

**Killing US Softly With Their Story:  
New York Times Coverage of the My Lai and El Mozote Military Massacres**

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**Abstract**

This study employs framing theory to systematically and situationally analyze about 50 New York Times articles regarding the My Lai and El Mozote military massacres. It explores how fundamental international reporting is in truth discovery, moral responsibility sounding and as a power monitor service. Coverage similarities include Allusions to Other Events, Calls for Retribution, Military Mentality, and the Media's Role. Considerations of Time and Politics-Public-Press Triangle Dynamics, including U.S. Military Involvement, Journalistic Repercussions and Political Climate, differentiate coverage.

KEYWORDS: News routines, framing theory, My Lai, El Mozote, international reporting , politics, press

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*"The gods of war... do not reside on Mount Olympus. They are in Washington."  
("Civilians Still Aren't Military Targets," 1994)*

On March 16, 1968, U.S. soldiers from Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, Americal Division massacred hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children. The U.S. military attempted to cover the crime, but the massacre's story, once broken, became a symbol of U.S.-American war crimes in Vietnam. It prompted widespread outrage around the world, reducing public support for the war in the United States ("My Lai Massacre," 2006). This military massacre is known as My Lai.

On December 11, 1981, soldiers of the Atacatl Battalion, a U.S.-trained counterinsurgency force, systematically exterminated the inhabitants of a small Salvadoran hamlet. The Reagan administration, determined to preserve U.S. support for El Salvador's war against leftist guerrillas, downplayed reports of the massacre. The White House ignored and deflected reports that hundreds of unarmed women, children and men were shot, hung or beheaded (Elliston, 2005). This military massacre, the worst in Latin American history (Danner, 1994), is known as El Mozote.

This paper, which analyzes two similar events' newspaper coverage from a framing perspective, is about the politics of power, and the actions described are about the deliberate use of excessive force. It presents a new take on an old issue. The "old" includes four givens. First, the press, policy and public

opinion scalene triangle stretches, as per trichotomous power struggles, but does not break. Second, the dichotomous relationship between the press and the government, to show vs. to shield, continues. Third, the U.S. press is ethnocentric; foreign policy proposal reporting is far less analytical and critical compared to domestic policy proposal reporting. In short, the “press behaves differently depending upon subject matter” (Berry, 1990, p. xv.). Fourth, whether they are covered or not, military massacres, unfortunately, occur all over the world too often.

The “new” concerns why news coverage of the 1968 and 1981 military massacres of My Lai in Vietnam and El Mozote in El Salvador, in particular, demand Cold War and pre 9-11 media environment critique. At least two interrelated reasons exist. One concerns the journalistic repercussions felt after each story broke, and the *why* surrounding them. The political environment affected how My Lai coverage, which unveiled U.S. military criminal behavior in Vietnam, launched freelance reporter Seymour Hersh’s journalistic career. It also affected how El Mozote reporting, which told of U.S.-trained Salvadoran military criminal performance, buried Richard Bonner’s journalistic career. A second connects past lessons with current-day concerns regarding international press freedom.

Investigative journalism played a key role in revealing both military massacres. A systematic analysis of about 50 *New York Times* articles regarding My Lai and El Mozote explores how fundamental international reporting is in truth discovery, moral responsibility sounding and as a power monitor service (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). The main question guiding this study is:

*RQ#1: How does The New York Time’s framing of the My Lai and El Mozote military massacres compare?*

### **Theoretical Overview: Framing News**

Framing refers to the way events and issues are organized, and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences. Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time. They work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world. This research moves analysis beyond simple discussions of media “bias” to consider the deeper structure of, in particular, news messages. It also makes connections between quantitative and qualitative, critical and social scientific, psychological and sociological, production and reception ideals.

A frame is a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991). It is “largely unspoken and unacknowledged” and organizes the world “both for journalists who report it and, in some degree, for us who rely on their reports” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). Much of the power of framing comes from its ability to define the terms of a debate without the audience realizing it is taking place. Media framing can be likened to the magician’s sleight of hand--attention is directed to one point so that people do not notice the manipulation that is going on at another point (Tankard, 2001).

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or/treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In short, framing is “how an event is packaged and presented in the media”(Severin, 2001, p. 15).

News frames are usually part of the reporting process for three different classes of objects: political events, issues and actors (who may be individual leaders, groups or nations) (Entman, 2004, p. 23). In this instance, the political events framed are two military massacres, and the issues and actors concern, among other points, journalists, their findings, and individual as well as societal implications.

### **Theoretical Context: Framing and Foreign Policy**

Although Goffman and Bateson introduced this theoretical concept into the social science literature more than a quarter of a century ago, framing was applied to communication on a systematic basis only in the 1990s (Reese, 2001). Since then applications have mushroomed, particularly regarding foreign policy analyses. Linking each is the common thread of dynamic triangular intersection among politics, press and public opinion. A spiral of silence effect can resound among media message and policymakers then mold majority public opinion formation followed by its cementation. International paradigm media framing can also exert a powerful influence on public opinion, possessing the ability to legitimize or undermine the decisions made by policymakers (Boaz, 2005).

For example, several U.S. media outlets used “sharply contrasting news frames” when covering two similar aircraft shootings, the 1983 Soviet Air Force fighter jet shooting down Korean Air Lines Flight 007, and the 1988 U.S. Navy ship *Vincennes* shooting down Iran Air Flight 655 (Entman, 2004, p. 29). Almost 600 civilians, total, died from the two similar military mistakes. Whereas the Cold War era news coverage of the Soviet shooting framed the incident as a “murder,” the same time period media explained the U.S. Navy shooting as a “technical glitch.” Simple contrasting word usage -- such as “tragedy” and “mistake” -- as in the U.S. case -- vs. “attack” and “deliberate” -- as in the Soviet situation -- led to differing foreign policy effects via garnered public support for U.S. policy. “In both cases, the dominant frame made opposing information more difficult for the typical, inexpert audience member to discern and employ in developing an independent interpretation” (Entman, 2004, p. 49).

Only consulting U.S. media for information also handicaps public opinion regarding foreign policy. An examination of U.S. political event framing revealed that Americans were persuaded to support the invasion of Iraq when citizens elsewhere were not. Investigation of 302 news stories from *Time* magazine (U.S.), *MacLean's* (Canada), *L'Express* (France), *The Economist* (UK) and *Der Stern* (Germany) exposed two dominant media-macro-frames regarding the U.S.-Iraq situation: the International/Realism and Militarism/Diplomacy frame sets. An Internationalist view emphasized international law, morality and international organization as key international event influencers, while the Realist purported power usage

to satisfy self-interest. Militarism supported use of force as a form of conflict resolution, while Diplomacy emphasized negotiation and bargaining. While the European press legitimized deliberation and spoke against a rush to war, U.S. press coverage, in the days leading up to war, portrayed protest as unpatriotic and the arguments against war as irrelevant, when it spoke of these phenomena at all (Boaz, 2005).

At least initial U.S. public opinion support regarding American use of force abroad has been reinforced through television media as well. Channel One TV, a commercial news provider for 12,000 schools affecting more than 8 million students and 400,000 educators, was found to lack a high degree of polysemic content. An observable pattern among its international news story framing confirmed the correctness of American foreign policy rising in conjunction with reports of violence overseas. Channel One TV employed limited and one-dimensional framing in its interpretation of global news issues (Golden, 2004).

Nationalism and foreign policy are inter-related (Hunt, 2002). Foreign and domestic policy framing can be done in terms of a struggle between good and evil as well as a tension between culture-war nationalism and global capitalism values. These paradoxes can unsettle and, if capitalized upon, garner domestic political support (Kline, 2004).

American sentiment is most likely to coincide with the president's policy when other political actors fail to challenge his situation or issue framing and to oppose it when the media contests the president's policy framing. Non-elite public opinion influencers such as grassroots social movements can also qualify as political actors. A critical case study investigating *NYT*'s articles from the 1980s found relationships among policy framing of U.S.-Central American relations under the Reagan administration, grassroots social movements and public opinion formation (Perla, 2004).

Additional scholarly research into the relationship between framing and U.S. foreign policy toward global issues and the Third World has been requested (Prewitt, 1983; Prewitt, 1984). This analysis is one suggested answer to that call.

### **Analysis Overview**

Using the LexisNexis database and the World News Category, I searched *New York Times* articles on Nov. 29, 2005 for articles concerning El Mozote. I found a total of 22 relevant *NYT* articles. I captured *all* for this analysis. That same day, following the same general procedure, I searched for My Lai stories. Four hundred thirteen surfaced. To achieve a comparable quantity of articles for this evaluation, I pulled, with a random start point of three, every 16<sup>th</sup> article, finishing with a total of 26 *NYT* My Lai reports. Forty-eight articles, in total, form the basis for this comparison.

The *New York Times* has been selected for this analysis for four reasons. One, and the most important, is for content uniformity. Although journalists vary individually in their writing styles, they are socialized in their respective newsrooms through routines, organizational influences, external media organizational pressures and publication ideology to produce messages at a particular organizational standard

(Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). (This idea will be a key point of discussion later on in this analysis.) In other words, same-medium's coverage should be studied to eliminate different-organizational similar - news -events framing disparities, as occurred when *Washington Post* and *New York Times* framing of U.S. foreign policy and the Bosnian crisis was analyzed (Auerbach & Bloch-Elkon, 2005). Second, the *Times* holds a unique social position in the United States. It is considered the most prominent American daily newspaper and is often referred to as the newspaper of record in the United States. Third, the *Times* is known for exemplary reporting. It has won 90 Pulitzer Prizes, the highest journalism accolade. Fourth, the *Times'* ideological slant is generally well known. Some liberals consider it conservative, claiming the paper fails "to critique and expose structural economic inequality, the comparative ideological similarity of the major U.S. political parties on many issues...[and] many important stories that... can be found in alternative media" ("The New York Times," 2006). Generally, however, the *Times* is considered to have a consistent and pronounced liberal slant, particularly on social issues, which encompass military action. Such "liberalness" should lend it to critique or to show military massacres rather than shield government ineptness.

### **Analysis Methodology**

Following basic framing methodology, I analyzed all articles according to the four major framing dimensions: topic (what is included in the frame), presentation (article size, as denoted by word count, and placement (page number and section)), cognitive attributes (details of what is included in the frame, including sources used) and affective attributes (article tone and genre, or whether it is a hard or soft news story). The affective dimension concerns the public's emotional response that may result from media coverage. One way the media exert this affective response is through narrative news structuration . The way a news story is structured focuses and thus limits an issue's causes and outcomes. The narrative is the link among the who, what, when, where, why, and how news story components that form the message content (Ghanem, 1997). I also categorized all stories according to their date of publication, byline, dateline and title. Please see Appendices A and B for catalogued My Lai and El Mozote *NYT* articles, respectively.

In general, the bulk of My Lai stories in this sample date from 1970 to 1971 (15 of the 22, or 58 percent). They are, interestingly, hard news stories *NYT* reporter Homer Bigart wrote from Fort Benning, Ga., about military trials of various persons involved in the My Lai massacre. Four of these articles made front-page news, and the majority of them are "long" articles. One story originates from My Lai or a non-U.S. location (Associated Press, 1973). Please see Appendix A for more details.

El Mozote articles spread over time, with 1992 – a decade after the murders -- hosting the bulk of stories (six of the 26, or 27 percent) that year alone. Six stories (27 percent) originate outside the U.S. in either El Mozote (four) or San Salvador (two). Reports range in length from 32 (Amaya, 2000) to 2,109 words, averaging 719. The bulk of the articles cluster around separate attempts to validate that a massacre did occur at El Mozote. Two articles include forensic excavations. A third article involves media surrounding

the release of Mark Danner's book *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. Please see Appendix B for more details.

As with any study, this analysis is not free from error. A number of limitations are inherent. The qualitative approach is one; a nonparametric sample prevents generalizability. However, while quantitative research permits more breadth, qualitative research allows more depth. Other theoretical perspectives -- perhaps one developing international theories incorporating Northern and Southern as well as Eastern and Western perspectives -- could have been used to dissect the articles and to have substantiated or evidenced the themes. Framing theory, however, fits this research situation well.

Coder bias should also be taken into account. I am a U.S. Caucasian female. Although I have lived almost the majority of my life outside the United States in Germany, Brazil and South Africa, I was raised as a U.S. military officer and infantryman's daughter. Inherent ethnocentrism may have clouded some of my interpretation, but I hope that my international experience has raised my cultural sensitivity.

Despite these shortcomings, similarities and disparities in My Lai and El Mozote coverage exist. These correlate with the investigative journalist approaches to search for truth, monitor power and be a sense of conscience as evidenced through the main themes that surfaced.

### **Main Themes**

A look at newspaper My Lai and El Mozote reports uncovers at least four noteworthy similarities as well as a minimum of three crucial differences. Similarities include Allusions to Other Events; Calls for Retribution; Military Mentality; and the Media's Role.

#### **Allusions to Other Events**

El Mozote reports as well as My Lai accounts reference historical milestones in strong emotional appeals to incite reader action. Recent El Mozote stories have stirred up 9-11 memories to drive home their points, as the quote below demonstrates:

Here in America, we know what our victims need. The intense desire to name and acknowledge those who died in the largest terrorist attack on American soil, the need to bring the guilty to justice, the families' urgency to possess a shard of bone to bury -- these things Americans understand, instinctively, as the foundations of healing. Yet they have been denied the families of those killed in what is probably the largest act of terror in recent Latin American history, the massacre at El Mozote, El Salvador... (Rosenberg, 2002)

My Lai accounts referenced intense WWII events for a similar effect during that historical time period: My Lai "...on a minute scale, was Southeast Asia's Nagasaki" ("Memory and Amnesty," p. 32).

In reference to the My Lai military officer trials, at least one article argued:

No amount of courts-martial and Nuremberg trials will ever separate them [referring to LT. Calley and others] out and leave a polite civilized war to be fought by polite civilized people. ("Rules of War," p. 22)

Pushing emotional 9-11 and WWII – events about which Americans feel or have felt passionately – buttons stirs compassion for relatives of El Mozote and My Lai victims. Survivors and/or those somehow closely involved want justice; investigative journalism accounts spotlight how they seek retribution.

### Call for Retribution

The media mediate requests from both situations in which survivors and/or victim family members ask for justice. In regard to El Mozote, journalism reports pin blame:

85 percent [sic] of the war's atrocities were committed by the military and its allies, attempts to hold them accountable have been unsuccessful in El Salvador and the United States. (Gonzalez, 2000)

They also provide payback possibilities:

Though it is unlikely that the court's decision would result in jail time for those involved, *the court could demand that the government conduct an investigation of the incident and require payment of reparations to the families of those who died or disappeared* [italics added]. (Urbina, 2005)

They do so, because

"They [El Mozote murderers] have never even come to ask our pardon," Rufina Amaya [the only woman El Mozote survivor] said. "They have never come to explain why they did what they did, or in any way ever accepted the responsibility for what happened here, and until they do, there cannot be true reconciliation or a just peace here." (Rohter, 1996)

Emotional requests, particularly ones involving children, are powerful:

"The Government [-- Salvadoran and U.S. --] cannot see all of these children and not want to do justice." (Golden, 1992)

Regarding My Lai, LT. Calley

...is facing a court martial on four counts of premeditated murder – two counts involving the mass killings and two counts of individual slayings, one involving a child who allegedly attempted to escape from the ditch...

He saw a head bobbing in a rice paddy, he said, and he fired and it turned out to be "just a boy" who, he said he learned later, was a fugitive from the ditch. (Bigart, 1971)

My Lai victims also desire justice:

A man pedals up the road, stops and says to the American: "What are you doing here? Don't you know the Americans killed many people here? What do you think now? *What are you doing [sic] to do about it* [italics added]?" He rides off. (The Associated Press, 1973)

The Vietnamese man obviously feels anger at what happened in his village and wants someone to do something. Although he assigns responsibility to act to the generic – meaning the American present who may not have any ability to assist – bystander, his call for retribution is passionate. He is angry that the U.S. military wiped out a village.

### **Military Mentality**

As mentioned previously in this study, militarism differs from diplomacy. It involves action rather than discourse. It practices accomplishing a mission through force. In the case of El Mozote:

The argument is that the army actions were a “logical response” to combat a rural guerrilla insurgency that was “swimming like fish in the sea of rural peasantry,” and that such slaughter “was the new rule of war as implicitly agreed upon by both sides.” (“Civilians Still Aren’t Military Targets,” 1994)

My Lai defendants provided this same thought line. Reports point out:

“Our mission was a combat sweep, in which we were to search the village then destroy it, so it wouldn’t be a functional area for the Vietcong.” (The Associated Press, 1970)

Military actions were methodological and purposeful, a means to an end.

Although similar soldier thought patterns are not unique to these situations or massacres, a common thread runs through them from a unique and uniform education: U.S. military training. El Salvador military members responsible for El Mozote received their training and mental conditioning from U.S. troops at the controversial School of the Americas:

73 percent of those soldiers cited for atrocities in the truth commission report, including the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the rape and murder of four United States churchwomen and the massacre of six Jesuit priests, were trained at the School of the Americas. The school is not only costly in human lives. According to the Pentagon, the yearly operating budget for this military school’s training of Latin America’s soldiers is \$18.4 million -- a disgrace when budgets for schools for our children are being cut. Representative Joseph P. Kennedy 2d of Massachusetts has introduced a bill calling for the closing of the School of the Americas. Support of this legislation can save lives in Latin America and money here at home. (“Salvador Massacre Recalls U.S. Role,” 1996)

Sometimes something else occurs, and a “collective sadism” emerges in many massacres that goes beyond mere extermination” (Dutton, Boyanowsky, & Bond, 2005). One round of deaths leads to another, and another, creating a mass murder domino effect. In each massacre situation, neither My Lai nor El Mozote was the only village wiped out those fateful 1968 and 1981, respectively, days.

El Mozote is the most familiar of the destroyed Salvadorian villages north of the Torola river in Morazán province. But murders also occurred, according to Mark Danner, in Los Toriles, two kilometers to the southeast, as well as in the surrounding Arambala, La Joya, Jocote Amarillo, Cerro Pando, Joateca and La Ranchería.

Likewise, My Lai is the best known hamlet of the southern Songmy Vietnamese village – sometimes referred to as “Pinkville” by Americans -- that a U.S. Americal Division infantry unit ruthlessly attacked.

In both instances, military leaders delivered faulty intelligence that provided a context in which soldiers could kill; Salvadorian Atacatl leaders told their men they were destroying F.M.L.N. guerilla sympathizers, and U.S. Americal Division soldiers, frustrated from trying to fight an unseen and evasive enemy, initially



believed they were rooting out Viet Cong after women and children had left the hamlet for market (“Excerpts...,” 1971).

In both instances, military leaders, even government officials, tried to rationalize their actions and those of their men:

Drawing on newly released documents and his own follow-up interviews, Mr. Danner traces how the U.S. Government’s misleading denials of the [El Mozote] massacre were created. (Lewis, 1993)

In both instances, military leaders tried to cover up the mistakes that their troops performed:

“... Secretary of the Army Howard H. Callaway rejected General Koster’s [the highest-ranking officer disciplined in the aftermath of the mass killing of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai in Vietnam] request that the demotion, ordered in 1971 because of his alleged involvement in the attempted cover-up of the killings, be reversed. (Krebs, 1973)

In both instances, military leaders failed to completely shush their actions at least by making one non-fatal error; they left survivors who spoke to investigative journalists.

### Media Role

Two journalists took phone calls that would not only influence the rest of their careers, but affect innumerable people, alive and dead. *New York Times* foreign correspondent Ray Bonner and freelancer Seymour Hersh, who was operating on a \$1,000 grant from the Foundation for Investigative Journalism, funded by Philip M. Stern, a resident of Washington, and would become a *Times* journalist, uncovered the El Mozote and My Lai massacres (Halstead, 2001).

Bonner’s story, which ran Jan. 27, 1982, with photojournalist Susan Meiselas’ photos, broke the news. Even with photographic evidence and eyewitness accounts, the story pitted the reporters’ word against the government’s. The Reagan administration denied the accounts of human rights violations:

A State Department report today sharply criticized the department’s handling of the largest massacre of the Salvadoran civil war, when hundreds were killed at El Mozote in 1981, but it rejected accusations that officials regularly lied to Congress about human rights violations in El Salvador to maintain the flow of military aid. (Krauss, 2003)

Years later, after forensic proof that the journalists’ told the truth about the El Mozote massacre, the *Times* reported:

As Haiti and El Salvador slide into news media eclipse, only public attention will police our leaders. In a sense, those United States trainers of death squad patrons have done their country a service. They have reminded all of us beyond any lingering doubt that our Government cannot be trusted to police itself. (“Time...,” 1993)

Hersh’s My Lai series began in major dailies Nov. 12, 1969. It did what others’ efforts – including those of American GI Ronald L. Ridenhour who had sent a summary detailing My Lai in early 1969 to the White House, secretary of defense and influential senators – could not:

The macabre [My Lai] story would be in the news for years and haunt the war-makers as no other publicity in the history of the [Vietnam] war had done. (Halstead, 2001)

Investigative journalists Bonner and Hersh brought to the public's attention the horrors associated with the El Mozote and My Lai massacres. Their accounts pricked social consciousness with varying effects. What are some of those differences?

### **Differences**

Although similar military events, El Mozote and My Lai massacres disparities are many. Wording, as in the previously cited example of the Soviet and U.S. Navy shootings, does not differentiate framing of the two similar events. But a thematic or situational analysis (Berry, 1990, p. xvi) reveals at least a stark division: Considerations of Time and Politics-Public-Press Triangle Dynamics. The latter further trisects into the inter-related U.S. Military Involvement, Journalistic Repercussions and Political Climate.

### **Time Considerations**

Once the massacre stories broke, time differentiated repercussions. Bonner's El Mozote story broke in early 1982, which was at the beginning of what would become a twelve-year civil war (1980-1992) within El Salvador that would claim more than 75,000 lives. Although six times the number of My Lai men, women and children were killed in El Mozote, not many follow-up stories were written. For more than a decade questions existed as to the account's authenticity. As was later established, Bonner's accounts were true. Over the next decade, with forensic experts later establishing the reality not once (Golden, 1992) but currently twice (Urbina, 2005), process of truth developed. "The search for truth [had become] a conversation" ("Journalism's First Obligation...", p. 7). *New Yorker* staff writer and narrative journalist Mark Danner's written documentary *The Massacre at El Mozote*, which appeared in 1993, helped punctuate that El Mozote truth lecture.

The My Lai story, once it broke through Seymour Hersh's series, accompanied by anti-war protests, garnered greater attention faster. Hersh's text, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*, appeared in 1970 providing more Vietnam War and My Lai massacre conversation fodder. What can explain the difference in U.S. media and audience attention and reaction to these two chilling massacres? One proposed reason is the U.S. military involvement dimension of the press-public-politics triangle.

### **Politics-Public-Press Triangle Dynamics: U.S. Military Involvement**

The U.S. military involvement in both My Lai and El Mozote differs in at least two ways. One addresses behavior, while another concerns extent.

Regarding behavior, My Lai military action differs from that of El Mozote. In the latter instance, no report suggests that men refused to kill, rape, plunder, or perform any one of the cruelties El Mozote villagers experienced, even death. In the former, not all My Lai men obeyed the orders they received. Performance

was complex and confusing. Some men did as they were trained and obeyed orders. Some refused to conform once they realized their information was erroneous. Others— such as then Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson – mutinied. Among some efforts, Thompson commandeered U.S. equipment – a helicopter -- to get My Lai villagers out of harm's way and ordered his men to protect villagers. This combat situation dilemma raises additional issues regarding the danger of dissent, etc., all of which are beyond the scope of this paper.

The degree of U.S. military involvement in the two military massacres is fairly obvious, yet noteworthy. My Lai involved U.S. military members murdering, while El Mozote experienced U.S.-trained Salvadoran military members man-slaughtering. In other words, U.S. involvement in El Mozote, as per the School of the Americas, was remote, or tangential. At least, some “one” succeeded in making the degree of responsibility for U.S. military action feel less to American media and audiences, and that somehow seemed to dismiss immediate outcries for some form of retribution or justice or government authority repercussions (although Salvadoran officials are still being sought after for accountability purposes). Journalists, however, experienced consequences.

#### **Politics-Public-Press Triangle Dynamics: Journalistic Repercussions**

In telling the My Lai and El Mozote massacre tales, Hersh and Bonner fulfilled their first loyalty as journalists: to citizens (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). These journalists served another journalistic element; they were independent monitors of military and government power (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Further, their stories provided a moral conscious, calling accountability to ruthless acts of terror (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Both, however, experienced significantly different effects from their roles.

Hersh, an independent investigative journalist at the time, broke the My Lai story on Nov. 12, 1969 (“My Lai Massacre,” 2006). In 1970 he received the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting. He worked at the *Times*' Washington Bureau from 1972-1975 then again in 1979 and watched as U.S. military officials – Capt. Medina, Lt. Calley (the only My Lai participation conviction) and others – went before military tribunals to be tried for their My Lai actions. Today, Hersh continues to be a powerful voice on security and military matters, contributing regularly to such publications as *The New Yorker* and, for example, having earned a lot of attention for his 2004 reports on the U.S. military's detainee treatment at Abu Ghraib prison.

Bonner, then a lawyer-turned-foreign correspondent for the *Times*, had a very different experience. His editors did not support him when a conservative press watch organization, a congressional committee and a number of other powerful political actors denied the Salvadoran genocide. The *Times* did not initially fire him; but they did fire at him. They moved Bonner from his South American foreign correspondent position to a New York metro desk claiming to help “routinize” or “*New York Times*-ize” his storytelling. The transfer was a demotion, and Bonner soon left the *Times* of his own accord.

Why did his editors not stand by him? Why would a foreign correspondent, a force “more critical in reporting foreign policy than reporters stationed in the United States” (Berry, 1990, p. xviii) because of his cultural understanding and connections, be fringed? He obviously illuminated something someone did not want seen.

### **Politics-Public-Press Triangle Dynamics: Political Climate**

Although the press is a “political actor of tremendous consequence” (Cohen, 1963, p. 268), its power strongly relates with political climate, another military massacre differentiator. The dominant political paradigm conditioning both events was the Cold War. Vietnam began on the heels of the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis and initially was highly supported by the U.S. public. But soon the press found it difficult 1) to frame an enemy as evil as Hitler; 2) to not “show” the war (in pictures or via television reporting); and 3) to not tell how many U.S. servicemembers were dying, among other points. Anti-Vietnam sentiment flourished and American foreign policy changed from containment to appeasement. One of President Nixon’s jobs was to get the U.S. out of Vietnam. The My Lai story broke around the time public sentiment against the war skyrocketed, beating opposition scores against the Korean War. It was socially acceptable to tell the My Lai story, to inform the American public of military madness, to use the press’ power to pressure political actors to bring the troops home (Mueller, 1973). Hersh’s voice was amplified.

El Mozote broke early into President Reagan’s first term in office. The story came on the heels of the Condor Years (1973-1980), or the first war on terrorism, which was “fought” in South America (Dinges, 2004), just after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and at the end of Irangate. As President, Reagan gained great popularity early in his presidency through successfully ending the Iran hostage situation. He changed the international playing field and championed the policy of not just containment, but victory over communism. The Reagan Revolution revived Americanism at home and abroad. Speaking against Reagan became socially unacceptable. Bonner’s story suggested U.S. tactics and Reagan were wrong. Bonner was silenced.

Political climate fans or snuffs press fires. Some journalists get burned in the process. The U.S. military plays a number of roles in international affairs. Time in story development is a key indicator of public-press-political dynamics. Among these differences associated with coverage of the My Lai and El Mozote military massacres is an underlying unifying theme: press freedom.

### **Press Freedom Discussion**

Power in the political realm takes many forms, but the most common are organized money, organized people and organized information (James, 2005). The mightiest is the behind-the-scenes organizer of it all. Policy framers can hide, if not masquerade, real agendas (James, 2005). “Foreign and domestic politics interact with the press quite differently” (Berry, 1990, p. x). A domestic political climate nurtured the My Lai story, while a hidden international agenda handicapped the El Mozote exposé. Press freedom

exercises within unseen but felt constraints, a type of international political hegemony. The “media are enmeshed in a hierarchical system of interdependence, the White House remains at its apex, and the framing of foreign news is susceptible to multiple influences from above and below” (Entman, 2004, p. 120). Capitalism leads many of those forces.

The key is to take what history has shown and not repeat it. A spiral of silence effect among reporters (Entman, 2004) can spread fear and distrust among media, resulting in self-censorship let alone organizational censorship. An end result then: The El Mozote story was hushed. Possible result today: Other stories critical of U.S. foreign policy and practice that need to be told aren't.

One struggle is for a reliable template by which to understand the role of American power. Justifying it in opposition to the Soviet model and increasing awareness of inappropriate ethnocentrism is defunct (Rojecki, 2004). Domestic reception of U.S. foreign policy relies heavily on how the elite press, the *Times* in this instance, transmits news frames. Those news frames must be transmitted in a frictionless, fearless, “free” media environment. That environment, with all the international intrigue, does not exist in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

Horrible, devastating acts of barbarity occurred at both El Mozote and My Lai. Framing analysis of their *NYT* accounts highlights a number of similarities, including Allusions to Other Events; Calls for Retribution; Military Mentality; and the Media's Role. A number of differences separate the reports. Situational analysis reveals two umbrella differences, Considerations of Time and Politics-Public-Press Triangle Dynamics, including U.S. Military Involvement, Journalistic Repercussions and Political Climate. International investigative journalists brought these tales to light through their search for truth, loyalty to citizens and verification. They also served as monitors of power and, by making the significant interesting and relevant (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001), raised moral consciousness.

Foreign news matters (Seaton, 1998). International investigative reporting must increase. Power has to be framed as a vice and not a virtue (Rojecki, 2004). All the news that's fit to print needs to be. Press freedom is a myth. “We don't have a free and independent press in the United States but one that is tied by purchase and persuasion to wealthy elites and their government counterparts” (Parenti, 1986, p. 6). Lack of press freedom is killing the U.S. softly (Nye, 2004).

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