

GUATEMALA'S MILITARY MIND-SET

By W. GEORGE LOVELL

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in Guatemala drags dishearteningly on. The national armed forces, the real political power behind the civilian facade, claim that incidents such as the ones that occurred at Magdalena Milpas Altas and Santa Maria de Jesús (just two of a growing number of confrontations largely unreported outside the country) involve only a small group of "terrorists" left over from the counterinsurgency sweeps of the early 1980s, when over 400 Indian communities were destroyed, 50,000 to 75,000 people "disappeared" or were killed, and as many as 200,000 rural families displaced from their homes and small holdings. If resistance is so slight, why (any foreign visitor might wonder) were government soldiers present in such visible numbers in February and March, not just in and around Antigua but

throughout the central highlands?

The military's physical presence, in the countryside foremost, underscores the hold it exerts on virtually every aspect of Guatemalan life, from local affairs to issues of state. In a country that, next October, will hold elections in which no party left of centre is currently represented, the slogan painted on army barracks at Sacapulas strikes a chilling, uncompromising chord. It reads: "Only he who fights has the right to win; only he who wins has the right to live."

Army graffiti as blunt and intimidating as this speaks volumes about the mentality, vision and historical aspirations of those who head the national armed forces. It also helps explain why over 40,000 Guatemalans, most of them Maya Indians, still live as refugees in

Mexico.

In August 1987, less than a week before the presidents of Central America convened to sign the peace accord known as Esquipulas II, an association called the Private Enterprise Council of Guatemala organized a National Forum entitled Twenty-seven Years of Struggle for Liberty. Part of this forum consisted of official presentations by military personnel, during which several representatives outlined the army's blueprint of what the New Guatemala will look like. Counterinsurgency in the early 1980s was justified in order, a military official said, "to rescue the nation from subversion and terrorism, a situation which has arisen due to the incompetence of previous governments." The army felt itself, in the words of Colonel Terraza Pinot, "compelled to assume control of the government, so that national dignity could be restored and peoples' faith in their institutions renewed."

In another speech, General Hector Gramajo, minister of defence for President Cerezo, spelled out how the army views its role as guardian both of democracy and nationhood. Gramajo declared: "At this time we consider ourselves to be the institution that gives impetus to democracy. We defend the interests of the nation in its totality, not the interests of a political party, group or institution. We protect the interests of the nation through political and military action that encompasses all the nation. This action has reciprocal consequences throughout Guatemala."

"Reciprocal consequences" is presumably military jargon for fear, harm and reprisal should any priest, lawyer, union representative or university professor dare to challenge the army's way of doing things.

One of Gramajo's colleagues, General Manuel Callejas, summed up army objectives as follows: "We seek to create a framework of security that permits integrated development in the best of conditions, supporting in all our greatness the different sectors of the nation, especially the most needy, focussing the discharge of our duty on achieving both the supreme national goal and the common good."

The "discharge of duty" Callejas refers to can only be exercised by commanding not just the apparatus of government but all that makes the country function, socially and economically as well as politically and psychologically. The army, "the supreme expression of the state," could not forge a "national destiny" without first wielding "national power."

Brigadier General Juan Bolaños elaborates on the military's concept of power: "Power signifies survival, the ability to impose on others the methods and procedures of life appropriate for their welfare and mutual under-



Children are sometimes recruited by the Guatemalan army to serve in civil defence patrols

Instead of regarding the army as an enemy of the democratic parties, we ought to consider accepting it as an ally of these parties. What I am suggesting here is that progressive politicians and military officers have a common responsibility and that both sectors ought to share the making of national decisions.

Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, 1975

The first task of our government is to be a government of transition.

Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, 1987

VIOLETA CHAMORRO has now assumed delicate responsibility as the president of Nicaragua. Over the past few months, media coverage of Central America has revolved primarily around the election she won so convincingly on Feb. 25. Ms. Chamorro's presidency carries profound implications not just for Nicaragua but for the Central American region as a whole. Electoral defeat for the Sandinistas, and their subsequent willingness to abide by the rules of democracy, may mean not only the end of war in Nicaragua, it could allow Hondurans to live in peace more easily, without the disruptive presence among them of Contra rebels and American servicemen.

Doña Violeta's coming to power may also reduce the flow of Nicaraguan refugees crossing the border into Costa Rica, where over 3,000 Nicaraguan refugees are reported to have entered in 1989 alone. Guerrilla forces in El Salvador, long committed to negotiating a peaceful settlement to the conflict there, have reiterated their willingness to sit down and talk. The importance of renewing dialogue is certainly not lost on Salvadoran insurgents who recognize that the new government in Managua is not entirely sympathetic to their cause. One country, however, remains marginal to these developments and continues to be the Central American republic most North Americans hear or read about least: Guatemala.

The same day that Daniel Ortega presided over democratic voting in Nicaragua, four fighters belonging to the Quetzal Squadron of the Guatemalan Air Force bombed hilly locations in the Guatemalan township of Magdalena Milpas Altas, where the Organization of People in Arms (ORPA) had earlier engaged an army patrol in combat. This encounter did not take place in some remote, mountain stronghold but in a small community near the colonial capital of Antigua, these days a "tourist town" (over 4,000 foreigners travelled to Guatemala last year) where Sunday visitors normally fill the central plaza and keep Indian vendors and local merchants both busy and happy. Antigua on the Sunday following the air raid was conspicuously quieter than usual. Tourists stayed away not just because of what happened in Magdalena Milpas Altas but because the army and guerrillas had clashed again two days later, in Santa Maria de Jesús, a township only half-an-hour's bus ride from Antigua and less than 20 kilometres from Guatemala City.

The military

Although not much in the news since Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo led the Christian Democrat Party into office in 1985, war



The sign on this military barracks at Sacapulas reads: 'Only he who fights has the right to win; only he who wins has the right to live'

standing. It is the capacity to enforce the law on those who lack it, and the ability to extract concessions from the opponent whom one has defeated."

Christian Democracy

What all this rhetoric amounts to, after heartbreak and misery, is proper recognition that it is the national armed forces, not the Christian Democrat Party of President Cerezo, who are the effective rulers of Guatemala. By not even attempting to dismantle the national security state devised and maintained by the military, Cerezo has lost all credibility as a politician committed to meaningful social change. Assuming presidential office in Guatemala under the circumstances that Cerezo did allowed for little political manoeuvring, but few Guatemalans five years ago reckoned that the Christian Democrats would achieve so pathetically little. Rather than create its own institutions to pave the way for a real political opening, the present civilian government has absorbed, or has been absorbed by, military ones.

The abandonment of policies of structural reform over such issues as land and taxation in fact dates to the 1970s, when the Christian Democrats drew closer to the military in a move that would result, 10 years later, in the emergence of a "strategic alliance." Cerezo himself, then the secretary general of the Christian Democrat Party, helped arrange this marriage of convenience, the offspring of which is politics as the continuation of war. The president now speaks of "na-

tional reorganization" and the need "to bury the past" in order to attain "national reconciliation." Cerezo's tenure, overall, has been a major disappointment, his last year in office one in which human rights violations have again made Guatemala an international pariah. How can people "forget the past" when its horrors are part of the present, when the nightmare haunts and lingers still?

Human rights

Criticism of the Cerezo government's record on human rights came in January from bishops of the Catholic Church when they met in Quezaltenango, Guatemala's second-largest city. The bishops published a communiqué that expressed alarm over recent political violence "that has struck at leaders, students, workers and members of popular organizations." The bishops said, "Human rights, such as the right to dignity and equality, do not exist." They pointed to the injustice inherent in "the traditional structure of a minority that accumulates wealth and privilege while the impoverished majority lacks food, good health, education and reasonably paid labor."

Episcopal concerns were later reinforced by the United Nations Commission for Human Rights at its 46th session held in Geneva in March. Having reviewed the evidence at hand, compiled by both national and international experts, the commission declared itself "profoundly disturbed that the [Guatemalan] government has been unable to control an ongoing climate of violence."

It urged Cerezo's government "to initiate or intensify investigations that will allow identification and judicial prosecution of those responsible for acts of torture, disappearances, assassinations and extra-legal executions." The commission also called for the apprehension of members of acknowledged death squads. It was particularly concerned with what it termed the "grave situation that has affected native peoples from time immemorial." Maya Indians (half the national population of eight million) were, the commission said, "the object of discrimination and exploitation, as well as suffering serious violation of their human rights and fundamental liberties."

The disapproval of the Catholic bishops and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights were damning enough, but an even more embarrassing censure came from the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, Thomas F. Stroock. Addressing the Rotary Club of Guatemala, Ambassador Stroock commented that he found it extraordinary that none of those guilty of kidnapping and killing had yet been brought to justice. The ambassador's remarks were followed by the release of a hard-hitting report compiled not by Amnesty International or Americas Watch but by the U.S. Department of State. In it, the United States (which has furnished president Cerezo's government with \$800 million in aid) observed that a deteriorating rights situation in 1989 had taken the lives of over 2,000 Guatemalans. Their deaths were attributed, among other causes, to the activities of

"ultra-right groups" and "military personnel" involved in "extrajudicial killing." The report, which considers Guatemala to be among a handful of countries across the world "plagued by insurgency, civil unrest and terrorism," was dismissed by President Cerezo as "false press information." President Cerezo's comment, in turn, prompted the release of another State Department bulletin, which noted "the disturbing increase in what appears to be politically related violence."

There is no small, tragic irony in this crossfire of words, for the architects of American foreign policy in the 1990s have only their colleagues of 40 years ago to thank for cultivating a military caste that has brought so much grief to the people of Guatemala. High-ranking members of the national armed forces are a stubborn, intransigent breed who still see communism behind legitimate demands for a country as rich in resources as Guatemala to avail these resources more equitably. When Violeta Chamorro assumed the presidency of Nicaragua, Sandinista respect for human rights in Nicaragua served also to benefit other Central American people. Guatemalans, unfortunately, were not among them, for their country continues to be led by a repugnant military even the administration of President Bush cannot tolerate in silence. □

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