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# 2

## Worthy and Unworthy Victims

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**A** PROPAGANDA SYSTEM WILL CONSISTENTLY PORTRAY PEOPLE abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*. The evidence of worth may be read from the extent and character of attention and indignation. We will show in this chapter that the U.S. mass media's practical definitions of worth are political in the extreme and fit well the expectations of a propaganda model. While this differential treatment occurs on a large scale, the media, intellectuals, and public are able to remain unconscious of the fact and maintain a high moral and self-righteous tone. This is evidence of an extremely effective propaganda system.

### 2.1. JERZY POPIELUSZKO VERSUS A HUNDRED RELIGIOUS VICTIMS IN LATIN AMERICA

A useful comparison can be made between the mass media's treatment of Jerzy Popieluszko, a Polish priest murdered by the Polish police in

October 1984, and the media's coverage of priests murdered within the U.S. sphere of influence. In our model, Popieluszko, murdered in an enemy state, will be a worthy victim, whereas priests murdered in our client states in Latin America will be unworthy. The former may be expected to elicit a propaganda outburst by the mass media; the latter will not generate sustained coverage.

### 2.1.1. Quantitative aspects of coverage.

Table 2-1 shows, on row 1, the coverage of Popieluszko's murder and the trial of his murderers by the *New York Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek*, and CBS News. Rows 2 through 5 summarize the coverage in the same media given to religious personnel murdered in Latin America by agents of U.S. client states:<sup>1</sup> Row 2 shows the coverage given seventy-two individuals in a list of Latin American religious "martyrs" named by Penny Lernoux in her book *Cry of the People*; row 3 describes media coverage of twenty-three priests, missionaries, and other religious workers murdered in Guatemala between January 1980 and February 1985. Row 4 summarizes the coverage of the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, of El Salvador, shot by an assassin in March 1980. Row 5 shows the level of media coverage of four U.S. women religious workers, murdered in El Salvador in December 1980.

The coverage of the Popieluszko murder not only dwarfs that of the unworthy victims, it constitutes a major episode of news management and propaganda. Nothing comparable can be found for victims within the free world.<sup>2</sup> It can be seen that the *New York Times* featured the Popieluszko case on its front page on ten different occasions, and the intensity of coverage assured that its readers would know who Popieluszko was, that he had been murdered, and that this sordid violence had occurred in a Communist state. By contrast, the public would not have seen mention of the names of Father Augusto Ramírez Monasterio, father superior of the Franciscan order in Guatemala, murdered in November 1983, or Father Miguel Ángel Montufar, a Guatemalan priest who disappeared in the same month that Popieluszko was killed in Poland, or literally dozens of other religious murder victims in the Latin American provinces, who were sometimes given substantial coverage in the local press of the countries in which the murders took place.

In fact, *none* of the extremely prominent victims of murder in Latin

America, including Archbishop Romero and the four American churchwomen, received anywhere near the attention accorded Popieluszko. We will show below that the *quality* of treatment of the worthy and unworthy victims also differed sharply. While the coverage of the worthy victim was generous with gory details and quoted expressions of outrage and demands for justice, the coverage of the unworthy victims was low-keyed, designed to keep the lid on emotions and evoking regretful and philosophical generalities on the omnipresence of violence and the inherent tragedy of human life. This qualitative difference is already apparent in placement and editorializing: ten front-page articles on Popieluszko is a statement about importance, as is the fact of three editorials denouncing the Poles, without a single editorial denunciation for the murderers of the unworthy victims.

By comparing rows 1 and 6 of table 2-1, we can see that for every media category the coverage of the worthy victim, Popieluszko, exceeded that of the entire set of one hundred unworthy victims taken together. We suspect that the coverage of Popieluszko may have exceeded that of all the many hundreds of religious victims murdered in Latin America since World War II, as the most prominent are included in our hundred. From the table we can also calculate the *relative* worthiness of the world's victims, as measured by the weight given them by the U.S. mass media. The worth of the victim Popieluszko is valued at somewhere between 137 and 179 times that of a victim in the U.S. client states;<sup>3</sup> or, looking at the matter in reverse, a priest murdered in Latin America is worth less than a hundredth of a priest murdered in Poland.

The claim is sometimes made that unworthy victims are so treated by the U.S. mass media because they are killed at a great distance, and are so unlike ourselves that they are easy to disregard.<sup>4</sup> Poland, however, is farther away than Central America, and its cultural and business links with the United States are not as great as those of Latin American countries in general. Three of the religious victims among the twenty-three murdered in Guatemala (row 3) were American citizens, a consideration that failed to light a fire under the media. Even the four American churchwomen raped and murdered by members of the Salvadoran National Guard failed to elicit attention comparable with that accorded Popieluszko. Their relative valuation by the *New York Times* was less than a tenth that of the Polish priest, and we will show later that the coverage of these American victims displayed considerably less outrage and passion than that of Popieluszko.<sup>5</sup>

The coverage of Popieluszko was somewhat inflated by the fact that his murderers were quickly tried, and in a trial that American reporters

**TABLE 2-1**  
**Mass-Media Coverage of Worthy and Unworthy Victims (1):**  
**A Murdered Polish Priest versus One Hundred Murdered**  
**Religious in Latin America**

Victims	NEW YORK TIMES				TIME and NEWSWEEK		CBS NEWS	
	Articles <sup>1</sup> No. % of row 1	Column inches % of row 1	Front- page articles % of row 1	Editorials <sup>1</sup> No. % of row 1	Articles <sup>1</sup> No. % of row 1	Column inches % of row 1	No. of news programs <sup>1</sup> No. % of row 1	No. of evening news programs No. % of row 1
1. Jerzy Popieluszko, murdered on Oct. 19, 1984	78 (100)	1183.0 (100)	10 (100)	3 (100)	16 (100)	313.0 (100)	46 (100)	23 (100)
2. 72 religious victims in Latin America, 1964-78 <sup>2</sup>	8 (10.3)	117.5 (9.9)	1 (10)	—	—	16 (5.1)	— <sup>3</sup>	—

3. 23 religious, murdered in Guatemala Jan. 1980-Feb. 1985 <sup>4</sup>	7 (9.0)	66.5 (5.6)	—	—	2 (12.5)	34.0 (10.9)	2 (4.3)	2 (8.7)
4. Oscar Romero, murdered Mar. 18, 1980	16 (20.5)	219.0 (18.5)	4 (40)	—	3 (18.8)	86.5 (27.6)	13 (28.3)	4 (17.4)
5. 4 U.S. religious women, murdered in El Salvador, Dec. 2, 1980	26 (33.3)	201.5 (17.0)	3 (30)	—	5 (31.2)	111.0 (35.5)	22 (47.8)	10 (43.5)
6. Total of lines 2-5	57 (73.1)	604.5 (51.1)	8 (80)	—	10 (62.5)	247.5 (79.1)	37 (80.4)	16 (69.6)

1. The media coverage is for an 18-month period from the time of the first report of the victim's disappearance or murder.

2. Listed in Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 464-65. We have omitted the names of seven martyrs who had joined the guerrillas. Lernoux points out that her list is far from complete, and is composed of only the better-known victims.

3. The CBS News Index begins in 1975; our blank figure for this category does not cover earlier years.

4. This is a partial listing only, taken from tabulations of "Religious Killed or 'Disappeared' in Guatemala," put out periodically by CONFREGUA: *Conferencia de Religiosos de Guatemala*.

could freely report. Almost every murder of the Latin American victims was carried out by official or paramilitary forces in crimes that were never investigated or prosecuted under law, and were on occasion even subject to active official cover-ups (as we describe below in connection with Romero and the four churchwomen). Only in the case of the four murdered American women, in El Salvador, was there sufficient pressure to force some kind of investigation and legal process. As we will see, this legal process was barely noted by the mass media (in contrast with their intense interest in the Popieluszko trial), and the press did not comment upon or explore the significance of the fact that there was a relatively serious trial in "totalitarian" Poland, while state murders were being carried out on a daily basis without any investigations or trials of the murderers in a number of countries within the U.S. sphere of influence called "fledgling democracies."

### 2.1.2. Coverage of the Popieluszko case

Jerzy Popieluszko was an activist priest and a strong supporter of the Solidarity movement in Poland. In an effort to eliminate or intimidate him, members of the Polish secret police abducted him on October 19, 1984. He was beaten, bound, and gagged, and eventually thrown into a reservoir. His body was found several days later. In the furor that ensued, the police directly involved in the killing were quickly identified and were eventually tried and given stiff jail sentences. As we have seen, the level of attention given to the case in the United States was very great. The quality of coverage was also extremely well designed to score political points, and contrasts sharply with the quality of coverage of unworthy victims.

**2.1.2(a). Fullness and reiteration of the details of the murder and the damage inflicted on the victim.** The coverage of the Popieluszko murder was notable for the fullness of the details regarding his treatment by the police and the condition of the recovered body. What is more, these details were repeated at every opportunity. The condition of the body was described at its recovery, at the trial when the medical evidence was presented, and during the testimony of the perpetrators of the crime.<sup>6</sup> At the trial, the emotional strain and guilt manifested by the police officers were described time and again, interspersed with the description of how Popieluszko pleaded for his life, and evidence of the

brutality of the act. Numerous unflattering photos of the policemen on trial were presented, adding dramatic detail in support of the image of police viciousness. In the courtroom, the guilty police sit, one with "a nervous tic on the right side of his face [that] caused his dark mustache to twitch uncontrollably," with "tear-filled testimony [that] gave the trial some of its most dramatic moments" (*Time*, Feb. 18, 1985). The police weep openly or bow their heads in the face of the grisly evidence. Popieluszko himself was humanized, with descriptions of his physical characteristics and personality that made him into something more than a distant victim.<sup>7</sup> In sum, the act of violence and its effects on Popieluszko were presented in such a way as to generate the maximum emotional impact on readers. The act was vicious and deserved the presentation it received. The acts against the unworthy victims were also vicious, but they were treated very differently.

**2.1.2(b). Stress on indignation, shock, and demands for justice.** In a large proportion of the articles on the Popieluszko murder there are quotations or assertions of outrage, indignation, profound shock, and mourning, and demands that justice be done. Steady and wholly sympathetic attention is given to demonstrators, mourners, weeping people, work stoppages, masses held in honor of the victim, and expressions of outrage, mainly by nonofficial sources. The population "continues to mourn," "public outrage mounted," the pope is deeply shaken, and even Jaruzelski condemns the action. The net effect of this day-in-day-out repetition of outrage and indignation was to call very forcible attention to a terrible injustice, to put the Polish government on the defensive, and, probably, to contribute to remedial action.

**2.1.2(c). The search for responsibility at the top.** In article after article, the U.S. media raised the question: how high up was the act known and approved? By our count, eighteen articles in the *New York Times* stressed the question of higher responsibility, often with aggressive headlines addressed to that point.<sup>8</sup> A number of articles bring in a Soviet link ("Lawyer Seemingly [*sic*] Implies a Soviet Link in Slaying of Priest" [Jan. 31, 1985]), and Michael Kaufman, of the *Times*, twice manages to drag in the plot to kill the pope, which the U.S. press, led by the *New York Times*, had been trying to tie in with the Soviets and Bulgarians.<sup>9</sup> These links to the Soviet Union and the Bulgarian Connection are established by finding someone who says what the reporter and his paper want to dredge up—in no case was there a trace of supportive evidence.

*Time*, *Newsweek* and CBS News played the same game of aggres-

sively raising questions about "Hints of a Contract from the Top" (*Time*) and "Keeping the Lid on Murder" (*Newsweek*), and *Time* raised questions about possible Soviet involvement as well as the Bulgarian Connection.

**2.1.2(d). Conclusions and follow-up.** The *New York Times* had three editorials on the Popieluszko case. In each it focused on the responsibility of the higher authorities and the fact that "A police state is especially responsible for the actions of its police" ("Murderous Poland," Oct. 30, 1984). It freely applied words like "thuggery," "shameless," and "crude" to the Polish state. The fact that police officers were quickly identified, tried, and convicted it attributed to the agitation at home and abroad that put a limit on villainy. This is a good point, and one that we stress throughout this book: villainy may be constrained by intense publicity. But we also stress the corresponding importance of a refusal to publicize and the leeway this gives murderous clients under the protection of the United States and its media, where the impact of publicity would be far greater.<sup>10</sup> The *Times* also fails to note the contrast between murderous Poland and murderous El Salvador—in the latter country, no murders of Salvadorans by the security forces or the death squads connected to them have ever resulted in a trial. The absence of such a comparison, as well as the failure of the *Times* to produce an editorial entitled "Murderous El Salvador," illustrates how a serviceable terrorism is protected in a propaganda mode.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2. RUTILIO GRANDE AND THE UNWORTHY SEVENTY-TWO

As shown on table 2-1, the unworthy seventy-two on Penny Lernoux's list of martyrs were subject to a grand total of eight articles in the *New York Times*, one in *Newsweek*, and none in *Time*, and they were never mentioned on CBS News in the years of index coverage (1975-78). A total of seven names on the Lernoux list were mentioned in the eight *Times* articles, and two different ones were discussed in *Newsweek*, which means that sixty-three of the murders were blacked out entirely in these important media vehicles. None of the eight articles in the *New York Times* had any details or dramatic quality that might evoke sympathetic emotion. They described the murders as remote events in a distant world (see the *Times*'s description of the murder of Michael

Jerome Cypher, in table 2-2). But that is a matter of editorial choice. The drama is there for the asking—only the press concern is missing.<sup>12</sup>

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### TABLE 2-2

#### The Savageries Inflicted on Worthy and Unworthy Victims, as Depicted in the *New York Times*

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##### WORTHY VICTIMS

###### *Jerzy Popieluszko, a Polish priest, murdered on October 19, 1984.*

(1) Account at finding of body: "The sources who saw the priest's body on Tuesday, said it was badly bruised, indicating he had been beaten after he was kidnapped on a highway near the town of Torun. The autopsy also showed that Father Popieluszko had been gagged at the mouth and apparently tied with a rope from neck to feet so that if he struggled he would strangle himself, they said. The sources said they could not confirm reports quoting members of the slain priest's family as saying he had suffered injuries to his jaw and skull" (Dec. 29, 1984).

(2) Account at trial of murderers: "The film showed clearly that the priest's bent legs were tied to a noose around his neck in such a way that if he straightened them he would be strangled. The rope binding his hands had evidently come loose in the water. Several gags had also worked free and lay covering his clerical collar and the front of his cassock. From his legs hung a sack of rocks that, according to earlier testimony, had been carried all over Poland for the week that the three assailants were pursuing the priest. When the cameras were trained on the priest's face, the narration by a police officer at the reservoir declared that 'there are clear signs of beating.' This was confirmed by medical evidence offered Thursday by Dr. Maria Byrdy, a pathologist, who said Father Popieluszko had been struck more than a dozen times with a club" (Jan. 26, 1985).

##### UNWORTHY VICTIMS

###### *Michael Jerome Cypher, an American priest murdered in Honduras.*

"The bodies were found in a dynamited well on an eastern Honduran estate . . ." (July 19, 1975). *Note:* There was no arrest or trial.

###### *Jaime Alcina, a Spanish priest of the Catholic Action Workers movement, following his arrest in Chile:*

"Several days later a body with 10 bullet holes in the back was found in the Mapocho River. A Spanish consul identified the body as that of Father Alcina" (Oct. 1, 1973). *Note:* There was no arrest or trial.

**Archbishop Oscar Arnolfo Romero, murdered in El Salvador on March 24, 1980:**

"Archbishop Romero was killed by a sniper who got out of a red car, apparently stood just inside the door of the Chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital, fired a single shot at the prelate and fled. The bullet struck the archbishop in the heart, according to a doctor at the hospital where the prelate was taken" (Mar. 25, 1980). *Note:* There was no arrest or trial.

**María Rosario Godoy de Cuevas, secretary of the Mutual Support Group, murdered in Guatemala on April 4, 1985:**

"The body of the secretary of the Support Group for Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Guatemala was found Friday in a ravine nine miles south of Guatemala City, according to a spokesman for the group. The bodies of her brother and young son were also in the car" (Apr. 7, 1985, p. 5). \* *Note:* There was no arrest or trial.

**Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Maura Clarke, four American women murdered in El Salvador, December 4, 1980:**

(1) Account at the finding of the bodies:

"Witnesses who found the grave said it was about five feet deep. One woman had been shot in the face, another in the breast. Two of the women were found with their blood-stained underpants around their ankles" (Dec. 5, 1980).\*

(2) Account at the trial of the murderers:

No description was given, although medical testimony was presented to the court; see text.

\* For details that were not presented in this account, see the accompanying text.

The murder of one of the seventy-two, Father Rutilio Grande, was an important landmark in the escalation of violence in El Salvador and in its effect on the newly appointed conservative archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. Rutilio Grande was a Jesuit, the pastor of Aguilares, and a progressive who helped organize peasants in self-help groups. He was strongly opposed by the local landlords, police, and military commanders, but he was a national figure in the Salvadoran church and was a friend of the archbishop. Rutilio Grande was shot to death, along with a teenager and a seventy-two-year-old peasant, while on his way to Mass on March 12, 1977. According to a church autopsy, the bullets that riddled the priest were of the same caliber as the

Manzer guns used by the police. "By 'coincidence,' all telephone communications in the area were cut off within an hour of the triple assassination. Police patrols normally active in the region mysteriously disappeared."<sup>13</sup> Archbishop Romero wrote to the president of El Salvador, Arturo Armando Molina, urging a thorough investigation, which was promised. A week later, the church having established that it was probably police bullets that had killed the three victims, Romero wrote a harsher letter to Molina, noting the absence of a promised official report and pointing out that comments, "many of them unfavorable to your government," have been made. With continued inaction, Romero threatened to refuse church participation in any official government event unless the murders were investigated and the killers brought to justice. Romero's biographer writes:

Six weeks later, the lawyer chosen by Romero to follow the case reported "an embarrassing and clear indifference toward the investigation on the part of state organizations." A suspect ordered arrested by a judge was living unconcernedly in El Paisnal, and no one had ordered the bodies exhumed and examined. The bullets are still in the graves.<sup>14</sup>

Rutilio Grande's murder followed a series of forcible expulsions of foreign clergy by the Molina government and several earlier murders of church personnel. Romero and the clergy deliberated at great length on their course of action in response to this escalation of the violence against them. They tried to get out their messages of concern, but many were not heard because of newspaper censorship. They finally decided to take dramatic action: temporary school closings, and implementation of the previously mentioned threat to refuse to support the government and other power groups on official occasions.

This entire package of murder and church response was hardly lacking in drama and newsworthiness. Yet murder, the confrontation of the desperate church with a repressive state, and the dramatic acts carried out to try to mobilize support in its self-defense were subject to a virtual blackout in the U.S. mass media. The murder of Rutilio Grande was mentioned in *Newsweek* ("Priests in Peril," Aug. 1, 1977), but it never once reached the audiences of the *New York Times*, *Time*, or CBS News. This was important in allowing the terror to go on unimpeded. To paraphrase the *New York Times* editorial on "murderous Poland": no publicity and agitation, no containment of terror.

### 2.3. ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO

The murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the highest Catholic church official in El Salvador, was "big news," and its political implications were enormous. At the time of his murder, Romero had become the foremost and most outspoken critic of the policy of repression by murder being carried out by the U.S.-supported military government. In his last sermon, he appealed to members of the army and security forces to refuse to kill their Salvadoran brethren, a call that enraged the officer corps trying to build a lower-class military that was willing to kill freely. Romero had been placed on right-wing death lists and received threats from the right wing, which from the beginning had been closely linked to the army and intelligence services.<sup>15</sup> Only a few weeks prior to his murder he had written a forceful letter to President Jimmy Carter opposing the imminent granting of U.S. aid to the junta as destructive of Salvadoran interests. The Carter administration had been so disturbed by Romero's opposition to its policies that it had secretly lobbied the pope to curb the archbishop.<sup>16</sup>

Romero, in short, was not merely an "unworthy" victim, he was an important activist in opposition to the local alliance of army and oligarchy and to U.S. policy in El Salvador. The U.S. media's news coverage of the archbishop's murder and its follow-up reflected well his threatening role, reaching new levels of dishonesty and propaganda service in their coverage of this and related events.

#### 2.3.1. Details of the murder and public response

The details of the Romero murder provided by the U.S. mass media were concise (see table 2-2). While there were expressions of shock and distress, there were very few quotations and expressions of outrage by supporters of Romero. There were no statements or quotations suggesting that the murder was intolerable and that the guilty must be found and brought to justice. The *New York Times* had no editorial condemning, or even mentioning, the murder. It was quickly placed in the larger framework of alleged killings by both the left and the right that were deeply regretted by Salvadoran and U.S. officials.

#### 2.3.2. The propaganda line: a reformist junta trying to contain the violence of right and left

The Salvadoran and U.S. governments contended at the time of Romero's murder that the killing going on in El Salvador was being done by extremists of the right and the left, not by the Salvadoran armed forces and their agents; and that the government was trying its best to contain the killings and carry out reforms. John Bushnell, of the State Department, stated before a House appropriations committee that "there is some misperception by those who follow the press that the government is itself repressive in El Salvador," when in fact the violence is "from the extreme right and the extreme left" and "the smallest part" of the killings come from the army and security forces.<sup>17</sup> This statement was a knowing lie,<sup>18</sup> contradicted by all independent evidence coming out of El Salvador and refuted by Archbishop Romero on an almost daily basis.<sup>19</sup> In his letter to Carter sent on February 17, 1980, the archbishop pointed out that aid to the junta had resulted in increasing repressive violence by the government, "amassing a total dead and wounded far higher than in the previous military regimes." And Romero explained to Carter that the idea that the junta was reformist was a myth, that "neither the junta nor the Christian Democrats govern the country," but, rather, power is in the hands of the army, serving itself and the oligarchy.<sup>20</sup>

What gave Bushnell's statement a certain credibility was the fact that there had been a "reformist coup" by young army officers in October 1979, and liberals and progressives entered the early junta. However, as Raymond Bonner points out,

The young, progressive officers who carefully plotted the coup lost control of it as swiftly as they had executed it. Their ideals and objectives were subverted by senior, more conservative officers who had the backing of [U.S. Ambassador] Devine and the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador and key Carter administration officials in Washington.<sup>21</sup>

The progressive elements on the junta found themselves entirely without power, and gradually exited or were forced out, along with large numbers from the cabinet and administration. José Napoleón Duarte joined the junta in March to serve as a fig leaf and public-relations agent of the army, but all those who were not satisfied to serve in that role departed.<sup>22</sup>

Once the old-guard military had seized control from the progressive officers in October 1979, it began a general war of extermination against all progressive individuals and organizations in El Salvador. By the end of May, church sources reported 1,844 civilian deaths already in 1980, a figure that reached 10,000 by the end of the year, almost all at the hands of the government. A guerrilla war was *forced* on the center and left by the policy of unconstrained violence of the Carter-supported government. The government was not centrist and reformist—it was a military regime of the right, closely linked to the terrorist force ORDEN and the death squads, and it used them regularly as proxies. The paramilitary groups were not uncontrollable—they were doing what the army wanted them to do. The paramilitary forces and death squads of El Salvador had extensive interlocking relationships with the official military and security forces and their U.S. counterparts. There was a revolving door of personnel, close cooperation in sharing information, funding of the paramilitary groups by the official forces, and a division of labor between them. The paramilitary did jobs for which the official forces wished to disclaim responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

Although the paramilitary group ORDEN was formally abolished at the time of the October 1979 coup, it was secretly maintained and had a close relationship with the regular military establishment. According to one detailed account,

The reformers had officially abolished ORDEN, the old information network. But . . . military officers suspicious of the young reformers secretly reestablished and expanded much of the old intelligence system into a grass-roots intelligence network that fed names of suspected subversives to military and paramilitary death squads. Four days after the coup, D'Aubuisson said in an interview, he was assigned by members of the high command to help reorganize ANSESAL [an intelligence communication network] inside a military compound under the chief of staff's office—out of the reach of civilians in the new junta.<sup>24</sup>

This secret assignment of D'Aubuisson was confirmed by junta member Colonel Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez, and then Deputy Defense Minister Colonel Nicolás Carranza.<sup>25</sup>

The U.S. mass media, however, followed the Bushnell formula virtually without deviation: there was a "civil war between extreme right and leftist groups" (*New York Times*, Feb. 25, 1980); the "seemingly well meaning but weak junta" was engaging in reforms but was unable to check the terror (*Time*, Apr. 7, 1980). The U.S. mass media had fea-

ured heavily the reformist character of the revolutionary junta, but they uniformly suppressed evidence of the powerlessness, frustrations, and early resignation of the progressives, and their replacement by civilians willing to serve as "front men" for state terror. Román Mayorga, an engineer and university professor who had been the unanimous choice of the original coup plotters, resigned on January 3, 1980, along with Guillermo Manuel Ungo "and at least 37 of the highest ranking government officials, including the heads of all government agencies."<sup>26</sup> But for the media, these events never happened, and the junta was still a "weak centrist government . . . beset by implacable extremes" (*New York Times* editorial, Apr. 28, 1980), not a right-wing government of massacre. Robin K. Andersen points out that

None of the networks reported . . . the final resignation of the junta members. Even CBS, which had reported at length on the appointment of Román Mayorga, failed to report his resignation, or any of the others. For television news viewers, these political developments never happened. Television news coverage omitted every reference to this all-important political power struggle that could have accounted for the abuses that continued. . . . The civilian lack of control, and even their resignation, had no effect on the way in which the news characterized the junta; it continued to be labeled moderate.<sup>27</sup>

And the Salvadoran government has continued to be "moderate" and "centrist" up to today.

Other media suppressions aided in bolstering the myth of the neutral junta standing between the extreme right and the extreme left. On March 29, 1980, the *New York Times* carried a Reuters dispatch noting the resignation of three high Salvadoran officials, who, according to the article, "resigned last night in protest against the junta's inability to halt violence by leftist and rightist forces."<sup>28</sup> The preceding day, an AP dispatch recorded the same resignations, but without any explanation of the reasons for this. One of the resigning officials, Undersecretary of Agriculture Jorge Alberto Villacorta, issued a public statement saying that

I resigned because I believed that it was useless to continue in a government not only incapable of putting an end to the violence, but a government which itself is generating the political violence through repression. . . . Recently, in one of the large estates taken over by the agrarian reform, uniformed members of the security



forces accompanied by a masked person pointed out the directors of the self-management group and then these individuals were shot in front of their co-workers.<sup>29</sup>

It can be seen from the statement that the reference in the Reuter's dispatch to protest "against the junta's inability to halt violence by leftist and rightist forces" is a gross misrepresentation, and it is evident that an honest transmission of Villacorta's statement would have contradicted the propaganda line.

At Archbishop Romero's funeral, on March 30, 1980, where many thousands gathered to pay tribute, bomb explosions and gunfire killed some forty people and injured hundreds more. The version of the event provided by U.S. Ambassador Robert White and the Salvadoran government was that "armed terrorists of the ultra left sowed panic among the masses and did all they could to provoke the security forces into returning fire. But the discipline of the armed forces held."<sup>30</sup> Joseph Treaster's account in the *New York Times* quotes Duarte that the violence was from the left. It also quotes a junta statement that the army was strictly confined to its barracks, and Treaster says, "There was no sign of uniformed government forces in the plaza before or during the shooting." No other version of the facts is mentioned. However, a mimeographed statement on March 30, signed by twenty-two church leaders present at the funeral, claimed that the panic had been started by a bomb thrown from the national palace, followed by machine-gun and other shots coming from its second floor.<sup>31</sup> This account was suppressed by Treaster and was never mentioned in the *New York Times*.

In a follow-up article of April 7, 1980, Treaster repeats that on March 30 the junta ordered all military forces into their barracks, and that they obeyed "even though they knew leftists with weapons were pouring into the central plaza." Treaster asserts this government claim as fact, and he continues to suppress sources and evidence that contradict this government allegation. He also fails to explain why the leftists would indiscriminately shoot their own people paying homage to the archbishop.<sup>32</sup>

The title of Treaster's article of April 7, 1980, is "Slaying in Salvador Backfires on Rebels." The article reads as follows:

The murder of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero two weeks ago and the killing of 30 at his funeral may have benefited, rather than hurt, the ruling civilian-military junta, in the view of many diplomats, businessmen and Government officials.

The extreme right is being blamed for the killing of the Arch-

bishop and the extreme left is being blamed for the shooting and bombing that turned the crowded central plaza into chaos as Archbishop Romero was being eulogized.

"It's not so much that the junta gained," said Robert E. White, the United States Ambassador to El Salvador, "but that its opponents on the extreme right and left have lost prestige. The net result is a boost in prestige for the junta."

We may note how the title of the article transforms the murder of the leader of the dissident forces (and then of his followers at the funeral) from a moral issue deserving outrage into a question of political advantage, and turns that against the rebels. It would be hard to imagine the *New York Times* publishing an article on Popieluszko headed "Slaying in Poland Backfires on Solidarity Movement," featuring perhaps the playing up by the official press of demonstrator aggressiveness or violence. Note also how the question of identifying the killer of Romero, and the government's obligation to seek justice, has been pushed into the background. Finally, there is the statement that "the extreme left is being blamed" for the deaths in the plaza. Use of the passive voice allows Treaster to avoid specification of just who is blaming the extreme left. He mentions as his sources for the article as a whole "many diplomats, businessmen and Government officials"—he doesn't even pretend to have talked to ordinary Salvadorans or church representatives—but his only citation near the statement that "the extreme left is being blamed" is the then-U.S. ambassador, Robert White. By relying only on government handouts and carefully avoiding readily available conflicting evidence and alternative views, the *Times* once again found the means of applying the usual formula of a deadly right offsetting a deadly left, with the junta favored by the U.S. government once more placed in the middle—with enhanced prestige!

### 2.3.3. Misrepresentation of Romero's views

As we noted earlier, Romero was unequivocal in laying the blame for the violence in El Salvador on the army and security forces, and he viewed the left and popular groupings as victims provoked into self-defense by violence and injustice. The peoples' organizations, he told Carter, are "fighting to defend their most fundamental human rights" against a military establishment that "knows only how to repress the

people and defend the interests of the Salvadorean oligarchy." And in his diary, Romero completely repudiated the idea that the army was reacting to somebody else's violence—the security forces are instruments "of a general program of annihilation of those on the left, who by themselves would not commit violence or further it were it not for social injustice that they want to do away with."<sup>33</sup> Thus Joseph Treaster's statement on the front page of the *New York Times* that Romero "had criticized both the extreme right and the extreme left for widespread killing and torture in El Salvador" (Mar. 31, 1980) is straightforward lying: Romero never accused the left of torture or widespread killing, he never equated the right and the left, and he was quite clear that the government (an agent of the right) was the primary killer. In this respect, Romero's perception, essentially the same as that *privately* conveyed to the press by the U.S. government, was grossly falsified in public by both the government and press.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, a year later, in an article marking the anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Romero, Edward Schumacher, of the *Times*, noted that under Romero's successor, Archbishop Rivera y Damas, "the church has moved to a more centrist position in the civil war between the Government and the guerrillas."<sup>35</sup> Of course, if the church now takes a centrist position, as opposed to its position under Romero, this constitutes an admission that the theme played by Treaster and the *Times* a year previously of an even-handed Romero was a lie (which it was). Is it possible that the *Times* always finds the church in the middle and is lying one year later as well? The question must remain open, as his successor has been much more circumspect than Romero. The willingness of the right wing and the army to murder people like Romero might have affected Archbishop Rivera y Damas's ability to speak his mind freely and forced public caution. The point does not arise for Schumacher and the *Times*.<sup>36</sup>

#### 2.3.4. The loss of interest in responsibility at the top

With Popieluszko, the media tried hard to establish that there was knowledge of and responsibility for the crime at higher levels of the Polish government. Soviet interest and possible involvement were also regularly invoked. With Romero, in contrast, no such questions were raised or pressed.

The media did note that Romero opposed aid to the Salvadoran

junta (which Carter provided anyway), but they failed to convey the depth of his hostility to U.S. policy and the importance of his oppositional role (although it was far more threatening to U.S. policy than Popieluszko was to the Soviet Union). The press never mentioned the special emissary sent by Carter to the pope in an attempt to bring Romero into line, or the fact that the head of the Jesuit order in Central America was called to Rome, probably in response to this U.S. pressure.<sup>37</sup> The media also suppressed Romero's appeal to the military to refuse to kill, a fact that would have made much clearer how strongly opposed he was to the official policies, and how convenient his murder was to the rulers of El Salvador.

Although Romero was far and away the most important establishment figure aligned with the popular movements, the media pretended at first that the affiliation of his killers was a complete mystery. The *Washington Post* supposed an equal likelihood of a left- or right-wing source, and the *Miami Herald* noted on March 27 that "Both stood to benefit from any chaos his death might have created." (No American paper suggested that Popieluszko might have been murdered by Solidarity sympathizers to discredit the Polish government.) This foolishness was the minority position—the bulk of the press suggested that the killer was probably a rightist, but of obscure connection. The reliable Duarte suggested that the killing was too professional to be indigenous—it must have been a contract job from the outside. This view was dutifully repeated by the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and CBS News.<sup>38</sup>

If, as seemed very likely, the killer was a Salvadoran rightist, or someone in their employ, what was his connection, if any, with the army and security forces? We saw earlier that the linkages between the death squads and the army were close: there was at least some degree of common command, shared operations, and mutual protection. Could the killer have been a member of the armed forces? Given the links of the army to the paramilitary forces, wasn't it likely that they knew who killed Romero? The U.S. mass media did not *raise*, let alone press, these questions. When D'Aubuisson's link to the murder became public knowledge, the media failed to make this a big issue, and his close relations to the official forces were not examined and discussed. This is evidence of a propaganda system at work.

Any possible U.S. connection to the crime was, of course, "far out," and could not be raised in the U.S. media. That we don't do this sort of thing is an ideological premise of the patriotic press, no matter what the facts of recent history tell us.<sup>39</sup> But still, the question might have been raised whether the environment that the United States was help-

ing to create in El Salvador, training and aiding a murderous army whose violence had driven Romero to passionate opposition, made the United States indirectly guilty of the murder? The press never discussed this point either. The *Times* quotes Secretary of State Cyrus Vance on the murder: "Two weeks ago I wrote the Archbishop and said: 'We share a repugnance for the violence provoked by both extremes that is taking the lives of innocent people. We deplore the efforts of those seeking to silence the voices of reason and moderation with explosives, intimidation and murder.'" <sup>40</sup> The paper points out that the letter from Vance was in reply to Romero's appeal to cease supplying arms. The article failed to include the gist of Romero's argument, and it did not quote that part of Vance's letter that rejected the archbishop's appeal. The report also did not take note of Vance's serious misrepresentation of the archbishop's position when he says that "We share a repugnance [for] . . . both extremes"; Romero attributed the killings to the army and the right, not "both extremes." We may note also that while Romero was victimized by the very forces that Vance supported, and Romero's forecasts seem to be vindicated by his own murder, there is no hint in the account of any irony or criticism of Vance and his associates. Here the press cannot plead lack of knowledge. As later conceded, the media knew very well that the security forces were the source of the violence.

### 2.3.5. Murder unavenged—or triumphant

The assassins of Archbishop Romero were never "officially" discovered or prosecuted, and he joined the ranks of the tens of thousands of other Salvadorans murdered without justice being done. But in contrast with Popieluszko, the U.S. mass media seemed quite uninterested in who committed the act or in demanding just retribution.

Subsequently, a great deal of evidence became available showing that Roberto D'Aubuisson was at the center of a conspiracy to murder Romero. On the basis of numerous interviews with Arena party activists and U.S. officials, and examination of State Department cables, investigative reporters Craig Pyes and Laurie Becklund claimed in 1983 that D'Aubuisson had planned the assassination with a group of active-duty military officers, who drew straws for the honor of carrying out the murder. <sup>41</sup> Former ambassador Robert White, who had access to State Department cables and other inside information during his tenure in

office, also stated before a congressional committee in February 1984 that "beyond any reasonable doubt" D'Aubuisson had "planned and ordered the assassination" of Archbishop Romero, and White gave details on the planning meeting and the subsequent execution of the trigger man to keep him quiet. <sup>42</sup> Further evidence of D'Aubuisson's involvement in the murder came to light with the confession of Roberto Santiváñez, a former high official in Salvadoran intelligence. According to Santiváñez, the murder of Romero was planned and carried out by D'Aubuisson with the aid of former national guardsmen of Somoza, but "under the protection of General García and Colonel Carranza." <sup>43</sup> Pyes's and Becklund's informants also indicated that D'Aubuisson was a subordinate and political ally of Carranza, who was the number two man in the Salvadoran military until his ouster under U.S. pressure in December 1980. Carranza then moved over to head the Treasury Police. D'Aubuisson also worked with the National Guard's G-2 central intelligence office while the guard was headed by General Eugenio Vides Casanova. Pyes and Becklund write that "During the time Vides commanded the Guard, active-duty military officers working with the G-2 were linked in State Department cables to the March 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. . . ." <sup>44</sup> Note that Vides Casanova became minister of defense, the post he still holds, under the Duarte government.

In short, there was substantial evidence concerning the identity of Romero's murderers, and there were significant links of the murders to the highest officials of the Salvadoran military establishment. In fact, a judicial investigation in El Salvador headed by Judge Atilio Ramírez quickly pointed a finger at D'Aubuisson and General Medrano, a U.S. protégé in El Salvador. But Ramírez soon fled the country after several threats and an attempt on his life, and active pursuit of the case in El Salvador ended. In exile, Judge Ramírez claimed that the criminal-investigation group of the police didn't arrive at the scene of the crime till four days after it was committed, and that neither the police nor the attorney general provided his court with any evidence. He concluded that there was "undoubtedly" a "kind of conspiracy to cover up the murder" from the very beginning. <sup>45</sup>

Needless to say, Judge Ramírez's testimony was not featured in the U.S. media, nor was the accumulating evidence of D'Aubuisson's involvement given significant play. It was back-page material at best, treated matter-of-factly and never put in a framework of indignation and outrage by the use of emotive language or by asking allies of Romero to comment on the evidence, and it never elicited strident demands for justice. To this day one will find no mention of the fact

that the effective rulers of this "fledgling democracy" are military officers who were closely associated with D'Aubuisson and his cabal and may well have been implicated in the assassination.

After D'Aubuisson was caught in a raid on May 8, 1980, with documents showing that he was planning a coup and with evidence of his involvement in the murder of Romero, he was arrested and faced with the threat of trial and imprisonment. An assembly of the entire officer corps of the Salvadoran army—seven hundred strong—was quickly convened, and demanded his release. He was turned loose shortly thereafter, with the concurrence of the minister of defense.<sup>46</sup> The documents found in his possession dropped out of sight. The security forces also raided the legal-aid office of the archbishopric, removing all of their files bearing on the assassination. At the previously mentioned meeting of the Salvadoran officer corps, Colonel Adolfo Majano, the last of the reformers in the "reformist" junta of 1979, was denounced, and he quickly exited from the junta, to be replaced by yet another hard-liner. The army had expressed its solidarity with the hard-line-death-squad right, and the junta was adjusted to meet this new threat to the image of a reformist junta, with Duarte advanced to president, serving as a figurehead for the benefit of Congress and the media, to ensure that arms would flow to the killers.

The U.S. mass media gave little notice to this important display and consolidation of the power of the extreme right, and the semi-official vindication of the murderers of Archbishop Romero. This was telling evidence about the nature of power in El Salvador and the fictional quality of the claim that the government was centrist or reformist. Unbiased media would have featured and explained the meaning of this information. But these facts contradicted the Carter-Reagan mythology, so the media predictably remained silent about these events and continued to perpetuate the myth. On November 29, 1980, following the massacre of the leaders of the opposition in San Salvador, the *Times* suggested that there is "a severe challenge to the credibility" of the government, but there is no hint that the revolt of May 1980 had changed their view of April 28 that this was a "weak centrist government."

The media also adjusted nicely, then and later, to the rehabilitation of the probable murderer of Romero and his reintegration into the official power structure. As D'Aubuisson sought high office and eventually became president of the Salvadoran legislature, the U.S. mass media did not focus on his record as the probable organizer of the murder of Archbishop Romero and as the acknowledged leader of the death squads and a mass murderer. Even the open anti-Semitism of this Fascist was kept under the rug.<sup>47</sup> We would submit that if an anti-

Semite and professional assassin, who was suspected of having organized the murder of Popieluszko in Poland, ran for office and became head of the Polish legislature, there might have been a raised eyebrow or two in the U.S. media.

Throughout this period, media coverage adopted a central myth contrived by the government, and confined its reporting and interpretation to its basic premises: the "moderate government" that we support is plagued by the terrorism of the extremists of the left and right, and is unable to bring it under control. The U.S. government and the media understood very well that the violence was overwhelmingly the responsibility of both the U.S.-backed security forces, which were, and remain, the real power in the country, and the paramilitary network they created to terrorize the population. But this truth was inexpressible. To this day the media maintain the central myth of earlier years, long after having conceded quietly that it was a complete fabrication. Reporting on the prospects for peace in El Salvador, Lindsey Gruson comments that "Today, death squads of the right and left no longer terrorize the population into submission and silence," thanks to the success of President Duarte and his U.S. supporters in moving the country toward democracy—exactly as a propaganda model would predict.<sup>48</sup>

#### 2.4. COVERAGE OF THE SALVADORAN NATIONAL GUARDS' MURDER OF THE FOUR U.S. CHURCHWOMEN AND ITS FOLLOW-UP

On December 2, 1980, four U.S. churchwomen working in El Salvador—Maura Clarke, Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, and Dorothy Kazel—were seized, raped, and murdered by members of the Salvadoran National Guard. This crime was extremely inconvenient to the Carter administration, which was supporting the Salvadoran junta as an alleged "reformist" government and trying to convince the public and Congress that that government was worthy of aid. While temporarily suspending military aid to El Salvador, the Carter administration sought a quick and low-keyed resolution of the case. It resumed aid at the drop of an announced rebel offensive, and—contrary to its promises—before there was any investigatory response by the Salvadoran

government. A commission headed by William P. Rogers was quickly sent to El Salvador to inquire into the facts and offer U.S. aid in an investigation. The commission reported that it had “no evidence suggesting that any senior Salvadoran authorities were implicated in the murders themselves,” but there is no indication that it ascertained this by any route beyond asking the authorities whether they were involved. The commission acknowledged that justice was not thriving in El Salvador,<sup>49</sup> but it proposed no independent investigation, merely urging the Salvadoran junta to pursue the case vigorously. It noted that the junta promised that the truth “would be pursued wherever it led anywhere in the country at any level.”<sup>50</sup> Rogers was later to concede that perhaps he was a bit optimistic in expecting the Salvadoran junta to pursue the case seriously.<sup>51</sup>

With the arrival of the Reagan administration, the already badly compromised concern to find the culprits diminished further, and the dominance of the interest in protecting the client regime in El Salvador became still more overwhelming. It was quickly clear that the whole business could be forgotten—along with the thousands of Salvadorans already killed—except for the demands of public relations. The willingness to support any feasible cover-up was also quite evident. Secretary of State Alexander Haig stated before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that the evidence “led one to believe” that the four women were killed trying to run a roadblock—a shameless lie that was soon acknowledged as such by the State Department.<sup>52</sup> The Reagan ambassador to the UN, Jeane Kirkpatrick, went Haig one better, suggesting that the four women were political activists for the “Frente”—as with Haig’s statement, an outright lie—hinting quite broadly that they were fair game.<sup>53</sup>

Although Kirkpatrick also asserted that the Salvadoran government “unequivocally” was “not responsible” for the murders, evidence was soon available that showed that members of the National Guard had killed the four women. The administration then moved to the position that it was clear that the local guardsmen had “acted alone.” This was asserted and reiterated despite the absence of any supportive investigation, and important leads suggesting the contrary were ignored. A propaganda model would expect that this preferred government explanation would be honored by the mass media, and that in contrast with the Popieluszko case, where useful points could be scored by searching for villainy at the top, the mass media would now be less eager to find that which their government was anxious to avoid.

The difference between the murder of the four women and the

thousands of others uninvestigated and unresolved in El Salvador was that the families of these victims were Americans and pressed the case, eventually succeeding in getting Congress to focus on these particular murders as a test case and political symbol. This forced these killings onto the political agenda. A trial and convictions were ultimately required as a condition for certification and aid to the military government of El Salvador. Both the Reagan administration and the Salvadoran military were thus obligated to “see justice done”—in this one instance. It took three-and-a-half years for justice to triumph in this one case, with a lid still kept on top-level involvement. It was a challenge to the mass media to present these murders, and the delayed and aborted outcome, in such a way as to keep indignation low and to downplay the quality of a system that murdered the women and had to be *forced* to find a set of low-level personnel guilty of the crime (which it took them years to do). The media met this challenge with flying colors.

#### 2.4.1. Details of the savagery

The finding of Popieluszko’s body was front-page news for the *New York Times*—in fact, the initial *failure* to find his body made the front page—and in all the media publications analyzed here, the details of his seizure, the disposition of his body, and the nature of his wounds were recounted extensively and with barely concealed relish (see table 2-2). These details were also repeated at every opportunity (and, most notably, at the trial). The finding of the bodies of the four women, by contrast, was a back-page item in the *Times*, and in all four of the media institutions in our sample the accounts of the violence done to the four murdered women were very succinct, omitted many details, and were not repeated after the initial disclosures. No attempt was made to reconstruct the scene with its agony and brutal violence, so that the drama conveyed in the accounts of Popieluszko’s murder was entirely missing. The murder of the four churchwomen was made remote and impersonal.

The *Time* account, for example, after giving the names of the victims, says, “Two of the women had been raped before being shot in the back of the head.” The *New York Times* account, shown in table 2-2, is also quite succinct. The Rogers Commission report pointed out that one of the victims had been shot through the back of the head with a weapon “that left exit wounds that destroyed her face.” The Rogers

report also noted that those present at the disinterment found "extensive" wounds and that "the bodies were also bruised." Raymond Bonner's account, in *Weakness and Deceit*, noted that

In the crude grave, stacked on top of each other were the bodies of four women. The first hauled out of the hole was Jean Donovan, twenty-seven years old, a lay missionary from Cleveland. Her face had been blown away by a high calibre bullet that had been fired into the back of her head. Her pants were unzipped; her underwear twisted around her ankles. When area peasants found her, she was nude from the waist down. They had tried to replace the garments before burial. Then came Dorothy Kazel, a forty-year-old Ursuline nun also from Cleveland. At the bottom of the pit were Maryknoll nuns Ita Ford, forty, and Maura Clarke, forty-nine, both from New York. All the women had been executed at close range. The peasants who found the women said that one had her underpants stuffed in her mouth; another's had been tied over her eyes. All had been raped.

We may note the failure of *Time* and the *New York Times* to mention the bruises (which both of these publications mentioned and repeated, as regards Popieluszko); the failure to mention the destruction of Jean Donovan's face; the suppression of the degrading and degraded use of the nuns' underwear;<sup>54</sup> the failure to give the account of the peasants who found the bodies. These and other details given by Bonner and suppressed by *Time* and the *New York Times* (and also *Newsweek* and CBS News) add emotional force and poignancy to the scene. Such details are included for a Popieluszko, but not for four American women murdered by a U.S. client state. The Rogers report also pointed out that the forensic surgeons sent to the scene of the crime by the junta, at the urging of Ambassador Robert White, refused to perform an autopsy on the ground that no surgical masks were available. This touch, which would have cast the junta and its agents in a bad light, was also omitted from U.S. media accounts.

In the Popieluszko case, both the finding of the body and the trial were occasions for an aggressive portrayal of the details of the act of murder and the condition of the body. The mass-media reticence on such matters at the time of the finding of the bodies of the four women was exceeded by their restraint at the trial. Lydia Chavez, of the *New York Times*, who attended the trial, notes that there were eight hours of testimony and seven hours of argument that focused on the women's work in El Salvador "and on the details of their kidnappings and

deaths," but her article gave no details whatsoever on the medical evidence.

#### 2.4.2. Lack of indignation and insistent demands for justice

In the Popieluszko case, the press conveyed the impression of intolerable outrage that demanded immediate rectification. In the case of the murder of the four American women, while the media asserted and quoted government officials that this was a brutal and terrible act, it was not declared intolerable, and the media did not insist on (or quote people who demanded) justice. The media relied heavily on "senior officials" of the U.S. and Salvadoran governments, who expressed a more resigned view of the situation and were prepared to allow the Salvadoran system of justice to work things out. Correspondingly, the media also moved into a philosophical vein—the women, as *Time* points out, were "victims of the mindless, increasing violence" of El Salvador (Dec. 15, 1980). With Popieluszko, it was live government officials who committed the crime, not blind forces (that are hard to bring to book).

Even the funeral and memorial services for the women in the United States were not allowed to serve as an occasion for outrage and a demand for justice. For the most part, they were ignored and suppressed. The *New York Times* (Dec. 8, 1981) gave a tiny, back-page, UPI account of the memorial service for Sister Dorothy Kazel, featuring the apolitical statement by Bishop Anthony M. Pilla that "The life of a missionary has never been easy or glamorous."

We must consider, too, that as Ambassador Kirkpatrick indicated, the victims may have been asking for it. As *Newsweek* observed (Dec. 15, 1980), "The violence in El Salvador is likely to focus with increasing ferocity on the Roman Catholic Church. Many priests and nuns advocate reform, and some of them are militant leftists. Such sentiments mean trouble, even for more moderate members of the clergy." (Note here also the impersonality of "the violence"—nowhere in the article is there a suggestion that the U.S.-backed government initiated, and was doing the bulk of, the murdering.) In the case of Popieluszko, by contrast, the media never once suggested that he was a regrettable victim of escalating conflict between the state and rebellious forces (or between East and West). That situation was much simpler than the one in El Salvador: Popieluszko was murdered by officials of the state, and

this was intolerable. The complexities and resort to philosophical inanities about unallocable "violence" are reserved for deaths in the provinces.

### 2.4.3. The lack of zeal in the search for villainy at the top

As we saw earlier, in the Popieluszko case the mass media eagerly, aggressively, and on a daily basis sought and pointed to evidence of top-level involvement in the killing. In the case of the killings of the four women, we can observe a completely different approach. Here the media found it extremely difficult to locate Salvadoran government involvement in the murders, even with evidence staring them in the face. Their investigatory zeal was modest, and they were happy to follow the leads of ("Trust me") Duarte and U.S. officials as the case unfolded. They played dumb. The Salvadoran army and security forces had been killing *Salvadorans*, in the same way they had killed the four women, for months. What is more, the churches with which the women were connected had been recently threatened by the army. More direct evidence was that local peasants had been forced to bury the bodies by the local military. But the media did not use this information to help them find the locus of the murders.

The initial line of the U.S. and Salvadoran governments was that there was no proof of military involvement, although the military's concealment of the bodies was not proper. A statement issued by the junta on December 8 claimed that the murderers were "terrorists of the extreme right,"<sup>55</sup> and Duarte reiterated this view to the press, which passed it along. In keeping with the government line, twenty days after the murders, the *New York Times* still spoke only of "unidentified assailants," although the leads to the National Guard were already plentiful, and it repeated the Rogers report finding that the security forces may have tried to "conceal the deaths" after the bodies had been found.<sup>56</sup>

Gradually, so much evidence seeped out to show that the women had been murdered by members of the National Guard that the involvement of government forces could no longer be evaded. A two-part process of "damage limitation" ensued, expounded by Salvadoran and U.S. officials and faithfully reflected in the media. One was a distinction between the government and the National Guard. In the Popieluszko case, the reader was never allowed to forget that the murdering police

were part of the Polish government. In the case of the four American women, it was barely evident in the mass media that the killers had any connection with the Salvadoran government. This was in keeping with the basic myth, also consistently followed by the media, that the Salvadoran government was reformist and centrist, trying to control killings by extremists of the right and left.<sup>57</sup> This fabrication allowed a two-track system of massive killing by the army and its affiliates and simultaneous claims of regret by the reformers unable to control the extremists. This was reminiscent of the heyday of mass murder in Argentina, when the *New York Times* regularly portrayed the junta and people like the recently convicted General Videla as moderates "unable to control the right-wing extremists" who were killing people.<sup>58</sup>

The most important goal of the immediate damage-containment process was to stifle any serious investigation of the responsibility of the officials of the Salvadoran government. The Salvadoran strategy was foot-dragging from beginning to end, as the idea of convicting soldiers for killing anybody was contrary to Salvadoran practice, and, moreover, there is little doubt that the responsibility for the crime went high. The U.S. official strategy, once it was clear that the National Guard was responsible for the killing, was to get the low-level killers tried and convicted—necessary to vindicate the system of justice in El Salvador, at least to the extent of keeping the dollars flowing from Congress—while protecting the "reformers" at the top. On September 30, 1981, Ambassador Deane Hinton stated with assurance that the local national guardsmen "were acting on their own," although internal State Department documents of the time recognized that the Salvadoran investigation had been a joke, and other evidence existed suggesting top-level involvement.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, the official position was clear. To go along with the official line, the mass media had to stop investigating high-level involvement and even to suppress evidence emerging from other sources. And so they proceeded to do this.

After a two-month investigation of the murders, the reporter John Dinges filed a story through Pacific News Service that showed the murders to have been preplanned in some detail.<sup>60</sup> First, there were intercepted radio communications indicating military discussions of the arrival of the women at the airport, and other evidence of close surveillance of their flight plans, all suggesting a coordinated and extensive military operation. Second, a former deputy minister of planning described to Dinges a half-hour presentation by Salvadoran Defense Minister Guillermo García in the national palace, denouncing the nuns and priests in the very area of the murders and stating that something must be done, only two weeks prior to the murders.

In a remarkable feat of self-censorship, most of the mass media completely ignored the Dinges findings. Dinges's report appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and some fifteen other papers, but not a word of it found its way into the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, or CBS News, and its leads were not pursued by any media. Instead, the media kept repeating the assurances of Duarte and U.S. officials that they were satisfied that the killings did not go beyond the local national guardsmen, and that the matter would be pursued diligently through proper legal channels.

In March 1984, Colonel Roberto Santiváñez, a high official in Salvadoran intelligence, agreed to "talk" about the death-squad network in El Salvador, and his claims found their way onto CBS News and the front page of the *New York Times*.<sup>61</sup> Santiváñez gave highly credible details about the murder of the four women, indicating that the act had been committed on the specific order of Colonel Oscar Edgardo Casanova, who was in charge of the zone in which the killings took place. Colonel Casanova was transferred to another assignment two weeks after the murder as part of the official cover-up. His first cousin Eugenio Vides Casanova, the minister of defense chosen by Duarte and head of the National Guard in December 1980, knew about the murder order by his cousin, as did Duarte. Although this crushing evidence implicated a high officer in the murder and the current minister of defense and Duarte in the cover-up, there was no follow-up to this story, no connection back to the Dinges story of high-level discussions of the need to do something about the religious workers—no editorials, no indignation, and no pressure for action.

In sum, the leads provided by Dinges, and the testimony of Santiváñez, strongly suggest that the killing of the women was based on a high-level decision. The evidence is even clearer that middle-level officials of the government ordered the killing, and that the highest-level officials engaged in a continuing and systematic cover-up. In the Polish case, the evidence of top-level involvement was never forthcoming, but the issue was pursued by the U.S. mass media relentlessly. In the case of the four churchwomen, where the evidence of top-level involvement was abundant, the U.S. mass media failed to press the matter, or even to engage in the pursuit of obvious investigative leads.

We cannot describe here the full details of the failure of the Salvadoran process of justice, which never moved forward except under U.S. pressure and threats.<sup>62</sup> The mass media did at one point berate the Salvadoran government for "stonewalling" the investigation,<sup>63</sup> but the media entirely failed to capture the depth and scope of the stonewalling process, or to remark on its significance in this "fledgling democracy,"

and they generally transmitted Salvadoran and U.S. government claims about the state of the process without sarcasm or expressions of outrage. If they *had* given full details, the Salvadoran government would have been thoroughly discredited. Thus, the extensive evidence concerning official Salvadoran refusals to take action or to interrogate relevant witnesses, and concerning threats to witnesses, lawyers, and judges—which would have been aired with delight if applicable to a Polish investigation—were ignored.

A few illustrations of the Salvadoran proceedings will have to suffice here. Two years after the crime, for example,

... the prosecutors expressed ignorance of the testimony [in the court record] of former guardsman César Valle Espinoza, dated August 9, 1982, which quotes Subsergeant Colindres Alemán as stating on December 2, 1980, that there were "superior orders" to apprehend the women. They were also ignorant of the statement of former National Guard Sergeant Dagoberto Martínez, taken by the FBI in Los Angeles, California, which establishes the existence of a cover-up of the crime as early as December 1980.<sup>64</sup>

A second illustration of the process: two of three judges assigned to the case resigned for fear of their lives. As we noted, Judge Ramírez, who was investigating the Romero murder, fled for the same reason. This line of evidence has cumulative weight, but it was never treated as a whole by the press (and was barely mentioned as individual items of back-page news). A third illustration: according to former ambassador Robert White, two national guardsmen who might have been able to link higher-ranking officers to the murders of the women were killed by military death squads, then listed as missing in action.<sup>65</sup> A final illustration: when the Salvadoran triggermen were finally assigned attorneys, one of the three, Salvador Antonio Ibarra, was prepared to defend the men seriously. His colleagues pressed Ibarra to abide by the statement that "the possibility of a cover-up had been thoroughly investigated" and rejected. He refused to go along with this request, with the consequence that on October 30, 1983, Ibarra was seized by the National Guard and tortured at its headquarters.<sup>66</sup> Released only under U.S. pressure, Ibarra fled the country, leaving the way clear for a lawyer team that would accept the notion that there had been a "thorough investigation" of top-level involvement. This last incident alone made it into the mass media in isolated and fleeting treatment; the others, and the package, were not featured in the free press.

The U.S. government also engaged in a systematic cover-up—of



both the Salvadoran cover-up and the facts of the case. The U.S. mass media, while briefly noting the Salvadoran stonewalling, failed to call attention to the equally important lies and suppressions of their own government. As we have pointed out, both the Carter and Reagan administrations put protection of its client above the quest for justice for four U.S. citizens murdered by agents of that government. The U.S. government's stonewalling to protect its client took many forms. One was an active collaboration in the Salvadoran cover-up. Former National Guard sergeant Dagoberto Martínez was allowed to emigrate to the United States in December 1980, and although a subsequent interview by the FBI indicated that Martínez admitted knowledge of the perpetrators of the crime and a failure to report that information—in violation of Salvadoran law—no action was taken against him. U.S. officials also reiterated that there was no reason to believe that higher-level officials knew about the crime or participated in it, when they had clear knowledge of a cover-up and a refusal to investigate.<sup>67</sup> The State Department also regularly lied about the thoroughness of the investigation. Ambassador Hinton stated in public that national guardsman Pérez Nieto “was thoroughly interrogated and repeatedly denied that anyone superior to him had ordered him to watch the women.” A State Department cable, however, describes Nieto's testimony as “incomplete, evasive, and uncooperative.”<sup>68</sup>

A second form of official U.S. participation in the cover-up was a refusal to make public information on the Salvadoran investigation and evidence uncovered by the United States itself. The Rogers report was released belatedly, in a version that edited out the original report's statement about the sad state of the Salvadoran system of justice. In response to a growing chorus of criticism of the delays, Judge Harold R. Tyler was appointed by the U.S. government to carry out a further investigation. His report was kept under wraps for a long time, again apparently because it had some serious criticism of the Salvadoran judicial process that would have interfered with Reagan administration plans to claim progress every time such certification was required.<sup>69</sup> The families of the victims and their attorneys regularly found the U.S. government unwilling to release information on the case. The argument given was that the information was sensitive, and that releasing it would interfere with the legal process in El Salvador. As the Salvadoran process was a sick joke, moving only in response to U.S. threats, the official rationale was transparently fraudulent. Furthermore, Duarte was regularly making statements that the arrested guardsmen were surely guilty, and that nobody higher than them was involved, which

blatantly prejudged the case. The only plausible rationale for the U.S. cover-up is that the administration wanted to minimize adverse publicity concerning the performance of its murderous client. Information on what was really going on, or its own internal analyses of the case or appraisals of the Salvadoran legal process, would make the client look bad. The administration hoped that the case would “go away,” but until that happened, it wanted the publicity flow to be under its control.

Part of the reason the administration wanted control was to allow it to claim reasonable progress in the pursuit of the case whenever the military government was due for more money. As with other right-wing satellites, “improvement” is always found at money-crunch time. In its July 1982 certification report, the State Department found that “substantial progress” had been made in the case and predicted a trial in the fall of 1982. In early 1983, the certification report noted “significant developments” in the case. This manipulation of evidence to protect the flow of arms and money to the regime would not be easy with full disclosure—or with a critical and honest press.

This cover-up of the Salvadoran judicial process, even though four murdered American women were involved, did not arouse the press to indignation or satire, nor did it cause them to provide more than minimal coverage of the inquiry.

#### **2.4.4. The trial—five national guardsmen for \$19.4 million**

The trial of the five immediate killers of the four women should have been presented in a Kafkaesque framework, but the U.S. media played it very straight. The trial took place three-and-a-half years after the acts of murder, despite the fact that the triggermen were immediately identified and despite enormous U.S. pressure. Two of three judges assigned to the case had resigned out of fear for their lives, and the only independent defense attorney had fled the country after a session of torture at National Guard headquarters. The defense at the trial made no effort to defend the men on the grounds of “orders from above,” although this is a standard defense in such cases, and significant evidence was available for use in this instance. The mass media failed to note the point, although it suggests fear, a deal, or both, and although, as we saw in the Popieluszko case, the media are sometimes immensely alert to cover-ups. In March 1984, former intelligence officer Santi-

vázquez stated that the guardsmen knew that "If they don't name Casanova, they will get out of jail as soon as it is feasible."<sup>70</sup> This testimony was not referred to in the trial context—the media played dumb.

Like the Salvadoran elections of 1982 and 1984, this trial was thoroughly American in staging and motivation. As Ana Carrigan put it:

Security in the courtroom was in the hands of a special Judicial Protection Unit, formed and trained in Glencoe, Alabama; the jurors were driven to the courtroom in the morning and returned to their homes after the verdict in bullet-proof American embassy vehicles; meals and camp beds were provided by the embassy so that if necessary the jurors and the staff of the court could sleep overnight within the protection of the guarded courthouse; and when the electricity failed, just as the prosecution began to make its presentation, light was restored by means of hurricane lamps delivered by embassy staff.<sup>71</sup>

The stakes were U.S. dollars. Congress had frozen \$19.4 million pending the favorable outcome of the case. Within twenty-four hours of the decision, the State Department, announcing that justice had been done, released the money to the charge of Minister of Defense Vides Casanova, who had been head of the National Guard on December 4, 1980, when the murders took place, whose first cousin, according to Colonel Santivázquez, had given the direct order to kill, and who had so effectively protected his cousin and stalled the prosecution of underlings for three-and-a-half years.

In conformity with the predictions of a propaganda model, the mass media failed entirely to capture the quality of this scene—the American omnipresence, the courtroom security, the failure of the defense to press the responsibility of the higher authorities, the role of Vides Casanova, the literal money transaction for justice *in this single case*, which dragged on for three-and-a-half years. *Newsweek* found the result a "remarkable achievement," in an article entitled "A Defeat for a Death Squad" (June 4, 1984), despite the fact that it was the National Guard that killed the women. The article does stress the difficulties in bringing and winning the case, and the possibility of a cover-up of higher-level personnel, but it does not use this information to point up the nature of the system being supported by the United States. It also closes out the discussion with reference to the Tyler report discounting high-level involvement, without quoting the report's acknowledgment of "some evidence supporting the involvement of higher-ups" or men-

tioning the report's admission of the limits of its information. No reference is made to Santivázquez or the Dinges report: *Newsweek* sticks to an official source, and misreads it.

## 2.5. TWENTY-THREE RELIGIOUS VICTIMS IN GUATEMALA, 1980-85

The modern history of Guatemala was decisively shaped by the U.S.-organized invasion and overthrow of the democratically elected regime of Jacobo Arbenz in June 1954. Since that time, while Guatemala has remained securely within the U.S. sphere of influence, badly needed economic and social reforms were put off the agenda indefinitely, political democracy was stifled, and state terror was institutionalized and reached catastrophic levels in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Given the client status of Guatemala and the fact that the antidemocratic counter-revolution served important elite interests, a propaganda model suggests that its victims will be "unworthy," which should be reflected in both the quantity and quality of media attention. Furthermore, whereas victimization in Soviet client states like Poland and Czechoslovakia is regularly traced back to the Soviet occupations, a propaganda model would predict that the U.S. media will not explain the contemporary Guatemalan environment of state terror as a natural product of the U.S. intervention in 1954 (and thereafter). On the contrary, we would expect the United States to be portrayed as a benevolent and concerned bystander, trying its very best to curb abuses of right and left extremists.

Before looking at the media's handling of Guatemala, however, let us step back for a brief review of the crucial period 1945-54 and its sequel to set the stage for an examination of the media's role in the 1980s. Arbenz and his predecessor, Juan Arévalo, led the first democratic system in Guatemalan history. During the decade of their rule, newspapers, social groups, unions, peasants, and political parties could organize without fear of repression or murder.<sup>72</sup> But this fragile democracy rested on a base of concentrated land ownership and foreign control of land and strategic facilities that was a constant threat to its independence and political freedom, as well as a human disaster. The struggle for unionization and land reform during the democratic decade was motivated in part by a desire to build a mass constituency that would provide an institutional base for democracy.<sup>73</sup> Each progressive

move by both Arévalo and Arbenz was greeted with fierce hostility by the local oligarchy, the multinational corporate community, and the U.S. government.<sup>74</sup> "Communism" was found to be in control, or a threat, from the time trade unions were allowed to organize in 1947, and Arbenz's modest and effective land reform was the last straw.<sup>75</sup> With U.S. initiative, organization, funding, and direct psychological warfare and terror operations, a tiny mercenary army ousted Arbenz and installed an "anti-Communist" regime.

From 1954 to the present day, neither reform nor democracy, let alone radical change, has been possible in Guatemala. The main reason for this is that the forces into whose hands the United States delivered that country in 1954 "bitterly opposed any change that might affect, however slightly, their entrenched position,"<sup>76</sup> and they had learned from the 1945-54 lesson that democracy moves inexorably toward reform and threats to privilege in a system of extreme inequality. The very brief interludes of tentative openness after 1954 witnessed the quick emergence of protective organizations of urban workers and the peasantry, strikes, and reformist and radical parties and organizations. As Piero Gleijeses puts it, "in the last months of the Arana period [1970-74], the repression had acquired a more selective character, and on repeated occasions Laugerud [Arana's successor, 1974-78] refrained from 'settling' strikes by force."<sup>77</sup> But the feebleness of the reforms and the awakened hopes and pressures forced a further choice; and "given the nature of the regime," the wave of terror that followed "was the only logical choice" for the Guatemalan ruling class.<sup>78</sup>

Another reason for the failures of both reform and democracy has been ongoing U.S. influence. The U.S. establishment found the pluralism and democracy of the years 1945-54 intolerable, and it eventually ended that experiment.<sup>79</sup> In the succeeding thirty-two years of U.S. guidance, not only has Guatemala gradually become a terrorist state rarely matched in the scale of systematic murder of civilians, but its terrorist proclivities have increased markedly at strategic moments of escalated U.S. intervention. The first point was the invasion and counterrevolution of 1954, which reintroduced political murder and large-scale repression to Guatemala following the decade of democracy. The second followed the emergence of a small guerrilla movement in the early 1960s, when the United States began serious counterinsurgency (CI) training of the Guatemalan army. In 1966, a further small guerrilla movement brought the Green Berets and a major CI war in which 10,000 people were killed in pursuit of three or four hundred guerrillas. It was at this point that the "death squads" and "disappearances" made their appearance in Guatemala. The United States brought in police

training in the 1970s, which was followed by the further institutionalization of violence. The "solution" to social problems in Guatemala, specifically attributable to the 1954 intervention and the form of U.S. assistance since that time, has been permanent state terror. With Guatemala, the United States invented the "counterinsurgency state."

The special role of the army in the counterinsurgency state gradually elevated its status and power, and eventually gave it the institutional capacity to rule Guatemala. As in many U.S. client states, the military used its power to carve out economic opportunities and to steal, directly or indirectly.<sup>80</sup> The terrorism, thievery, and autonomy of the Guatemalan military reached a temporary peak—later surpassed by Ríos Montt—during the reign of Lucas García (1978-82). This overlapped the brief interlude of the Carter human-rights policy, during which there was open criticism of the Guatemalan government and a brief and partial cutoff of arms supply from the United States under congressional pressure.<sup>81</sup> Even during the Carter years, however, relations with Guatemala were not hostile—it was as if a child in the family were naughty and briefly put in the corner. Part of the reason for the willingness of the Carter government to provide no new arms supplies was that the bad boy was in no danger. In El Salvador in 1980, by contrast, where the Carter administration saw the possibility of a left-wing victory, support was quickly forthcoming to a right-wing terror regime.

During the Reagan years, the number of civilians murdered in Guatemala ran into the tens of thousands, and disappearances and mutilated bodies were a daily occurrence.<sup>82</sup> Studies by Amnesty International (AI), Americas Watch (AW), and other human-rights monitors have documented a military machine run amok, with the indiscriminate killing of peasants (including vast numbers of women and children), the forcible relocation of hundreds of thousands of farmers and villagers into virtual concentration camps, and the enlistment of many hundreds of thousands in compulsory civil patrols.<sup>83</sup> Reagan, however, visiting Guatemala in December 1982, commented that head of state Ríos Montt was "totally committed to democracy" and was receiving a "bum rap" on human-rights abuses. Two months earlier, AI released its report describing sixty different Indian villages in which massacres of civilians took place in a three-month period, with the total killed exceeding 2,500.<sup>84</sup>

The Reagan policy toward Guatemala was, as with South Africa, "constructive engagement."<sup>85</sup> From the beginning, the administration strove to embrace and provide arms to the military governments. Ongoing mass murder was merely an inconvenience. One method by which the administration sought to rehabilitate our relations with the

Guatemala regimes was by continual lying about their human-rights record (with Reagan himself setting the standard). Stephen Bosworth, of the State Department, assured a House committee in July 1981 that the Lucas García government was successfully attacking the guerrillas "while taking care to protect innocent bystanders."<sup>86</sup> The State Department's Country Report on Human Rights for 1981 also found it impossible to determine who was doing all the killing in Guatemala, and disappearances were attributed to the "right" and the "left," but not to the government. Amnesty International, by contrast, in February 1981, gave detailed evidence that the thousands of murders were almost entirely governmental in origin, including those of the death squads, whose victims were targeted in an annex of Guatemala's national palace under the direct supervision of President Lucas García.<sup>87</sup>

With the overthrow of Lucas García, suddenly, as if by magic, the Reagan administration line altered, and Stephen Bosworth "could not emphasize strongly enough the favorable contrast between the current human rights situation in Guatemala and the situation last December. . . ." Melvyn Levitsky, deputy assistant secretary of state for human rights, told another congressional committee that "the United States cannot easily sustain a relationship with a government which engages in violence against its own people," as with the Lucas García regime.<sup>88</sup>

When Lucas García was in power, Bosworth found it a caring regime that protected the innocent, and the State Department couldn't determine that the government was doing any killing. With Lucas García ousted, the State Department discovered that he was an indiscriminate murderer and assumed a high moral tone about his behavior. That is, the State Department implicitly conceded that it was lying earlier and counted on the press not to point this out. Of course, the reason for the switch was to help make a favorable case for Lucas García's successor, Ríos Montt. Under Ríos Montt there was "a dramatic decline" in human-rights abuses, according to State Department spokesman John Hughes in January 1983. Ríos Montt is the one whom Reagan found to be getting a bum rap. But as we noted, Amnesty International found Ríos Montt to be another top-rank murderer, who appears to have exceeded his predecessor in civilian massacres.

When Ríos Montt was ousted in his turn, once again the State Department line shifted. It was admitted that things had been terrible under Ríos Montt in 1982, but *now* there was a dramatic improvement, and the government was showing "increased sensitivity to human rights questions."<sup>89</sup> It is evident that we have here a consistent pattern that may be formulated into a quasi-law: in the case of a terrorist state with which the administration wants "constructive engagement," things are

always OK and improving; but when that regime is ousted, its record deteriorates *ex post facto* and looks most unfavorable compared with the humanistic and sensitive one now in power! This droll pattern of identical apologetics for each successor terrorist, and *ex post* denigration of the one ousted, is an Orwellian process that the Western press associates with totalitarian states, but it happens here. And it can only occur if the mass media are cooperative. They must be willing to downplay or ignore the large-scale murders going on in Guatemala in the first place. In that context, the serial apologetics, the lies defending each murderer, and the mind-boggling hypocrisy will hardly be newsworthy.

Given the U.S. role in originating and sustaining the Guatemalan counterinsurgency state, and the fact that that state is dedicated to blocking the growth of popular organizations (i.e., "anti-Communist" in Orwellian rhetoric) and has a strong U.S. business presence, a propaganda model would anticipate a lack of media interest in its "unworthy" victims and an evasion of the U.S. role in its evolution and practices. We would expect reports on Guatemala put out by Amnesty International and other human-rights groups to be downplayed or ignored, despite their spectacular data and horrifying stories. This is a strong test of the model, as the number of civilians murdered between 1978 and 1985 may have approached 100,000, with a style of killing reminiscent of Pol Pot. As AI pointed out in 1981:

The bodies of the victims have been found piled up in ravines, dumped at roadsides or buried in mass graves. Thousands bore the scars of torture, and death had come to most by strangling with a garrotte, by being suffocated in rubber hoods or by being shot in the head.<sup>90</sup>

The expectations of a propaganda model are fully realized in this case. Referring to our table 2-1 comparison of media treatment of twenty-three religious victims in Guatemala with the coverage accorded Popieluszko, only four of the twenty-three were ever mentioned by name in our media sample, and the twenty-three taken together had approximately one-twentieth of the space in the *New York Times* that the newspaper of record gave to Popieluszko. In the case of the murder in Guatemala of the American priest Rev. Stanley Rother, the *New York Times* reported on August 5, 1981, in a tiny back-page article, that three men had been arrested for questioning in the shooting. What was the outcome of the arrests? Were the arrested persons tried? Readers of the *Times* will never know, and the Guatemalan government did not have

to suffer the embarrassment and pressure of the press raising questions in this or any of the remaining twenty-two Guatemalan cases.

Along with the minuscule attention to the murder of Guatemalan priests, the details of the killings were brief, and no sense of outrage was generated or sustained.<sup>91</sup> The few lengthier articles never discuss the role of the 1954 coup and the long training and supply relationship of the United States to the Guatemalan police and army;<sup>92</sup> rather, they almost invariably put the killings in the format of a civil war with unexplained atrocities of extremists of the right and left (see "Archbishop Oscar Romero," p. 48). An AP dispatch in the *New York Times* of May 16, 1981, is entitled "Four Guatemalans Slain in Leftist-Rightist Rivalry." The article, which reports on the murder of one of our twenty-three priests, the Reverend Carlos Gálvez Galindo, says: "The attacks appeared to be related to the long struggle for power between leftists and rightists." A UPI dispatch in the *Times* of July 29, 1981, reporting on the murder of Rev. Stanley Rother, also relates the attack to "right-wing extremists"—not the Guatemalan government.

*Time* has Rother and his Guatemalan villagers "caught in the middle of an undeclared civil war. . . ."<sup>93</sup> *Time* never explains the roots of the civil war, nor the crucial role of the United States in refusing to allow peaceful social change and installing the institutions of permanent counterrevolution. *Time* does, in most unusual fashion, point out that the government was responsible for the "overwhelming majority" of the killings, and even more exceptionally, it cites Amnesty International's evidence that the paramilitary death squads are an arm of the government. But the article fails to give illustrations of the scope and quality of the murders, and retreats, as noted, to the civil-war rationale. Even more compromising is its framing of the U.S. policy debate. According to *Time*, "Yet Guatemala confronts the Reagan administration with one of its toughest foreign policy challenges: on one hand, the country is viewed as a victim of Cuban-sponsored insurgency, needing U.S. support; on the other, the government obviously violates human rights." The dichotomy offered by *Time* is a bit uneven: the Cuban sponsorship is a Cold War ploy for which no evidence has ever been given, but it provides a convenient propaganda framework that is regularly deployed by the State Department to divert attention from its support of mass murderers. *Time* thus elevates it to equality with a real and extremely serious charge—and without an honest citation even to a political hack. The "on the other hand" is, despite the "obviously," a gross understatement. The Reagan administration chose to support and provide regular apologetics for a genocidal government that was using a policy of massacre to destroy a purely indigenous revolt. The "challenge" for the

Reagan administration—quite different from that portrayed by *Time*—was how to *sell* the support of mass murder. *Time* did its little bit by unqualified transmission of the claim of a Cuban-based insurgency, which posed a serious dilemma for policy-making.

The holocaust years 1978–85 yielded a steady stream of documents by human-rights groups that provided dramatic evidence of a state terrorism in Guatemala approaching genocidal levels. Many of these documents had a huge potential for educating and arousing the public, but as a propaganda model would anticipate, they were treated in our media sample in a manner that minimized their informational value and capacity to create and mobilize public indignation. Using a selection of ten important reports on Guatemala by Amnesty International and Americas Watch issued in the years 1981–87, we could only find *mention* of four of them in our media sample.<sup>94</sup> None of these four made it to the first page, and none provided the basis for an editorial or the building up of a press campaign of sustained coverage and indignation. The spectacular AI report of 1981 on "*Disappearances: A Workbook*, describing a frightening development of state terrorism in the Nazi mold, was entirely ignored in our media sample, as was AI's March 1985 report on "*Disappearances*" . . . *under the Government of General Oscar Humberto Mejía Víctores*, which if publicized would have interfered with the media's portrayal of the Guatemalan elections of 1984–85 as exercises in legitimation (as described in the next chapter). AW's 1985 report on the Mutual Support Group was ignored, as was the 1987 study of human rights in Guatemala during Cerezo's first year. We return to the Mutual Support Group in the next section. We will see in the next chapter, too, that the media reported Cerezo's election in a framework of hopefulness and optimism, despite prior electoral experience in Guatemala and Cerezo's own expressed doubts about his ability to rule; the ignoring of AW's retrospective describing the actual results of Cerezo's presidency reflects the media's general failure to follow up on the effects of client state elections (as we show in chapter 3 with regard to El Salvador).

We described earlier the important Americas Watch study *Guatemala Revised: How the Reagan Administration Finds "Improvements" in Human Rights in Guatemala*, whose most striking and important theme was the ex post facto admission by the State Department that its apologetics for the *previous* general had been false. This illuminating document was ignored in our media sample, except for the *New York Times*, which gave it a three-inch article on page 7 under the benign title "Rights Group Faults U.S. on Guatemala Situation" (Sept. 24, 1985). The article describes the report as saying that the administra-

tion has refused to acknowledge major human-rights abuses in Guatemala, but it fails to mention the stress on the ex post facto tacit admission of lying. Mentioning this would, of course, suggest that the *Times's* primary source for its "news" is thoroughly untrustworthy. The last paragraph of the article, which absorbs a quarter of the three inches devoted to this document, gives a State Department response to the AW report, which is that AW is "less a human rights organization than it is a political one." The brazen hypocrisy of this retort would have been clear and dramatic if the article had given the gist of AW's evidence that the administration was not merely an apologist for state terrorism in Guatemala, but was also demonstrably dishonest.

In its concern to protect the Guatemalan generals in their terroristic assault on the population, the Reagan administration took umbrage at organizations like Amnesty International and Americas Watch and mounted a systematic campaign in 1981 and 1982 to discredit them as left-wing and politically biased. In a letter dated September 15, 1982, directed to AI and the Washington Office on Latin America, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders assailed the reporting of these organizations as one-sided and apologetic for the "ferocious" and "terrorist attacks"—of the guerrillas. Enders writes that

No one would deny the possibility [*sic*] of units of the military, in contravention of stated policy, having been involved in violations of human rights. What is important is that since March 23 the Government of Guatemala has committed itself to a new course and has made significant progress.<sup>95</sup>

This amazing piece of apologetics for an army that was in the midst of slaughtering thousands of civilians was distributed within Guatemala as an official U.S. document, and its full text appeared in the Guatemalan press. AW states:

We find this use of the letter unconscionable in light of the risks run by human rights investigators in a political climate like Guatemala's. It also appears to us to be further evidence that the State Department, like the Guatemalan government, admits no neutrals in the Guatemalan conflict; the bringer of bad news becomes, through this reasoning, part of the enemy, to be publicly discredited if possible.

Americas Watch also indicated that the State Department's substantive criticisms of AW and AI were not merely incompetent but, more impor-

tant, were based largely on the assumed truthfulness of Guatemalan army claims (a form of gullibility displayed clearly in the statement by Enders quoted above).

As we discussed in chapter 1, the government is a primary flak producer as well as information source. This Guatemala episode is an important illustration of the government's efforts to silence competing sources of information. It is interesting that the *New York Times* never mentioned or criticized this sinister campaign, even though it was carried out in the context of a policy protecting mass murderers. We will see in the next chapter that *Time* magazine cooperated with the campaign, citing Americas Watch only once on Guatemala, but with the qualifying explanation that it is "a controversial group that is often accused of being too sympathetic to the left" (the State Department, on which *Time* relies very heavily, is never subject to any adjective suggesting any bias). The *Washington Post* (Dec. 4, 1982) had one back-page article by Terri Shaw, on the Enders letter, which features the State Department charges in the title—"Embassy Sees 'Disinformation' on Guatemala: U.S. Report Says Rights Groups are Used"—and in the text. The author allows the embassy claim that "the report never was meant to be made public" to stand unchallenged, and never refers to the threat posed to human-rights monitors by the release of such State Department charges. The human-rights groups are allowed to suggest a State Department intent to discredit, but the word "disinformation" is never applied to State Department allegations, and no serious examination of the content of those charges is provided. This superficial piece exhausts the sample media's coverage of this State Department campaign. The AW report *Human Rights in Guatemala: No Neutrals Allowed*, which discusses this campaign and the Enders letter, was never mentioned.

## 2.6. THE MUTUAL SUPPORT GROUP MURDERS IN GUATEMALA

Human-rights monitoring and protective agencies have had a very difficult time organizing and surviving in the "death-squad democracies" of El Salvador and Guatemala. Between October 1980 and March 1983, five officials of the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador were seized and murdered by the security forces. In accord with

a propaganda model, these murders should have been of little interest to the U.S. mass media, and this expectation is borne out by evidence. As an illustrative comparison, the *New York Times* had a grand total of four back-page articles on these five murders,<sup>96</sup> whereas, during the same period, the *Times* had thirty-five articles on the Soviet human-rights activist Natan Sharansky, not all of them on the back pages. The proportionality of attention fits well our general propaganda-model analysis of the media's treatment of worthy and unworthy victims.

Guatemala has been even more inhospitable to human-rights organizations than El Salvador. Guatemalan Archbishop Monsignor Próspero Penados del Barrio asserted in 1984 that "It is impossible for a human rights office to exist in Guatemala at the present time."<sup>97</sup> "Disappearances" as an institutional form began in Guatemala in the mid-1960s and eventually reached levels unique in the Western Hemisphere, with the total estimated to be some 40,000.<sup>98</sup> Protest groups that have formed to seek information and legal redress have been consistently driven out of business by state-organized murder. The Association of University Students (AEU) sought information on the disappeared through the courts in the course of a brief opening in 1966, but after one sensational exposé of the police murder of twenty-eight leftists, the system closed down again. As McClintock points out, "In the next few years many AEU leaders and member law students were hunted down and killed."<sup>99</sup> In the 1970s, a Committee of the Relatives of the Disappeared was organized by the AEU, with headquarters in San Carlos National University. As Americas Watch points out, "It disbanded after plainclothesmen walked into the University's legal aid center on March 10, 1974, and shot and killed its principal organizer, lawyer Edmundo Guerra Theilheimer, the center's director."<sup>100</sup> Another human-rights group, the National Commission for Human Rights, was created in the late 1970s by psychologist and journalist Irma Flaquer. Her son was murdered, and she herself "disappeared" on October 16, 1980.

According to the British Parliamentary Human Rights Group, in 1984 alone there were an average of one hundred political murders and over forty disappearances per month in Guatemala.<sup>101</sup> These figures are almost surely an underestimate, as only the disappearances that took place in and around Guatemala City received any publicity. The greater number of murders and disappearances occur among rural and Indian families who do not have the resources to complain and are more exposed to retaliation.

In this context of murder, fear, and the prior failure of all human-rights organizations, the Mutual Support Group, or GAM, was formed

in June 1984. It was a product of the desperation felt by people seeking information on the whereabouts of disappeared relatives and willing to take serious risks to that end. Many of them had suffered enormous pain in frustrating searches and inquiries that never bore fruit. There is no legal redress in Guatemala, and nothing useful can be obtained by appeals to the police or courts of law. Mr. Hicho, looking for his disappeared daughter, saw some one hundred bodies in the months he spent at the morgue, and "seventy to seventy-five percent of them had been tortured."<sup>102</sup> Others took different painful routes in their search. In early 1985, one woman was told by an army officer that her husband was still alive, and that he would see to his return if she slept with him. She did so, and her husband turned up dead shortly thereafter.<sup>103</sup>

The intention of the organizers of GAM was to seek strength by collective action, and to use it to gather data and seek redress by petition and publicity. Their hope for survival and success rested, in part, on the fact that the chief of state, Mejía Vítores, was being built up by the Reagan administration as another "reformer," and the Reagan-Mejía Vítores team was trying to establish the appropriate "image" to induce Congress to loosen the purse strings. GAM also had support within Guatemala from Archbishop Penados del Barrio and other church groups and lay persons, although few felt able to speak up in the system of unconstrained state terror. Internationally, GAM received significant political support from progressive and humanitarian political parties and human-rights groups.

Thirty members of the newly organized GAM held a press conference in Guatemala City in June 1984, denouncing the disappearances and calling on the government "to intervene immediately in order to find our loved ones." In the latter part of June, and again in early August, masses were held in the Metropolitan Cathedral to express concern over the fate of the disappeared, with the initial services held by the university rector, Meyer Maldonado, and Archbishop Penados. A thousand people attended the August mass. On August 1, the group first met with General Mejía Vítores, at which time he promised to investigate the disappearances. In ads placed in the major newspapers on August 8 and 9, GAM put his promises on the public record. Subsequently the group began to call attention to the government's failure to follow through on the August 1 promises, and they moved gradually to other actions. In October 1984 they sponsored a march and mass for the disappeared at the cathedral—the first mass demonstration in Guatemala since May 1, 1980 (at which time protestors were seized on the streets and an estimated one hundred were assassinated, or disappeared).

The organization continued to grow, from the initial handful to 225 families in November 1984 and then to 1,300 in the spring of 1986. Most of the members were women, a large majority peasant women from the countryside. They were persistent. After initial petitions, requests, meetings, and marches, they began to make explicit accusations and “publicly charge elements of the national security forces as directly responsible for the capture and subsequent disappearance of our family members.”<sup>104</sup> They asked for an investigation, an accounting, and justice. They appealed to the constituent assembly and began regular protests in downtown Guatemala City, banging pots and pans and, on occasion, peacefully occupying buildings.

Nothing, of course, was done in response to the GAM demands. The assembly had no powers anyway, but was too fearful even to pass a resolution of support. The military rulers toyed with GAM. In public, with the press on hand, Mejía Vítores would say, “I don’t want to shirk responsibilities and something has to be done.” But when the press was not there, he said, “It seems as though you are accusing me—and we don’t have them [the disappeared].” “You have them,” we said. “We don’t have them,” he replied.<sup>105</sup> The military rulers were getting annoyed, and phone threats, letters of warning, and open surveillance intensified. Two days after the exchange between Mejía Vítores and GAM, the tortured bodies of two disappeared associated with GAM members showed up, one placed in front of his house with his eyes gouged out and his face barely recognizable.

In a television interview on March 14, 1985, Mejía Vítores said that GAM was “being used by subversion, because if they have problems, solutions are being found, and they have been given every advantage to [solve these problems].”<sup>106</sup> A spate of newspaper headlines followed, stressing government warnings and allegations that GAM was being manipulated by subversives. In mid-March, General Mejía Vítores was asked on television what action the government would take against GAM. He replied, “You’ll know it when you see it.”<sup>107</sup>

On March 30, 1985, GAM leader Héctor Gómez Calito was seized, tortured, and murdered. (The six policemen who had come for him were themselves assassinated shortly after his death.)<sup>108</sup> He had been burned with a blowtorch, on the stomach and elsewhere, and beaten on the face so severely that his lips were swollen and his teeth were broken; his tongue had been cut out. Then, on April 4, another leader of GAM, María Rosario Godoy de Cuevas, her twenty-one-year-old brother, and her two-year-old son were picked up, tortured, and murdered. Her breasts had bite marks and her underclothing was bloody; her two-year-old son had had his fingernails pulled out.

On grounds of newsworthiness, the murders of the two GAM leaders, along with the brother and the child of one of them, would seem to deserve high-order attention. Their bravery was exceptional; the villainy they were opposing was extraordinary; the justice of their cause was unassailable; and the crimes they suffered were more savage than those undergone by Popieluszko. Most important of all, these were crimes for which we bear considerable responsibility, since they were perpetrated by clients who depend on our support, so that exposure and pressure could have a significant effect in safeguarding human rights. On the other hand, the Reagan administration was busily trying to enter into warmer and more supportive relations with the Guatemalan military regime and, as we described earlier, was going to great pains to put the regime in a favorable light. A propaganda model would anticipate that even these dramatic and horrifying murders would be treated in a low-key manner and quickly dropped by the mass media—that, unlike Popieluszko, there would be no sustained interest, no indignation capable of rousing the public (and disturbing the administration’s plans). These expectations are fully vindicated by the record.

Table 2-3 compares media coverage of the Popieluszko case with that of the murders of the GAM leaders. It is immediately obvious that the treatment is radically different in the two cases. The GAM murders couldn’t even make “the news” at *Time*, *Newsweek*, or CBS News. The *New York Times* never found these murders worthy of the front page or editorial comment, and we can see that the intensity of its coverage was slight. The first report of the quadruple murder was on April 7, 1985, in a tiny item on page 5 of the paper in which it is mentioned that the body of María Rosario Godoy de Cuevas was found in her car in a ravine, along with the bodies of her brother and her young son. In neither this item nor any succeeding article does the *Times* provide details on the condition of the bodies, or mention that the two-year-old child had his fingernails torn out.<sup>109</sup>

In other respects, too, the *Times* articles, all written by Stephen Kinzer, generally employ an apologetic framework. That is, they don’t focus on the murders—who the victims were, the details of the violence, who did it, why, and the institutional structures and roots of organized murder of which these are an obvious part. With Popieluszko, these were *the* issues. Kinzer has little or nothing on the details of the GAM murders and very little on the victims and the experiences that brought them to GAM, and the question of who did it and what was being done (or not done) to bring the murderers to justice he hardly considers. Kinzer takes it for granted that the murders were committed by agents of the state, but he doesn’t say this explicitly, or discuss the



**TABLE 2-3**  
**Mass-Media Coverage of Worthy and Unworthy Victims (2):**  
**A Murdered Polish Priest versus Two Murdered Officials**  
**of the Guatemalan Mutual Support Group**

	NEW YORK TIMES				TIME and NEWSWEEK				CBS NEWS							
	Articles <sup>1</sup>		Column Inches		Front-page articles		Editorials		Articles <sup>1</sup>		Column inches		No. of news programs <sup>1</sup>		No. of evening news	
	No. row 1	% of row 1	No. row 1	% of row 1	No. row 1	% of row 1	No. row 1	% of row 1	No. row 1	% of row 1	No. row 1	% of row 1	No. row 1	% of row 1	No. row 1	% of row 1
<b>Victims</b>	78	(100)	1183.0	(100)	10	(100)	3	(100)	16	(100)	313.0	(100)	46	(100)	23	(100)
1. Jerzy Popieluszko, murdered on Oct. 19, 1984	5	(6.4)	80.0	(6.8)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Héctor Orlando Gómez and María Rosario Godoy de Cuevas, murdered between Mar. 30 and Apr. 6, 1985 (along with a child, who was tortured)																

<sup>1</sup> The media coverage is for an 18-month period from the time of the first report of the victim's disappearance or murder.

background, or provide a framework for evaluating the case. He looks "objectively" at the scene, quoting some of the GAM survivors in brief and rhetorical statements that are offset by quotes from the generals: they approved the formation of GAM (an ambiguous half-truth); they appointed an investigating committee that "found no evidence of secret detention centers in Guatemala" (no mention of the composition of the committee, no counter-evidence, and no mention of issues they may have overlooked—like disappeared who are murdered); and they deny any responsibility for the murder of Godoy, her brother, and her son, who they claim to have been victims of an auto accident. If Kinzer had given the details of the victims' injuries, this lie would have been exposed as such, and further questions would have suggested themselves.

In article after article, Kinzer repeats that the Mejía Victores government has pledged to return to civilian rule shortly, which helps deflect attention from the ongoing killing and its causes, and from the GAM murders under discussion; he also does not tell us just what "civilian rule" would mean in a terrorist state in which, as he knows, the effective rulers would be the same military forces.<sup>110</sup> In the Popieluszko case, once it was established that the police had committed the murder, the media spent a great deal of space discussing the police apparatus and police methods, as well as attending to the responsibility of the people at higher levels for the murder. Kinzer doesn't discuss these questions at all. The structure of the Guatemalan murder machine and how it works would make a good story, and numerous details of its operations were available, but this did not fit the government agenda and the *Times* format. Similarly, the role of Mejía Victores in the murder of the GAM leaders—recall his warnings just prior to the murders, and consider his virtually unlimited discretionary power to murder or protect the citizenry—is ignored. But once again, the links to the top in the case of unworthy victims do not fit the propaganda format. Kinzer does a nice job of making the GAM murders seem to be part of the natural background—regrettable but inevitable, part of the complex inheritance of a troubled country, and possibly, it is hoped, to be rectified when the new civilian government takes power.

In an attempt to gain support abroad, two of the remaining leaders of GAM, Nineth de García and Herlindo Hideo de Aquino, traveled to Europe in March and April 1986, after the inauguration of the elected civilian president, Christian Democrat Vinicio Cerezo. One of their most important messages was that killings and disappearances had not abated at all during the first three months of Cerezo's presidency, and that the death squads had actually reappeared and were active in