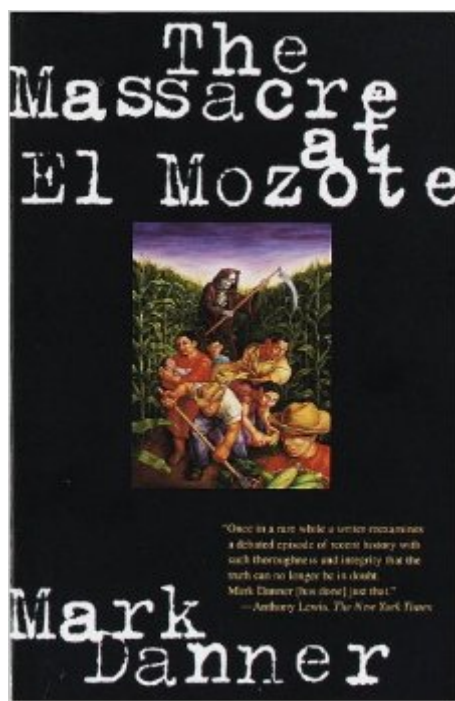


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# The Massacre At El Mozote



## Synopsis

In December 1981 soldiers of the Salvadoran Army's select, American-trained Atlacatl Battalion entered the village of El Mozote, where they murdered hundreds of men, women, and children, often by decapitation. Although reports of the massacre -- and photographs of its victims -- appeared in the United States, the Reagan administration quickly dismissed them as propaganda. In the end, El Mozote was forgotten. The war in El Salvador continued, with American funding. When Mark Danner's reconstruction of these events first appeared in *The New Yorker*, it sent shock waves through the news media and the American foreign-policy establishment. Now Danner has expanded his report into a brilliant book, adding new material as well as the actual sources. He has produced a masterpiece of scrupulous investigative journalism that is also a testament to the forgotten victims of a neglected theater of the cold war.

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## Customer Reviews

Mark Danner has written a marvelously researched and page-turning account of one of the larger atrocities in Central America committed by U.S. trained, supervised and funded armies. After the American War in Vietnam, the U.S. made a strategic decision to pay the locals to do our fighting. In other words, a proxy war. Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, the crafty, spirited and charismatic officer who commanded the Salvadoran forces at El Mozote, trained in Panama at the U.S. training installation later moved to Ft. Benning, Georgia and named the School of the Americas. Graduates of the SOA have been implicated in the murders of thousands of civilians, Archbishop Romero and American nuns and priests. What I found most interesting, contrary to my previous opinion, is that the Ambassador and at least several American officials in San Salvador

believed something terrible had happened in El Mozote. Without access to the site - it had been recaptured by the FMLN rebels - they could prove nothing. Nevertheless, they attempted to communicate their fears to Washington. Washington decided not to believe. Instead, the New York Times recalled one of the reporters who had been to the site at FMLN invitation and had seen the bodies. The story seemed unbelievable. The story was, of course, Communist propaganda and therefore not to be believed. Well, yes, the FMLN did broadcast the story with the intent of influencing Salvadorans and Americans. It was propaganda. It was also true. There is a parallel in U.S. history. (There may be more than one.) During the 1920's and 30's and even later, the American and European press was rife with reports of mass murders in the Soviet Union.

In the early 1980s the Reagan administration engaged in all sort of efforts to convince the American people that its policies in Central America were geared towards preserving the democracy and freedom of the region's inhabitants, while at the same time preventing damage to their country's own internal security. However, Mark Danner, in his brilliant work that examines one of the darkest episodes of the conflict in Central America during that period, demonstrates that the U.S. supporters of the counterinsurgent option in countries like El Salvador, openly misled the American public as to the origins, methods, and final results of their intervention there. Throughout his well-documented effort, Danner (who himself became another unwilling victim of the Cold War - he was virtually fired from his job at the New York Times as a result of his coverage of El Mozote massacre) provides more than enough evidence that the U.S.-perfected doctrine of counterinsurgent warfare, when applied to situations such as El Salvador, can produce results of unequaled human perversity. In the name of freedom and democracy, the U.S.-trained "Atlatl Battalion" murdered in cold blood hundreds of innocent, unarmed civilians - mostly women and children. In the meantime, Reagan and his advisors in Washington (even after convincing proof had been provided by the reporting of Danner that the massacre had indeed been carried out by U.S. allies there) cynically denied that anything had taken place. Instead, some argued that perhaps the victims of the massacre had killed themselves to embarrass the U.S and its military allies. In the end, Danner and the only survivor of the massacre - a middle aged woman - would be vindicated by history. And yet, the disturbing nature of that dark episode in the history of U.S.

Mark Danner's short book, *The Massacre at El Mozote*, is an extremely powerful depiction of not only what can go wrong with US foreign policy, but of the lengths politicians will go through to convince us that what they are doing is, in fact, right. The thoroughness and integrity of Danner's

investigation cannot be disputed; on top of that, he is very adept at leaving readers to draw their own conclusions. The book may be the Hiroshima of our times. While I agree with earlier reviewers, especially the point that what appears to be propaganda should not be immediately dismissed as such, I think the real lesson of the book is that the US, as a leader in world affairs, needs to choose its "friends" very carefully. Danner's book made me realize that while the US likes to shape Latin American policy, in point of fact the powerful "Good Neighbor" to the north is often manipulated by the very regimes it seeks to control. And as citizens of this great country, we have a hard time imagining such a thing. The butchers of the El Salvador government, trained and financed by the US, knew that they could commit whatever atrocities they wished so long as they opposed the socialist rebels. Consequently, in December 1981, they murdered 767 people at El Mozote and in surrounding villages with impunity because they understood that the political stakes were much higher in Washington once the Reagan administration had committed itself to supporting the status quo. In its frantic attempts to dispute or to ignore the details of the massacre, the Reagan administration—which liked to portray itself as hard-line—really appears as the spineless weakling in this whole affair. Truly, the "tail wagged the dog."

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