

Exhibition at International Center of Photography

Images of El Salvador carnage reprised in light of Iraq war

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Over the past several weeks, thousands of people have visited New York City's International Center of Photography (ICP) for the restaging of an exhibition that the museum presented two decades ago, but which has taken on fresh urgency in the shadow of the ongoing war in Iraq.

"El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers" was first shown at the center in 1984, at the height of the bloody struggle in El Salvador that pitted a popular insurgency against a US-backed regime that ruled through savage military repression and death squads.

Twenty-one years later, the impact of these stark black and white images are just as powerful and upsetting. In a number of cases, they depict the victims of this repression—students, workers, peasants—whose horrifically mutilated corpses were left in public view as a warning against anyone who dared oppose the regime and the oligarchy that it defended.

The photographs were assembled by photojournalists Susan Meiselas and Henry Mattison, with 30 photographers contributing their work, including John Hoagland, Eugene Richards, Eli Reed and James Nachtwey. Hoagland, who took photos for *Newsweek* magazine was one of three contributors who died in El Salvador, gunned down by US-trained government troops.

In explaining the need for the exhibition when it first opened, Meiselas said, "[We] were living there and believed that the larger context of the war needed to be felt by Americans considering the growing involvement of the US."

Cornell Capa, the photojournalist and brother of famed war photographer Robert Capa, who founded the center, said in 1984, that the photos represented an "urgent eyewitness to a civil war occurring practically in our backyard.... These photographs, charged with horror and emotion, are a visual plea to stop the bloodshed and inhumanity."

The decision to reprise the exhibition came after the entire collection was recently donated to the ICP. More importantly, however, it also constituted a renewed "plea to stop the bloodshed and inhumanity" as Washington once again engages in massacres and torture, this time in Iraq.

In the introduction to the photographs, the center states: "The lessons of El Salvador are newly relevant, with both critics and proponents of the Bush administration drawing parallels between the US role in El Salvador in the early 1980s and the current situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. And though photojournalism is a vastly changed field—with new technologies, new outlets, and many new constraints—the commitment of these photographers working over 20 years ago to engage their fellow citizens can serve as a reference point for photographers working today in the Middle East."

Indeed, the Pentagon is reportedly working on a so-called "Salvadoran option" in Iraq. The plan, first reported in *Newsweek* last January, calls for the constitution of death squads to carry out the assassination of members of the Iraqi resistance and massacres of their supporters.

Since then, there has emerged substantial evidence that the "Salvadoran option" is being implemented. The number of death squad-style killings has grown steadily. While frequently attributed to "sectarian violence," there is every indication that they are the work of specially trained units drawn from the Shiite militias and the Kurdish *peshmerga*.

The *New York Times Magazine* reported last May that James Steele, who as a Special Forces Army colonel led the US Military Advisory Group in El Salvador from 1984 to 1986, had been sent to Iraq to train a unit known as the "Wolf Brigade" or Special Police Commandos in the same methods.

The belief that the "Salvadoran option" will provide a viable solution to the quagmire in Iraq is another of Washington's delusional fantasies. The supposed "success" in El Salvador consisted of bleeding the country white, with over 75,000 killed—approximately 2 percent of the population. In the end, the first Bush administration had to call in the United Nations to negotiate a settlement. The country remains devastated nearly 15 years after the end of the fighting.

There is little that has come out of the Iraq war to compare with the collection of photographs displayed in the exhibition on El Salvador. The best known photographs confronting the American people with the atrocities carried out in their name were taken by the perpetrators themselves at Abu Ghraib. While scenes of car bombings in Baghdad are regularly presented in the press and on TV, seldom are we shown the victims of US bombing raids, roadblock killings and the kind of full-scale military sieges laid to cities like Fallujah.

The "constraints" that the exhibition introduction refers to include those of the immense violence wracking the entire country, the US military's own severe restrictions—and in some cases murderous attacks—and the unwillingness of the media itself to expose the war crimes in Iraq.

The exhibition at the International Center of Photography takes a chronological form, with photographs placed on the walls of two large rooms spanning the three-year period from the opening of the revolutionary crisis in El Salvador in 1979 to the unleashing of intense urban repression and then the onset of full-scale guerrilla warfare.

It begins with scenes of everyday life: a shanty neighborhood in San Salvador known as "la Fosa"—the Grave—where a small baby stands in the hand of his father to the amusement of a scrum of local children; a naked baby watching a hog being brought to market in the town of Sonsonate; an old peasant tending coffee beans drying in the sun; and a woman dancing to guitars at a beach restaurant in La Libertad.

A few of the photographs also point to another form of everyday life, that of the wealthy, residing in comparatively opulent houses surrounded by fences and guarded by shotgun-toting security guards.

The next set of photos points to the popular movement that arose against the dictatorship, and the bloodbath that was unleashed to suppress it. A

group of students are shown leafleting in a poor district of the capital. Another picture depicts the blood of a student, shot to death for handing out political leaflets. Three large splotches stain a stone floor at its juncture with an adobe wall. Again there is the crowd of children, but looking somber, reflective, frightened.

Another photograph shows a dozen flag-draped coffins lined up outside a church. The victims were young members of a street theater, mowed down by the National Guard in October 1979 for a performance critical of the government. Another shot shows the face of one of the slain youth seen through a small glass window in the coffin. Over it is written an inscription in chalk—"I love you, I will never forget you, I will tell my daughter about you when she grows up and can understand."

Some of the images are quite familiar from the period. These include Michel Philippot's photo of black-booted National Guard troops straddling the bodies of suspected leftists thrown one on top of another in a wooden-slatted truck bed and Susan Meiselas's photographs of the unearthed corpses of three American nuns and a lay worker murdered by the military in December 1980. While the killings shocked the American public, they were dismissed by then secretary of state Alexander Haig, who joked about and slandered the dead, describing them as "pistol-packing nuns" and falsely asserting that they had run a roadblock.

There are also photographs of the massive outpouring for the March 1980 funeral of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, assassinated as he performed mass in a plot organized by one the CIA's key "assets" in El Salvador, the psychopathic killer Major Roberto D'Aubuisson. Attacked by the military using snipers and explosives, the funeral turned into chaos, with 39 killed and over 200 wounded.

Accompanying these photos are excerpts from the sermon Romero delivered the day before his death, calling on troops to stop killing the people. "The *campesinos* you kill are your own brothers and sisters," he declared. "In the name of God ... I beg you, I beseech you, I order you: stop the repression."

Other photographs are difficult to look at. These include particularly those taken by Hoagland, who provided the most unflinching portrayal of the death and suffering inflicted by the US-backed military.

One depicts the bodies of two young girls murdered by a death squad, their hands tied behind their backs, left hanging over a low wall by the highway to the airport. Another shows the grisly desolation of *El Playon*, a volcanic lava bed that served as a well-known dumping ground for the mangled corpses of the disappeared. Five bodies of young men wearing only their underwear, their torsos split open, lie amid skulls and bleached bones of previous victims

Beside these photographs is the text, written by poet Carolyn Forché and presumably taken from an interview:

"When someone joins a death squad, he is in for life. If you quit, you might talk, and no one wants to be fingered later for these crimes. The first time such a man goes out on an operation, he is tested by the others. They tell him he must rape the victim in front of them, then cut off certain pieces of the body. They want to see if he has the stomach for this. After that, he is as guilty as the others and he is *in* ...

"Why isn't it enough to kill a victim? Why must each suffer mutilation?"

"The death squad members must *all* be guilty of every murder, so one rapes, another strikes blows, another uses the machete, and so on until it would be impossible to determine which action had caused the death, and the squad members are protected from each other by mutual guilt. Also,

when mere death no longer instills fear in the population, the stakes must be raised. The people must be made to see that not only will they die, but die slowly and brutally."

The exhibition also includes photographs of the combatants. In one, the guerrillas are seen organizing a dance at a clandestine base in the countryside. Another shows a wounded government army soldier being carried by three of his comrades, all of them appearing to be no more than 16 years old.

Accompanying the photographs is a searing 12-minute video dealing with the El Mozote massacre of December 1981 in which as many as 900 men women and children were slain by troops of the elite, US-trained Atlacatl Brigade. The video is narrated by the massacre's sole survivor, Rufina Amaya. Her testimony, given over images of bodies and of child-sized skeletons unearthed by an Argentine forensic team a decade later, is chilling and tragic.

She saw her husband, a 29-year-old woodcutter, shot and beheaded by the soldiers and had her four children, the youngest eight months old, taken from her and slaughtered. The soldiers took the younger women and girls, some no more than 10, to a nearby hill where they raped and then killed them.

Rufina was able to hide behind a bush after being marched out with one of the last group of women to be shot. From her hiding place she could hear the screams of children, including that of her own son, crying out, "Mommy! Mommy! They're hurting us! Help us! They're cutting us! They're choking us!"

Also shown is then-undersecretary of state for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders testifying before Congress that there existed "no evidence to confirm that government forces systematically massacred civilians." Two days after the mass killing at El Mozote, the Reagan administration certified that the Salvadoran government continued to make progress on human rights. The certification was given to Congress, which in turn assured that US military aid continued to flow, making the mass killing possible.

Included in the text accompanying the photographs is the inscription written by Francisco Goya beside his sketches depicting the atrocities of the Napoleonic war in Spain. "*Yo la vi ... I saw it, and this, and also this.*"

Through the images captured by these 30 photographers two decades ago we too see the brutality of US militarism and the depravity of the crimes that the American ruling elite is prepared to carry out in order to defend its interests and global domination.

"El Salvador: Work of 30 Photographers" continues through November 27, 2005 at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd St. in New York City).

Visit the International Center of Photography web site at: http://www.icp.org/site/c.dnJGKJNsFqG/b.1026823/k.9432/El_Salvador.htm



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