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Kerr, Dara

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Ghosts of El Salvador

By Dara Kerr

The memories of bloodshed never really faded. But the annual presidential speeches commemorating El Salvador's peace accords of 1992 had always avoided addressing them. Year after year, presidents urged Salvadorans to "forgive and forget" while sidestepping the civil war's haunting reality: military death squads and rolling rural massacres resulting in the murders of tens of thousands of civilians. Echoing one another's patriotic rhetoric, El Salvador's presidents never spoke to the war's survivors about justice, responsibility, or reconciliation.

But on January 16, 2010, coincidentally my last day in the country after an intensive research trip examining buried war crimes, this pattern was broken. Seven months after taking office, El Salvador's first left-of-center president, Mauricio Funes, stepped up to give the annual speech. He stood before a small audience—Supreme Court judges, members of Congress, El Salvador's surviving ex-presidents, and many other dignitaries. National television showed the officials singing the country's anthem, bowing their heads for a minute of silence, and waiting for the speech.

"The message I want to send today is part of a debt that the Salvadoran state contracted eighteen years ago with all of its citizens," said President Funes, "and it's my responsibility as the top representative of the state to recognize this debt and begin to pay it off." Few of those present or in the nation knew what he was about to announce.

"I recognize that state agents, including the armed forces, security forces, and other paramilitary organizations, committed grave human rights violations and abuses of power. Among those crimes committed were: massacres, extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, torture, sexual abuse, arbitrary detentions, and different acts of repression." The mood in the room was intensely serious.

"For all of the above," President Funes announced, "in the name of the state of El Salvador, I apologize."

Row by row, the audience rose, clapping. Many were crying. Here and there, a few people, including some of the former presidents, kept their seats, with grim expressions, hands folded on their laps. Although the war ended nearly twenty years ago, its polarizing effect still reverberates through Salvadoran society, and people grapple with whether to remember or to forget.

The president reached the peroration of his speech: When El Salvador signed the peace accords, he reminded everyone, it agreed never to violate human rights again. "Today, we are putting another 'never again' on this list—never again turn our backs on the victims, never again negate our history."

And so begins a new era of truth and remembrance in El Salvador, one that's slowly coming to terms with its unquiet ghosts. Healing is at stake, and so is understanding history: How did this little country begin its downward slide into colossal bloodshed and self-destructive war? What caused it, and who—if anyone—benefited? The journey back in time for El Salvador will raise

the questions about the still incompletely understood complicity between the U.S. Army and the Salvadoran state and military, as well as of the origins of the war.

Half a decade before the onset of El Salvador's civil war, unrest was already simmering between the military and the newly organizing dissidents. Then an assault occurred in a single village that marked a change in the nature of persecution in the country. This unprecedented event was the turning point when standard army procedure first shifted to become mass murder—going from targeted killing of specific individuals to attacks on entire rural communities. The bloody crackdown on the village of La Cayetana was a harbinger of what was to come, an assault already bearing the marks of a methodically planned, trained, and practiced type of attack. This defining event, almost completely unknown except to its victims, had been the central subject of my research trip.

On a muggy afternoon in November 1974, a faction of the national military descended on La Cayetana, a village of unarmed civilians, treating them as militants. The soldiers moved from house to house with grim efficiency, and by dusk, six people were murdered, twenty-eight imprisoned, and dozens more wounded.

Few people remember or know about La Cayetana because, after a frenzy of attention, all information about it was quickly silenced—a silencing that was eerily like the media blackouts to come after later massacres, including the famous one at El Mozote. What happened was further shrouded when, after the civil war ended, the Congress passed amnesty laws for all who fought—absolving war criminals—and official amnesia set in.

I first learned about La Cayetana, which is in the department of San Vicente in central El Salvador, from a Salvadoran in New York City. I was working on her asylum case as a researcher for a small non-profit called Central American Legal Assistance. She told me what happened that day in 1974. At that point, I'd never heard of such an early massacre and couldn't find any documented information to corroborate it—which surprised me. I knew El Salvador well, having spent the previous few years living there and researching human rights abuses.

Fascinated by the mystery of this practically undocumented event, I decided to go to El Salvador to see if I could learn anything more about this missing piece of the puzzle.

Back to the Beginning

Through the bus window, the Salvadoran countryside flies by. It's rainy season, hot and humid, and the landscape is a blur of deep green hues. As we rumble on—past tin-roofed shacks with laundry hanging off to the side, sugarcane fields, and women walking down the highway carrying buckets on their heads—I wonder if I'll find the survivors. I have only one name, Pablo Anaya, and all I know is he lives in some small village near La Cayetana.

Down the road, Chichontepec Volcano looms ever larger above the surrounding hills. As the bus nears, I ask the driver if he knows where La Cayetana is. He has no clue. "Who are you looking for?" he asks. I think: this bus is covering fifty miles of countryside in one of the most densely populated countries on the planet. How could he know one lone farmer? "Pablo Anaya," I say.

From a few rows back, a woman yells out, “This is where he lives.” I get off the bus and stand aside as it drives away. Another woman has also gotten off the bus. To my surprise, she offers to walk me to Anaya’s house.

We reach a small adobe home with a tin roof covered in clay tiles. Anaya is inside resting in a hammock. Now seventy years old, he seems younger; he’s thin and sprightly with deep-set eyes and ears that stick out. He’s wearing an unbuttoned shirt and a baseball hat showing support for a Nicaraguan socialist party. I tell him why I’m here. Without hesitation, Anaya launches into his narrative. La Cayetana is now a ghost town, he tells me—“You’d only see remnants of where the homes once were”—but in 1974 it was a bustling plantation.

Anaya was born on the plantation and lived there until he was thirty-five, when the soldiers descended on the town. Everyone who lived in La Cayetana—about five hundred people—worked for the same landowner, Coralia Angulo, growing coffee, sugar, indigo, and basic grains. Angulo was from one of the famous fourteen families who, then and now, own most of the country’s land. El Salvador had always been run by an oligarchy, leading to a sharp divide separating rich and poor, but in Anaya’s youth the country was not yet filled with unrest and violence.

In 1969, everything changed for La Cayetana’s workers. Angulo started renting the plantation to a cotton farmer who made it nearly impossible for Anaya and everyone else in La Cayetana to survive. The new farmer brought in her own workers for much of the year; she crop-dusted her cotton fields with DDT, a once-popular synthetic pesticide, which seeped into the creek where the peasants got their water—poisoning the fish, along with their domestic animals—and they were no longer allowed to grow their own food on the land they had traditionally used.

Around this time, a young Catholic priest named David Rodríguez Rivera moved to a nearby church. The peasants called him Padre David. He had just returned from the 1968 Latin American Bishops Conference in Medellín, Colombia, where he learned about liberation theology, the idea that spirituality and political activism should merge. As he witnessed La Cayetana workers’ day-to-day lives, his mission as a priest changed drastically. He and other like-minded priests across the country formed peasant groups in their local parishes and encouraged people to talk. “Here, the peasants are accustomed to listen—listen to the priest, listen to the boss, listen to the National Guard, listen to the mayor, listen to the second-in-charge, listen to everything,” Padre David tells me later. “They are never asked for their own opinions.”

The people of La Cayetana began organizing within the Catholic Church and other community groups like the farm workers’ union, Union de Trabajadores de Campo. Ultimately, some, including Anaya, joined a newly formed clandestine guerrilla group, the Fuerzas Populares de la Liberación Popular Farabundo Martí, the Popular Liberation Force, or FPL. “This is the way the social and political movement in La Cayetana was born,” Anaya says. One of their first responsibilities was to store and distribute a homemade revolutionary magazine, *El Rebelde*, The Rebel.

Some peasants, under the leadership of La Cayetana’s FPL, became bolder. They staged strikes and asked for better salaries and fair treatment on the farm. But nothing seemed to work. In early

1974, Anaya and others decided to take things further: they snuck out one night and chopped down ten acres of cotton with their machetes. When Angulo found out the next day, she told them that she was going to bring in the National Guard. At this time, National Guard soldiers were often the much feared mercenaries for large private landowners, known to pick out “troublemakers.” The following day, a pair of National Guard soldiers showed up at La Cayetana, but nothing happened. Re-emboldened, a few months later, the peasants burned down the sugarcane crops.

On November 26, 1974, a couple of months after the sugarcane fields were burned, a jeep with five military detectives rumbled up the road to La Cayetana. They were looking for the leader of the town’s FPL group. They searched a suspect’s house and found stacks of *El Rebelde* buried in a small hole out back—the proof they needed that subversives lived in the community. Unable to find the suspect, the detectives arrested the suspect’s brother, tied him up, and threw him in the back of their jeep. As they did this, whistling and ringing bells echoed throughout the forest—the workers alerting each other. Hundreds of peasants came running, armed with whatever slingshots, machetes, and sticks they could find. They seized the rifles from the detectives, filled the road with large rocks, slashed the jeep’s tires, and demanded that the soldiers release their prisoner. With this minor victory, the politicized peasants realized they had power in numbers.

Defeated and angry, the military men headed back down the mountain on foot. As they turned to leave, they threatened to return within three days. “And exactly three days later, on November 29, they arrived,” Anaya says. “But this time they came with reinforcements.”

The Massacre

Hidden underneath cornstalks in the middle of a field sits a three-foot solid cement block. Anaya points to it in the distance, then weaves through the tall green plants. I follow him. Fixed on the front of the cement block is a light gray marble plaque that’s cracked and weathered. Anaya stoops down, points to the lettering, and reads aloud while tracing his finger along the words. “Martyrs of the struggle for land,” he says, then recites its six names. We have just hiked up the same mile-or-so rocky road to La Cayetana the soldiers came up more than thirty-five years ago. The town of La Cayetana is still a hundred yards away. No one who died in La Cayetana is buried here, but three of the men whose names are inscribed on the memorial were killed in this exact spot.

What rolled into town that afternoon was a military convoy prepared for combat. A half dozen large flatbed trucks were packed with hundreds of National Guard soldiers and National Police, some in uniform, others in civilian wear, and all armed with everything from rifles to submachine guns to hand grenades. In one of the trucks, the soldiers had set up a 51mm caliber mortar canon. An army Red Cross ambulance trailed the caravan, strategically parked for a fast getaway.

Most of the peasants had finished their day’s work and were resting in their homes. As the trucks arrived at the outskirts of town, dozens of troops jumped out and linked arms to form a human cordon around the town—to catch anyone who tried to escape. Other soldiers shot their guns into the air and fired a mortar shell, then went house to house, dragging out the residents at gunpoint

and chasing down anyone attempting to flee. “Very few of us escaped,” Anaya says. “Most didn’t.” He was one of the lucky ones. Hiding behind a tree up on a hill about seventy yards from where it all happened, he watched in disbelief and horror.

Anaya saw the soldiers capture the peasants, march them to the town’s soccer field and force the men to lie face down in the dirt. The soldiers stripped the peasants down to their underwear, then walked amongst them, hammering the men’s heads with the butts of their rifles. They singled out three men, and shot and killed them.

Dolores Alfaro and her husband also saw the soldiers from the hillside. They were coming home from a day of picking coffee beans higher up the volcano. They hurried down the mountain, thinking somehow they could help. On the road toward La Cayetana, they met another couple and their sixteen-year-old son, who were also coming to help. None of them knew three people had been killed. Nearing the village, they saw troops guarding the road; as they approached, the soldiers demanded the farmers throw their machetes to the ground. “If you are armed, we can be too,” the farmers replied. Angered by their insolence, the soldiers forced the five peasants into a small nearby hut at gunpoint and began to interrogate them. When the farmers were uncooperative, one soldier shot up the dirt at their feet. Furious, another soldier stormed in, grabbed the couple’s son, dragged him out front, and shot him dead. Then the soldier did the same to the boy’s father.

Next, the soldiers pulled Dolores Alfaro’s husband from the hut. Two of the soldiers held him by the elbows while another shot him in the chest. As he slumped to the ground, Alfaro ran out of the hut and clawed at one of the soldiers, screaming and crying. He raised his rifle and she fell to the ground, covering her face. He cracked the rifle across the side of her head and then, enraged, beat her on her back, wielding the butt of his rifle as if it were an ax. When he stopped, she fumbled around on the ground, bleeding. She was partially blinded from the blow to her head. She crawled to her husband and laid his head in her lap. He was still alive. She heard footsteps, then a loud blast gust past her face. Visionless, she touched her husband’s head with her hands until she found the gaping hole above his ear. The soldier had killed her husband at point-blank range while she was still clutching him.

Dolores Alfaro is now seventy-nine years old with thick white hair that she ties back in a bun. Her blindness, which has grown progressively worse over the years, gives her brown eyes a soft blue tinge. Sitting in her house, gently rocking back and forth in a hammock, she tells me about that day in a near whisper. “They scraped off all of my skin here,” she says, motioning to her lower back. Then, making a chopping motion with one hand against the palm of the other, she says, “Because this is how they hit me—just like this—and blood gushed everywhere.”

The soldiers were as efficient in cleaning up the carnage as they were swift in causing it. They demanded that the peasants bring them sacks and empty coffee baskets. Stripping leaves off a nearby tree, they lined the baskets; then, with machetes, they cut off each of the dead men’s arms and legs and heaved the limbs and bodies into the baskets, covering the tops with sacks. The soldiers then forced twenty-eight of the surviving men to walk, naked, barefoot, and blindfolded, down to the highway. The caravan of trucks, one of them carrying the dead, inched along behind.

When they reached the highway, the soldiers loaded fourteen prisoners onto one truck and lined up the other fourteen, then sprayed acid into their eyes, temporarily blinding them, presumably so they wouldn't be able to see which direction the truck carrying the body parts went. One of the fourteen men forced onto the truck was Pablo Anaya's older brother.

For the first time, the peasants' unarmed protest movement had been met with overwhelming, coordinated military force. El Salvador's top archivists, documenters and researchers of the war, including attorney Wilfredo Medran, from Tutela Legal, an organization that documents the war's atrocities; Carlos Consalvi, the director of the archival Museum of the Word and Image; and Ana Julia Escalante, from the independent Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, all agree that La Cayetana was the first state-sponsored massacre in the run-up to the war. Padre David explains, "The Army and National Guard were already killing and disappearing peasants, but confronting an entire community of people—this was the first time that happened."

The next day, November 30, 1974, buried deep within two of the country's newspapers, a brief bulletin from the Ministry of Defense, written the day of the massacre, was published:

"Today, at five in the afternoon, in the hamlet of La Cayetana, when National Guard and National Police patrols were searching for delinquents, they were ambushed and attacked by a group of unidentified individuals with firearms. The attack was repelled by the law enforcement agents, in reaction to the ambush. There were four deaths in the attacking group and one National Guardsman injured. The agents are in pursuit of the rest of the criminals and are also investigating the event."

The Aftermath

The six men killed in the massacre are actually buried about five miles from La Cayetana, in a place called Las Cañas. I've asked someone from town to take me there. It's up a dusty, bumpy road near an old train stop that hasn't been used in decades. Across from the station's crumbling walls is a dry creek bed, a shallow, weedy depression. This is where the National Guard soldiers dumped the bodies of the men they killed in La Cayetana.

My guide walks over to a weedy thicket above the creek bed and begins to hack away with his machete. He reveals a small, thigh-high stone and five short cement crosses clustered together. It's a small area, about the size of a twin bed. I knew I was coming to visit the men's graves, but it's only now I realize they are all buried in a single mass grave. I look closely at the tombstone. Hand-carved into the cement in childlike writing, the inscription reads, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. —Matthew 5:10."

As the fourteen prisoners who were left down by the highway returned to La Cayetana, the townspeople began to piece together what had happened. They called Padre David to come help and made lists of who was killed and who was taken away. The next day, they formed two committees, one charged with finding where the bodies were scattered, the other with taking the fifty-mile trip to San Salvador, the capital, to file a formal complaint, locate the other half of the prisoners, and try to launch a public campaign. At first, "It brought a lot of national press coverage," Anaya says. "Because it was the first massacre in this new era."

One man became very important to their quest—Julio Alfredo Samayoa, a local congressman who belonged to the left-centrist Christian Democratic Party. When the peasants flooded his office that following day to tell him what happened, he immediately went into high gear. He contacted forensic teams and justices of the peace, and sent experts to La Cayetana to gather information and search for the bodies. On December 2, 1974, he also filed a petition before Congress, asking the Supreme Court to investigate the massacre and the Ministry of Defense to issue a formal report detailing exactly what happened that day.

“They brought a 51mm mortar and an ambulance. All of this seems like they were trying to carry out a military operation of grand importance,” Samayoa announced in his speech to Congress. “I am certain the president of the republic could not have given an order like this, to massacre peasants and steal their bodies, and this order also couldn’t have been given by the minister of defense nor the directors of the National Guard or police. However, one thing is evident: Someone gave ‘the order,’ but who?”

Soon, every paper in the country was publishing articles about the “Massacre in La Cayetana.” Some wrote that it was the fault of a priest who had been instigating the peasants. Others simply laid out the facts, saying forensic workers found shells from G3 assault rifles and a 51mm mortar in La Cayetana’s soccer field.

The same day Samayoa filed his petition in Congress, three days after the massacre, the bodies were located in Las Cañas. “Six rotting cadavers were found yesterday, each with a bullet wound in the thorax. The authorities ordered their burial since they were unidentified and none of them had any documents,” wrote La Prensa Grafica. Another paper, El Mundo, wrote, “Many people suspect these deaths had something to do with the incidents between the military and civilians in La Cayetana. The cadavers have multiple bullet wounds and have been devoured by dogs and vultures.”

Dolores Alfaro and other family members of the victims went to see if they could identify any of the bodies. “When we found them, they were very bloated. They just left them there like animals,” Alfaro says. “When I got closer to look, I couldn’t take it. I took off running. It felt like I was running through the air, as if I was flying.” The family members that stayed told her they recognized all six of the dead. “This land is bathed in blood,” Alfaro says. “And still, people refuse to believe what happened.”

The supervising soldiers wouldn’t let the townspeople take the bodies back to La Cayetana for individual burial. Instead, they demanded that the bodies be buried immediately. A couple of family members helped dig the small, shallow grave. I found one of these family members, who confirmed that she helped bury the bodies and that the soldiers refused to let her take them home. “Before I die I will get the money and make proper graves for them,” she said angrily.

The day after the bodies were found and buried, after hours of debate, Congress rejected Samayoa’s petition for a governmental investigation. Samayoa pleaded with his colleagues. At one point, he even compared La Cayetana to My Lai, the U.S. Army massacre of villagers in Vietnam that had happened only six years earlier. The opposing party’s Congress members

refused to discuss the matter further and left the chambers. Before heading out, one of them announced, “The situation in La Cayetana might only be the beginning of something more grim to come.”

On December 6, one week after the massacre, the president of El Salvador, Colonel Arturo Armando Molina, visited the National Guard headquarters. He met with the head of the guard, Colonel José Mario Rosales y Rosales, his staff, officers, and other top army, National Police, and Treasury Police officials. It isn’t known what they talked about. However, from that day forward, there were no congressional or military investigations, nor did any of the mainstream newspapers conduct media investigations or publish any more articles about La Cayetana. The silencing had begun.

Eight days after the massacre, on the evening of December 7, a vehicle dropped the missing men off on a field strewn with lava rocks nearly ten miles from La Cayetana, a place called El Playón, which later became a notorious spot where dead bodies were dumped by death squads. “The fourteen came home, but they came home ruined, beaten up, and tortured,” Anaya says. “Their entire bodies were beaten to get them to talk. Some were given electric shocks. Others had internal bleeding.” With the prisoners returned and the dead buried, it seemed the people of La Cayetana could do nothing more. The National Guard’s assault—the assassinations, imprisonment, beatings, and torture—all quickly disappeared from public view.

A few days later, Anaya’s older brother died. “He died slowly,” Anaya says, “with blood coming out of his ears, nose, and mouth.”

The Template

General Juan Orlando Zepeda works in the last house on a dead-end street in a middleclass neighborhood in San Salvador. Formerly the vice minister of defense and director of military intelligence, Zepeda is one of the most feared generals from the civil war. The nongovernmental Human Rights Commission in El Salvador, which independently monitored human rights abuses during the war, cites him for planning or ordering 210 summary executions, sixty-four instances of torture, and 110 illegal detentions throughout the 1980s. He is also one of fourteen in absentia defendants accused of planning the gruesome 1989 Jesuit slaying case, where six Jesuit priests were murdered along with their cook and her daughter. (Similar to the case against Chile’s dictator, Augusto Pinochet, the Spanish government has allowed a lawsuit against Zepeda in Spain, since five of the six priests were Spanish.) If he travels to the European Union, he risks being arrested. Zepeda is a 1969 graduate of the notorious U.S. Army School of the Americas—an institution designed to teach Latin American soldiers how to deal with rebel insurgents. At the time of the La Cayetana massacre, Zepeda was an army captain.

Although he doesn’t have a proven connection to La Cayetana, I’ve come to meet him to see if he can help me understand the military’s mindset during the 1970s. Zepeda stands to shake my hand. I’m not exactly sure what I expected an accused war criminal to look like, but I’m surprised to see an elegant older man with a thick white mustache, dressed in slacks and a navy blue striped sweater. Lining one wall of his office are rows of classics and Spanish translations of Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Dickens. His large wood desk is bare except for a small Bible.

Behind him hangs a huge portrait of himself when he was younger, dressed in full military regalia, his face fixed in a stern expression.

Zepeda says that when the war ended, he retired as a general and became president of a trash-collecting company. In recent years, Congress appointed him president of the Academy of Military History of El Salvador, which documents military facts and events. He also wrote and self-published a book, *Profiles of the War in El Salvador*. I ask him whether he can explain La Cayetana.

“For the army to control the rebels,” he responds, “There’s always violence, there’s always repression.” The army’s task was difficult because the FPL, in that period, was multiplying quickly, he says. At one point, in the mid-1970s, he tells me, they had upward of ten thousand combatants. “They divided the territory into war zones to carry forth their guerrilla war, break the armed forces, and establish a Marxist, Leninist, Communist, revolutionary, popular government.”

He insists that people who were arrested or killed were guerrillas, “because there were also people that maybe didn’t have a rifle but they were sympathizers—helping with intelligence, logistics, medicine, clothes, support.”

But if Zepeda justifies the assault as targeting only combatants or sympathizers, Anaya explains it differently. In his village, when I had asked Anaya if the six men killed were revolutionaries, he said that some were organized in unions or with the church, and some were in the FPL. “And that was the motive—the military discovered that there was this organization and they called all of us dangerous terrorists and Communists,” he said. But if suppression of leftist insurgents was the purpose of brutal repression, it had almost the opposite effect: after the massacre, those who weren’t part of any official movement soon joined, Anaya said, not only in La Cayetana but, as the same pattern began to be repeated in other villages, throughout the country. Padre David compared it to the plight of the early Christians. “When the emperors martyred the Christians, they said, ‘The blood of martyrs is the seed of more Christians,’” he said.

As the guerrilla movement grew, all the smaller factions united under the umbrella of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Anaya soon devoted himself to the revolution; he was trained in how to blow up bridges, take down electrical wires, and make Molotov cocktails. Peasants deemed traitors to the revolution or possible government spies were run out of town or killed. “War is not desirable in any country—it’s cruel,” Anaya says. “This is why I believe that whoever is involved in war cannot say, ‘My hands are clean.’ If you’re involved in war, your hands are always stained.”

While Anaya was being trained in guerrilla tactics, Salvadoran soldiers were also being trained. Many of those who rose to command level, like Zepeda, had special training at the U.S. Army School of the Americas. The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were bitter decades in the Cold War, and the U.S. actively supported the fervent anti-Communism prevalent throughout Latin America’s militaries. Zepeda himself returned to the school for a second time in 1975 to take a course called Urban Counterinsurgency Operatives. Over the years, the United States trained 6,817 Salvadoran soldiers at the school.

The year the La Cayetana killings occurred, several key Salvadoran military officials besides Zepeda were already graduates of the school. They included the very people who had the most authority over the military's conduct at the time of the assault—from the national minister of defense to the vice secretary of defense to the head of the national guard for Region IV, which included La Cayetana.

It's unclear if anyone in the U.S. government, then headed by President Gerald Ford, knew about what happened at La Cayetana, but the military strategy used by the National Guard on that day was textbook School of the Americas training. Following the "domino theory," the idea that if one country falls to communism, so too will its neighbors, the U.S. institution taught the Salvadoran soldiers every aspect of counterinsurgency operations, which had colorful names like "death by a thousand small cuts," "iron fist," "scorched earth," and "hammer and anvil."

By circling an enemy base with soldiers, then sending in other troops to drive the enemy out of hiding, the "hammer and anvil" tactic traps everyone inside the large circle in order to catch fleeing insurgents. The problem with "hammer and anvil" is that insurgents tend to escape before the soldiers get there, and most people caught and killed between the hammer and anvil tend to be civilians. Although relatively few people were killed at La Cayetana, and women and children were largely unharmed, Wilfred Medran, a lawyer for Tutela Legal, believes it was during this time period that the Salvadoran military began to first employ the tactics taught at the School of the Americas. "When the U.S. saw Nicaragua's insurgents gaining a stronghold, they came and told the Salvadoran military to implement counterinsurgency operatives here," he says. "The operatives focused on torture, scorched earth, and the like." Soon "hammer and anvil" became a common Salvadoran military strategy.

The National Guard assault on La Cayetana became the template for rural repression; the squashing of any outcry or investigation afterward cleared the way for the Salvadoran military to react even more harshly in other communities. "In '74 and '75, [the Salvadoran military] initiated its policy to stop what it called 'communist danger,' and in many parts of the country selective massacres began," says Carlos Consalvi, the director of the archival Museum of the Word and Image. Waves of rural massacres followed. The security forces had learned they could get away with these killings without any restraints coming from their own government or the U.S.

Six months after the La Cayetana massacre, in June 1975, the National Guard tortured and killed six farmers in the Tres Calles massacre. Then, on July 30, 1975, at the University of El Salvador, the National Guard shot at a peaceful protest, killing three students; sixteen others disappeared. Other small-scale massacres ensued. By 1977, the massacres were getting bigger, more frequent, and more blatant. In February, at the Plaza Libertad massacre, security forces opened fire on people protesting the recent presidential election. According to the government, the death toll was sixty; other estimates say between one hundred and three hundred people died. Political assassinations increased tenfold from 1972 to 1979.

By 1980, El Salvador was ready to ignite into full-blown civil war. On March 24, while standing at the pulpit, the country's much-beloved Archbishop Romero, who was not a left-wing figure

but did speak out for the peasants and the poor, was assassinated. He was shot in the heart while celebrating mass by an unknown shooter with an M-16 assault rifle, known as a U.S.-supplied weapon. His death became the catalyst for the country's twelve-year bloody conflict, where massacres, arrests, and torture of prisoners became an everyday occurrence.

El Salvador's civil war between the leftist guerrillas and the state assumed the form of a critical proxy war between the United States and the USSR. According to the book *A Scourge of Guns* by Michael Klare and David Andersen, Soviets and Cubans provided Salvadoran rebels with training and thousands of weapons. At the same time, according to a 1991 Rand Institute report, "American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador," prepared for the Department of Defense, the U.S. government supplied the Salvadoran military with weapons, training, and a total of six billion dollars in aid throughout the war, which averages out to over a million dollars a day.

The military returned to La Cayetana on June 4, 1981. This time it came with far more troops and took over more territory. According to Anaya, they brought hundreds of soldiers, heavy artillery, and helicopters, and again enacted the "hammer and anvil" tactic. Before the soldiers arrived, the guerrillas caught wind of it and got most people out of the way. The army ransacked the vacant homes and set them on fire, rendering La Cayetana a ghost town, as it remains to this day.

On December 11 of the same year, the biggest massacre in modern-day Latin America—El Mozote—took place. Using the same tactic they applied twice to La Cayetana, troops crushed this small hamlet in El Salvador's northeast mountains. The soldiers stormed from house to house, dragging people into the plaza and forcing them to lie face down on the ground. The next day the killing began: men were interrogated and executed, groups of women were raped and then gunned down, and dozens of children were locked in the town church and burned alive. Over two days, the soldiers killed one thousand people.

Although journalists from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* reported the killings in El Mozote, and the Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas documented the dead bodies, the U.S. government refused to confirm what happened—a history recounted by Mark Danner in *The New Yorker*. And despite some finger wagging and lectures on human rights from Vice President George H. W. Bush, the military aid continued. With the United States under the leadership of President Ronald Reagan, fighting the Cold War was more important than ever.

In her book *Salvador*, Joan Didion summed up the perspective of the Salvadoran government during those years. "'Anti-communism' was seen, correctly," she writes, "as the bait the United States would always take." And the Salvadoran government knew that as long as there were "insurgents" left to fight, their funding was secure.

From Amnesty to Amnesia

A blue and white striped flag with "God, Union, Liberty" lettered across the center flaps in the sky above the old army barracks in San Salvador. This building is now the army's Military Museum, and I've come to search the archives for any information on the National Guard.

Inside, photos, weapons, and memorabilia from the war line the walls. I sit down with the head of archives, Ernesto Garcia Rivera, and he tells me they don't have any documentation on the guard and that I'd be hard pressed to find information about it anywhere in the country. "Nobody wants to talk about this," he says. "Thirty-five years later, the wounds are still open and the architects are still alive."

By the time the war reached a stalemate and ended in 1992, the civilian death toll was seventy-five thousand, and between fifty-five hundred and eight thousand people were "disappeared" and also presumed dead—staggering numbers for a country of just 5.5 million at the time. Eighty-five percent of these deaths and disappearances were attributed to government forces. The peace accords mandated that a new constitution be drawn up, that a UN Truth Commission be established to investigate human rights violations, and that the FMLN convert from a guerrilla group to a political party.

Another requirement brokered during the peace accords negotiations was a 70 percent reduction of the armed forces, along with a complete disbanding of the National Guard, National Police, Treasury Police, special battalions, and all armed FMLN units. With these demobilizations, however, all kinds of records disappeared. Once the National Guard disbanded, for instance, a rash of curious fires broke out in various offices where records had been sent. The office where La Cayetana's records were stored was one of the places to go up in flames.

On March 20, 1993, the UN Truth Commission released its report naming some of the principal architects—including Zepeda—behind the war's worst atrocities: the assassination of Archbishop Romero, the massacre at El Mozote, and the slaying of the Jesuit priests. Five days later, the Salvadoran Congress, ruled by the right-wing political party Nationalist Republican Alliance, or ARENA, passed a general amnesty for anyone involved in human rights violations between 1980 and 1992. All official investigations having anything to do with human rights violations were immediately and indefinitely halted. There would be no public accounting as there was in other war-torn countries like South Africa, Bosnia, and Rwanda. In El Salvador, hundreds of perpetrators slipped through the cracks.

For seventeen years, ARENA held power and today still controls Congress and the Supreme Court, but gradually the FMLN won municipalities and a few seats in Congress. One such congressman is Padre David, who left the priesthood during the war and turned to politics. He is now serving his second term for the FMLN. When President Funes took office on June 1, 2009, he was not seen as a radical. A former television journalist who campaigned as a moderate, President Funes joined the FMLN party only recently.

Seven months after taking office, President Funes stood before the small audience and announced his historic apology. He said this wasn't just a symbolic act but that he was also signing into law two governmental commissions—one to help the victims and another dedicated to searching for children who disappeared during the war. By the time President Funes finished, for many across the country, shock had turned to catharsis as he gave the pledge that rings through history at times like these—never again—the pledge ultimately required by national atrocities from the Holocaust to apartheid to slavery.

His key words reverberated deeply in El Salvador's bereft soul: "Let this apology serve to dignify the victims, to let it help relieve your pain and contribute to healing your wounds and the wounds of all of the country."

Memorial Park

Every year on November 2, Salvadorans bring confetti, streamers, papier-mâché, and colorful flowers to cemeteries to celebrate the Day of the Dead. Families wrap and decorate the graves like Christmas trees with the ornaments they've brought with them. By the end of the day, an uninformed onlooker wouldn't know there are graves beneath the flowers and confetti.

Burying each person in their own resting spot dignifies the dead and brings closure for the living, unlike the jumble of bones in a mass grave. In Carolyn Forché's poem, "Because One is Always Forgotten," dedicated to a Salvadoran labor activist whose murder was covered up by the government during the war, there is a sense of completion:

When Viera was buried we knew it had come to an end, his coffin rocking into the ground like a boat or a cradle.

The last time I visit Anaya, he wants to show me a special section of the new town park. We walk up the dirt road as if we were heading to La Cayetana. At the edge of town, the road opens up into the woods. "Here is where the Memorial Park will be," Anaya says. A tall monument with the names of the six men who died in La Cayetana will be built, and six separate graves will be dug, he explains. Family members can decorate the graves and plant flowers. "The idea is to do something significant," he says, "to not forget and to come here every year to commemorate this date—we cannot leave behind this important part of our history."

They aren't sure yet when they'll be able to exhume the mass grave in Las Cañas, but it's definitely in the works. Before I leave, I stop by Dolores Alfaro's house and ask her how it's coming along. She tells me she is gathering her husband's official documentation to get the process started. "They need to know exactly how his name was spelled, how tall he was ..." She drifts off into her own thoughts for a moment. "He was tall and dark skinned," she says, almost as if talking to herself. "Have you seen the park?"

"Yes," I say.

"That's where they're going to have the burial," she says. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"