



PRESS REPORTING ON EL SALVADOR AND NICARAGUA  
IN LEADING CANADIAN AND AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

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The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in the United States and the *Toronto Globe and Mail* and the *Ottawa Citizen* in Canada were studied for their coverage on El Salvador and Nicaragua during the final three months of 1983. Twenty-five issues of each paper, selected on an every three day basis, were examined for material dealing with El Salvador and Nicaragua, resulting in a data set of 156 cases. The most notable findings are that the volume of coverage in the American press was nearly twice that appearing in the Canadian press, American wire services tended to provide the largest category of Canadian material, the U.S. role in the conflict was the single most important theme, and that there were remarkably few differences in thematic coverage between Canadian and American newspapers.

Le *New York Times* et le *Washington Post* aux Etats Unis et le *Toronto Globe and Mail* et l'*Ottawa Citizen* au Canada ont été étudiés afin de déterminer leur reportage pendant les trois derniers mois de 1983 en ce qui concerne l'El Salvador et le Nicaragua. Vingt-cinq numéros de chaque journal, choisis à une intervalle de tous les trois jours, ont été examinés pour les matériaux utiles ce qui donnait une série de data de 156 cas. Les conclusions les plus remarquables sont que le volume de reportage dans la presse américaine était presque deux fois celui de la presse canadienne, que l'agence de presse américaine a eu tendance à fournir la catégorie la plus grande de matériaux canadiens, que le rôle américain dans le conflit était le thème le plus important, et qu'il y avait très peu de différences entre les journaux canadiens et américains quant au reportage thématique.

Literature dealing with western news coverage of the Third World points to an unevenness in that coverage. Events that are sensational or violent, especially if they impact on the West, are those most likely to find their way into news reports (Markham, 1961; Hester, 1974). This article, based on a study of news coverage of Central America in the fall of 1983, substantiates this generalization, as one hundred and fifty-six out of a total of two hundred and fourteen items

dealing with the entire region in four leading Canadian and American newspapers (72.9%), focused on the violence torn countries of El Salvador and Nicaragua. With respect to the remaining items, twelve percent focused on the region in general (often in terms of the implications of the violence in El Salvador and Nicaragua), while only seven percent dealt with Guatemala, 3.7% with Honduras, 3.3% with Costa Rica, and 0.6% with Panama. If violence, both external and internal, is the magnet which attracts western press attention to countries of the Third World, we have little difficulty in locating the primary sites of that violence within the Central American isthmus.

The genesis of the conflicts in these two societies is of course as different as the manner in which the conflicts are carried out. In El Salvador, a Communist-led insurgency has challenged an entrenched oligarchy which is firmly committed to protecting its privileged position. A civil war, fought with varying degrees of intensity, and characterized by great loss of civilian life, has been raging for the past six years (North, 1981; La Feber, 1983). In this conflict, the United States has supported the government, while Cuba and Nicaragua have supported the FDR/FMLN, the political coordinating group for the rebels and the guerrilla forces themselves.

In Nicaragua, the situation is quite different. The Sandinista Front (FSLN) overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979 and installed a revolutionary government which, while dominated by leaders of a clearly Marxist orientation, nevertheless attempted to maintain a degree of economic and political pluralism.

Initially the Carter Administration attempted a policy of providing economic aid to the Sandinistas. However, with the Reagan victory in 1980 the United States adopted an increasingly hostile attitude toward the Sandinistas, motivated at least in part by the new administration's view that revolutionary Nicaragua was aiding the rebels in the Salvadoran Civil War. By the fall of 1983, the United States was actively pursuing a policy of "destabilization" toward Nicaragua, wherein the United States Central Intelligence Agency was organizing and supporting counter-revolutionary military forces (the Contras). These forces launched armed attacks on the ground against Nicaragua from neighbouring Honduras and Costa Rica and carried out bombing raids against the country's fuel storage facilities. Thus in Nicaragua, the United States was supporting the forces challenging the new political order, while Cuba was on the side of the incumbent government (La Feber, 1983, 226 - 242, 293 - 299).

Such a complex situation is obviously difficult for the average North American to comprehend. Even for those of us with special interest in the region, the fact that few of us have any first hand knowledge of more than a fraction of what is happening there makes even our analysis difficult. We, as does the average citizen, must rely on the press for information (Smith, 1980, 24). What this study seeks to do is to probe the press reporting on El Salvador and Nicaragua as found

in leading Canadian and American newspapers in order to clarify the "pictures of reality" regarding these countries which were presented to the general public as well as attentive publics in the fall of 1983. The primary question addressed in this article is whether press images of conflict in El Salvador and Nicaragua differed for readers of Canadian and American newspapers.

#### METHOD

The major "national" newspapers in Canada and the United States, the Toronto Globe and Mail and the New York Times, as well as the major newspapers serving each nation's capital city, the Ottawa Citizen and the Washington Post, were selected for study. The New York Times and Washington Post and the Globe and Mail are included on the list of the world's fifty greatest newspapers (Merrill and Fisher, 1980). While the Citizen does not make this list (and Table Four makes it clear that it does not devote the resources to international reporting characteristic of the other newspapers), it is nevertheless, the only English-language newspaper in Ottawa, and after the Globe and Mail is the newspaper most widely read by Members of Parliament (Dewitt and Kirton, 1983).

Beginning on a date randomly selected, 4 October 1983, and continuing until mid-December, twenty-five issues of each newspaper were selected on an every three day basis. Each of these issues was read in its entirety for material on Central America, with Salvadoran and Nicaraguan material singled out for analysis here. Press items were divided into five categories of content: front page news, inside page news, editorials, features, and letters to the editor. In addition, each item was coded as to source of content, story lead, major actors and issues discussed, and use of Cold War language, e.g., such terms as communist, leftist, Cuban-backed, Soviet-backed, etc. All coding was done by the author, with intercoder reliability calculated at .82 (Holsti, 1969, 140).

#### RESULTS

Before examining data relevant to the above mentioned five areas of investigation, some general comments on the data are in order. First, events in Nicaragua had a slightly higher salience in the North American press than did those in El Salvador, accounting for 53.2% of the total for the two countries, as opposed to 46.8% dealing with El Salvador. Second, American newspapers gave events in both Nicaragua and El Salvador far more coverage than did Canadian papers, as one hundred items (64.1% of the total) appeared in the New York Times and the Washington Post, as opposed to only fifty-six items (35.9% of the total) which appeared in the Globe and Mail and the Citizen.

TABLE ONE  
 TYPE OF CONTENT, BY COUNTRY

	CANADA		UNITED STATES	
	El Salvador N=24	Nicaragua N=32	El Salvador N=49	Nicaragua N=51
Front Page News	0	0	20.4	17.3
Inside Page News	87.5	84.4	61.2	66.7
Editorials	0	0	2.0	2.0
Features	8.3	9.4	16.3	3.9
Letters to the Editor	4.2	6.3	0	9.8

Table One presents data which indicate where in Canadian and American newspapers content on El Salvador and Nicaragua appeared. As is immediately apparent, hard news dominated coverage in both countries, with the American newspapers again demonstrating that events in El Salvador and Nicaragua had a higher news salience, in that nearly 20% of hard news reported found its way to the front page. With the exception of reporting on El Salvador in the American press, analytical material (editorials and features), accounted for less than 10% of total content. Letters to the editor focused in the main on Nicaragua, with a greater balance between letters on El Salvador and Nicaragua appearing in Canadian newspapers.

Table Two shows the breakdown of content by individual newspapers. A number of interesting variations are immediately evident. First, the New York Times was the only newspaper among the four studied that presented more items on El Salvador than on Nicaragua. By and large, this added material took the form of features. Also of considerable interest was the very high percentage of content on El Salvador in the Washington Post which merited front page status (47.4%). Thus, while overall, Nicaraguan coverage exceeded slightly that devoted to El Salvador in the United States as well as Canada, given the fact that the New York Times ran more material on El Salvador and that the Washington Post put an extraordinary amount of Salvadoran news on the front page, it would be hard to sustain the argument that events in Nicaragua held greater importance for the American press.

Table Three shows the source of material on El Salvador and Nicaragua which appeared in the Canadian and American newspapers under study. There are obvious major differences in the patterns of news flow into the two countries. First, the American newspapers relied most heavily on their own local staffs and special correspondents, as these sources contributed over seventy percent of American material on both El Salvador and Nicaragua. The American wire services (AP and UPI) were the next most important source of material for the American papers, furnishing just over 18% of content on El Salvador and just over 10% of content on Nicaragua. The remaining American content was provided by Reuters and by freelance American journalists and letter writers.

The Canadian pattern with respect to where news came from is quite different. In this case it was the American wire services that provided the primary source of information: 45.5% of material on El Salvador and 59.3% of material on Nicaragua (Robinson, 1983). European wire services (Reuters and Agence France Presse) were the second most important sources of information for Canadian newspapers, with local staffs and special correspondents the third most important source. The Canadian wire service (Canadian Press), syndicated and freelance American journalists, and Canadian letter writers contributed the remainder of Canadian material.

TABLE TWO  
TYPE OF CONTENT, BY NEWSPAPER

	GLOBE & MAIL		CITIZEN		N.Y. TIMES		WASHINGTON POST	
	El Salvador N=9	Nicaragua N=10	El Salvador N=15	Nicaragua N=22	El Salvador N=30	Nicaragua N=26	El Salvador N=19	Nicaragua N=25
Front Page News	0	0	0	0	3.3	23.1	47.4	12.0
Inside Page News	77.8	80.0	93.3	86.4	66.7	69.2	52.6	64.0
Editorials	0	0	0	0	3.3	0	0	4.0
Features	11.1	10.0	6.7	9.1	26.7	7.7	0	0
Letters to the Editor	11.1	10.0	0	4.5	0	0	0	20.0

TABLE THREE  
SOURCE OF CONTENT, BY COUNTRY

	CANADA		UNITED STATES	
	El Salvador N=22	Nicaragua N=27	El Salvador N=49	Nicaragua N=49
Local Staff/ Special Correspondent	13.6	11.1	73.5	71.4
Canadian Wire Services	9.1	3.7	0	0
American Wire Services	45.5	59.3	18.4	10.2
European Wire Services	18.2	11.1	2.1	6.1
Other Canadian Sources	4.5	7.4	0	0
Other American Sources	9.1	7.4	6.1	12.2

The most important finding with respect to source of content is confirmation of the charge that due to patterns of international news flows, Canadians get an essentially American perspective on world events (Scarlon, 1974; Scanlon and Farrell, 1983). In that at least sixty percent of the total Canadian content regarding El Salvador and Nicaragua was traced directly to American sources, we see that the problem which has long troubled Canadian students of the media is indeed evident with respect to reporting on these particular conflict situations.

In examining Table Four, which shows the source of content by individual newspaper, we see considerable variation between the two Canadian newspapers. The *Ottawa Citizen* published virtually no material from local staff members or special correspondents, while leaning quite heavily on American sources, especially the wire services. The *Globe and Mail* was far more balanced; actually showing a majority of Canadian content (57.2%) in reporting on Nicaragua. The *Globe and Mail* was also the heaviest user of material from the Reuters wire. The two American papers demonstrated quite similar patterns of content origination. However, it is interesting to note that the *New York Times* featured more local staff/special correspondent material on Nicaragua, while the *Washington Post* did so for El Salvador.

Table Five shows the lead theme of items on El Salvador and Nicaragua appearing in Canadian and American newspapers. Again, we detect a major variation in the pattern of news salience. The Canadian newspapers were prone to highlight the military activities associated with the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan situations (reports of guerrilla, Contra, or government actions), while the American papers concentrated on the political dimensions of the conflict, very often those involving continued United States government support for either the Contras or the Salvadoran government. Economic considerations were not a major focus of reporting in either country, while only in Canadian newspapers was there any human interest focus.

Table Six, which shows the distribution of lead items by individual newspaper, really does not turn up any startling variations. In both of the Canadian newspapers military leads predominate in every case except for *Ottawa Citizen* leads on Nicaraguan items, and here the political leads exceeded the military ones by less than five percent. The two American papers were quite consistent, with the exception of a somewhat lower percentage of political leads in the *Washington Post's* coverage of El Salvador. On balance, however, it is clear that readers of the two Canadian papers would have been exposed to more concentration on the military aspects of the conflicts in the region than would have readers of the American papers.

Data in Table Seven show the coverage of major international actors, issues, and extent of Cold War language in Salvadoran items in Canadian and American newspaper reporting. Perhaps most noteworthy here is the very heavy emphasis which was given to the role of the



TABLE FOUR

## SOURCE OF CONTENT, BY NEWSPAPER

	GLOBE & MAIL		CITIZEN		N.Y. TIMES		WASHINGTON POST	
	El Salvador N=9	Nicaragua N=7	El Salvador N=15	Nicaragua N=22	El Salvador N=30	Nicaragua N=24	El Salvador N=19	Nicaragua N=25
Local Staff/Special Correspondent	25.0	42.9	7.1	0	66.7	75.0	84.2	68.0
Canadian Wire Services	0	0	14.3	5.0	0	0	0	0
American Wire Services	37.5	28.6	50.0	70.0	20.0	16.7	15.8	4.0
European Wire Services	25.0	14.3	14.3	10.0	3.3	4.2	0	8.0
Other Canadian Sources	12.5	14.3	0	5.0	0	0	0	0
Other American Sources	0	0	14.3	10.0	10.0	4.2	0	20.0

TABLE FIVE  
STORY LEADS, BY COUNTRY

	CANADA		UNITED STATES	
	El Salvador N=24	Nicaragua N=32	El Salvador N=49	Nicaragua N=51
Political	25.0	34.4	67.3	72.5
Military	58.3	56.2	24.5	23.5
Economic	4.2	9.4	8.2	3.9
Human Interest	12.5	0	0	0

TABLE SIX  
STORY LEADS, BY NEWSPAPER

	GLOBE & MAIL		CITIZEN		N. Y. TIMES		WASHINGTON POST	
	El Salvador N=9	Nicaragua N=10	El Salvador N=15	Nicaragua N=22	El Salvador N=30	Nicaragua N=26	El Salvador N=19	Nicaragua N=25
Political	11.1	0.0	33.3	50.0	73.3	73.1	57.9	72.0
Military	66.7	80.0	53.3	45.5	23.3	19.2	26.3	28.0
Economic	11.1	20.0	0	4.5	3.3	7.7	15.8	0
Human Interest	11.1	0	13.3	0	0	0	0	0

United States in the conflict. This factor was present in nearly 80% of American press items and fully 50% of Canadian ones. The American role was the most heavily reported on aspect of the conflict. There was no American press interest in any form of Canadian involvement in El Salvador and only scarcely more Canadian press interest in such involvement. What is truly remarkable is the lack of press attention paid to the role of Cuba in the Salvadoran crisis. This is even more intriguing in that in an examination of these same four newspapers' coverage of El Salvador in the fall of 1981, the role of Cuba was featured in 18.5% of Canadian and 36.4% of American items (Soderlund and Schmitt, 1982). There can be little doubt that a major decrease in the press' perception of the salience of the Cuban role in El Salvador had occurred over the two year period.

Looking at the specific issues which dominated North American press coverage of El Salvador, it is apparent that abuse of human rights on the part of the Salvadoran government was far and away the most hotly covered substantive topic in both Canadian and American newspapers. In only two cases are differences in issue coverage statistically significant. Both of these, "United States aid" and the "United States policy-making process," have an unique interest to American readers and it is not surprising that there was little Canadian interest in these topics.

In the area of the use of Cold War language there is indeed an interesting finding, in that the American papers used Cold War terminology in Salvadoran material to a far greater extent than did Canadian papers (44.9% to 20.8%).

Small cell sizes make a comparison between specific newspapers hazardous. However, regarding the role of the United States in the conflict, all newspapers hovered around the national average. The *New York Times* stressed the human rights issue, while the *Washington Post* seemed specifically concerned with the issues of U.S. aid and domestic political conditions in El Salvador. In the area of Cold War language use, there was little difference between the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, while in Canada, the *Citizen* ran twice as many pieces featuring this language than did the *Globe and Mail*.

Table Eight, which shows the major actors, issues and use of Cold War language with respect to Nicaragua, presents a picture similar to the one produced for El Salvador, with one crucial exception. It is not surprising to find, for example, that the U.S. role in Nicaragua was reported at the same level in American newspapers (80.0%), as was the U.S. role in El Salvador. In the Nicaraguan case, however, the Canadian reporting was up to just under ten percent of the American on this dimension. Also, the Canadian press was far more prone to comment on the Canadian role in the Nicaraguan conflict, although again we see absolutely no American press interest. The role of Cuba figures more

TABLE SEVEN

MAJOR ACTORS, ISSUES AND COLD WAR LANGUAGE IN NORTH AMERICAN  
NEWSPAPER REPORTING ON EL SALVADOR, BY COUNTRY  
(due to multicoding, columns do not add to 100%)

	CANADA N=24 % of items	UNITED STATES N=49 % of items	PHI	SIGNIF
ACTORS				
Role of United States	50.0	79.6	.30	.01
Role of Canada	4.2	0		NS
Role of Cuba	0	4.1		NS
ISSUES				
Human Rights	50.0	65.0		NS
Guerrilla Military Action	29.2	18.4		NS
Government Military Action	20.8	14.3		NS
Domestic Political Conditions	16.7	34.7		NS
Kissinger Commission	12.5	10.2		NS
United States Aid	12.5	49.0	.35	.01
Domestic Economic Conditions	12.5	6.1		(too few cases)
United States Policy- making Process	4.2	34.7	.33	.01
"Cold War" Language	20.8	44.9	.23	.05

TABLE EIGHT

MAJOR ACTORS, ISSUES, AND COLD WAR LANGUAGE IN NORTH AMERICAN  
NEWSPAPER REPORTING ON NICARAGUA, BY COUNTRY  
(due to mutlicoding, columns do not add to 100%)

	CANADA N=32 % of items	UNITED STATES N=51 % of items	PHI	SIGNIF
<b>ACTORS</b>				
Role of United States	71.9	80.4		NS
Role of Canada	12.5	0	.28	.05
Role of Cuba	12.5	23.5		NS
<b>ISSUES</b>				
Contra Military Action	43.8	33.3		NS
CIA Activity	40.6	33.3		NS
U.S. Destabilization Program	34.4	29.4		NS
U.S. Invasion of Nicaragua	21.9	15.7		NS
Contradora Group Peace Plan	15.6	17.6		NS
United States Policy- making Process	3.1	29.4	.32	.01
Nicaraguan Political Concessions	9.4	21.6		NS
United States Aid	0	19.6	.29	.01
"Cold War" Language	37.5	17.6	.22	.05

prominently in North American reporting on Nicaragua, although still not rivaling the figures for Cuban involvement in El Salvador in the fall of 1981.

With respect to the coverage of substantive issues, there is again a great similarity between the reporting in the two countries, with "Contra activity," "CIA involvement," and "U.S. destabilization policy" ranking as the top three themes in both Canadian and American press reporting. As was the case with El Salvador, on only two issues was there a statistically significant difference in issue coverage, and this occurred on the same two issues, "U.S. policy-making" and "U.S. aid."

It is on the question of the use of Cold War language that we detect a significant departure from the Salvadoran pattern. In the case of Nicaragua, press reports in the Canadian papers utilized Cold War language to a far greater extent than American reporting (37.5% to 17.6%). This puzzle is further complicated by the fact, as mentioned earlier, American sources (albeit different sources) furnished the majority of material for newspapers in both countries.

What accounts for these differences? Although overall, local staff and special correspondent material and American wire service material contained a similar percentage of Cold War framed stories, 35% to 32.5% respectively, their use of this language in the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan contexts diverged sharply. In the Nicaraguan case only 23.7% of material produced by local staff members or special correspondents used Cold War language, while 38.1% of American wire service material did. On the other hand, for El Salvador, 46.2% of local staff/special correspondent originated material contained Cold War language, while only 26.3% of American wire service material did. Thus, although the source of material in both Canadian and U.S. newspapers was American, differing perceptions of the relevance of Cold War imagery to the Central American conflicts is evident due to the fact in one country stories came primarily from local staff members and special correspondents, while in the other material came primarily from the wire services.

As was the case with El Salvador, small cell sizes make comparison between individual papers very tenuous. However, the role of the United States in the conflict featured prominently in the coverage of all newspapers and the coverage of the Canadian role was equally divided between the Globe and Mail and the Citizen. The Washington Post tended to de-emphasize the actual Contra military activities, while giving greater than average attention to the role of the CIA and the general U.S. destabilization policy.

## CONCLUSION

First, there seems little question that the events involving political and military violence in Nicaragua and El Salvador attracted the primary attention of the western press within the Central American region. Second, these conflict situations had a greater relevance for American than for Canadian newspapers, both in terms of absolute number of items and the placement of material on the front page. Third, both the sources of material and the story leads in Canadian and American newspapers varied greatly.

This said, however, when we examine the actual thematic coverage contained in the press reports, minimal differences were found. Moreover, when those specific themes on which statistically significant differences did turn up are examined, it is seen that they involved domestic aspects of U.S. foreign policy making, which almost by definition would have less relevance for Canada. Thus in addition to the differences with respect to Cold War language already discussed, readers of the two Canadian newspapers would probably be more sensitized to the actual military operations in both the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran conflicts, while readers of the American papers would have a greater appreciation for the political dimensions of the conflicts, especially as they involved the United States.

With respect to the actual issues discussed in the press it is noteworthy that in both the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan contexts, it was precisely those issues that were most embarrassing to the Reagan Administration which were emphasized in the press. In El Salvador, these included human rights abuses (the government's inability to curb death squad activity), which was linked to continued U.S. aid, as these issues were debated within the United States political process. In Nicaragua it was the destabilization program, Contra activities, backed by the CIA, rumours of a possible U.S. military invasion following the successful Grenadian operation in late October, and of course, the reluctance on the part of Congress to continue to appropriate money in support of Contra operations that dominated the press agenda.

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