Dominoes and Destiny: Myth and Reality in Central America

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Con los pobres de la tierra/Quiero yo mi suerte echar
José Martí

With hostilities in the South Atlantic having receded from public consciousness almost as quickly as the conflict itself began (historically, Argentina has never been able to discern between civilization and barbarism,[1] but one looks for more mature political behavior in a nation like Britain) media attention has once again returned to a Latin American struggle of far greater import than sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (or Islas Malvinas): the fight for decent human existence in Central America. Before focusing on this issue, however, the speed with which the media abandon one international crisis in favor of another is, in itself, a phenomenon that warrants brief examination.

By all accounts, somewhere in the region of eight hundred representatives of the world press found their way to El Salvador to cover the elections for the national constituent assembly held, in the midst of full-scale civil war, on 28 March 1982. A macabre unreality (immorality, some would say) seems to have surrounded the vast majority of this contingent. With appalling human suffering taking place all around them, the atmosphere in the lobby bar of the Camino Real Hotel in San Salvador, where most members of the media were billeted, was described by Oakland Ross (Latin American correspondent of the *Globe and Mail*) as "a bit lax, rather like summer camp."[2]

This remark is quite revealing and provides some insight into what the media deem newsworthy. It appears that the primary objective of the press was to seek and to record, preferably in a visual format, the "bang-bang" or "boom-boom" which was expected to rage in the streets and hills of El Salvador beyond the reporters' cozy sanctuary. Apparently forgotten in the journalistic fantasy was the sorry case of *Newsweek* photographer Olivier Rebot, who died as a result of being shot on assignment in El Salvador only a year or so earlier. Not until four Dutch reporters met the same tragic

fate did members of the media sober up. A cynic could hardly be faulted for noting that the attitudes, priorities and terms of reference of the press bear a striking resemblance to those of the protagonists in *Scoop*, a novel by Evelyn Waugh about foreign correspondents working for such Fleet Street dailies as *The Brute* and *The Beast* whose job while abroad is to compete for the sensational and the offbeat: news as entertainment, as filler between the ads, delivered in coy, glib and gory packages (in the hope of high ratings) by a Barbara Frum or a Knowlton Nash. In the media today, as *Harper's* correspondent Alexander Cockburn has pungently observed, there is a sickly high correlation between blood and ink.[3]

One is therefore moved to ask: Does it *really* have to be this way? Judging by the scuttling of El Salvador for the Falklands/Malvinas; by the abandonment of the icy waters of the South Atlantic for the electric heat of Lebanon; and by the flight from Beirut back to Central America around the time of President Reagan's visit to Costa Rica and Honduras in December 1982, the answer to that question must sadly be in the affirmative. Apparently, alternative means of keeping up to date with international developments, other than the ones currently in operation, have yet to be devised. Solutions to the problems of better media delivery lie not so much in technical advancements in the field of electronics and telecommunications as in an upgrading of the human components of the system, in improving the critical faculties and quality of education of all those who supply and consume information about what happens (or is said to happen) in the outside world.

Few areas of the outside world have suffered more from ignorance and a lack of understanding on the part of others, especially the United States, than Central America. While the contemporary crisis in the region has reached a stage of complexity baffling even to experienced observers, still the myth of a Red Blight in the Banana Republics lives on, advanced and articulated by a US administration which fails to comprehend (or refuses to acknowledge) that political unrest in Central America stems overwhelmingly from internal conditions and cannot successfully be instigated and maintained by alien forces which, in President Reagan's words, are "not of our hemisphere."[4]

Although every US government in recent memory has at one time or another invoked the specter of an international communist conspiracy sweeping through the lands and islands beyond its southern border, the phobia is raging in a particularly virulent form in the minds of the present Administration. Since taking office in 1981, President Reagan, ably assisted by former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, US Ambassador to the United

Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick and National Security Adviser William Clark, has severed détente between Washington and Moscow and laid the logic and ground rules for an American foreign policy now essentially defined as anti-Sovietism. The previous Carter Administration's human rights policy has been dismissed flatly as utopian, serving ultimately only to advance communism and thus to threaten the strategic interests of the United States, especially in its own "back yard," Latin America. A distinction has been made between regimes that are "authoritarian" ("good": for example, Nicaragua under the Somozas) and "totalitarian" ("bad": for example, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas). The former, claims the strident Kirkpatrick, should be supported because, historically, relations with them have been friendly and because they "do not disturb the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal relations."[5] She further asserts that "because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope, as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill."[6] Such views show little awareness of, or sensitivity to, the tortured realities of Central American life. Like Mr Haig's discredited "proof" of leftist domino-theory tactics (the infamous White Paper on *Communist Interference in El Salvador*), they are naive and scurrilous fictions which purposely ignore the geographies of inequality historically responsible for the contemporary isthmian crisis.

While Mrs Kirkpatrick, however much one disagrees with her analysis, at least has the professional training with which to support her convictions, William Clark's only apparent credential is blind allegiance to the hard line President Reagan now demands from his most influential staff. In a recent speech on Central America, the National Security Adviser queried: "If we lack the resolve and dedication the President asked for, can we not expect El Salvador to join Nicaragua in targeting other recruits for the Soviet brand of Communism? When, some ask, will Mexico and then the United States become the immediate rather than the ultimate target?"[7]

Clark and Kirkpatrick are now, following the removal of Thomas Enders as Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, the principal architects of US foreign policy in Central America. With a hawkish emphasis based firmly on the military option, their primitive Cold War rhetoric only increases East-West tension and exacerbates an already explosive world situation.

The people of Central America are certainly no strangers to bloodshed

and suffering. From colonial times until the present, their lands have been dominated by strong-willed and autocratic men who viewed, and continue to view, violence and repression as instruments necessary for the maintenance of power, as simply distasteful means to desired ends. The terror of conquest and subjugation by imperial Spain is poignantly recorded in one of the Mayan Indian chronicles of Guatemala:

> Little by little heavy shadows and black night enveloped our fathers and grandfathers and us also ... when the Spaniards arrived. Their chief, he who was called Tunatiuh Avilantaro [Pedro de Alvarado] conquered all the people. Then Tunatiuh asked the kings for money. He wished them to give him piles of metal, their vassals and crowns. And as they did not bring them to him immediately, Tunatiuh became angry with the kings and said to them: "Why have you not brought me the metal? If you do not bring with you all of the money of the tribes, I will burn you and I will hang you."
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> Next Tunatiuh ordered them to pay twelve hundred pesos of gold. The kings tried to have the amount reduced and they began to weep, but Tunatiuh did not consent, and he said to them: "Get the metal and bring it within five days. Woe to you if you do not bring it! I know my heart!" Thus he said to the lords.[8]

Once in power, self-preservation justifies all. Seldom have enlightened experiments in democracy amounted to much in a region far less accustomed to hope than to despair, from the attempts of the Dominican humanist Bartolomé de las Casas to create an egalitarian society among the Mayan Indians of sixteenth-century Verapaz to the short-lived Guatemalan dream of Jacobo Arbenz in the early 1950s. Confrontation rather than compromise has long been characteristic of the Central American tradition. Greed among a few perpetuates misery and deprivation among the many. Peaceful solutions to an unequal distribution of basic needs (land, food, housing, education, and employment) are apparently unrealistic, and serve only to prolong the agony. Change here moves slowly and must be measured in centuries. It does not come about by way of the ballot box, for efforts in this direction have been constantly thwarted by rigged and fraudulent elections, as in the case of Guatemala and El Salvador over the past decade. In Central America, democracy and suffrage (with the sole exception, since 1948, of Costa Rica) have little meaning or relevance. Any transformation, any attempt to ameliorate the lives of the poor by curtailing the avarice and ostentation of the rich, must be fought for. Such is the bitter history these past few years of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Nicaragua

Even by Central American standards the historical experience of Nicaragua, territorially the largest country in the isthmus, warrants consideration as an extreme and special case of a regional malaise because of the prominent role in the tragedy of one single family: the Somozas. Before discussing their rise and fall over the past fifty years, however, it is necessary to place Nicaragua and the Somozas in the political context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Central America.

Following independence from Spain in 1821, the failure of the liberal-inspired union of Central America led, around mid-century, to the emergence of the various constituent parts as self-governing nations, nations which have survived (albeit shakily) into the present day as the republics of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The political autonomy of Nicaragua, more than any of its neighbors, has been undermined constantly by the looming presence of the United States. First attracted to Nicaragua by its trans-isthmian potential (goods and passengers crossed the country by water, road and rail during the Gold Rush to California in 1849), the United States considered it necessary to intervene militarily on numerous occasions between 1909 and 1933, marines being landed and stationed in Nicaragua allegedly to safeguard American interests, lives and property.

When they withdrew their armed presence in 1933, the Americans left behind two lethal legacies: the National Guard they formed, trained and continued to equip, and the man who was later known as "the last marine," Anastasio Somoza García (Tacho I), the founder of the Somoza dynasty and the heavy-handed ruler of Nicaragua until his assassination in 1956. The power and greed of Tacho I, who shrewdly orchestrated the murder of the peasant leader and later revolutionary hero Augusto César Sandino in 1934, is perhaps best summarized by the words of the Panamanian calypso singer Rupert (Kontiki) Allen:

> A guy asked de dictator if he 'ad any farms
> An 'e said 'e 'ad only one – Nicaragua.[9]

After the assassination of Tacho I power passed smoothly on to his two sons, Luis, who assumed the presidency of Nicaragua in 1957, and Anastasio Jr, who ran the country single-handedly, in conjuction with the National Guard he headed, after his brother died of a heart attack in 1967.

Anastasio Jr (Tacho II or Tachito) was, one hopes, the last Somoza to govern Nicaragua, which he did, with exemplary avarice and brutality,

from his "election" on 15 February 1967 to his ouster in July 1979 by opposition forces led by the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, the Sandinista National Liberation Front. (Anastasio Somoza Debayle was later assassinated, under mysterious circumstances, while in exile in Paraguay on 17 September 1980.) Upon fleeing Nicaragua, Somoza left behind a gutted nation, one racked by a horrendous civil war that claimed between 30,000 and 40,000 lives and from which he departed with a personal fortune estimated at close to 500 million dollars.[10] The national treasury, on the other hand, reported a staggering foreign debt (for a country of 2.9 million people) of 1.5 billion dollars and reserves amounting to little more than three million dollars.[11]

The collapse of the Somoza dynasty, hitherto seemingly one of the most invincible and enduring of all Latin American dictatorships, sent shock waves throughout Central America. It was, in many important ways, a pivotal event with profound regional ramifications, particularly for El Salvador and Guatemala, where the revolutionary inspiration of Sandinista victory had an immediate impact. Some scrutiny of the factors most responsible for Somoza's overthrow are therefore in order.

While rule through fear and all its attendant atrocities must be seen as a constant backdrop, the dictator's demise can be critically linked to three alienating incidents. The first is what took place in the aftermath of the earthquake which devastated Managua and west-central Nicaragua on 23 December 1972. By pocketing the vast majority of the funds which poured into the country earmarked for the relief of earthquake victims and a program of national reconstruction, Somoza lost completely what little credibility he had formerly enjoyed among the common people and his middle-class supporters. (The downtown core of Managua has, in fact, still to be rebuilt.)

The second incident which must be singled out is the murder by Somoza sympathizers on 10 January 1978 of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, editor of the anti-government newspaper *La Prensa* and a popular critic of Somoza and his National Guard. Chamorro's murder served to "radicalize" many conservative anti-Somoza forces, including the Roman Catholic Church and important business and commercial interests who then cast their lot, morally if not physically, with the revolutionary Sandinistas.

The third incident is the callous slaying, recorded by a television camera crew and later viewed by millions around the world, of the American journalist Bill Stewart on 20 June 1979. The sight of one of its citizens being ordered to lie prostrate on the ground by a National Guardsman who kicked him and seconds later pointed a gun at his head and shot him

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dead proved too much even for Somoza's staunchest American backers. In an age of television, seeing was believing. Henceforth, Somoza's days were numbered and the eventual triumph of the popular insurrection assured.

During their four years in power, the Sandinistas (like all governments) have committed certain errors of judgment, but never have they lost the support of the common people nor faltered from their intent to create a new Nicaragua in which *Somocisma* and *Somocistas* have no part. The Sandinistas have won the right to peace; they should be encouraged in their efforts, not plotted against.[12] However, by approving and funding a program of destabilization orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency, one in which exiled *Somocistas* and extreme right-wing mercenaries figure prominently, the United States violates Nicaragua's right to self-determination and casts its leading actor, Ronald Reagan, in a doomed, Canute-like role.[13] He sits precariously (like the fallible monarch of centuries ago) on a treacherous shore, the tide of history against him. Its inevitable advance must be properly seen as seeping from decades of injustice and inequality in the broad context of Nicaraguan society, not ascribed a fictitious source elsewhere in the Caribbean Basin or on the other side of the Atlantic.

El Salvador

27 May 1975. A humid tropical evening in San Salvador, the capital city of El Salvador, a country about one-fifth the size of Newfoundland but with a population ten times as numerous – approximately five million people packed densely into a territory of 21,000 square kilometers. Tired after a long, slow bus journey (I had left Nicaragua before dawn the previous day and had travelled overland through Honduras) I sit with a beer and a sandwich in a downtown cafe. None of the other tables are occupied, the few clients at this late hour apparently feeling happier in off the street with their music, chatter and drink. I choose not to stay for long, pay my bill and am about to walk back to my *pensión* when I notice, curled in a doorway adjacent to the cafe, the sleeping rag-clad form of a young boy of perhaps seven or eight years of age. The noise of some people leaving the cafe disturbs him, and he starts awake. Frightened, alone, unsure of where he is, he begins to cry. I crouch beside him, seeking to console him, and through tears learn that he is parentless, homeless, hungry, and very much on his own. His name, he tells me, is Marcos Antonio Hernández. Completely at a loss, I approach a waiter for advice. He shrugs his shoulders, saying he can take the boy to a children's center run by the Church on his way home from work. I ask him to do this, give him a tip and buy some food for the boy, whom I leave quietly eating (he even

managed a smile) as I head off uneasily to the nearby *pensión*.

I mention this incident because the sight of Marcos Antonio Hernández, huddled womb-like on a dark doorstep, seems to rise out from every article I read, every newsreel I watch, every radio broadcast I listen to which deals with events in El Salvador. His urchin vulnerability is somehow there with each reference to El Salvador's countless thousands of luckless and, for most of us, nameless oppressed: among the jobless and underemployed in the shanties of the capital; among the landless and exploited in the countryside; among the displaced and neglected rotting in refugee camps; among the estimated 40,000 (most of them civilians) already killed in the brutal war that has raged since October 1979; among the many helpless victims yet to fall.

Now (if still alive) in his teens, and therefore of combat age, perhaps he has left the city to join the guerrillas fighting in the hills of Morazán and Chalatenango. On the other hand, possibly he views enlisting in the national armed forces as his best chance of long-term survival and security. I see him mesmerized by the sterile ideological rhetoric of ignorant men in distant lands, as a frail and defenseless creature preyed upon by both (American) eagles and (Soviet) bears, as an animal doomed by some inexorable law of social Darwinism to exist in a perilous shadowland between two hostile predators. That boy is a Third World Everyman, an Everyman whose options have for centuries been meager and few. Any appreciation of the civil war in El Salvador is an appreciation of him and his unfortunate kind.

The cultural-historical specifics involved in the forging of a nation founded upon the governing of a disadvantaged many by a privileged few have recently been synthesized by, among others, Liisa North and Joan Didion, and will therefore not be reiterated here.[14] It is sufficient to note that in El Salvador a geography of inequality has always prevailed; as late as 1971, six families alone held as much land as eighty percent of the rural population together. No government has ever seriously attempted widespread socio-economic reforms, simply because it has not been in its dynastic and class interest to do so. Thus the most productive land in the country, as in neighboring Guatemala, produces coffee and cotton for export abroad, not staple foodcrops needed to feed malnourished and undernourished local populations. Wealth is equated with political clout and with the legendary "Fourteen Families" who, in conjunction with the armed forces spawned to protect them, act as deadly efficient powerbrokers whose primary objective is maintaining the *status quo*. The window dressing undertaken to justify massive American military and economic aid to

the government of El Salvador, whether headed by José Napolean Duarte or Alvaro Magaña, does little to disguise the reign of terror which still prevails and which people both inside and outside the country continue to speak out against.

One voice no longer heard, but whose message lives on, is that of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. For centuries the Church in Latin America sided overwhelmingly with the wealthy and the privileged, simply preaching to the impoverished masses that not *here* but *hereafter* was all that should concern them. This questionable message was finally deemed inconsistent with the fundamental tenets of Christianity by Pope John XXIII in his revolutionary encyclicals *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963), thus paving the way for a "theology of liberation" which aligned the Church more closely with the needs of the poor in this world and not just in the one to come.

The severing of the Church from the State, of the cross from the sword, has had profound repercussions throughout Latin America, and in the case of El Salvador made it possible for Archbishop Romero to pronounce that "when a dictatorship seriously violates human rights and attacks the common good of the nation, when it becomes unbearable and closes all channels of dialogue, of understanding, of rationality, when this happens the Church speaks of the legitimate right of insurrectional violence."[15] The Archbishop of the Poor, knowing he would be killed, cast his ultimate lot when he declared to the armed forces of El Salvador on 23 March 1980 that "no soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. It is time for you to come to your senses and obey your conscience rather than follow sinful commands."[16] After his assassination the very next day, Archbishop Romero (and the priests and nuns killed in El Salvador before and after him who also subscribed to the theology of liberation) assumed a martyrdom which is no less a threat to the ruling oligarchy than when he (and they) still lived.

Guatemala

The third-largest but most populous of the Central American republics, Guatemala has approximately 7.7 million inhabitants, at least half of whom are of Mayan Indian extraction. Ladinos, persons of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, comprise the majority of the remainder, with a small but powerful group of pure-blooded or almost pure-blooded whites and some scattered blacks completing the racial picture. Predominantly Indian communities (some twenty-three distinct language groups in all) are to be found in the rugged highland region to the north and west of the capital,

Guatemala City, with Ladinos most numerous in the east of the country, along the southern Pacific coastlands and in the Petén lowlands far to the north. Just as anthropologists marvel at the richness and uniqueness of indigenous culture, so naturalists stand in awe of the myriad splendors of the Guatemalan landscape.

The impact is always striking, often disconcerting. The simple, land-oriented lives of the Indians and their day-to-day concerns seem far removed from the affairs of Ladino businessmen and shopkeepers in the capital. Likewise, the trees, flowers, birds, and other living creatures inhabiting the cool volcanic highlands to the west of Guatemala City seem to belong to a different planet than those inhabiting the hot and humid coastal lowlands or the Petén rain forest. In this regard Guatemala all too vividly reflects the stark, contradictory, separate realities that comprise much of Central America. To know Guatemala is to be confronted by a perplexing, irresolvable array of dualities: rich and poor, strong and weak, ancient and modern, tenderness and cruelty. The bell tolls: discord and harmony. Beauty and squalor, abundance in the midst of deprivation.

And yet, to a greater or lesser degree, this is how it has always been. To portray pre-Columbian Guatemala as some kind of romantic, Rousseau-like arcadia would be little more than an exercise in delusion. The noble savage died a long time ago; he and she probably never existed. But this is in no way to suggest that the pre-Columbian Maya of Guatemala were not an advanced and civilized human assortment, well adjusted – socially and materially – to an environment that was as much a part of them as they were of it.

The Maya lived, as do their descendants still, not so much on or from but *with* the land, tied intimately to it by an almost mystical sense of belonging. They built sophisticated and complex settlements, not cities as we know them today, but ceremonial centers around which dense populations eked out an existence based on what anthropologist Eric Wolf calls the Trinity of the Mesoamerican Indian: maize, beans and squash.[17] Their remarkable achievements in sedentary agriculture, in astronomy, mathematics and sculpture, and in a host of other physical and intellectual endeavors rightly demand our respect. But ancient Maya society was based firmly on the government of the many by the few, whether in the relatively peaceful Classic period of AD 300–1000, when a priesthood constituted the ruling elite, or in the more belligerent post-Classic era of AD 1000–1524, when militaristic rather than theological might characterized the ranks of the elite. Even if, as in Inca culture and civilization, the common majority lived under a benevolent despotism, there must certainly have been a price

to pay, in terms of personal liberty and freedom of expression, for the adequate provision of food, housing, clothing, and the allocation of land and work.

The Spanish conquest of Guatemala, begun by Pedro de Alvarado in 1524, signified for the Maya the beginning of an era in which benevolence vanished and only despotism remained. Historian Benjamin Keen, from the standpoint of twentieth-century scholarship, asserts that "Spanish demands for labor and tribute were immeasurably greater than before the conquest simply, aside from other reasons, because pre-conquest tribute demands were limited by the capacity of the native ruling classes to consume the fruits of tribute and labor, whereas Spanish demands, aimed at the accumulation of wealth in monetary form, were quite unlimited."[18]

In contrast to the conquest of Mexico, which had been executed with a prompt and ruthless efficiency, Spanish subjugation of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala was made an arduous, protracted affair by the political fragmentation of the region, a fragmentation which, prior to the arrival of the forces led by Alvarado, had resulted in open hostilities between rival Mayan groups, especially between the Quiché and Cakchiquel. Unlike his commanding officer Hernán Cortés in Mexico, whose defeat of the Aztecs did much to hasten the surrender of other Mexican peoples, Alvarado in Guatemala had no single, dominant Indian group to conquer. Rather, a number of small but tenacious groups had to be overcome. Successful domination of the Quiché, the first important Indian group to succumb, was followed by a series of laborious campaigns against such peoples as the Tzutuhil, the Pocomán, the Mam, the Cakchiquel (initially Spanish allies who revolted in 1526 after suffering two years of abuse at the hands of their European masters), the Ixil, the Uspantec, and the Kekchí.

As throughout the New World, the Spaniards were greatly assisted in the conquest of the Maya by the ravages of Old World diseases inadvertently introduced by the European invaders to the immunologically defenseless autochthonous population. Epidemics of smallpox, typhus, measles, mumps, and pulmonary plague (the "shock troops" of the conquest) occurred throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, decimating the native population and reducing substantially both Indian numbers and their ability to fight against the alien invasion force. A superior military apparatus, together with a strategic sense of when and how to deploy the men and equipment at their disposal, also did much to ensure Spanish victory. The physical and psychological impact of cavalry on peoples who had never before seen a horse and its rider in combat was as devastating

as the material superiority of steel and firearms over the bow and arrow. Brave and stubborn though the Maya were, defeat and subjugation were ultimately their fate.

The "culture of conquest" which developed from Spain's imperial ventures in Guatemala had a profound impact on both the land and the people. Through the policy of *congregación*, thousands of Indian families were forced to move from their old homes in the mountains to new towns and villages built around churches in open valley floors. By altering the native pattern of settlement from one of dispersion to one of nucleation, *congregación* promoted more effective civil administration, facilitated the conversion of the Indians to Christianity and created centralized pools of labor which the Spaniards ruthlessly and relentlessly exploited. The *conquistador* and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo, writing in the mid-sixteenth century, summed up Spanish aims and intentions quite succinctly (and spoke for more than just a few) when he declared that "we came here to serve God and the King, and also to get rich."[19]

Because Spanish conquerors and colonists were more entrepreneurially than feudally inclined, control of labor was initially of greater importance than control of land. It was not until exploitation of Indian labor proved to be an unreliable source of wealth that materially-minded Spaniards turned to the land as an alternative means of support and enrichment. Spanish acquisition of land coincided closely with a period of economic depression in Central America which lasted for much of the seventeenth century. The principal factor behind the seventeenth-century depression and the taking up of land on the part of Spaniards was the depletion of a native labor force which – overworked, undernourished and constantly stricken by disease – had declined drastically in size since the early sixteenth century. By the end of the colonial period, the native population had recovered somewhat from the biological and cultural impact of conquest by retreating into a "culture of refuge" whereby, especially in many parts of the western highlands with limited economic or entrepreneurial potential and consequently of no great attraction to the Spaniards, the Indians had succeeded in holding on to their ancestral lands and had kept alive their languages, customs and mores. Mayan blood had been spilled and wrung, but it still ran proudly in the veins of successive generations who survived and retained the collective memory of their forefathers.

For most of the half-century following its independence from Spain in 1821, Guatemalan politics were dominated by a series of conservative regimes which, particularly when headed by José Rafael Carrera, promoted the continuation of a way of life similar to the one led under Spanish rule.

A Creole elite simply replaced a peninsular Spanish elite at the top of society. Names and faces changed, but not the fabric of Guatemalan life. Affairs of state were conducted in the new republic without unduly disturbing the culture of refuge the Indians had long since fashioned for themselves in remote rural areas some distance from the cities and towns where Creole and Ladino officials resided. Only with the coming to power of the liberal administration of Justo Rufino Barrios in 1871 did the then predominantly communal, self-sufficient existence of scores of native communities throughout the western highlands begin to be affected by the decisions made and directions taken by the republican government.

Unlike the conservatives, the liberals aimed at assimilating introspective Indian communities into a modern, outward-looking, nationalistic Ladino culture. Under Rufino Barrios, one of the principal components of the liberal drive towards modernization was a land reform program designed to abolish the collective system of Indian landholding in Guatemala by subdividing communal lands among township inhabitants. Numerous measures to encourage Indians to secure individual titles to their land met with little success. As a result, communal holdings were then often deliberately classified by government officials as "unclaimed land" and fell into the hands of Creoles and Ladinos much more familiar with the legal aspects of landholding legislation than their non-literate, misinformed and confused Indian countrymen.

To the Indians, land was like air and sunlight, a God-given resource over which no one could claim exclusive proprietary rights. The notion of land as a commodity, as something that could be bought and sold, as symbols on a piece of paper signifying personal ownership, were to them completely incomprehensible. The fate of native communal lands was sealed in 1877 with the ending of *censo enfiteutico*, a system dating back to colonial times whereby a tax for the use of land was exacted from Indian communities as corporate units. Legislation was also passed requiring individuals to demonstrate private ownership of land by possessing formal titles; old community titles were simply no longer legally recognized. Although legislation governing landholding was radically altered, the Indian communities most directly affected by the changes were usually unaware of them. By the end of the nineteenth century, native communities throughout Guatemala lost possession of thousands of acres of cultivable land to ambitious Creoles and Ladinos capitalizing on Indian ignorance of the land tenure situation.

Contemporaneous with these developments was a substantial foreign investment, particularly from German business interests, in Guatemalan

coffee production. The environmental suitability of the Pacific piedmont of the country for large-scale coffee cultivation, together with the liberal disposition towards *laissez-faire* enterprise, resulted in the emergence of coffee as Guatemala's major export crop, a dominance it has maintained in the national economy from the time of Rufino Barrios up to the present day. Organized on an efficient plantation basis, coffee requires an intensive labor input only during its brief harvest period. It was the drafting of a seasonal workforce from among the native communities of the western highlands to labor on coffee plantations on the Pacific piedmont that reshaped the pattern of Indian life in Guatemala and unleashed on the country the full force of capitalistic development.

The methods employed to procure an adequate flow of migrant labor during the coffee harvest have varied over the years. Outright coercion in the form of a draft known as the *mandamiento* gave way to legalized debt peonage which, in turn, was replaced (in 1934) by the implementation of a vagrancy law requiring individuals holding less than a stipulated amount of land to work part of each year as wage laborers for others. Anyone farming less than 6.9 acres was required to work one hundred days; anyone farming less than 2.8 acres was required to work one hundred and fifty days.[20] Although forced labor in Guatemala is generally regarded as having ended with the social reforms stemming from the "revolution" which ousted President Jorge Ubico in 1944, irregularities in hiring manpower for the coffee harvest have persisted. But the necessity of indenturing labor, by whatever means, has diminished since the 1940s, simply because explosive population growth and the need to earn more money to feed more mouths insure a "free" and plentiful workforce, particularly from among the Indian population, most of whom live on tiny plots of land which cannot provide year-round employment and subsistence.

Structural imbalances such as unequal land distribution are primarily responsible for the perpetuation of seasonal migration and the social disruption and economic exploitation that inevitably accompany it. In Guatemala, as throughout Central America, the fundamental characteristic of landholding is the concentration of sizeable amounts of cultivable land in the hands of a wealthy and powerful Creole/Ladino minority while an impoverished but dignified peasant/Indian majority subsists on a tiny percentage of the total national farmland. Official statistics in two agricultural censuses, the first conducted in 1950 and the second in 1964, reveal the essential reality of land ownership in Guatemala: a small percentage of the total farmland (14.3 percent in 1950 and 18.6 percent in 1964) is shared between a large percentage of farm units (88.4 percent in 1950 and

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commercial crops such as coffee, bananas and sugar cane for the export market, and therefore did not use their land to produce food for local consumption. Of approximately four million acres in the hands of these plantation owners, less than one-quarter of this amount was actually under cultivation at any given time. As Indian and poor Ladino families went hungry through lack of sufficient land, American corporations invested heavily in Guatemalan agribusiness, to the tune then of some 120 million dollars. The largest and most powerful American corporation was the United Fruit Company, known in Guatemala either simply as *La Frutera* (The Fruit Company) or, colloquially but perhaps more accurately, *El Pulpo* (The Octopus).

In June 1952 the Guatemalan Congress approved legislation devised by Arbenz which empowered his government to expropriate uncultivated portions of large plantations and to turn them over to landless *campesinos*. The value of the expropriated land was related directly to its declared taxable worth, a provision which disturbed certain targets, particularly United Fruit, since for years its property had been deliberately undervalued in order to reduce the company's tax liability.

Over the next eighteen months, some 100,000 poor Guatemalan families received a total of 1.5 million acres of formerly uncultivated land, for which the reform authorities paid 8.3 million dollars in government bonds. Arbenz expropriated about 400,000 acres of land from United Fruit, offering in return 1.25 million dollars, a figure based entirely on the company's own taxation records. United Fruit's response was one of the most audacious and criminal acts in all of Central America's sordid history.

By careful manipulation of its clout in the United States, *La Frutera* was able to convince the Eisenhower Administration that a Red Menace in Guatemala threatened American business and security interests. It then wooed the Central Intelligence Agency into masterminding, at an estimated cost to US taxpayers of twenty million dollars, the overthrow of the Arbenz government, ushering into power a repressive military junta headed by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a devout "anti-communist" whose forces invaded from neighboring Honduras, protected by American air strikes. The wife of John Peurifoy, the American ambassador to Guatemala who was among those largely responsible for the success of the *coup d'état*, immortalized the moment in a few lines later published in *Time* magazine:

> Sing a song of quetzals, pockets full of peace,
> The junta's in the palace, they've taken out a lease.
> The commies are in hiding just across the street,

To the Embas
And pistol-pac
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In a final broadcast t
Salvador Allende was for
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To the Embassy of Mexico they beat a quick retreat.
And pistol-packing Peurifoy looks mighty optimistic,
For the land of Guatemala is no longer Communistic![23]

In a final broadcast to the Guatemalan people, similar to one that Salvador Allende was forced to make to the people of Chile two decades later,[24] the shattered Arbenz declared:

> Our only crime consisted of decreeing our own laws and applying them to all without exception. Our crime is having enacted an agrarian reform which affected the interests of the United Fruit Company. Our crime is our patriotic wish to advance, to progress, to win economic independence to match our political independence. We are condemned because we have given our peasant population land and rights.[25]

Although United Fruit has long since departed, the legacy of authoritarian protection of corporate interests that it and its offspring imposed on Guatemala continue to this day, inflicting on the hearts and minds of thousands of innocent people wounds that never will heal. If the United States had allowed the Guatemala Arbenz dreamed of to be created, if the process he represented had been encouraged and fostered rather than sabotaged and violated, then the carnage of the past few years would not have taken place. However, twenty years of military government, from Castillo Armas (1954–57) to Kjell Laugerud (1974–78) served only to consolidate the power of the armed forces over Guatemalan political life, and paved the way for the genocidal response of Romeo Lucas García (1978–82) and then Efraín Rios Montt (1982–83) to popular demands for social justice and basic human rights.[26] The 35,000 people slaughtered in Guatemala over the past five years have once again been killed in the name of anti-communism. The majority of these people were Indian men, women and children who in all probability had never even heard of a man called Karl Marx, and who likely had no better idea of what communism is than the soldiers conditioned into annihilating its perceived existence in the most barbarous and bestial ways imaginable.[27] By failing to understand (or choosing to disregard) the true origin and meaning of civil rebellion in Guatemala, as also in El Salvador and in Nicaragua, the United States not only assures but advances human suffering in Ceneral America.[28] Nothing the commission headed by Henry Kissinger will recommend is likely to alter the dogmatic, self-serving perspective in which the Reagan Administration views the Central American crisis. For a nation that was itself born of revolutionary struggle, one that supposedly stands for freedom

and dignity everywhere, the ignorance, arrogance and irresponsibility currently displayed by United States foreign policy in Central America is as paradoxical as it is tragic.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo* (1845); Eduardo Mallea, *Historia de una Pasión Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1945); Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *X-Ray of the Pampa* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1971); and Jacobo Timerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

2 Oakland Ross, "Enjoying an Oasis after a Hectic Scene," *Globe and Mail*, 15 April 1982, 8. For a detailed analysis of news coverage of Central America over the past few years, particularly in relation to the March 1982 elections in El Salvador, see Dan Hallin, "The Media Go to War: From Vietnam to Central America," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 17(4), July–August 1983, 2–35.

3 Alexander Cockburn, "Blood and Ink: Keeping Score in El Salvador," *Harper's*, February 1981, 80–83.

4 The words form part of the address presented to the Organization of American States by President Reagan on 24 February 1982, the full text of which appears in the *New York Times*, 25 February 1982, 8.

5 Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, November 1979, 34–45, reprinted in Marvin E. Gettleman, ed., *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War* (New York: Grove Press, 1981), pp. 15–39.

6 Kirkpatrick, in Gettleman, ed., *El Salvador*, p. 36.

7 Quoted in Steven R. Weisman, "The Influence of William Clark: Setting a Hard Line in Foreign Policy," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 August 1983, 17. Of the background and clout of the National Security Adviser, Weisman writes: "Seldom has a man so inexperienced become so powerful in helping to shape United States foreign policy." Mr Clark was relieved of his post on 13 October 1983.

8 Adrián Recinos and Delia Goetz, *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1953), pp. 115–24.

9 Quoted in Bernard Diederich, *Somoza and the Legacy of U.S. Involvement in Central America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981), p. 50.

10 The horror of the civil war is portrayed by Susan Meiselas in her powerful photographic essay *Nicaragua* (London: Writers and Readers, 1981).

11 Diederich, *Somoza*, p. 327 and *Washington Report on the Hemisphere*, 30 November 1982, 1.

12 This was the view expressed by a group of Canadian parliamentarians in their report on *Canada's Relations with Latin America and the Caribbean* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1981), p. 15.

13 See "A Secret War for Nicaragua," *Newsweek*, 8 November 1982, 42–55.

14 Liisa North, *Bitter Grounds: Roots of Revolt in El Salvador* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1981) and Joan Didion, *Salvador* (Toronto: Lester and

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15 Quoted in Alan
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16 *Ibid.*, pp. 196–97.
17 Eric Wolf, *Sons*
1959), p. 63.
18 Benjamin Keen,
Sixteenth-Century
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19 Bernal Díaz del C
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20 Carol A. Smith,
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21 See Nathan L. Wh
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22 Suzanne Jonas ar
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23 Mrs John Peurifoy
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mission on Human
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15 Quoted in Alan Riding, "The Cross and the Sword in Latin America," in Gettleman, ed., *El Salvador*, p. 196.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 196–97.

17 Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 63.

18 Benjamin Keen, quoted in William L. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor in Sixteenth-Century Central America* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 456.

19 Bernal Díaz del Castillo, quoted in J.H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 65.

20 Carol A. Smith, "Beyond Dependency Theory: National and Regional Patterns of Underdevelopment in Guatemala," *American Ethnologist*, 5 (3), August 1978, 589–90.

21 See Nathan L. Whetten, *Guatemala: The Land and the People* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 92–106, and L.B. Fletcher et al, *Guatemala's Economic Development: The Role of Agriculture* (Iowa: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1970). For comparative purposes, see Sven Linqvist, *Land and Power in South America* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979).

22 Suzanne Jonas and David Tobis, *Guatemala* (Berkeley: North American Congress on Latin America, 1974), p. 9.

23 Mrs John Peurifoy, quoted in Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), p. 204.

24 For a chilling exposé of the destabilization activities which led to the overthrow of Salvador Allende, see Seymour M. Hersh, "The Price of Power: Kisinger, Nixon, and Chile," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1982, 31–58.

25 Jacobo Arbenz, quoted in Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, pp. 19–20.

26 For detailed analysis and meticulously documented evidence of human rights violations in Guatemala, see Amnesty International, *Guatemala: A Government Program of Political Murder* (London, 1981); Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Guatemala* (Washington, 1981); and Shelton H. Davis and Julie Hodson, *Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala: The Suppression of a Rural Development Movement* (Boston: Oxfam America, 1982).

27 A grotesque example of the atrocities is reported by Alan Riding, "Guatemalans Tell of Murder of 300," *New York Times*, 12 October 1982, 3. The ferocity unleashed by the Guatemalan armed forces on the Indian peoples of the country prompted an editorial on 14 December 1982 in the *Globe and Mail* (hardly a radical source) which accused the regime of Rios Montt of producing "a ghastly chronicle of barbarism which may be unequalled anywhere else in the world."

28 No one argues this point with as much perception and eloquence as does the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes in "Farewell, Monroe Doctrine," *Harper's*, August 1981, 29–35 and "High Noon in Latin America," *Vanity Fair*, Sept-

ember 1983, 44–51. The same point of view is also nicely articulated by Wayne S. Smith, "Wrong Central American Policy," *New York Times*, 12 October 1982. Other critiques of US foreign policy in Central America include T.D. Allman, "Reagan's Manifest Destiny," *Harper's*, September 1983, 30–39; Shirley Christian, "Washington: Real Policy vs. Applause Lines," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1983, 10–24; Carlos Andrés Pérez, "Respect for Latins," *New York Times*, 14 August 1983; and Robert E. White, "Perilous Latin Policy," *New York Times*, 2 May 1983.