
El Salvador's Worst Shitholes Are 'Made in America'

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My journalist's hiking boots still have leftover feces and dirt from the ultimate shitholes of El Salvador: its mass graves. Many of the thousands of graves that my sources there have mapped were dug by U.S.-trained and funded security forces in the 80s. Most of the rest were dug more recently by L.A.-based-gangs steadily deported to El Salvador by U.S. immigration authorities since the 90s.

Protest against US involvement in the Salvadoran Civil War in Chicago, Illinois, in March 1989 (Linda Hess Miller/ Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported)

President Trump's characterization of Africa, Haiti and El Salvador as "shitholes" disturbed me, but I wasn't sure why. The comments were made during a discussion about the temporary protected status for hundreds of thousands of Salvadoran, Haitian and other immigrants Trump had just rescinded. In search for an answer, I went home and pulled out and studied my boots, which were tattered after too many visits to mass graves, mass graves with the remains of Salvadorans—in El Salvador, in Mexico and in the deserts of south Texas. Wearing my hiking boots during visits to numerous sites along this chain of devalued life led me to the conclusion that mass graves were the ultimate shitholes.

What made me most uncomfortable was less about Mr. Trump's choice of word than how he used it: he mistook the shithole part for the whole country. Trump's rhetorical fallacy feels like a cover-up, a distraction from the fact that El Salvador's mass graves contain fingerprints and other evidence that point to the United States as an accomplice to the mass murder and violence that created them. Viewed from this perspective, Trump's "shithole" comment said in words what all US presidents have said with their policies towards

countries like Haiti and El Salvador.

Consider, for example, the Salvadoran case of El Mozote, the site of the massacre of almost a thousand peasants, a crime whose irresolution still haunts many. Some 37 years after the mass massacre, forensic evidence from mass graves proved that 553 of those victims were children, many of them under six years old.

Victims of the El Mozote Massacre (Photo by Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos/ Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States)

El Mozote is the best documented of El Salvador's thousands of mass graves, many of which remain unexcavated. Forensic

experts with El Salvador's Institute for Legal Medicine and the world renown Argentine forensic team told me that their evidence—bones, shoe marks, hair samples, bullet shells—of the mass killing at El Mozote pointed to elite Salvadoran soldiers trained in places like Fort Bragg and Fort Benning, Georgia, formerly known as the notorious "School of the Americas." Evidence from recent Salvadoran and international court cases corroborates this. The boots, bullets, weapons,



Protest against US involvement in the Salvadoran Civil War in Chicago, Illinois, in March 1989 (Linda Hess Miller/ Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported)

helicopters and uniforms used during the massacre were all Made in the U.S.A. And the evidence trail isn't limited to El Mozote.

A United Nations Truth Commission established by agreement between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN guerrillas at the end of the civil war in 1992 concluded that U.S. trained security forces had perpetrated 85% of the killings of innocents during the war that left over 75,000 dead. Most of the perpetrators remain free. The forensic evidence left by El Salvador's US-trained and funded military is undeniable at El Mozote, in the murder of El Salvador's only saint, Monseñor Romero, in the case of the 4 Maryknoll nuns raped and killed in 1980, just as it is in the cases of the tens of thou-

sands of other, lesser-known slaughtered innocents.

The war-era mass graves I visited around an area called Pan-chimalco are located right next to the more recent mass graves dug by gangs in the area. Like the weapons and training used by the Salvadoran military, the gangs themselves were also born in the United States, specifically Los Angeles' Pico Union neighborhood. I remember because I was there in the early 90s, when police of the Rampart police division—the site of the worst police scandal in U.S. history—started pushing the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs

to escalate the warfare between them. The Rampart division's well-documented tactics—planting guns for false arrests, taking a young man in gang from one neighborhood into the hostile territory of rival gangs, shooting and even killing gang members and make it seem like rival gangs did it—did much to foment violence among the gangs.

Most damaging for El Salvador and its shitholes was the way LAPD then broke sanctuary laws designed to protect people fleeing extreme violence and other disasters from deportation. In the

early 90s, the LAPD and INS began the fatal practice of handing the young gang members over to the then Immigration and



Victims of the El Mozote Massacre (Photo by Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos/ Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States)

Naturalization Service (INS) for deportation. In the process, these agents of US policy helped create a gang culture in a country with no history of U.S.-style gangs and gang warfare. These gangs have since gone on to fill the mass graves that mark El Salvador as one of the most violent countries on earth.

In immigration terms, the shithole is a distraction. Calling the countries shitholes, but also designating them as counties ready to both receive hun-

dreds of thousands of deportees and lose billions of dollars sent home by them is also a logical—and tragic—fallacy, another policy failure. But if the President is going to use such language, he should back up his words with policy that recognizes U.S. responsibility for the foreign war and immigration policies that create catastrophes. In other words, I would prefer Trump walk the shithole talk—and can give him the hiking boots to do it with.

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Rape on the Night Shift

Film Screening & Conversation with Lilia García-Brower

This film by Frontline (PBS) investigates the sexual abuse of women who work as janitors. Lilia García-Brower is the Executive Director of the Maintenance Corporation Trust Fund (MCTF) a watchdog organization in California whose mission is to abolish illegal and unfair business practices in the janitorial industry.

Contact Dr. Rita Urquijo-Ruiz at 210.999.7898 or rurquijo@trinity.edu for more information. **Co-sponsored by the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center.**

Thursday, March 22, 2018

Northrup Hall 040

Refreshments: 5:30 pm

Screening & Conversation: 6:00 pm

Free & open to the public

