and another directed a questioner to Section 59, the wrong place. The small shiny stone actually lies across Eisenhower Avenue from Section 59, in Section 12. There were no flowers or flags. The names of the 21 dead soldiers were not engraved on the stone, just the words: "El Salvador 1981-1992. Blessed are the peacemakers. In sacred memory of those who died to bring hope and peace."

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