

felt by the upper class and the military, not the whims of the man in the presidential palace. Thus President Méndez Montenegro, a well-respected moderate, oversaw an unprecedented wave of violence. After winning election in 1966, this "proud and sensitive man," as U.S. intelligence described him, was allowed to assume the presidency only after signing a statement that gave the army "carte blanche in the field of internal security."³ Thus he stood by as the military descended into what the CIA gently called "its extralegal terror campaign"—that is, a wave of "kidnappings, torture, and summary executions"⁴ of thousands of peasants in order to eliminate the handful of guerrillas. "The assumption of power by Méndez will represent an impressive victory for democracy in this hemisphere," Lyndon Johnson's National Security Adviser wrote shortly after the Guatemalan election. "The formula of civilian, reform-minded presidents with the political knack for reaching practical working relationships with the military and other conservative elements is one which I hope will continue to prosper in this hemisphere."⁵ In Guatemala, the formula meant slaughter.

It was only under Méndez Montenegro's successor, General Carlos Arana, that Guatemala returned to normal, i.e. selective murder. The guerrillas had been crushed, and extreme measures were no longer necessary. The generals felt so confident, in fact, that when the incoming Carter administration mildly criticized their human rights record, they proudly renounced U.S. military aid.

³National Intelligence Estimate, "Prospects for Stability in Guatemala," June 24, 1966, p. 9, National Security File, Box 9, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (hereafter LBJL); Thomas Hughes (Director of the Office of Intelligence and Research of the U.S. Department of State [hereafter INR]) to SecState, "Guatemala: A Counter-Insurgency Running Wild?" Oct. 23, 1967, p. 1, National Security File, Country File [hereafter NSFCF]: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL. For the text of the secret agreement signed by Méndez Montenegro on May 4, 1966, see *La Hora* of Nov. 26 and 27, 1973.

⁴CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "The Communist Insurgency Movement in Guatemala," Sept. 20, 1968, p. 4, NSFCF: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL; Hughes (INR Director) to SecState, "Guatemala: A Counter-Insurgency Running Wild?" Oct. 23, 1967, p. 1, *ibid.*

⁵W. W. Rostow, Memorandum for the President, Apr. 5, 1966, NSFCF: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL.

The tranquillity that seduced the Guatemalan generals was deceptive. New guerrilla groups were organizing, and unlike their fallen comrades they were developing a peasant base. By the late 1970's the war had resumed in earnest, and this time the Indians joined the guerrillas.

While the army had fought a few hundred guerrillas in the 1960's, it faced several thousand in the early 1980's; while the guerrillas had been largely isolated in the 1960's, they had widespread support in the early 1980's, particularly among the Indians in the highlands. And so the army resorted again to heroic methods. A whirlwind of death swirled through the Indian highlands of Guatemala. The mountains and the valleys were littered with corpses of men, women, infants. Rape was a banal event, charred villages a fact of life.

These atrocities were the work of the demented, but the demented had their logic: the army was responding to Mao Tse-tung's dictum, "The guerrillas must swim among the population as the fish in the water." How could the army differentiate the tame and the rebellious among the Indians in the highlands? "The guerrillas," an army officer wrote, "have penetrated entire populations which now support them unconditionally."⁶ All that the army knew was that there were guerrillas in the highlands, that the Indians were rising in revolt, and that selective repression no longer cowed them. Only the massacre of whole communities could drain the river in which the fish swam.

Terror was effective. As the guerrillas retreated, tens of thousands of Indians died.⁷ Others, possibly 200,000, escaped to Mexico. Still more fled deeper into the mountains. As the country was swept up in unspeakable horrors, the Reagan administration comforted the murderers. Thus in 1981, the State Department attributed most of the violence to "self-appointed vigilantes" beyond the government's control,

⁶César Augusto Ruiz Morales, "Por qué solos?" *Revista Militar* (Guatemala City), Sept.-Dec. 1981, p. 89.

⁷Excesses were committed by the guerrillas, but the voluminous evidence from Amnesty International, Americas Watch, and other human rights organizations, as well as from observers, is conclusive: the immense majority of the killings were committed by the Guatemalan army.

and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Bosworth blamed leftists for the violence and discerned "positive developments" in security forces "taking care to protect innocent bystanders."⁸ In March 1982, as the slaughter reached unprecedented levels under General Efraín Ríos Montt, Reagan told the world that the general had gotten a "bum rap" on human rights.⁹ Fourteen years later, the U.S. government set the record straight, belatedly and without fanfare. "In the late 1970's and early 1980's," the Intelligence Oversight Board stated, "the Guatemalan army . . . waged a ruthless scorched-earth campaign against the Communist guerrillas as well as noncombatants. In the course of this campaign . . . more than 100,000 Guatemalans died."¹⁰

The war against the guerrillas helped the army forget its shame. In June 1954, it had betrayed President Arbenz, and, fearing America's wrath, it had surrendered to the parody of an invasion staged by Castillo Armas. The Guatemalan officers returned from the "front" after their capitulation "despondent, and with a terrible sense of defeat."¹¹ They, who had proudly supported the nationalism of the revolutionary years, had behaved at the decisive moment like officers of a banana republic. Now they were subjected to the contempt of those whom they had betrayed, of those who had benefited from their betrayal, and of U.S. officials. On August 1, 1954, military troops on parade were jeered by the masses and by the upper class, by the defeated and by the victors alike, seen as traitors by the former and as cowards by the latter. It was a moment the Guatemalan officers never forgot. Henceforth, they vowed, they might be the object of hatred, they might be cursed, but never again would

⁸Quotations from United States Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1981* (Washington DC: GPO, 1982), p. 442, and from prepared statement of Stephen Bosworth before the Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Inter-American Affairs, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, July 30, 1981 (Washington DC: GPO, 1981), p. 6.

⁹*New York Times* (hereafter NYT), Dec. 5, 1982, p. 1.

¹⁰Intelligence Oversight Board, "Report on the Guatemala Review," June 28, 1996, p. 18.

¹¹Interview with Colonel Oscar Mendoza, Guatemala City, Sept. 6, 1982. Mendoza was appointed army chief of staff in early July 1954. "Therefore," as he said, "I saw all this very closely."

they be the object of ridicule, never again would they be jeered. And they would never forgive the United States for forcing this humiliation on them.¹²

The guerrillas helped them recover their pride. In the late 1960's, as the army crushed the fledgling guerrilla movement, the officers boasted, "We won in Guatemala while the United States was losing in Vietnam." And in the early 1980's they defeated a far stronger guerrilla movement.¹³

As the pride of the Guatemalan officers grew, so too did their power. Until 1944, they had been the instrument of the dictators. After the overthrow of Arbenz, they ruled the country as the junior partner of the upper class, but the marriage underwent a subtle transformation in the late 1960's as the army battled the guerrillas. "The army, which had entered the partnership as the bride, gradually grew whiskers and developed strong muscles."¹⁴ In 1966, as Méndez Montenegro assumed the presidency, civilian death squads operated independently of the military, but by 1970, when he stepped down, the machinery of murder was concentrated in the hands of the military, and civilian terrorist groups acted only under its orders.¹⁵ Henceforth the army encroached upon the political and economic preserves of the upper class and even dared to kill its members if they challenged its primacy. The military had become, the CIA declared, "the final arbiters of political power in Guatemala."¹⁶

The army developed an institutional pride and a mystique that set it sharply apart from its counterparts in Honduras and El Salvador. The Guatemalan officers were proud to be members of an army that had

¹²See Gleijeses, *Politics and Culture*, p. 20.

¹³Interview with Colonel Héctor Rosales, Guatemala City, Jan. 10, 1985.

¹⁴Personal interview, Guatemala City, Jan. 6, 1985.

¹⁵CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "Guatemala—A Current Appraisal," Oct. 8, 1966, NSFCF: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL; Hughes (INR Director) to SecState, "Guatemala: A Counter-Insurgency Running Wild?" Oct. 23, 1967, *ibid.*; CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "The Military and the Right in Guatemala," Nov. 8, 1968, *ibid.*; Amnesty International, *Guatemala: A Government Program of Political Murder* (London, 1981).

¹⁶CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "Guatemala—A Current Appraisal," Oct. 8, 1966, p. 5, NSFCF: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL.

fought alone and defeated the Communist hordes. They were proud to be above the law: as the Intelligence Oversight Board pointed out, the army "acted with total impunity."¹⁷ They were proud of the fear they inspired. "The army is untouchable," a Guatemalan priest lamented. "It is mightier than God. It is everywhere, it sees everything, it knows everything."¹⁸ This pride, this mystique, became as integral to the world of the Guatemalan military as was greed. Officers received subsidized housing and consumer goods, and soft loans; as they rose through the ranks, the perks and opportunities for graft increased. In exchange, they defended the motherland against the enemy within, the Communists, the subversives. Their motherland was Guatemala, but it was also, above all, the army, their one refuge in a world in which all civilians were potential enemies. As they waded through the blood of their compatriots, as they burned and slaughtered, their alienation grew. They grew more powerful, more alone, more hated, more feared, and more fearful of the revenge that might some day overwhelm them.

Since 1986 Guatemala has been, officially, a democracy. Vinicio Cerezo, a Christian Democrat, began his presidency in 1986 amid high hopes, but left four years later in humiliation. His term had been characterized by an orgy of corruption, the mishandling of the economy, and the absence of social reform. It would be unfair, however, to lay all the blame, or even most of it, at Cerezo's door. Guatemala was only, to borrow a line from the CIA, a "guided democracy."¹⁹ Cerezo and his party won at the polls, but they were only the props of the upper class and the army.

How could it have been otherwise? In the culture of fear, only emasculated political parties can exist, just as only stunted vegetation can survive in the tundra. Guatemala had seen the tentative beginnings of

¹⁷Intelligence Oversight Board, "Report on the Guatemala Review," June 28, 1996, p. 19.

¹⁸Interview with a Guatemalan priest, Guatemala City, Mar. 20, 1986.

¹⁹CIA, Office of Current Intelligence, "Guatemalan Communists Take Hard Line as Insurgency Continues," Aug. 6, 1965, p. 8, NSFCF: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL.

a multiparty system only during the 1944-54 revolution. The overthrow of Arbenz slammed closed the democratic opening. Over the next three decades, the penalty for a troublesome politician was death. Guatemala, a machista society, increasingly lacked civilian caudillos: civilian leaders who challenged the system were killed, or went into exile, or joined the guerrillas. Those politicians who survived accepted the rules that the Guatemalan army determined: competence was acceptable; honesty, suspect; social justice and political democracy, subversive. As the honest and those committed to political democracy and social reform withdrew from the field, the arena was left to the opportunist, the servile, and the corrupt.

Had there been no guerrillas, there would have been far less bloodshed. Had they not defied the regime, Guatemala would have experienced only a fraction of the pain it has known. Does this mean, therefore, that the guerrillas bear responsibility for the slaughter and the horrors perpetrated by the army?

Do the oppressed have the right to fight back? It may be easier to come to grips with this question if one ranges beyond the confines of Guatemala, where left-wing guerrillas fought against a government supported by the United States, and consider also an armed insurrection that evoked widespread sympathy and respect in the United States: the anti-Communist revolt in Hungary in 1956. There is no question that if the Hungarians had not rebelled, the Soviet troops would not have fought or killed. Are the Hungarian rebels responsible, then, for Soviet repression? Do they bear responsibility for the killings committed by the Soviet troops?

Neither in Hungary nor in Guatemala was there any possibility that the change the rebels so desperately sought could have been achieved through peaceful means. The Soviet Union was not going to grant Hungary independence, and the Guatemalan upper class was not going to grant the masses justice. As the CIA itself admitted in 1968, the Guatemalan upper class and officer corps were adamantly opposed to "even the most elemental progress and reform" that would alleviate "the miserable poverty of most Guatemalans." The ballot box was a sham;

peaceful protest, a death warrant.²⁰ If Americans believe, as most do, that armed struggle was justified in the thirteen colonies of North America in the 1770's, then it was justified in Guatemala, where the rulers since Jacobo Arbenz have been far more oppressive than the British ever were in North America.

If the guerrillas are not at fault, what about the United States? Does it bear any responsibility for the tragedy of Guatemala?

There is, of course, the original sin of 1954. Just as the Soviet army intervened in Hungary to bring down a reformist government that was moving the country away from the Soviet orbit, so the United States intervened to bring down Jacobo Arbenz, who was moving Guatemala away from the *pax Americana*. Most American commentators now admit, with hindsight, that the intervention was a mistake. Some condemn the Eisenhower administration for acting on behalf of the United Fruit Company. Others, while lamenting the outcome, add an important caveat: America's intentions were pure. A chain of errors—fueled by anti-Communist paranoia, not economic imperialism—led the United States to overthrow Arbenz, but the United States intended no harm to the Guatemalan people. The policymakers who engineered PBSUCCESS were “well-intentioned men,” as Latin America expert Robert Pastor has argued.²¹ And, as Cullather indicates, if the CIA colluded with members of the Guatemalan upper class to oust Arbenz it was not because it, too, opposed social reform, but because they were the only Guatemalans who were eager to overthrow him. The outcome was tragic, but, as Pastor points out, this was not the Eisenhower administration's intention.

This is a common refrain in American interpretations of U.S. foreign policy: even when the United States has erred, its intentions were pure. The United States always means well. It is the city on the hill.

I agree with Pastor that in overthrowing Arbenz the United States was motivated by anti-Communist paranoia, not economic imperial-

²⁰CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, “Guatemala after the Military Shake-up,” May 13, 1968, pp. 2, 6, NSFCF: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL.

²¹Robert Pastor, “A Discordant Consensus on Democracy,” *Diplomatic History*, Winter 1993, p. 125.

ism; that, as José Manuel Fortuny said, “they would have overthrown us even if we had grown no bananas.”²²

I disagree that the men who engineered PBSUCCESS were well-intentioned. Their intentions were as old as international relations: they believed they were acting in the U.S. national interest. Any impact on the Guatemalan people was incidental: if they did not suffer in the process, so much the better, but if they did, *tant pis*. My own study of PBSUCCESS, which has been confirmed by the documents that the CIA has declassified and by Cullather's history, showed that the Eisenhower administration acted with supreme indifference toward the fate of the Guatemalan people. This cannot be described as being well-intentioned. It is, rather, wanton criminal negligence.

In Hungary, after the first months of bloody repression, the regime imposed by the Soviet Union eased up, and by the late 1960's it had become the least repressive of the Soviet bloc. In Guatemala, however, the regime imposed by the United States in 1954 became more repressive as time went by. But is the United States responsible for the regime's crimes?

The United States did not murder Guatemalans, and it did not urge the Guatemalan army to slaughter, rape, or burn. But the United States armed the murderer. The Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford administrations supplied and trained the Guatemalan military, and in the 1960's U.S. military advisers helped it fight against the guerrillas. Tenaciously, U.S. officials helped the Guatemalan army overcome its “poor training, indecisiveness, and lack of initiative.”²³ The United States did not, of course, want to harm the Guatemalan people; it wanted only to defeat the guerrillas and uphold pro-American stability. The result was tragic for the Guatemalans. And when the stench grew too vile, when the cries of human rights activists grew too loud, U.S. officials tried to shift the blame from the army to the guerrillas or to fictive civilian death squads. The most brazen was the Reagan admini-

²²Interview with Fortuny, Mexico City, Aug. 16, 1981.

²³CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, “Guatemala—A Current Appraisal,” Oct. 8, 1966, p. 11 quoted, NSFCF: Guatemala, Box 54, LBJL.

stration, and the prize for misstatement belongs to Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams. On April 4, 1985, Rosario Godoy, a charismatic, 24-year-old leader of Guatemala's only human rights group, disappeared along with her two-year-old son and her younger brother. Their corpses were found in a ravine on the outskirts of Guatemala City. The baby's fingernails had been pulled out. General Mejía Victores, Ríos Montt's successor, spoke of a car accident. The Archbishop of Guatemala spoke of triple murder. Elliott Abrams came to the general's defense: "So far there is no evidence indicating other than the deaths were due to an accident," he asserted on May 3.²⁴ The lie was as unnecessary as it was sordid. The general did not need Washington's propaganda: the army had already won; the guerrillas were in retreat.

The army had won without U.S. military aid. In the early 1980's the U.S. Congress resisted Reagan's attempts to resume the military aid Guatemala had spurned in 1977. U.S. aid would have helped, but it was not necessary. The army was strong enough to triumph without it, thanks in large part to American assistance in the 1960's. Furthermore, Israel stepped into the breach, becoming Guatemala's main supplier of arms.²⁵ But the primary reason the Guatemalan army won was that the guerrillas had been unable to amass enough weapons to arm their supporters. Had it been otherwise, the challenge would have been formidable.

In 1996, after a poignant crusade by Jennifer Harbury, a Harvard-trained lawyer and wife of a slain Guatemalan guerrilla commander, the Clinton administration released a report admitting that the CIA had worked closely with Guatemala's security and intelligence services through the Reagan, Bush, and first Clinton administrations, had funded them to the tune of several million dollars, and had kept a number of Guatemalan officers on its payroll who

²⁴For the deaths of Rosario Godoy, her son, and her brother, see: *El Gráfico*, *El Imparcial*, *La Razón*, and *La Hora* of Apr. 8, 1985; *Prensa Libre*, Apr. 9, 1985; and Americas Watch, *Guatemala: The Group for Mutual Support, 1984-1985* (New York, 1985), pp. 40-46. For Abrams's comment, see *ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁵See Michael McClintock, *The American Connection*, vol. 2: *State Terror and Popular Resistance in Guatemala* (London: Zed Books, 1985), pp. 192-96.

were "alleged to have been involved in significant human rights abuses." Frankly acknowledging the magnitude of the slaughter perpetrated by the Guatemalan army, the report also repeatedly stressed that in providing assistance to the murderous security services, U.S. intentions had been good.²⁶

The CIA deserves credit for having released documents about PB-SUCCESS, for having hired someone of Cullather's intellect and integrity to write an internal history of the operation, and for then declassifying it. But for a cleansing to take place there must be the equivalent of a truth commission, one that will shed light on the U.S. role in Guatemala after 1954. "America's relations with Guatemala are a chilling study in cynicism," the *New York Times* noted in 1995. "Americans deserve a truthful accounting of the events of the past 40 years in Guatemala. Guatemalans deserve no less."²⁷

This cleansing, however, will not change reality in Guatemala. Guatemala is today a sick society. The tortures, the disappearances, and the killings fester. In a country of ten million, about 150,000 have been slaughtered. Can one imagine the effect on the survivors, on the children of the woman who was raped before she was killed, on those whose father was hacked down and burned alive, or mercifully killed by a machine gun burst, without torture? As of the victims, so of the criminals: can we imagine the scars on those soldiers who perpetrated the atrocities—youths in their late teens, many of them, abducted from their villages to serve in the army and subjected to grueling and dehumanizing military training? The slaughter of the early 1980's tightened the grip of fear over the populace, and the culture of fear, not the democratic opening, remains the fabric of Guatemalan society.

Still, one searches for reasons to hope. Perhaps with the end of the Cold War, the anti-Communist banner, in whose name so many crimes

²⁶Intelligence Oversight Board, "Report on the Guatemala Review," June 28, 1996, p. 25 quoted. CIA financial assistance, over \$30 million according to press reports, fell under the rubric of "liaison" relationships with foreign intelligence services, which did not require congressional notification and were not affected by the congressional prohibition on military aid to the Guatemalan army (NYT: Apr. 2, 1995, p. 12; Apr. 5, p. 6; Apr. 10, p. 8).

²⁷NYT, May 19, 1995, p. 30

have been perpetrated and so many minds warped, will be lowered. The Guatemalan guerrillas, acknowledging their military defeat, signed a peace agreement in December 1996 in which they relinquished their arms and were welcomed back into the Guatemalan family. Perhaps, at last, the upper class might grant some social concession. Perhaps an honest civilian president will challenge the status quo and support social reform.

These are reasonable hopes, but Guatemala has defied reason since 1954. It still has the most regressive fiscal system and the most unequal land-ownership pattern in Latin America. Its army, victorious on the battlefield, has evolved into an all-powerful mafia, stretching its tentacles into drug-trafficking, kidnapping, and smuggling. And its civilian presidents have shown no inclination to challenge the army and the upper class, to fight for social reform, or to clamp down on corruption. Today Hungary is free. Guatemala is still paying for the American "success."

Piero Gleijeses

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