

The brutal practices in question included “water-boarding,” for which Danner offers a description recounted by a prisoner who was tortured during the Algerian War in the 1950s by French police and soldiers:

Then they laid me on a bench, flat on my stomach, head extending into the air, and tied my arms against my body with cords. Again the same question, which I refused to answer. By tilting the bench very slowly, they dipped my head into a basin filled with stinking liquid—dirty water and urine, probably. I was aware of the gurgling liquid reaching my mouth, then of a dull rumbling in my ears and a tingling in my nose.

“You asked for a drink—take all you want.”

The first time I did drink, trying to appease an insupportable thirst. I wanted to vomit immediately.

“He’s puking, the bastard.”

And my head was pushed back into the basin....

From time to time one of them would sit on my back and bear down on my thighs. I could hear the water I threw up fall back into the basin. Then the torture would continue.

The quotation is from *The Gangrene*, a 1960 book by seven Algerian prisoners, translated from the French by NYRB cofounder Robert Silvers. Tapping such historical sources helps set Danner’s work apart from more conventional investigative reporting. “There’s an area that falls somewhere between the world of academic scholarship and journalism, where thoughtful writing, long-form journalism, documentary research, and essayistic style all merge,” says Schell. “That, to me, is the most interesting, hopeful, and exciting area of journalism. Mark has staked out this territory as where he wants to operate. He will go to Iraq or Haiti to report on events, but he’ll also sit at home for a more slow-motion, echo-chamber consideration of books, documents, history, literature, philosophy, poetry. Unfortunately, very few media outlets esteem, cultivate, and publish such writers. The *New Yorker* does, and the *New York Review of Books* does it par excellence.”

Those two periodicals have published the bulk of Danner’s work. His relationship with the NYRB extends back to his early twenties, and he became a staff writer at the *New Yorker* in 1990, just a few days after his three-part series in that magazine on the upheavals in Haiti won the 1990 National Magazine Award for reporting. These venues allow Danner enough working space to explain the historical forces that drive current events. “I’ve always thought that history is particularly critical to having a clear understanding of a

conflict,” he says. “It allows you to anticipate what’s about to happen in a place like Haiti or Iraq. The Iraqis, for example, are very aware of the revolt under the British in 1920 and 1921. One could almost say that history times geography equals politics.”

History and geography certainly informed Danner’s investigative report on a ruthless 1981 slaughter in the mountains of El Salvador. For only the second time in its history (the first was John Hersey’s Hiroshima report of August 31, 1946), the *New Yorker* devoted an entire issue (December 6, 1993) to one article, “The Truth of El Mozote.” In this piece, Danner provided a chillingly explicit documentation of a massacre in which U.S.-trained Salvadoran troops murdered nearly a thousand peasants, including children and even infants, in a horrifying atrocity whose reality the Reagan administration steadfastly denied.

To most readers, Danner’s monograph settled the issue. “Once in a rare while a writer re-examines a debated episode of recent history with such thoroughness and integrity that the truth can no longer be in doubt,” wrote Anthony Lewis ’48, Nf ’57, in a 1993 *New York Times* article. “After the Danner report, no rational person can doubt that Salvadoran Government forces carried out a massacre.” Christopher Lehmann-Haupt’s *Times* review of Danner’s subsequent book, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* noted that “[T]his account is agonizing to read and is redeemed only by the clarity of perspective the author brings to it. You struggle to understand both the brutality of the soldiers and the suffering of the victims, and feel as if you are staring into the bowels of hell.”

Time and again, Danner has explored those hellish depths

## How to Report from Overseas

**W**HEN HEADED ABROAD on a story, Mark Danner, who knows French and Spanish, prepares very thoroughly beforehand by learning about the local history, politics, and geography; this allows him to guess what might come next. “In Haiti, for example, Gonaives is a city of revolution,” he says. “Typically, an uprising will start there, move through the country, and come to the capital last.” Second, he tries to make as many contacts as possible: “Not just the key political players, but doctors, day laborers, people who own small grocery stores, artists, farmers. People off the beaten track; it’s good to get someone who has never talked to a journalist before. You have to surmount obstacles, like—in Haiti—having white skin and being a foreigner. You want to work like hell and talk to people all the time.

“Third, make what ignorance you have your main strength,” he continues. “Treat your innocent eye like a great treasure. See what surprises you about the place, and try not to filter what you see through the traditional journalistic lens of what is supposed to be important. The most valuable thing you bring is your own reactions to that place. There’s a great corporate pressure to come up with the same lead that everybody else does. Instead, do everything you can to keep that individuality and originality. A corollary is having a kind of skepticism about the story as it’s being told. Don’t only rely on the people who traditionally translate the society to foreigners—diplomats, officials, the educated class that has been trained abroad. Talk to people like the desk officer at the World Bank who can lead you to mid- and lower-level officials who know where the bodies are buried. Make contact ‘horizontally,’ in government and society, through international agencies and non-governmental organizations; that’s more valuable than getting interviews with ministers.

“Fourth, distrust easy answers; societies are profoundly complicated. By the time you’ve been there for a while you should be thinking, ‘I know nothing about this place, I’m totally, utterly, deeply confused about what’s happening here.’ The more information you take in, the more you’ll feel that way. Don’t worry: that’s a good sign.

“Fifth, don’t get killed.”