

Death Squads, Guerrilla War, Covert Operations, and Genocide: Guatemala and the United States, 1954-1999

The United States and Guatemala: Counterinsurgency and Genocide, 1954-1999

By Kate Doyle

Essay

Is it conceivable that we are so obsessed with insurgency that we are prepared to rationalize murder as an acceptable counterinsurgency weapon?

--Viron P. Vaky

Policy and Planning Council staff, Department of State memorandum

Guatemala and Counter-terror, March 29, 1968

Guatemala and the United States share an ugly past. Beginning in 1954, when the Eisenhower administration brought down Guatemala's democratically elected president and installed a military dictator in his stead, the two countries embarked on a campaign to cleanse the state of real and imagined enemies and thereby destroy the Guatemalan left. The result was a holocaust of violence. It dwarfed every other cold-war conflict in the hemisphere, leaving some 200,000 Guatemalan citizens dead or missing and at least one million displaced people. It lasted for more than three decades.

One can quibble today – and many do – about the true extent of Washington's responsibility for the blood shed in the years following the 1954 coup against President Jacobo Arbenz. One can argue, correctly, that the Guatemalan regimes that followed were not simply puppets of American design, but had their own ends in mind and their own means to achieve them, distinct from the objectives of U.S. policy makers. One can insist that the United States always intended to encourage democracy, nurture political participation, and strengthen the rule of law in Guatemala: these goals, and many others, are reiterated in almost every major policy and planning document on Guatemala issued by Washington over the last forty years. One can point out that the United States withdrew overt aid to Guatemala on the basis of human rights concerns when the violence was at its worst in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. All of this is true.

But it is also true that the United States was present at the creation of a uniquely savage form of counterinsurgency. By overthrowing Arbenz and destroying Guatemala's new democracy, Washington contributed directly to the conditions that led to the internal conflict. And when an armed opposition emerged to challenge the Guatemalan government in 1962, U.S. security planners sprang into action. The Pentagon drafted the terms of the anticommunist doctrine that the Guatemalans embraced, U.S. officials helped design "counter-terror" tactics used by successive Guatemalan governments to pursue the rebels and their presumed allies, the Central Intelligence Agency rebuilt and refined Guatemala's intelligence apparatus, U.S. military advisors established, trained, armed, equipped and motivated the Guatemalan army's original fighting battalions and U.S. police experts reorganized the country's security forces.

As the insurgency evolved during the 1960s and 70s, U.S. aid increased -- even as the

regimes it supported became increasingly repressive. This was cold war in America's backyard, and the policies pursued in Guatemala flowed from a deep well of conviction about the role of the United States in the hemisphere during that era: about the imperative of U.S. security and economic interests, the righteousness of U.S. hegemony, the inevitability of Soviet designs. When state violence surged in Guatemala, as it did periodically, someone was always around to remind Washington of the alternative. "A takeover by a radically anti-U.S., militant, communist dominated government of the Castro type is the only eventuality in Guatemala which would in and of itself have a truly serious and harmful effect on U.S. security," wrote the U.S. chargé to Nixon's State Department in 1971.^[1] At the time, members of Congress were questioning support for the murderous Arana Osorio regime. The aid continued.

Overt assistance finally ended under President Jimmy Carter, when administration and congressional concerns about human rights abuses worldwide inspired the imposition of new conditions on U.S. foreign aid. Yet the support given to Guatemala by the United States in the early years of the conflict endured long after the cut-off. As one prescient Senate report perceived in 1971, American involvement and influence in Guatemala was, by that point, "so pervasive that if we withdrew completely tomorrow, our presence would live on for years in a kind of reflected half-life."^[2] When the Guatemalan armed forces unleashed the massacres of 1978-83, they did so under the command of officers trained in U.S. military schools, guided by an intelligence apparatus built largely by the United States and with which the CIA continued to maintain liaison relations. The arms embargo required the military to turn to other suppliers, and it did so with ease – to some of America's closest allies, Taiwan and Israel among them.

The military's decision to halt the scorched earth campaigns brought the reward of resumed assistance from the Reagan administration in 1985. Selective repression replaced the policy of indiscriminate violence. For the next decade and more, as U.S. aid to Guatemala ebbed and flowed, some of the country's best and brightest lost their lives to the low-intensity conflict that continued to rage: human rights activists, political leaders, scholars, journalists, judges. Washington pushed for peace negotiations, and American embassy officials were increasingly vocal in their criticism of the army, especially after the murder by Guatemalan soldiers of a U.S. citizen in 1990. But the United States continued to try to deal with the Guatemalan security forces with failed policies and bankrupt rationales; President Clinton's ambassador to Guatemala, Marilyn MacAfee, insisted into the mid-1990s that U.S. military training programs continue: otherwise, she argued, "we may lose influence with the institution."^[3]

On February 25, 1999, the Historical Clarification Commission (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*—CEH) – a body created by the 1996 peace agreement to examine the causes and consequences of violence during the internal conflict -- delivered the results of its two-year investigation, before an audience of several thousand, assembled inside the country's National Theater. In a speech that stunned the large auditorium into silence, the commission's coordinator, Christian Tomuschat, declared the state guilty of genocide against the Mayan Indian communities during certain periods of the war, and named the Guatemalan security forces as responsible for 93 percent of the human rights violations committed during the conflict. He also identified the United States as the source of the national security doctrine employed so ruthlessly by Guatemala, an influence that made

even the most extreme forms of Guatemala's counterinsurgency possible, so that "...believing that the end justified anything, army and state security forces blindly pursued the anticommunist struggle, respecting neither judicial principle nor the most elemental ethical or religious values, and thus arrived at the complete loss of human morality."^[4]

The declassified documents in this collection portray U.S. policy in Guatemala in a harsh light: not as a tool to instill democratic values, but as a blunt instrument fashioned to destroy dissent and prevent radical change. They tell the troubling tale of what happened to diplomacy crafted in the shadow of the cold war, and convey the motives and the misgivings of the officials enlisted to carry it out. It is our hope that they will serve scholars, historians and journalists for years to come in constructing a deeper history of the part played by the United States in Guatemala's tragedy.

The National Security Archive's Guatemala Documentation Project

In June 1994, the Guatemalan government and the insurgent coalition (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*—URNG) signed an accord establishing the Historical Clarification Commission. That same month, the National Security Archive began work on a Guatemala Documentation Project, an effort to obtain the release of secret U.S. files on Guatemala.

The project's first objective was to support the human rights investigations of the Clarification Commission. We believed the commission would benefit from access to declassified U.S. documents because the United States had maintained close relations with every Guatemalan government since the overthrow of Arbenz (with the exception of the Lucas García regime). Such contact implied the existence of a treasure trove of documents that could shed light on a range of critical issues, including U.S. policy in Guatemala; relations between the two countries; social, political and economic developments; the origins of the civil conflict; and details on specific human rights cases. We also knew there was one issue about which the truth commission would have virtually no primary source information, but which is well documented by U.S. agencies: the Guatemalan military, intelligence and security apparatus.

The Archive already had experience working with truth commissions in Central America. In 1992 and 1993, the Archive provided declassified documents and some technical assistance to the United Nations Truth Commission in El Salvador and saw the immense trouble its staff had in obtaining even the most basic data about the Salvadoran armed forces -- information the commission needed in order to understand the institutional causes behind the human rights violations it was charged with investigating. Dr. Leo Valladares, the Honduran human rights ombudsman with whom the Archive collaborated extensively beginning in 1993, had an equally difficult time compiling fundamental information about Honduran army intelligence units behind many of the disappearances of the early 1980s. In view of the Guatemalan military's traditional secrecy and opacity, it was evident that a Guatemalan truth commission would have no more luck than Dr. Valladares or the commission in El Salvador in locating information on the armed forces.

A second objective of the Guatemala Documentation Project was to address directly a restriction placed on the Clarification Commission by its mandate: that is, the prohibition

against naming names. As the establishing document stated, "The work, recommendations and report of the Commission shall not individualize responsibilities..."^[5] The Archive respected the decision of the peace negotiators to limit the scope of the commission's investigations, and recognized that there were legitimate misgivings about permitting a human rights entity – which had no legal or judicial powers – from accusing individuals by name of specific crimes. What seemed unacceptable, however, was the perpetuation of a protective wall of silence around the army as an institution. This concern prompted us to create a database on the Guatemalan armed forces. Our objectives were distinct from the goals of human rights advocates. A human rights organization deals with the issue of naming names by starting with the abuses and abusers. The Archive approached the issue by starting with an analysis of the institution.

The dilemma posed by the military's culture of secrecy went beyond impeding accountability, of course. Without basic information on the architecture of the armed forces, the CEH would have had difficulty identifying potential military sources for testimony or firsthand accounts of the violence. And without reliable data on the professional careers of army officers, it would have been impossible to confirm the information those sources did provide. Even more broadly, it would be futile for a truth commission or for the Guatemalan public to attempt to comprehend four decades of violence without a detailed understanding of what everyone acknowledges has been Guatemala's most powerful institution. Accordingly, the Archive decided to compile a database of the most important military units and officers. Our intention was to provide the Clarification Commission with an encyclopedic guide on the command structure and organization of the armed forces as an aid for their investigations – the kind of reference tool we take for granted in the United States but which simply does not exist in Guatemala.

Finally, we felt it was critical to clarify U.S. responsibility for the violence that occurred. In the United States, analysis of U.S. policy in Guatemala tends to begin and end with the coup in 1954. Much less is known or understood about the complex, intimate and enduring role played by successive U.S. administrations in Guatemala throughout the course of the long civil conflict. The declassified documents begin to tell that story. They contain a wealth of new details about the U.S. government's operations on the ground in Guatemala and about U.S. relations with the Guatemalan military, and offer an invaluable public record of overt and covert decision-making in Washington.

The Guatemala Documentation Project began with months of secondary research, resulting in a series of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests submitted to the U.S. government during 1994-96. As we filed our requests, we investigated other sources of declassified information on Guatemala, including the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, presidential libraries (Eisenhower to Reagan), U.S. military holdings and private papers collections. The research required more than simply gathering and copying whatever relevant materials we found in those institutions; we also submitted hundreds of Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests with government libraries in order to try and obtain documents still classified 10, 20, even 30 years after the fact. Accordingly, scholars reviewing the older documents reproduced in the current collection should keep in mind that – although most of them exist in the National Archives system today – many of the same documents were represented by "withdrawal sheets" when we began our work.

Happily, despite the numbing process required to obtain records under FOIA and MDR, the Guatemala Project was extraordinarily productive. Some 1,200 FOIA requests and several hundred MDR requests resulted in more than 10,000 documents – hundreds of thousands of pages – originating from every relevant federal agency. When Archive researchers combined the materials we obtained directly with documents released through executive order (explained in detail, below), we were able to compile a definitive collection of U.S. records on Guatemala, unavailable anywhere else.

The Archive's Guatemala collection also benefited enormously from a series of unique circumstances that began to unfold in 1995. That spring, then Representative Robert Torricelli publicly identified Guatemalan intelligence officer Col. Julio Roberto Alpírez as a paid asset of the CIA, and linked Alpírez to two crimes: the cover-up of the brutal 1990 murder of American innkeeper Michael DeVine, and the torture and disappearance of captured Guatemalan rebel leader, Efraín Bámaca Velásquez, husband of U.S. citizen Jennifer Harbury. The public outcry that followed the congressman's revelations prompted President Bill Clinton to order a government-wide review of U.S. intelligence operations in Guatemala, forcing U.S. agencies to identify and scrutinize thousands of their secret records. In June 1996, the president's Intelligence Oversight Board (IOB) released its findings, along with some 6,000 documents from the State Department, CIA, and Defense Department.

The report's disclosure that paid CIA informants were guilty of "assassination, extrajudicial execution, torture, or kidnapping while they were assets" provoked fresh outrage from human rights organizations, members of Congress and editorial writers, anger from U.S. victims of human rights abuses in Guatemala, and a decision by a number of Washington based non-governmental organizations and public interest groups to join forces in a campaign for greater openness on all human rights information. Although the coalition's hope for legislative remedy (through the "Human Rights Information Act," introduced in the House and Senate in 1997) was not fulfilled, the public pressure brought to bear by groups as disparate as the National Security Archive, the Center for National Security Studies, Amnesty International, the Washington Office on Latin America, and the Federation of American Scientists did help convince the Clinton administration to accept a formal request for declassified documents from the Clarification Commission after it opened its doors in July 1997. Six months later, the United States turned over an important set of newly declassified records directly to the commission, some 1,000 in all. That release – and the campaign that led up to it – has provided inspiration for subsequent declassification campaigns for human rights documents: in particular, the effort to secure records on U.S. policy in Chile under Pinochet, and in Argentina during the dirty war of the 1970s.

And finally, there is one document in the collection that deserves special mention. The *diario militar*, or "death squad diary," as it came to be known, came to light in 1999, shortly after the Clarification Commission issued its final report. It was smuggled out of the secret files of Guatemalan intelligence and into the hands of human rights activists, who subsequently turned it over to the National Security Archive. It is a military logbook, a chilling daily chronicle of the abduction and "disappearance" of some 183 Guatemalan citizens from 1983 to 1985. It is also concrete evidence that the Guatemalan army produced and preserved detailed records of even its most clandestine operations. Replete with photographs of the victims and coded references to their executions, the 54-page logbook represents a rare

glimpse inside Guatemala's killing machine.^[6]

It was, of course, precisely the kind of document needed but not received by the Historical Clarification Commission. The commission's mandate gave it the right to request information from the parties to the peace accords (government and guerrillas), but levied no sanction for refusing to comply. Unsurprisingly, the Guatemalan army gave only the most minimal help requested, and refused to turn over most of the critical documents the CEH believed it to have, claiming they were exempt on "national security" grounds or that the papers had been destroyed in the course of the war. Without the army's cooperation, the commission was forced to rely almost entirely on secondary sources for information on the military -- and the military was permitted in turn to maintain what the CEH report would call its "impenetrable impunity."

As readers make their way through this collection, they should be alert to an anomaly. The definitive history of the United States in Guatemala during the civil conflict does not, for the most part, emerge from records produced by executive debate or decision-making; it comes from the ground. Guatemala was not the Cuba of the 1960s, the Argentina of the late 1970s, or the Nicaragua or El Salvador of the 1980s. The intensity of the violence that raged during the war notwithstanding, senior U.S. policy-makers tended to consider the country only rarely, and only in moments of crisis. More frequently, Guatemala was the victim of Washington's broader strategic objectives in the region, and did not receive the kind of news coverage, presidential attention or congressional outrage that other regional issues did.

The Coup and Its Consequences

It became evident during Arbenz's regime that forces in Moscow, working mainly through trained and dedicated Creole minions, had achieved powerful influence in the councils of government and in education and trade union circles.

-- John J. Muccio

Chargé, U.S. Embassy Guatemala

Internal Security Situation and Needs, 5/23/61

There is an abundance of excellent secondary literature on 1954, and the why and how of the U.S. intervention in Guatemala is a tale already told.^[7] The documents gathered in this collection add a central piece of the puzzle by chronicling the covert planning and operations of the CIA in the coup. They are the fruits of a special declassification review conducted by the CIA in the mid-1990s, during its (brief) campaign to refashion itself in the wake of the cold war's end as a friendlier, more responsive intelligence agency. Before Director George Tenet brought the effort to a halt in July 1998, the CIA's history staff managed to review and release several important collections of secret agency records on past covert operations. Guatemala 1954 was one of them.

Code-named "PBSUCCESS," the operation aimed to overthrow Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, the second president in Guatemalan history to take office after a legal election. Although Arbenz was regarded within Guatemala as a reformist bent on changing the country's rigid oligarchy, the United States considered him a danger of international dimensions. Arbenz permitted the Guatemalan Communist Party (*Partido Guatemalteco de los Trabajadores*--

PGT) to operate openly, and his land reform program threatened U.S. commercial interests, in particular the powerful United Fruit Company. In the volatile atmosphere of the early years of the cold war, such acts were enough to set off alarm bells inside Washington.^[8]

U.S. concerns rapidly became covert plans to destroy the Arbenz administration. By 1952, two years after Arbenz's election, the CIA began seeking an opposition force that could overthrow the government. It looked to the Guatemalan military for a solution. A *General Plan of Action* written in 1953 stated that the agency regarded the military as "the only organized element in Guatemala capable of rapidly and decisively altering the political situation."^[9] The CIA chose as its lead man for the coup a disgruntled officer named Carlos Castillo Armas.

The declassified files make clear that the CIA was willing to consider any means necessary to get rid of the Guatemalan president. A secret report written days before PBSUCCESS began records one senior CIA official telling his colleagues, "Arbenz must go; how does not matter." Indeed, proposals to assassinate leading members of the Arbenz government and military permeated the CIA's planning. In one of the collection's most chilling documents, an unsigned *Study of Assassination* intended as a training aid, the agency elaborated its favorite methods for murder. Sections on "accidents," "drugs," "edge weapons," "blunt weapons" and "firearms" offered tips on the most effective assassination techniques, such as which poisons to use, how to choose a site for "accidental" falls ("Elevator shafts, stair wells, unscreened windows and bridges will serve"), and the correct way to club a man to death.^[10]

Other documents trace the agency's persistent efforts to compile hit lists in preparation for the coup and its aftermath. During planning for a first, aborted attempt in 1952, the CIA discussed training "special squads" for execution; after that operation was cancelled, "the Agency continued to try and influence developments and float ideas for disposing of key figures in the [deleted] government."^[11] The records also outline tactics used by the CIA and its allies to undermine Arbenz and deceive the Guatemalan public in the weeks leading up to the coup, including provocation, "nerve war" and propaganda.

Despite the millions of dollars the CIA poured into PBSUCCESS, it barely succeeded. The Agency's own account of the coup, written by a member of its history staff in 1994, describes disastrous military planning and failed security measures. In the end, the Guatemalan army decided to depose President Arbenz not because they believed Castillo Armas was a serious threat but because they feared the United States was prepared to invade the country. On June 27, 1954, Arbenz stepped down after he realized he had lost the army's support. Castillo Armas took his place days afterward as the head of the Guatemalan government.

In Washington, there was jubilation. The operation entered agency lore as an "unblemished triumph"-- and the CIA used it as a model for future CIA activities in Latin America, including the disastrous invasion of the Bay of Pigs in 1961, the agency's failed attempt to topple Cuba's Fidel Castro. But in Guatemala, the coup had a deadly aftermath. The same CIA planners who had been so meticulous in preparing an invasion had, according to the agency's historical account, "no plans for what would happen next." They considered democracy an "unrealistic" alternative for the country, and envisioned a moderate authoritarian regime that would be friendly to U.S. interests. Guatemala's political center

quickly "vanished from politics into a terrorized silence."^[12]

Thirty years after the fact, the CIA itself provided an extraordinary coda to the operation it ran to destroy Jacobo Arbenz. In a long and thoughtful assessment produced by its Directorate of Intelligence in 1983, the agency acknowledged that the 1954 coup "ended a decade of economic and social reforms," and left a nation ruled by elites who "share a tacit understanding that unpredictable and unmanageable political processes – such as free elections and greater popular participation – are inimical to their interests." In pursuit of a "policy of political exclusion," the document continued, the Guatemalan elites: "Killed the leaders of many independent or opposition organizations that could not be co-opted, silenced or frightened into exile. Manipulated procedural techniques in electoral and labor laws to deny or delay legal recognition of opposition political parties and independent unions. Subverted the integrity of the judicial system by government- and rightwing-sponsored use of death squads to murder and intimidate judges, witnesses and defense lawyers."^[13]

Such was the legacy of 1954.

Consolidating Counterrevolution

Following the coup, Washington was deeply involved in promoting the economic, political and military welfare of Guatemala. The stakes were perilously high. "Collapse of the present Guatemalan Government would be a disastrous political setback to the United States," wrote the National Security Council in a top-secret planning document in 1955,

shaking the confidence of people everywhere in our stability of purpose and our ability to insure the success of a regime which had thrown off Communist tyranny. The keynote of our policy toward Guatemala, therefore, is that the anti-Communist victory of June 1954 must be preserved and consolidated...^[14]

Millions of U.S. dollars began to pour into Guatemala's coffers: \$58,000,000 by 1959, a considerable sum by any measure. The funds propped up Castillo Armas and -- after his assassination in 1957 -- his successors with agricultural support, highway construction, health programs, education programs, development loans, military expenditures and police training. Internal security was a constant preoccupation, subversion an ever-lurking presence. In order to monitor what remained of the Guatemalan left, U.S. officials met with their counterparts to exchange lists of suspected communists for future surveillance.^[15] The U.S. Military Assistance Program (MAP) built first one and then several well-equipped, well-trained infantry units; in 1960 one document called the existing MAP battalion "the most important military unit in the Guatemalan Army. Its combat capability far exceeds that of other Guatemalan Army units."^[16] At the same time, the Agency for International Development (AID) put into place a police training, or "public safety," program aimed at reorganizing Guatemala's police forces.

U.S. officials were not unduly alarmed by an attempted coup against President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes in November 1960, perceiving the rebels to represent a clique of military officers dissatisfied with government ineptitude and corruption. By 1962, however, the combination of student unrest in the capital and the appearance of the first rural guerrilla group (the 13 November Revolutionary Movement, or MR-13) convinced the United States

that the government needed more security assistance.^[17] Military Training Teams (MTTs) run by U.S. army special forces flew in from Ft. Bragg and the Canal Zone to train select Guatemalan officers in unconventional warfare. The U.S. launched civic action projects in the Petén, delivered patrol boats to the Navy, fighter jets, engineering equipment and C-47 transport planes to the army and air force, and designed classes for the Guatemalan Intelligence School. By 1963, MAP funds supported four infantry units, one airborne infantry company, a central maintenance facility and a counterintelligence detachment. CIA recruited and debriefed members of the MR-13 and assisted the government in interrogating captured rebels.^[18] The Public Safety Division, in turn, trained hundreds of police officers annually and in 1964 helped create a new joint intelligence unit and communications center in the capital designed to track subversives throughout Central America.^[19]

The Guatemalan government, now headed by Col. Enrique Peralta Azurdia, was becoming increasingly concerned about its capacity to deal with urban terrorism. Rural guerrilla attacks in the northeast -- fairly common under Ydígoras and during the first years of Peralta -- had diminished somewhat in the face of military counterinsurgency operations. By 1965, however, U.S. embassy reports noted a marked rise in terrorism in Guatemala City, which came to a head after a series of kidnappings targeting wealthy Guatemalans for ransom prompted widespread fear among the elite and pressure on the Peralta government to act. In November 1965, Peralta convened meetings of his senior military and police chiefs to discuss counter-subversive strategy. According to an embassy document, Peralta was reported during one such meeting to have ordered his forces to take "no terrorist prisoners, shoot to kill, and to suspend any judicial process for terrorists caught in act." In response to a worried cable from Washington asking how the United States could support the regime, Peralta formally requested U.S. counter-terror assistance and assembled a task force of top security officers to address the problem.^[20]

Washington's answer came several days later in the persons of John Longan, a Public Safety official stationed in Caracas, Venezuela, and Peter Costello from the State Department. Both men were experts in urban terrorism. After a week in Guatemala, Longan concluded that the key to success would be coordinated intelligence gathering and counter-terror operations.^[21] He and Costello met with Peralta's task force, which included Col. Rafael Arriaga Bosque, commander of army general headquarters. The group agreed to launch a two-pronged attack. First, a police operation underway since October called "*Operación Limpieza*" (Operation Clean-Up) was accelerated and transformed into a joint action, composed of army, Judicial Police and National Police personnel. The task force employed a "Frozen Area Plan" designed by Costello, in which security forces cordoned off targeted areas of the city and carried out extensive raids of suspected subversive homes and safehouses. The second phase of the program was the creation of a "small covert action unit to mastermind" the campaign against terrorists. This special group of "trusted investigators" had access to all information gathered by law enforcement sources -- including leads collected through interrogation of captured suspects -- and in turn supplied finished intelligence to raiding forces. Staffed by army officers, the unit functioned from a special room called "The Box" -- first located in the National Palace and later in army general headquarters -- and included investigators on loan from the military, Judicial Police and Treasury Police. U.S. public safety advisor Alfred Naurocki provided technical assistance. Arriaga Bosque oversaw the operation as a whole: both "The Box" and the joint raids.^[22]

The task force was immediately successful. Security forces operating in the capital and in the country's interior arrested dozens of suspects. U.S. Ambassador John Gordon Mein reported that "National and Judicial Police forces now...actually cooperate with each other and with Army (Military Police) both in collection, analysis of intelligence and in actual operations. ...Security forces under Arriaga are conducting large-scale joint 'sweeps' of suspect urban areas which [are] beginning to produce some useful information."^[23]

The U.S.-designed operation resulted in one of the earliest and most infamous human rights cases of the war. In March 1966, Guatemalan soldiers in Retalhuleu captured five people, including PGT leader Leonardo Castillo Flores, as they tried to get to the capital after crossing the border from Mexico. The group was first tortured and interrogated by army personnel, then "reinterrogated by Guatemalan security officers who were sent to Retalhuleu from Guatemala City specifically for this assignment," reported the CIA. "After the completion of the interrogation, the prisoners were secretly executed."^[24] Intelligence gleaned from the interrogations resulted in a series of raids by security forces in Guatemala City and the clandestine capture and murder of dozens of Communist Party members and their associates in the following days. The operation – representing the Guatemalan government's first use of mass forced "disappearance" against its opponents -- caused a public outcry and became known as the "Case of the 28," based on the number of victims believed to have died at the time. In fact, some 33 prominent leaders of the political left and their associates were abducted, tortured and then "disappeared." Among them was Victor Manuel Gutiérrez Garbín, secretary-general of the PGT's Central Committee. Gutiérrez was a school teacher and respected labor leader during the Arbenz years. He died under torture in Judicial Police headquarters on March 6.

Years later, the Historical Clarification Commission would refer to the case as a "milestone" in the internal conflict, an indication of the absolute intolerance of the state for political dissent and the lengths to which it was willing to go to crush the opposition. The U.S. embassy applauded the government's diligence at the time; by April 1966, one cable noted, the operation had resulted in more than 80 raids using the "frozen area plan," and was notably "productive in apprehensions."^[25]

The First Counterinsurgency Campaign

Peralta's limited success against the insurgency did little to shield the incoming president, Julio Méndez Montenegro, from the escalating civil conflict. Soon after his inauguration on July 1, 1966, the guerrillas stepped up pressure on the government with a series of assassinations, targeting wealthy landowners, members of the conservative National Liberation Movement (MLN), a former president of Congress, and a retired military officer. The army and the extreme right were openly suspicious of a civilian chief of state. Under pressure from the United States to arrive at an acceptable *modus vivendi*, Méndez moved to assuage their fears by vowing not to interfere with the military's counterinsurgency operations. He appointed Col. Arriaga Bosque minister of defense, designated Vice Defense Minister Col. Francisco Sosa Avila as chief coordinator of military and police efforts, and stood aside as his army and security forces prepared to launch their first concerted campaign of terror against the insurgents.

Washington believed the new government was serious about defeating the guerrillas and

provided a massive infusion of aid early on, while U.S. military advisors in-country maintained close contact with Defense Minister Arriaga Bosque. "...Military are now preparing long-range plans for anti-guerrilla actions," wrote Ambassador Mein in September 1966. The U.S. Military Group (MilGp), according to Mein, was "working in advisory capacity with the Ministry of Defense in the preparation of these plans." In response to an "urgent request" for assistance by Arriaga, Washington sent helicopters and a Military Training Team for "crash counterinsurgency training of specific military units."^[26] The campaign was launched in October with the arrival of five infantry companies in the northeast Sierra de las Minas region where they would conduct major anti-guerrilla sweeps. Col. Carlos Arana Osorio would command the assault.

By the time the military declared open war against the rebels in Zacapa, however, a covert plan of terror was also coming to fruition. Beginning that autumn with the birth of "CRAG," a clandestine organization devoted to fighting communism, a handful of new death squads suddenly appeared in Guatemala. The extremist MLN had already created its shadowy *Mano Blanca* (White Hand) in an effort to provoke a coup against the new Méndez government, but the groups that followed -- including the National Resistance Front, the New Anticommunist Organization (NOA) and Anticommunist Council of Guatemala (CADEG) -- were not inventions of the political right. They were creations of army intelligence.^[27] The death squads represented a "psychological warfare device of GOG clandestine forces," observed the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. "For the most part, the units never did exist except on paper, and the operations they threatened were actually performed by the GOG clandestine units."^[28] These "fictitious anti-communist front organizations" served as convenient cover for a range of activities the army wanted to keep secret, including propaganda, psychological operations and fund raising for paramilitary forces.^[29] They were staffed by "well-trained and highly motivated younger military personnel and are believed to operate under the direction of high-ranking military officers. . . The Intelligence Section of the Guatemalan Army is reportedly closely connected with the vigilantes, and the terrorists' target lists may be compiled from materials in official files."^[30]

The organizations actually doing the dirty work were elite intelligence and action units operating under the command of Arriaga and Sosa Avila. According to one INR report, "At the center of the army's clandestine urban counterterror apparatus" was the military's Special Commando Unit of the Guatemalan Army (SCUGA), formed in January 1967. "Composed of military and civilian personnel, SCUGA has carried out abductions, bombings, assassinations, and executions of real and alleged communists."^[31] SCUGA collaborated closely with a secret unit within the Policía Nacional's Fourth Corps, which conducted similar operations; both operated primarily in Guatemala City, although they occasionally carried out actions in other departments.

In Zacapa, the counterinsurgency campaign quickly became a bloodbath. Arana Osorio enlisted the assistance of local military commissioners and MLN henchmen to attack civilians as well as the tiny guerrilla force; by 1968, even conservative CIA estimates put the death toll of Guatemalan civilians at upwards of 4,000.^[32] But U.S. advisors were pleased with the Guatemalan army's achievements, stressing in one document that due to the flow of U.S. advice and assistance in the build-up to the campaign, "The fine rapport enjoyed between the United States and host military personnel has reached new heights..."^[33] In Washington, National Security Advisor Walt Rostow alerted President Lyndon B. Johnson to

the army's progress. "The insurgents are now on the defensive," wrote Rostow. "The success of the security forces has made them look like 'winners.'" Several months later, Rostow pointed out to the president that, "It shows what a democratic, popular government can do when it determines to take firm action."^[34]

The combined butchery of the army in the northeast and the death squads in the capital finally persuaded Méndez to try and bring the violence under control. In late March 1968, he dismissed three of his most important commanders in the campaign (Arriaga, Sosa and Arana), and in the following months disarmed the rightist civilians and announced the dismantling of the "official" clandestine units. But it was too late. The intelligence and security forces had experienced the exhilaration of unfettered counter-terror operations, and they had no desire to end them. A CIA report from the period characterized the president's bureaucratic changes as purely cosmetic: "Recent changes within the high command of the Guatemalan armed forces do not indicate [deleted] government will lessen its pressure on the Communist insurgents. ... Counter-terror activities of the Fourth Corps of the National Police would be discontinued, although some personnel from that clandestine group would be retained for future selective and tightly controlled operations. [Deleted] that the Special Commando Unit of the Guatemalan Army (SCUGA) would not be disbanded, but that it would be used in the future on a much more limited basis."^[35]

Not everyone in the U.S. embassy in Guatemala was satisfied with what had happened, nor with the part played by the United States. Professional foreign service officer Viron P. Vaky served as deputy chief of mission in Guatemala City from 1964 to 1967. After returning to Washington in 1968, Vaky sat down and penned his thoughts about the recent counterinsurgency campaign in a rare dissent to official policy. In the document, Vaky decries the use of "counter-terror" by Guatemalan armed forces and raises the question of U.S. culpability.

We have condoned counter-terror; we may even in effect have encouraged or blessed it. We have been so obsessed with the fear of insurgency that we have rationalized away our qualms and uneasiness. This is not only because we have concluded we cannot do anything about it, for we never really tried. Rather we suspected that maybe it is a good tactic, and that as long as Communists are being killed it is alright. Murder, torture and mutilation are alright if our side is doing it and the victims are Communists.^[36]

Nothing came of Vaky's indictment; the cold war imperative in the hemisphere rendered such protests irrelevant. "We never debated it as an ethical question," Vaky recounted to *The Washington Post* three decades later. "The issues were never really posed that way."^[37] Vaky went on to a long and illustrious career in the State Department and U.S. policy in Guatemala carried on for another 10 years much as it had before.

The Carter Interlude

Washington's strategy of unfettered collaboration and accommodation ended in 1977 when the Carter administration imposed human rights conditions on U.S. security assistance overseas, prompting the government of Gen. Kjell Laugerud García to reject U.S. aid altogether. Congress actively halted Foreign Military Sales later that year, but the policy satisfied no one. Weapons and ammunition waiting in the pipeline continued to flow.^[38] Within

the State Department, the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs and Human Rights debated whether the cut-off would advance respect for human rights in the country or simply isolate the Guatemalan regime and encourage further abuses; on the ground, the ambassador and the U.S. Military Group argued for engagement. The CIA's station in Guatemala remained open and liaison with military intelligence continued, sending a mixed signal to their Guatemalan counterparts. In the face of a wave of government-sponsored killings in 1980 and the evident failure of U.S. policy to stop it, Carter sent a secret mission headed by the commander-in-chief of the Southern Command, General Wallace Nutting, to offer Lucas García new incentives in exchange for a promise to end the violence. The president listened "in stony faced silence," reported the officials, then "after a moment's thought he stated that he was sorry, but he could not do what we were asking him to do."^[39] By then it was too late for Washington to react; Carter lost his bid for reelection three months later.

Why didn't the Carter administration take a harder position against Lucas García? The record shows that by mid-1979, Washington had incontrovertible evidence of the government's complicity in murder. U.S. intelligence reports indicated that army chief of staff Gen. David Cancinos had ordered the assassination of two of the country's most respected moderate politicians – Congressman Alberto Fuentes Mohr and Manuel Colom Argueta, a former mayor of Guatemala City and head of a new political party – a direct blow to the Carter policy of encouraging the political center to counter the extremes. Why, then, was Carter unwilling to take the strongest steps available to him: by closing the U.S. embassy in Guatemala, imposing a trade embargo, demanding multilateral action through the Organization of American States, or pressuring our closest allies not to replace U.S. military assistance with their own?

The documents in this collection do not fully explain the rationale behind the administration's attempts at constructive engagement; the strategic context does, to a degree. With the fall of the American-backed Somoza regime in Nicaragua in July 1979 and the challenge of insurgency in El Salvador rising, U.S. hegemony in Central America was in jeopardy. Despite the best efforts of the Guatemalan army, the ranks of the guerrillas had swelled to some 4,000 combatants, according to U.S. defense estimates at the time, and were able to rely on moderate amounts of arms and assistance from Cuba. The rebels' new strategy of courting indigenous support in the country's highlands, the destruction of the political center in the cities, and the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua together conspired to encourage Guatemalans opposed to the repressive regimes of the 1970s to join the armed struggle. For the United States, the possibility – however remote – of the left triumphant in the region's richest and most populous country was insupportable.^[40]

As the Guatemalan state's campaign to crush the insurgency evolved, those measures the Carter administration did employ were ineffectual in stopping it. Certainly the annual human rights reports by themselves – without the additional prod of real and enforced sanctions -- were not and never could have been persuasive to the Lucas García regime. Alone, they served only to alienate and anger. "On balance the HR reports have worked against our national interests in Guatemala," wrote one political officer after four years in the Guatemala embassy under Carter. "Even goons and scoundrels develop a sense of offended dignity. We must recognize this if we wish to shape their actions."^[41] The policy, in short, was to continue trying to negotiate with the goons, even if they gave no sign of relenting.

Scorched Earth

There is no evidence of a systematic campaign by the Guatemalan government to eliminate non-guerrilla opposition. There is hard evidence of external support for the Communist insurgents. Captured films show insurgents wearing military uniforms similar to Guatemalan army uniforms. It is not to be ruled out that some atrocities attributed to the Guatemalan army were, in fact, insurgent atrocities.

-- General (ret.) Vernon A. Walters
Department of State memorandum
Guatemala and El Salvador, May 27, 1981

Faced with several options to combat the insurgency, the State chose the one that caused the greatest loss of human life among non-combatant civilians... the annihilation of those they identified as the enemy. In consequence, the CEH concludes that agents of the State of Guatemala, within the framework of counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people...

-- *Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification*
Conclusions and Recommendations, pp. 40-41
February 25, 1999

Ronald Reagan's election revived the anti-communist right in the United States and spawned a frenzy of public diplomacy in an effort to sanitize Guatemala's image so that aid could resume. The new administration believed that only by forging a partnership with Lucas García -- beginning with the resumption of security assistance -- could it hope to help the regime "defeat the Cuban supported Marxist insurgency and to become a keystone for regional stability," as one secret planning document put it early on.^[42] Convincing Congress to support the Guatemalans was a difficult task, however. Just one month after Reagan took office, Amnesty International published a devastating report accusing the Lucas García regime of the murder of some 5,000 Guatemalans since 1978; hundreds of others seized by government security forces during the same period were "disappeared."^[43] In response to congressional concerns, Reagan officials characterized violence in Guatemala as "endemic," the product of a historic cycle of "provocations" by the left and "overreaction" by the extreme right. They refused outright to link Lucas García explicitly to the violence. Representative Stephen Solarz of New York questioned the State Department's Stephen Bosworth during a hearing held in July 1981 before two subcommittees of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs:

Mr. SOLARZ. ... As a factual matter, is it your impression that the Government of Guatemala, at the highest levels, is engaged in acts of political murder?

Mr. BOSWORTH. The reports that the Government of Guatemala is engaged in such acts are one of the major elements of our concern about the overall human rights situation in Guatemala.

Mr. SOLARZ. But do we believe the Government is involved? I know you say there are reports. We know there are reports. Do we believe they are true?

Mr. BOSWORTH. Mr. Solarz, it wouldn't be helpful to our objective of bringing about an improvement in the situation in Guatemala for me at this point to characterize the Government of Guatemala in either a yes or no fashion in that regard.^[44]

The words were a whitewash; secretly, the administration had agreed in April to "Minimize public statements by US officials on the human rights situation in Guatemala..." in order to improve relations with Lucas.^[45] One month later, a special envoy for Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Gen. Vernon Walters – formerly a deputy director of operations for the CIA – went to Guatemala to launch the new relationship. Walters offered an array of unilateral initiatives in an attempt to convince Lucas García to improve the visible human rights record and thus permit overt U.S. aid to flow. Once again a U.S. emissary faced the laconic Guatemalan president in the hope of engaging him in "productive dialogue." And once again, Lucas García disappointed, rejecting the proposal that he curtail violence in exchange for U.S. assistance. The administration chose not to exacerbate tensions between Guatemala and the United States, however. Instead, the United States would wait out the storm. "Having failed in our efforts to dissuade the GOG [Government of Guatemala] from its policy of repression," observed the State Department that fall, "we ought to distance ourselves from the GOG and not involve ourselves in Guatemala's 'dirty war.' If the repression does work and the guerrillas, their supporters and sympathizers are neutralized, we can in the aftermath of the repression work to restore normal relations with the successors of President Lucas."^[46]

Washington's decision to stand aside as the Lucas regime's scorched earth policies devastated the country, combined with its powerful desire to resume aid to Guatemala, encouraged dishonest human rights reporting from the U.S. embassy. Indeed, read collectively, the declassified documents covering the period of the highest incidence of violence – 1981 to mid-1983 – provide a fairly stunning portrait of an embassy determined to deny the facts before it in favor of misleading government statements, a controlled press, and outright lies served up by the very army carrying out the carnage. As a result, Ambassador Frederic Chapin and his country team produced consistently biased assessments of the violence, insisting that abuses were committed by both the left and the right (falsely implying an equity of scale), that the embassy was unable to determine responsibility, that massacres occurred in remote areas that were difficult to reach, that insurgents operating in the highlands frequently masqueraded as soldiers to confuse the affected populations, and that respected U.S. and international human rights organizations reporting on the genocide were actually dupes of a disinformation campaign waged by Communists. In November 1982, on the eve of a meeting between President Reagan and Lucas García's successor, Efraín Ríos Montt, the State Department's human rights bureau was troubled enough by the reporting coming from Chapin and his officers to conclude that "our Embassy does not really know who is responsible for the killings in rural Guatemala," and that – despite mounting evidence that the Guatemalan military was behind the massacres – the embassy *"has not reported in any cable a single instance that it believes was done by the Army."*^[47]

If the U.S. embassy was unable to identify the perpetrators of the mass murder underway in

the countryside, the CIA station and the Pentagon's in-country personnel had no such difficulty. Field reports from both agencies accurately portrayed an army under orders to use any means necessary to crush the opposition, whatever the human toll. "The Guatemalan military's plans to begin sweeps through the Ixil Triangle [in the Quiché] ... could lead not only to major clashes, but to serious abuses by the armed forces," warned the CIA in February 1982. "Chief of Staff [Benedicto] Lucas [García] has ... acknowledged that because most Indians in the area support the guerrillas it will probably be necessary to destroy a number of villages."^[48] After Rios Montt took power in March, a U.S. defense attaché revealed the dark side of his regime's "Beans and Bullets" program, which promised economic support to non-subversive rural populations. Describing a speech given by Rios before his senior military commanders, the attaché reported that the new chief of state intended "to permit each commander as much freedom as possible" in fighting the guerrillas. "Rios said he was leaving the details up to them, and he expected results. ... He wanted each commander to take special care that innocent civilians would not be killed; however, if such unfortunate acts did take place, he did not want to read about them in the newspapers."^[49]

Rios Montt's coup against President Lucas García on the heels of a blatantly fraudulent election in March of 1982 led Reagan administration officials to rejoice. That April, Reagan's National Security Planning Group, a very small and very senior White House task force, met to review U.S. policy in Central America. Concluding that the fall of the Lucas regime "has given us new possibilities for working out an improved relationship with that country," the group agreed to approve up to \$10 million in Foreign Military Sales credits to Guatemala, a new military training program, and \$2.5 million in covert monies from the CIA to launch an "expanded program" of intelligence collection and support.^[50] Washington's overtures did not prevent the new government from implementing its policy of selective, genocidal massacres in the countryside; as the investigations of the Historical Clarification Commission made clear almost two decades later, Guatemala experienced the worst violence of the 35-year war under Rios, with army operations resulting in the destruction of hundreds of villages and the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians. At the same time, Rios Montt's decision to halt the more visible death squad killings in Guatemala City and other urban centers permitted the Reagan administration to tout him as a leader committed to ending the indiscriminate butchery that had so tarnished Lucas García. In December 1982, President Reagan emerged from a meeting with Rios in Honduras hailing him as "totally dedicated to democracy in Guatemala," and calling human rights charges against him "a bum rap."^[51] Despite the public relations campaign, the administration lost its bid in Congress to resume overt assistance to Guatemala under Rios Montt and eventually became disillusioned with the government – not because of the genocide taking place in the country's highlands, but because of the army's execution of a Guatemalan working on contract with the Agency for International Development and his three companions in February 1983.

With the economy in shambles and the guerrillas all but destroyed, the Guatemalan armed forces decided that the military-led scorched earth policies could be replaced by a "guided democracy" that would end the country's international isolation and attract new economic aid. Defense Minister Oscar Mejía Víctores was assigned the task of preparing the country for transition to a civilian president, and he obligingly led a military coup against Rios Montt on August 9, 1983. As the massacres in the highlands wound down, repression in the country's capital escalated sharply in an army effort to finish off the insurgency by targeting

its intellectual infrastructure. The rate of political killings and abductions soared, with over one hundred new cases of “disappeared” civilians each month – twice the number under the Lucas García regime.^[52] But the United States again exulted at the prospect of a more palatable leader than the last, and hastened to assure him of Washington’s support. Driven by the decision of Congress to cut off all aid to the Nicaraguan contras in the autumn of 1984, Reagan officials approached Mejía Víctores to offer an all-out push for renewed U.S. military assistance in exchange for his help in equipping the contras by supplying false end-user certificates for weapons intended for them. The Guatemalan chief of state agreed, prompting a memorandum from National Security Council staff member Oliver North to his boss, Robert McFarlane, in March 1985, urging him to find a way to “compensate” the Guatemalans for the “extraordinary assistance they are providing to the Nicaraguan freedom fighters.” The United States should justify renewed aid publicly as “assisting Guatemala’s progress toward democracy,” wrote North, but the Guatemalan armed forces would be told that the aid was in fact a reward for “their cooperation on the [contra] resistance issue.”^[53] Six months later, the United States Congress delivered, approving up to \$5 million in “non-lethal” military equipment for Guatemala and paving the way for the incoming president, Vinicio Cerezo, of the Christian Democratic Party -- the first civilian to take power in Guatemala in 16 years.

Crisis and Scandal: The 1990s

With the inauguration of Vinicio Cerezo in January 1986, Washington normalized relations with Guatemala, resuming military assistance at moderate levels and a hefty economic aid program to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars: “disguised security assistance,” as U.S. Guatemala scholar Susanne Jonas has pointed out, “insofar as it freed up local funds for counterinsurgency.”^[54] The promise of a genuine transition to civilian rule did not last long. Once in office, Cerezo acceded the prosecution of the war to the army high command, preserving the military’s most critical (and criticized) tools of the counterinsurgency – strategic hamlets, abusive civil defense patrols and the army-run “development committees” established in conflictive rural areas. Although Cerezo made an initial stab at opening peace talks with the URNG in 1987, he quickly curtailed the effort after a military coup nearly threw him out of office in May of 1988. In 1989, following a second coup attempt, human rights violations began to rise precipitously in an expression of the struggle occurring behind the scenes between the extreme right within military and civilian sectors and more moderate forces. That summer, a noted Christian Democratic political leader, Danilo Barillas, was assassinated, and more than a dozen students and professors from the University of San Carlos were abducted, tortured and murdered.

U.S. Ambassador Thomas Stroock attributed the wave of violence to “security forces out of control,” but in secret he and other American officials began to express their growing disillusionment with Cerezo.^[55] Diplomacy gave way to open outrage after a team of Guatemalan soldiers savagely murdered a U.S. citizen in June of 1990. Michael DeVine, an innkeeper living in the northern department of the Péten, was at first reported by police to be the victim of a common crime. When U.S. intelligence sources and a private detective hired by the DeVine family turned up evidence of military involvement, the embassy pressed hard for a credible investigation. It soon became clear that not only had the army killed DeVine, but that the army high command was involved in a massive cover-up. Confident that the problem, like so many before it, would disappear over time, the Cerezo administration

procrastinated and prevaricated, infuriating the United States. In early December, after a first round of presidential elections had voted Cerezo's party out of office, Ambassador Stroock told the lame-duck leader tersely, "We are fed up with the lack of progress on this case and we know that the military is trying to con us."^[56] He urged Washington to sanction Guatemala with an immediate halt in military aid. In the new post-cold war climate, the administration of President George H. W. Bush was willing, and the State Department announced in its regular noon press briefing on December 21 the suspension of all Foreign Military Funds, including deliveries waiting in the pipeline, and a prohibition against commercial sales. The decision would be reviewed, U.S. officials said, once a new president took office in January.

Despite the administration's public statements, aid to the Guatemalan army was not entirely abandoned, as *The New York Times* would reveal several years later. Covert funds continued to flow to military intelligence through the CIA station, amounting to some \$5 million before that, too, was ended in 1995.^[57] The army high command was outraged, nevertheless. Even before the December cut-off, the military lashed out against the United States by ordering restrictions on visits by U.S. officials to Guatemalan military installations, reasoning that the routine visits represented "attempts to obtain information about alleged human rights violations committed by the Guatemalan army"; the order was later expanded to prohibit even "personal relationships" between Guatemalan officers and their American counterparts.^[58] Indeed, reviewing the declassified record on the DeVine killing and subsequent events, one is struck by the level of fury and disbelief with which the Guatemalan military reacted to pressure over the case. The fact was, the United States had always exercised – even in the most fraught times of bilateral relations – a dual diplomacy, publicly avowing its commitment to democracy and human rights, while privately reassuring the Guatemalans of its support. The blunt representations of Ambassador Stroock and his successors in the U.S. embassy astonished the armed forces.

Relations did not improve under the new Guatemalan president, Jorge Serrano. The army continued to stonewall the DeVine investigation. When, to the embassy's delight, a captain was actually convicted for complicity in the murder in 1993, his fellow officers helped him escape imprisonment and flee the country. Serrano's attempted "auto-coup" in late May of 1993, and the success of the progressive officers within the military to stop it, achieved a temporary truce, as did the appointment of Serrano's replacement as president, former human rights ombudsman Ramiro de León Carpio, and the arrival of a new American ambassador, Marilyn McAfee. But the close of the cold war and the inauguration of the United States' first post-cold war president, Bill Clinton, signified the end of an era. The strategic rationale had vanished: the Soviet Union had collapsed, the Berlin wall had fallen, Cuba was experiencing its worse economic crisis in decades, the Sandinistas had been voted out of office and the Salvadoran rebels had transformed themselves into a political party. In Washington, the political costs of insisting on continued support to the infamous Guatemalan army -- even tiny, symbolic amounts of aid, such as cooperation in joint civic action exercises and "extended" international military training (human rights-oriented training) -- rose proportionately as the significance of U.S. interests in Guatemala dropped.

The case of guerrilla leader Efraín Bámaca Velásquez provided a new and even more unwelcome shock. Bámaca was a senior commander in the Organization of People in Arms, who was captured by a Guatemalan army unit in March 1992 and disappeared. After his wife, U.S. citizen Jennifer Harbury, staged two hunger strikes in the hope of forcing the

release of information about her husband, the news broke on March 23, 1995, that a Guatemalan military officer on the payroll of the CIA was connected to Bámaca's torture and death and to the army cover-up in Michael DeVine's murder. The scandal exploded like a bombshell in Washington, where Clinton officials had met with Harbury repeatedly but failed to disclose the CIA connection in the murder. In Guatemala, the armed forces were stunned. Unlike the DeVine case, the army perceived the pressure over Bámaca's fate as a direct threat to the institution. The role of the military in Bámaca's death could not be explained away as an unfortunate anomaly, a random killing by "security forces out of control," but represented standard operating procedure for the duration of the counterinsurgency: the capture of armed combatants and their perceived supporters, their secret detention in clandestine prisons, interrogation, torture, death.

Combined with the tensions induced by the peace negotiations that were now underway, the issue generated fury within army circles. As pressure over the Bámaca and DeVine cases grew increasingly intense in 1994 and 1995, peace negotiations between the Guatemalan government and the guerrillas were proceeding rapidly. Guatemala's armed forces bitterly opposed a truth commission. The military had long used the silence produced by repression to obscure its role in the violence and to maintain deniability. But having benefited from an absolute impunity for the duration of the war, military leaders began to fear the consequences of the imminent human rights investigations that were now an inevitable part of the peace process. Shortly before the accord establishing the Historical Clarification Commission was signed in June 1994, the army high command launched a secret campaign of deception in order to sabotage the commission's work. According to U.S. intelligence sources, the then-minister of defense told his military zone commanders in May to "identify clandestine cemeteries and purge intelligence-related documents."^[59] A more detailed account of the army's scheme was provided six months later by a U.S. defense attaché, who reported that the order had been "reissued" to senior military officers to remove any incriminating files in their possession and destroy them. Some army installations had already complied, wrote the attaché, such as the Southern Air Base in Retalhuleu, where "facilities that were used in the middle to early 1980's as 'interrogation' areas have been totally demolished and pits which existed to bury guerrillas have been filled and covered over with cement." The army also plotted ways to block human rights investigators from entering military bases altogether, including requiring the presence of a judge before they would be allowed to search an installation. "Even then," the attaché continued, "an unidentified clause in the Constitution will be used to prevent their gaining access to classified archives."^[60]

But the army's determination to disappear its own history was too little, too late. In December 1996, a war-weary Guatemala signed the final peace agreement in Oslo, Norway, ending the conflict that had ravaged the lives of so many of its citizens. The Historical Clarification Commission began its work six months later. Despite enormous public skepticism, the limits of its own mandate and the undisguised hostility of the Guatemalan military, the commission delivered its powerful indictment in February 1999. The significance of commission's report came as a surprise and shock to many, not least to U.S. officials posted in Guatemala at the time, who reacted with anger at the CEH's conclusion that the United States bore a share of responsibility for what had happened. But the White House accepted the findings, and President Clinton took the unprecedented step, two weeks later, of acknowledging U.S. complicity before a public gathering in Guatemala City that included the Guatemalan president, Alvaro Arzú. "For the United States," declared Clinton, "it is important that I state

clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent or widespread repression... was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake.”^[61]

Exhuming the Truth: U.S. Policy in Guatemala in Retrospect

The board asked itself: “The cold war’s over – what are we doing there?”

-- Anthony Harrington
Chairman, Intelligence Oversight Board
Quoted in *The New York Times*, June 29, 1996

If Jennifer Harbury’s efforts, and the revelations that resulted from them, exposed long-standing practices of the Guatemalan army – to torture and assassinate guerrillas – they also revealed the willingness of U.S. officials to take such practices in stride. The declassified documents are rife with reports on extra-legal executions, interrogation and clandestine prisons.^[62] Indeed, the records from this period lay bare many of the conflicts and contradictions that plagued U.S. policy in Guatemala not simply during the 1990s, but throughout the course of the war. They included:

- **The desire to sanction vs. the desire to engage.** This was a debate that echoed within U.S. policy circles time and time again during Guatemala’s 35-year conflict. It was inevitably resolved in favor of the strategic imperative. Anti-communism, counternarcotics cooperation and peace negotiations each played a role at varying times in convincing U.S. officials of the necessity for continued engagement with the Guatemalan armed forces -- even in the face of undeniable evidence of their role in the worst kind of individual and institutional abuses and anti-democratic practices. Combined with an apparently unshakeable belief that proximity to representatives of the United States – whether through international military training programs, military aid, joint exercises, intelligence exchange or civic action – would influence the Guatemalan military to behave democratically, U.S. strategic interests in collaborating with the Guatemalans meant that the possibility of taking truly drastic measures against them was rarely considered.

- **The urge to rehabilitate individual Guatemalan officers who had perpetrated grave human rights abuses but who served U.S. interests.** The force of U.S. security interests in Guatemala during the cold war encouraged U.S. officials to overlook a multitude of sins in their Guatemalan counterparts, when the need arose. There are countless examples of military officers whose appalling human rights records were conveniently glossed over by American embassy personnel because of their importance within the army hierarchy; one of them was Juan José Marroquin Siliezar. A powerful intelligence officer whose career included a stint in Zacapa during the counterinsurgency campaign of the late 1960s and as chief of the presidential staff under Rios Montt, Marroquin led the notoriously brutal intelligence unit known as “Archivo” in 1983. In November of that year, three Guatemalan employees of USAID were murdered by the army – killed, as U.S. Ambassador Frederic Chapin recounted in a cable to Washington, by Marroquin’s Archivo in retaliation for U.S. pressure on human rights issues.^[63] After the murders, Marroquin continued his rise up the military ladder, becoming commander of the prestigious Honor Guard Brigade under Cerezo and positioned to be the next army chief of staff (he was named in 1990). By then, U.S. officials were referring to him as “perhaps the most solid, loyal and trustworthy general on

active duty. He is a commanding military presence and is idolized by his officers and men ... [and] eloquent in his defense of democracy...”^[64]

• **The reliance on murderous military units for intelligence liaison.** Within the Guatemalan armed forces, the United States had no closer ally than the defense staff's Directorate of Intelligence, or D-2. In the 1960s and 70s, the CIA and U.S. military advisors helped transform the directorate from a neglected backwater into the Guatemalan army's most important and powerful command center of the counterinsurgency. U.S. officials relied on their access to the D-2 for intelligence about army strategy and tactics, guerrilla operations, the threat of the “subversive” left, the inner workings of the military institution, and political forces at play within successive governments. The access was excellent: the D-2 was well known for its use of blackmail, kidnapping, torture, interrogation, murder and mayhem to maintain its power and prosecute the war.^[65] U.S. advisors taught the D-2 some of what it knew; the rest the United States tolerated, implicitly, through its unswerving support for and liaison with the directorate. Even when it became clear by 1991 that the D-2 had played a central role in hiding the truth about the killing of Michael DeVine, the CIA's Guatemala station continued to pour millions of dollars into the directorate for its cooperation in counter-drug missions.

• **The disconnect preserved between the CIA station and the rest of the U.S. policy apparatus.** Pressure from Jennifer Harbury for details about her husband's fate persuaded U.S. officials to undertake a major internal review of government documents in search of information and to meet with her to relay what they had learned. Throughout the process, the CIA withheld the crucial fact that its own asset may have played a role in his torture and death – and certainly was deeply involved in the cover-up of Michael DeVine's murder. After an internal review board at the CIA found that not only Col. Julio Roberto Alpírez but also others among the agency's Guatemalan assets were guilty of grave human rights abuses, CIA Director John Deutch took the rare step of sanctioning senior agency employees for their role in withholding the information. Two top officials were fired outright; seven more received serious reprimands.^[66] But the scandal revealed a basic truth about CIA operations in Latin America: that the agency had a free hand in liaison with the armed forces, and that the conduct of its paid assets was subject to virtually no outside scrutiny.

The declassified records contained in this collection take a step toward restoring a deep history of the conflict – for Guatemalans and for the United States. But their lessons must be heeded. For Guatemala, the historical accountability offered by the documents is only useful if it serves to advance real political and social change, so that a return to the past of silence, violence and impunity is made impossible. That has not yet happened. Beginning in 1998 with the assassination of Bishop Juan José Gerardi – head of the Catholic Church human rights project, “Recovering Historical Memory” – a wave of violence has targeted the very people whose work was validated and legitimized by the Historical Clarification Commission's report: members of indigenous organizations, human rights activists, independent judges. The repression is a sure sign that those who lost out in the country's struggle for democracy feel cornered, and now seek to sabotage change by any means necessary.

In the United States, the full story of how Washington aided and abetted in genocide must also be harnessed. American policy in Guatemala, as in other parts of Latin America and

indeed across the globe, was shaped for the better part of 50 years by the interplay between American interests and the exigencies of the cold war. With the end of that global conflict -- and as we embark on new ones -- there is a vital need to reexamine the underlying patterns of past practice and to find a meaningful balance between just goals and moral approaches, not only for our own ethical well-being but for the sake of our future relations with other countries in an increasingly inter-reliant world. If democracy and the rule of law are to be the ends of our policy, they should also be the means by which we achieve them.

NOTES

Portions of this essay have previously appeared in Doyle, Kate, "Getting to Know the Generals: Secret Documents on the Guatemalan Military,"^[1] a paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association's XXI International Conference in Chicago, IL, September 24-26, 1998; and in Doyle, Kate, "Bloodbath Courtesy of Uncle Sam" in *The Baltimore Sun*, 6/8/97. All documents cited in the text may be found in the Guatemala collection, with the exception of those marked by an asterisk (*).

¹ U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Fascell, Sub-committee Hearings on Guatemala Public Safety Program*, 9/2/71

^[2] U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. *Guatemala and the Dominican Republic*. 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 30 December 1971

^[3] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Concerns over the Military*, 12/21/93

^[4] Speech given by Christian Tomuschat in Guatemala City, February 25, 1999.

^[5] For the complete text of the commission's mandate, see Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, Tomo XII, Anexo III, 9-11 (Guatemala City: 1999). The report may be viewed in its entirety on a Web site maintained by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at <hrdata.aaas.org/ceh>.

^[6] In addition to the death squad diary, supporting documents and Archive press material distributed on the day of the document's public release may be found at the Web site of the National Security Archive's Guatemala Project at <www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/latin_america/guatemala.html>. For an exegesis of the document, see Kate Doyle, "Death Squad Diary: Looking Into the Secret Archives of Guatemala's Bureaucracy of Murder" in *Harper's Magazine*, June 1999, vol. 298, no. 1789, pp. 50-53.

^[7] First and foremost is Piero Gleijeses's superb account, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer's *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* is also indispensable (Boston, MA: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1999). See also Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982).

^[8] No evidence has emerged in the half century since the 1954 coup -- neither from the United States nor from the archives of the former Soviet Union -- indicating Soviet influence on the Guatemalan Communist Party or on Arbenz himself. On the contrary, historians have noted Moscow's indifference to Guatemala during the 1940s and 50s, and the PGT's isolated political development and provincial nature. See Gleijeses, *ibid.*, pp. 184-189.

^[9] CIA, *Guatemala--General Plan of Action*, 9/11/53

^[10] CIA, *A Study of Assassination*, c. 1952

^[11] Center for the Study of Intelligence (U.S.) History Staff, *CIA and Guatemala Assassination Proposals 1952-1954*, 6/95

^[12] Center for the Study of Intelligence (U.S.) History Staff, *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala 1952-1954*, 1994. In the wake of the document's release by CIA in 1997, its author, historian Nicholas Cullather, published it in its entirety with a fascinating introduction. See Cullather, Nick, *Secret history: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

^[13] CIA Directorate of Intelligence, *Guatemala: Prospects for Political Moderation*, 8/83

^[14] NSC Operations Coordinating Board, *Outline Plan of Operations for Guatemala*, 6/1/55

^[15] See, for example, U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *List of Guatemalan Exiles*, 11/13/57

^[16] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Guatemalan Military Expenditures*, 4/7/60 (see enclosed memo)

^[17] In particular, the embassy insisted on the need for intelligence assistance, and bemoaned the failure of Ydígoras to gather detailed information on subversives: "nowhere in the Government is there a file which would provide data on, say, the 25 to 50 most important Guatemalan Communists." See US Embassy Guatemala, *Visit of Secretary Martin to Guatemala*, 7/20/62.

^[18] DOS Interdepartmental Coordinating Committee on Cuban Affairs Subcommittee on Cuban Subversion, *Report of the Sub-Committee on Cuban Subversion...*, 11/13/63

^[19] The collection includes dozens of documents tracing the birth and development of the *Centro Regional de Telecomunicaciones*, or "Regional," the earliest version of what would later become the notoriously violent counter-subversive unit, the "Archivo." See, for example, AID Office of Public Safety, *Program Adequacy in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Venezuela*, 4/1/64.

^[20] Peralta request: U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Reactions to Increased Terrorist Activity*, 11/19/65; U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *[Kidnapping Task Force]*, 11/24/65

^[21] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *[Coups Turmoil and Covert Police Unit]*, 12/11/65

^[22] See AID Office of Public Safety, *Operational Resumé of Terrorist Kidnappings and Guatemala Police Activity to Counter*, 12/17/65

^[23] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Police Coordination Efforts*, 1/6/66

^[24] CIA, *[Capture of the "28" Activists]*, c. 3/12/66. The document contains extensive notes taken during the torture sessions with Castillo Flores and his companions.

^[25] AID. Bureau for Latin America Mission to Guatemala, *Public Safety Monthly Report-- March, 1966*, 4/13/66. The CEH would later identify Col. Arriaga Bosque as the one responsible for ordering the killing spree -- an officer considered "one of the more effective and enlightened leaders in the military establishment" by the CIA. See CIA Office of National Estimates, *The Danger of a Military Coup in Guatemala*, 9/28/66. Two decades after the U.S.-supported abductions, a secret State Department report on disappearances in Guatemala pointed out their tragic, if inevitable, consequences: the "Case of the 28," wrote the department's Central America desk officer, "radicalized the [Communist] party and helped fuel the FAR insurgency during 1966-68. The purpose of the disappearances—to intimidate the left from involvement in politics—was to become one of the principal goals of such tactics by government agents and paramilitary groups...". Department of State Bureau of Inter-American Affairs Office of Central American Affairs, *Guatemala's Disappeared: 1977-1986*, 3/28/86.

^[26] Department of State, *[Response to Calls for Security Assistance]*, 7/30/66. On August 1, the Minister of Defense formally requested an emergency package of U.S. equipment, the loan of helicopters and light planes, and a counterinsurgency MTT. Three days later during a

meeting in the Pentagon, senior U.S. military officers agreed to divert two Huey helicopters already on their way to Bolivia by sea, and would provide two more by March 1967. See Department of State Bureau of Inter-American Affairs Office of Central American Affairs, *Roundup of Guatemalan Events for Mr. Sayre from July 22 to August 3*, 8/3/66, and *Meeting on Helicopters for Guatemalan Counter-insurgency Effort*, 8/4/66.

^[27] Within Guatemala at the time (and persisting today in literature about the violence), there was confusion about the origins, financing and personnel of the death squads. The phenomenon was, for the most part, believed to be a tragic outcome of the struggle between the “far left” (guerrillas/terrorists/Communists) and the “far right” (members of the MLN and other former Castillo Armas supporters, large landowners, conservative peasants). The declassified documents are unequivocal in ascribing them to the Guatemalan armed forces.

^[28] INR, *Terrorism in Guatemala: New Myths and Hard Realities*, 2/17/68

^[29] INR, *Guatemala: A Counter-insurgency Running Wild?*, 10/23/67. Psychological operations had to do not only with creating a climate of fear through death threats and “black lists,” but concealing the *modus operandi* of the violence. One source explained to the CIA that, “insurgents who are killed by Guatemalan security forces must appear to have died in an armed encounter, regardless of the manner in which they actually died. A judge is to be called to the scene of an ‘encounter’ whenever possible.” CIA, [*Continuation of Government Sponsored Terror*], 7/68.

^[30] INR, *Guatemala: Vigilantism Poses Threat to Stability*, 5/12/67

^[31] INR, *Guatemala: A Counterinsurgency Running Wild?*, 10/23/67

^[32] Others claim as many as 9,000 died in the campaign. As for the magnitude of the guerrilla threat at the time, a Defense Intelligence Agency analysis put the total number of armed militants from MR-13 and the more recently formed *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (Rebel Armed Forces—FAR) at 150; see DIA, *Military Intelligence Summary...*, 1/1/67. CIA figure: CIA Directorate of Intelligence, *The Military and the Right in Guatemala*, 11/8/68.

^[33] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *The Méndez Administration: An Assessment after 18 Months in Office*, 2/9/68

^[34] EOP, *Appraisal of the Guatemalan Security Situation*, 5/26/67; EOP, [*Guatemalan Counterinsurgency Efforts*], 7/11/67. In the second memorandum, Rostow also let Johnson know that the United States had helped by providing “equipment, training [deleted: and intelligence] to the military and police which has helped them ferret out the guerrillas and terrorists.”

^[35] CIA, [*Counterinsurgency Strategy in Wake of Army Leadership Changes*], 4/68. This was not insider information known only to the CIA station. In the Public Safety Division’s report for the same month, an advisor wrote that Méndez had decided on a public shake-up of the military in an effort “to cut down on the covert, counter-terror activities of the security forces and to better conceal these activities where they are still necessary.” (*) AID, *Public Safety Monthly Report--April 1968*, 5/10/68, our emphasis. (Document may be found in the National Archives at College Park, Maryland.)

^[36] Department of State, *Guatemala and Counter-Terror*, 3/29/68

^[37] *The Washington Post*, 3/12/99

^[38] According Defense Security Assistance Agency (DSAA) figures, the United States delivered \$8.5 million in military assistance to Guatemala and issued \$1.8 million in export licenses for commercial arms sales during FYs 1978-80. Cited in testimony by political scientist Lars Schoultz in U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations. *Human Rights in Guatemala*. 97th Cong., 1st sess., 30 July 1981, p. 98.

- [39] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Emissaries to President Lucas*, 8/18/80
- [40] This argument is made most cogently in William LeoGrande's superb account of U.S. policy in the region, *Our Own Backyard: The United States and Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 33-34 and 50-51.
- [41] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Annual Human Rights Reports*, 3/2/81
- [42] Department of State, *U.S. Strategy toward Guatemala*, c. 3/3/81
- [43] Amnesty International, *A Government Program of Political Murder*, 1981, p. 5
- [44] House 7/30/81, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31
- [45] Department of State, *Initiative on Guatemala*, 4/8/81
- [46] Department of State Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, *Guatemala: What Next?*, 10/5/81
- [47] Department of State Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, *Credibility of Embassy Guatemala Human Rights Reporting*, 11/23/82. Emphasis in the original.
- [48] CIA, *DCI Watch Committee Report*, 2/5/82
- [49] DIA, *Additional Information on Operations Plan "Victoria 82"*, 7/30/82
- [50] *The New York Times*, "National Security Document on Policy in Central America and Cuba," 4/7/83
- [51] *The New York Times*, 12/5/82. Speaking to the press in Honduras after the encounter, Rios Montt told reporters that, in Guatemala, "We have no scorched-earth policy. We have a policy of scorched Communists." *The New York Times*, 12/6/82.
- [52] Department of State, *Guatemala's Disappeared: 1977-1986*, 3/28/86. Dozens of the victims appear in the "death squad diary" which is included in this collection. See Guatemala Presidential Staff Archivo, [*Death Squad's Dossier of Captured Citizens*], 3/85
- [53] (*) NSC, *Guatemala Aid to the Nicaraguan Resistance*, 3/5/85 (document may be found in the NSA's Iran-contra collection, see fiche no. IC00917); Leogrande, *op. cit.*, p. 391
- [54] Susanne Jonas, *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), p. 122
- [55] Quote from U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Who Is Doing the Kidnapping and Killing?*, 9/12/89. Several months before Cerezo left office, the CIA issued an intelligence assessment on Guatemala that lambasted the president and his administration, citing Cerezo for "the large-scale misappropriation of government funds," accusing the military of involvement with drug traffickers and deploring the army's role in human rights abuses. CIA Directorate of Intelligence, *Guatemala: Prospect for Democratic Rule*, 9/90.
- [56] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Ambassador Raises DeVine Murder Case with President Cerezo*, 12/5/90
- [57] *The New York Times*, 4/3/95. In 1991, the State Department's Inter-American Affairs Bureau explicitly queried the CIA Station on the matter in a secret cable, asserting that it was "totally inconsistent for US to cut off all mil aid, while maintaining major [deleted] assistance program" to the Guatemalan Intelligence Directorate. The bureau's concerns were apparently overruled. See CIA, [*DeVine Case*], c. 4/4/91.
- [58] CIA, [*Army General Staff Orders New Restrictions*], 10/90 and CIA, [*President Serrano Refuses U.S. Military Assistance*], 2/91
- [59] CIA Directorate of Intelligence Office of African and Latin American Analysis, [*Review of Bámaca Case*], c. 10/25/94
- [60] Department of Defense, *The Rising Impact of the Bámaca Case on the Guatemalan Military Establishment*, 11/24/94
- [61] See White House, *Remarks by the President in Roundtable Discussion on Peace Efforts*, 3/10/99 in the collections of the National Security Archive.

^[62] References to criminally abusive practices by the Guatemalan military appear not only in declassified documents from the early phases of the conflict, when U.S. embassy personnel were less cautious in their appraisals of the violence, but into the 1980s and 1990s.

^[63] U.S. Embassy Guatemala, *Ambassador's Comments on the Information concerning the Deaths of the Three AID Project Related Persons*, 11/15/83

^[64] U.S. Southern Command, *Bio's on Key GT Military*, 12/4/89

^[65] The conclusions of the Clarification Commission's report contain repeated references to the role of the D-2 in human rights violations, for example: "The CEH has corroborated the involvement of military intelligence...in the use of illegal detention centers or 'clandestine prisons'..." where prisoners were subjected to "interrogation, accompanied by torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment" (para. 38); "forced disappearance," explains another section of the report, "was a systematic practice which in nearly all cases was the result of intelligence operations" (para. 89). See Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, Conclusions and Recommendations (Guatemala City: 1999)

^[66] Director of Central Intelligence, *Statement of the Honorable John Deutch on Guatemala*, 9/29/95