Religion and Counterrevolution:
Fundamentalist Evangelicalism and the Dictatorship of Efraín Ríos Montt

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Introduction

Thank you, my God. You have put me here.[1]
Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982

In the fall of 1981, after a coalition party asked him to be their candidate in the upcoming presidential election, Efraín Ríos Montt assembled his closest friends for advice. Having already experienced the shock of a stolen electoral victory in 1974 and a subsequent three-year "exile" to Spain, Ríos Montt was reluctant to re-enter the realm of politics. In addition, his recent conversion experience with the *Verbo* Church, a group of influential Evangelicals[2] to whom "political involvement was not a natural inclination," further complicated Ríos Montt's decision.[3] How was he to fulfill his civic duties without neglecting his religious responsibilities?
The group of four Americans and four Guatemalans pondered these questions during several days of fasting and reflection at the *Verbo* Church in downtown Guatemala City. On the third day, Church Elder Francisco Bianchi spoke up. "Now is not the time," he told Ríos Montt. "… As we were praying here I had a distinct impression, I believe from the Lord, that another door will be opened to you. And it will be a sovereignly opened door."[4] The others agreed, and Ríos Montt was relieved when the coalition that originally extended the invitation disintegrated. Shortly thereafter, however, Ríos Montt was asked to join another party as their vice presidential candidate. He once more went to his *Verbo* advisors who again told him not to run. On this advice, Ríos Montt officially declared that he would not participate in the 1982 elections.[5]

Meanwhile, thousands of American Evangelical Christians, frightened by the recent Sandanista victory in Nicaragua and apprehensive about a possible guerrilla takeover of Guatemala, prayed for a successful outcome in the 1982 elections. Noting that president Romeo Lucas-García's efforts at defeating the guerrilla insurgency through "state sponsored terror"[6] actually had the opposite effect, these Christians were hoping that an "intercession with Christ" (i.e. a cross-congregational prayer network) would bring about a non-communist peace to Guatemala.[7] Whereas Ríos-Montt's religious convictions were leading him away from politics in the months leading up to the March 1982 election, the American

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[1] Quoted in Davidson, Spencer. "God's Man on Horseback." *Time.* June 21, 1982.
[2] My loose use of the term "Evangelical" encompasses David Stoll's three categories of non-traditional Protestantism in Guatemala: conservative neo-evangelicals, separationist fundamentalists, and Pentecostals. Stoll, David. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 51.
[3] Anfuso, Joseph and Sczepanski, David. *Servant or Dictator? The Real Story of Guatemala's Controversial Born-Again President.* Ventura: GL Publications, 1983, p. 105.
[4] Ibid, p. 106.
[5] Ibid, p. 109. The people present at the meeting were Guatemalans Efraín Ríos Montt, Carlos Ramirez, Alvaro Contreras, Francisco Bianchi; and Americans Jim Degolyer, James Jankowiak, Tom Becotte, and Dick Funnell.
[6] REMHI: Archdiocese of Guatemala, Human Rights Office. "Recovery of Historical Memory Project." 1998, p. 212.
[7] Huntington, Deborah. "God's Saving Plan." *NACLA Report on the Americas*, January/February 1984, p. 40.

Evangelicals that organized the prayer network saw politics as central to their vision for a new Guatemala.

The "intercession" did not work. A few months later, as Ríos Montt settled back into his quiet job as academic director of *Verbo*'s Christian day school in the capital, official government candidate Angel Aníbal Guevara won the "clearly fraudulent" race for the presidency.[8] The result was expected by those familiar with the high levels of corruption and cronyism in Guatemala's oligarchic political circles, but nobody foresaw what would happen in the weeks following the election. On March 23, 1982, between parent-teacher meetings at school, Ríos Montt heard his name announced over the national radio; a coup had taken place and the officers now in charge were calling on him to join their forces. The former General, hesitant to respond to the call for the same reasons that motivated him to decline political candidacy months earlier, conferred with *Verbo* Pastor Carlos Ramirez. They prayed together before the retired General made the decision to meet with coup leaders at the National Plaza. By mid afternoon he had undergone a change of heart, and Ríos Montt was placed in charge of Guatemala's new government.

He accepted the rebelling officers' invitation to head the three-man junta because, in his words, "I believed it was God Himself who brought me to this moment."[9] Playing on this theme, *Newsweek* published an article a few weeks after the coup entitled "God Has Changed Things."[10] Ríos Montt and his supporters interpreted the fact that he had effortlessly achieved the presidency as a sign of Divine mandate. His pastor, Carlos Ramírez said that Ríos Montt "is an instrument of the Lord,"[11] and one of the American preachers that organized the initially unsuccessful "intercession with Christ," called the coup "the greatest miracle of the twentieth century, formed in heaven before it was formed on earth."[12]

Regardless of the extent to which Ríos Montt's coming to power was "formed in heaven," it is clear now that the 1982 coup was the culmination of cross-continental social and political processes that had been taking place, here on earth, for decades. Prior to the coup, Evangelicals within and outside of Guatemala played a decisive role in shaping a society that would accept a non-Catholic president; and once the coup occurred, they continued to have a significant impact on the forming of Ríos Montt's political character. Evangelicalism defined the Ríos Montt administration: it permeated Ríos-Montt's rhetoric, influenced outsiders' views of him, and ultimately led to his removal from office.

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[8] Brockett, Charles. *Land, Power, and Poverty: Agrarian Transformation and Political Conflict in Central America*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998, p. 117.

[9] Quoted in Frazier, Steve. "Born-Again General Reduces the Killings by Guatemala Right." *Wall Street Journal* (date unknown) (CIRMA).

[10] Anfuso and Sczepanski, p. 114, 121, 111.

[11] Quoted in Frazier.

[12] Huntington, p. 40.

In his seventeen months as Guatemala's dictator, an astounding 70,000 Guatemalans were murdered – mostly indigenous Mayas, and almost entirely at the hands of their own government.[13] Extrajudicial executions went through the roof and displaced Mayas were reorganized into "Model Villages," a move which was at best a relocation campaign designed for government social control, and at worst, a network of "concentration camps."[14] Despite the "miracle," that put Ríos Montt into office and gave hope to so many people for a Guatemalan leadership that broke with the violence of the past, historians now agree that Ríos Montt's legacy is that of a "spectacular killer."[15]

Scholars have long argued that cold war hysteria pushed political actors into supporting – or even becoming – oppressive authoritarians in Central America. In most cases, the adoption of repressive political and social measures stemmed from a fear of communism and the perceived threat of its imminent expansion. But free-market zeal was not the only explanation for increased levels of violence during the Ríos-Montt presidency. Rather, a nascent form of politicized fundamentalist Evangelicalism provided the social groundwork, as well as the political muscle and financial support abroad, to legitimize and facilitate a genocidal project in Guatemala.

This paper explores the political impact of religious movements leading up to, and during, the Ríos Montt presidency. Beginning with a short summary of the nation's turbulent political past, I show how political polarization after the 1954 coup mirrored itself in religious division. I trace the impact of fundamentalist Evangelicalism on rural Guatemala, particularly in the realms of education and community organization. Evangelical Christians played a significant role in the development of two institutions designed for political oppression: the Model Village and the Civil Patrol. In my investigation of the United States' importance to the Ríos Montt presidency, I show how the Evangelical connection explains Reagan's insistence on supporting the Ríos Montt regime and Israeli's ability to carry out that support through military aid. The unique marriage of Israeli arms, Guatemalan militarism, American anti-communism, and worldwide born-again Christianity under the administration of Ríos Montt had a lethal result for Guatemala's civilian population.

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[13] CEH: Guatemala: Memory of Silence: Report to the Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999.

[14] Some historians and anthropologists have contested using the term "concentration camp" to describe the "Model Village" program because of its WWII connotations. David Stoll, for example, portrays Model Villages as "nucleated resettlements to bring campesinos as close as possible to their fields while keeping the guerrillas at a distance." Stoll's questionable analysis, however, neatly follows the Guatemalan army's line, and his implication that guerrillas needed to be kept at a distance points to the notion that they were primarily outsiders, and that the guerrilla movements were never "mass movements" as some scholars argue (see the section of this paper entitled "Evangelicals and the Model Villages"). While Model Villages were certainly not as benign as Stoll imagines, nor were they, in the opinion of this writer, "concentration camps." Chasteen, John Charles. *Born in Blood & Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, p. 293; Stoll, David. *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 156.

[15] Blackwell, Judith C., Smith, Murray E.G., and Sorenson, Jon. *Culture of Prejudice: Arguments in Critical Social Science*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003, p. 60.

Revolution and Reaction

Ríos Montt was not Guatemala's first controversial president. By 1944 President-General Jorge Ubico y Castañeda, the enigmatic Guatemalan dictator, known both for his close friendship with the United States as well as for saying "I am like Hitler - I execute first and hold trial afterward," knew he could no longer stand up to the nationalistic and democratic climate of the period.[16] Students were striking, and fascism's imminent defeat in Europe "opened up a space within Guatemala for a full frontal attack on the dictatorship."[17] Escalating violence in the capital forced Ubico to step down in June of 1944. But his voluntarily exit was not enough to satisfy urban reformers and student activists. Guatemala's new political class wanted revolution, not reform.

Shortly after Ubico's ouster from office, Juan José Arévalo received a telegram inviting him to return to Guatemala to participate in the upcoming presidential election. He had been in "exile" in Argentina for eight years, and the decision to invite him home started as a whim on the part of a few friends from the newly formed teacher's party.[18] But the whim was soon embraced by the nation, and when Arévalo arrived in Guatemala on September 2, 1944 Guatemalans greeted him with praise and excitement. Ubico's illegitimate successor, Federico Ponce, barely set foot in office before being ousted in an armed revolt. Arévalo easily won the December elections, and the "Revolution's" first president took office in March.

Ironically, the scene was reminiscent of Efraín Ríos Montt's coming to power nearly forty years later. Despite the drastic differences in their political policies, both were seen as a good and honest man whose presidencies signified "a break with the past."[19] Arévalo, like Ríos Montt, "could be all things to all people," thanks to a long absence from the public eye. Like 1982, 1944 saw a politically fragmented Guatemala in which a charismatic savior figure embodied the nation's hopes for change.

Arévalo indeed brought change to Guatemala. He implemented the reforms of a new constitution, gave women the right to vote, and oversaw the proliferation of labor unions. He was popular, and his six year presidency met internal resistance only from the nation's most conservative elements, which included the Catholic Church. Although he openly espoused socialist leanings, he did so in the spirit of Franklin D. Roosevelt, condemning Marxism. Thus, Arévalo managed to receive the United States' partial blessing towards the beginning of his six-year

[16] Quoted in James, Daniel. *Red Design for the Americas: Guatemalan Prelude*. New York: The John Day Company, 1954, p. 35.
[17] Jonas, Susanne. *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991, p. 22.
[18] Gleijeses, Piero. *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 34.
[19] Schlesinger, Stephen and Kinzer, Stephen. *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 31.

presidency. But his 1947 Labor Code ensured agricultural workers rights similar to industrial workers, a move that angered the owners of American corporations in the region like the United Fruit Company. Arévalo's reforms roused suspicion of communist leanings from observers in Washington, and in 1949 the issue came before congress. To American politicians, American business was "being persecuted" under Arévalo, communist infiltration in the Guatemalan government was certain, and the nation was "a nightmarish world infested not only by communists, but also… protocommunists, fellow travelers, extreme leftists, and radical leftists."[20]

1950 saw a worsening of Guatemala's image in the eyes of American policymakers. The moderate Arévalo's political career had come to an end, and the government candidate, Jacobo Arbenz, was decisively more radical. Pitted against conservative Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, Arbenz easily won. His victory was a sign that the Guatemalan people were happy with the October Revolution's gains, and a mandate that they wanted more. Accordingly, Arbenz gathered his closest advisors (many of whom were indeed communists) and outlined a draft for an agrarian reform program. The bill passed, and American anti-communists went haywire. While the Arbenz government expropriated huge land holdings from corporations like the United Fruit Company, the CIA compiled a hit list of the administration's most influential communist members and even considered presidential assassination.[21] The State Department decided to support a covert coup, and in 1954 the CIA - along with support from Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza, the United Fruit Company, and the Honduran military – forced Arbenz to resign in favor of the staunchly anti-communist Carlos Castillo Armas.[22]

El País Polarizado

Castillo Armas outlawed unions, arrested over 9,000 Guatemalans and tortured many of them, cancelled the nation's land reform program, and formed a "National Committee of Defense against Communism" to appease his CIA sponsors.[23] He then held an election which he won with 99.99% of the vote. The American press was friendly to the Guatemalan president, justifying his absurd electoral victory by noting that it would be "unfair to expect anything else so soon after a revolution against a Communist-dominated regime."[24] Similarly, American political leadership chose to overlook clear signs of political repression during this time;

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[20] Gleijeses, 35, 101, 132.
[21] Declassified CIA document. "A Study of Assassination." Unsigned, undated. In *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 4*. Accessed through www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsaebb/nsaebb4/index.html on 22 October, 2007.
[22] Schlesinger and Kinzer, 199.
[23] A distinction should be made between the human rights violations committed by the Castillo Armas regime and those of later regimes like Ríos Montt's. Torture and random disappearances of suspected political opponents was indeed a strategy used by Castillo Armas, but in a way that was "not systematic." Likewise, substantial evidence exists showing United States government knowledge of torture under Ríos Montt, but not under Castillo Armas: Hey, Hilde. *Gross Human Rights Violations: A Search for Causes*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, p. 34. Also see: Barry, Tom and Beth Wood, Deb Preusch, James Petras . *Dollars & Dictators: A Guide to Central America*. Ann Arbor: Grove Press, 1983, p. 120.
[24] "Voting in Guatemala." Editorial. *The New York Times*. October 12, 1954, p. 26. Quoted in Gleijeses, p. 383.

Vice President Richard Nixon celebrated "the first instance in history when a Communist government has been replaced by a free one"[25] and President Dwight Eisenhower called Castillo Armas' death in 1957 "a great loss to the entire free world."[26]

It was neither the first nor the last time that the United States would exercise its military might in Guatemala in order to shape a hemisphere accordant with its political and social goals. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles proclaimed the coup the "biggest success in the last five years against communism."[27] Nonetheless, replacing a popular and democratically-elected president with the autocratic Castillo Armas, a man whose friends admitted "didn't know what he was doing,"[28] radicalized the left, emboldened the right, and threw the nation into a four decade succession of violent confrontations between dissatisfied reformers and revolutionaries and an oppressive government apparatus.

The 1954 coup started a cycle of polarization and violence which would culminate nearly three decades later under the administration of Ríos Montt. The American reception to Castillo Armas' regime laid the foundation for a pattern of American behavior in which state-sponsored violence in Guatemala was either ignored or portrayed as necessary for fighting communism in the third world. The trend, which justified oppression as "cultural," continued well into the Ríos Montt years. As one contemporary of the period wrote, "force and violence are so much a part of Hispanic culture that it is fair to say they are institutionalized in Latin American politics."[29]

Although the United States dealt with Castillo Armas and Ríos Montt in similarly warm fashion at the beginning of their presidencies, Ríos Montt's regime mobilized a completely different segment of American society for support. Though both leaders took strong stands against communism and shaped their domestic policy around reflecting values and practices that would garner U.S. economic aid, only Ríos Montt offered the charisma, conviction, controversy, and connections to divide the American president and Congress on the issue of funding for his regime. Reagan and the Christian right went on a crusade to ensure that during the Ríos Montt years American interest in supporting the Guatemalan "opportunity" would not dwindle as it did in the years following Castillo Armas' 1954 coup.[30]

From 1954 until the early 1980s Guatemala saw military dictatorship after military dictatorship. Under the guise of the "National Security Doctrine," the

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[25] Quoted in Wright, Ronald. *Time Among the Maya: Travels in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico*. Ann Arbor: Grove Press, p. 136.
[26] Quoted in Lafeber, Walter. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993, p. 127.
[27] McPherson, Alan. *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*. Washington: Potomac Books, 2006, p. 39.
[28] Schlesinger and Kinzer, p. 122.
[29] Stokes, William S. "Violence: The South American Way." *United Nations World*. December, 1951. As quoted in James, Daniel. *Red Design for the Americas: Guatemalan Prelude*. New York: The John Day Company, 1954., p. 247.
[30] Brockett, Charles. "An Illusion of Omnipotence: U.S. Policy Toward Guatemala, 1954-1960." *Latin American Politics and Society* 44/1, Spring, 2002, p. 110.

successive regimes of Castillo Armas, Ydígoras, Peralta, and Menendez increased oppression against even moderate political dissidents.[31] Kidnappings and murders terrorized the cities, and rural peasants faced increased militarization of daily life. In the 1960s, intellectuals and urban elites flocked to Izabal and Zacapa where they organized the first guerrilla units. They enjoyed early success, but failed to mobilize the masses, and only a few urban guerrillas held the insurgency together going into the 1970 elections. Ironically, the PGT (*Guatemalan Workers' Party*)[32], which had united with the FAR (*Rebel Armed Forces*) called on its members to vote for the government candidate, General Carlos Arana Osorio, a rightist counterrevolutionary, in order to further polarize society and encourage greater levels of oppression, thus driving moderates to support the guerrillas.

The plan worked. Arana took office in the summer of 1970 and, after a relatively calm first few months, "unleashed a brutal wave of terror."[33] Arana declared a state of siege and state-sponsored strikes against laborer organizers, journalists, and other suspected subversives increased substantially.[34] After a fraudulent electoral victory in 1974, General Kjell Laugerud, Arana's former defense minister, attempted to initiate a certain level of reforms, but violence and repression, particularly in rural areas, continued.[35] Laugerud's defense minister, General Romeo Lucas García, won the 1978 elections the mild political opening offered by the Laugerud regime immediately ended. These military leaders put the rapid defeat of the guerrilla movement at the top of their priorities, and often used questionable tactics to achieve what they considered just ends. As state oppression increased, so too did support for the guerrillas. Just as the PGT had hoped, the "climate of terror" motivated formerly apolitical or moderate Guatemalans to radicalize.[36] Significantly, the groups most radicalized by the violence were the same groups targeted by Ríos Montt: the majority Indigenous population and the Roman Catholic Church.

Liberation Theology and a Politicized Church

Chepe, an American priest of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, came to Guatemala in 1970. What he perceived as persecution of the Catholic Church by

[31] Shortly after Castillo Armas' assassination in 1957, army candidate Miguel Ydígoras won elections. Like his predecessor, Ydígoras continued in the tradition of "arrests, kidnappings, executions, [and] military tribunals," but State repression was not nearly as high as under Castillo Armas and sucessors. The nation's first guerrilla groups, inspired by Cuba, formed after a failed 1961 coup. Later, these groups united with the PGT (Guatemala's banned communist party) to form the first unified rebel force. By the time Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurida assumed the presidency in a 1963 coup, the *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* had grown enough to warrant doubling the number of government troops in rural areas. Peralta's presidency saw increased urban repression and the conflict's first rural massacres. The model continued under Julio César Méndez Menendez (1966-1970), who allowed for greater military control over the executive. "Chronology of Events During the Armed Confrontation in Guatemala, 1962-1966." CEH.

[32] All translations by author.

[33] Ibid, pp. 202-203.

[34] Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central* America, p. 209; Black, George. *Garrison Guatemala*. London: Zed Books, 1984, p. 33

[35] Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central America*, pp. 210-211.

[36] REMHI, p. 211.

the State and State-sponsored groups drove him to embrace leftist Christianity shortly after arrival.[37] Young and impressionable, he became a collaborator of the EGP (*Guatemalan Army of the Poor*) four years after his arrival. In 1980, he was sent to the department of Sololá where several priests had been disappeared by the State. When his Bishop asked him to leave the country for safety's sake, Chepe, having already been a collaborator with the guerrilla movement, left the Church and joined the EGP full-time. "The only reason I joined the guerrilla movement was because of the situation," he says.[38] In a process similar to many other priests and catechists who took up arms to fight what they saw as an opressive State, Chepe's entrée into the EGP (and later the URNG[39]) was the Church. Like many other revolutionary organizations of the time, the EGP had close links to elements of the Catholic Church: "the ones that I lived with underground, they were all Catholics," he says.[40] Patricia, a Guatemalan Catholic that went to Mexico to become a nun, came back as an EGP militant. "That, to me, was being a Christian… I joined as a Christian."[41] Cases of Catholics shifting to the left caused the State to increase oppression against the Church as a means of defending itself. This, in turn, pushed more Catholics to taking up arms, a move which further distanced the Church from the State and opened the window for Evangelical success.

Chepe and Patricia's transformations took place within the context of a rapidly changing Latin American Church. Like the Guatemalan government, the Catholic Church underwent drastic changes in the decades following the 1944 October Revolution. Allied to the conservative elite since the Colonial period, Church leaders were highly critical of the Arévalo and Arbenz administrations. They praised the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup, and like Eisenhower, mourned the death of Castillo Armas. In a eulogy to the former president, Archbishop Mariano Rossell wrote: "May the liberty that you gave to your people be effective and ever lasting."[42] In the early post-coup period, Church and State could count on each other for support against the threat of communism.

Conservatives continued make up a majority of the institutional Catholic Church throughout the 20th century, but the 1960s saw the emergence of a different form of Catholicism . Just as Kennedy tried to prevent revolution by pushing for reform under the Alliance for Progress, so too did the Catholic Church attempt to stem the tide of radicalism by making concessions to those wanting social

[37] In the late 1960s, secret organizations with names like "An Eye for an Eye" and "The Hawk of Justice" published death lists of suspected subversives, many of whom were in the Catholic Church. Black, p. 51.
[38] Interview by author with Chepe (real name withheld), July 25, 2007.
[39] URNG is an acronym for the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity), an umbrella group formed in 1982 by the EGP (Ejército Guatemalteco de los Pobres – Guatemalan Army of the Poor); the O.R.P.A. (Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo Armado – The Revolutionary Organization of the Armed People); the F.A.R. (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias – the Revolutionary Armed Forces); and the P.G.T. (Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajadores – Guatemalan Workers' Party).
[40] Interview by author with Chepe, July 25, 2007.
[41] Interview by author with Patricia, August 3, 2007.
[42] Quoted in Saxon, Dan. To Save Her Life: Dissappearance, Deliverance, and the United States in Guatemala. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p. 68.

change.[43] Vatican II (1962-1965) reoriented the Church towards contemporary life and "the most honorable art of politics,"[44] while Catholic Action[45] penetrated into Guatemala's rural highlands, spreading orthodoxy, teaching literacy, and organizing peasants into networks which would later be utilized by guerrillas.[46] Meanwhile, Latin America's Bishops gathered in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 to consider how best to implement the Vatican Council's reforms. There, they endorsed a "preferential option for the poor," denounced state-sponsored violence and tyranny, and called for Catholics to take an active stand against political, social, and economic injustice.[47] Medellín became a "Magna Carta" for an emergent school of leftist clerics known as Liberation Theologians, "shatter[ing] the centuries-old alliance of Church, military, and the rich elites."[48] Liberation Theology, which taught that the poor should strive for political freedoms and social justice "through consciousness raising and organizing" is central to understanding State paranoia of Catholicism as well as the appeal that Evangelicalism offered to moderates.[49]

Reaction to Reforms

We make no distinction between the Catholic Church and the communist subversives.[50]
Colonel Roberto Matta, 1982

We had to bury our Bibles.[51]
Father Chepe, 2007

Reforms and Liberation Theology had mixed results for the Catholic Church. At its core, these movements were part of an effort to save a traditional institution from a progressive political climate; as Anthony Gill points out, opposing oppression was a clever "membership retention strategy" in the face of competing ideologies like communism and Protestantism.[52] But the reactions to reform, both from the left and the right, clearly went beyond what Church reformists could have

[43] Kearney, Michael. "Religion, Ideology, and Revolution in Latin America." *Latin American Perspectives* 13/3, Summer, 1986, p. 4.
[44] The Documents of Vatican II. New York: 1966, pp. 286-287.
[45] Ironically, Catholic Action was initiated in 1946 by conservative Catholics hoping to strengthen the Church and create a "new organization to be a counterreformation that would protect their parishioners from the lure of communism." Stoll, David. *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999, p. 90.
[46] Brockett, Charles. *Political Movements and Violence in Central America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 133.
[47] Conference of Latin American Bishops: Final Document. Medellín Colombia. 6 September, 1968. Accessed through http://personal.stthomas.edu/gwschlabach/docs/medellin.htm on 22 October, 2007.
[48] Lernoux, Penny. *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America – The Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. Policy*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 36-37.
[49] Mcpherson, p. 83.
[50] Quoted in Black, p. 141.
[51] Interview with C.
[52] Gill, Anothony J. "Rendering unto Caesar? Religious Competition and Catholic Political Strategy in Latin America, 1962-1979." *American Journal of Political Science* 38/2, May, 1994, p. 405.

expected. Like Pérez, many priests surprised their superiors by embracing revolutionary political organizations, a move which caused conservatives to confuse reformists with revolutionaries, and accuse the Church of having turned red. Liberation Theology's willingness to use sociology and even Marxist analysis in theological discussion placed the Church "squarely within the process of revolution," and the danger that this transition posed to Guatemala's conservative oligarchy and America's anti-communist vanguard did not go unnoticed.[53]

As segments of the Church radicalized it came under increased scrutiny from authorities. In 1974 the first Central American Anticommunist Congress declared that "priests betrayed Christ when they became the accomplices of the guerrillas and communist violence."[54] The Lucas-García regime was openly hostile to the Church, and the years leading up to Ríos Montt's coup saw a proliferation of public and private groups focused on criticizing Catholic leftism.[55] Priests accused of being communists ended up on hit lists, fled the country for fear of their lives, or were killed.[56] As many Protestants and conservative Catholics began to associate the Church with communism, Liberation Theologians fought back, accusing their critics of being tools of a C.I.A.-orchestrated campaign to discredit one of the only organizations with the courage and means to challenge oppressive military dictatorships.[57]

The debate about the Church's political role was not limited to Guatemala. Nelson Rockefeller's 1969 report to President Nixon sheds light on American attitudes towards revolutionary Christianity in Latin America. Written in the immediate aftermath of Vatican II and Medellín, the report makes recommendations for winning the ideological war with Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban forces which had united to commit "acts of subversion, terror, and violence" in Latin America. Rockefeller compared the Catholic Church to Latin American youth, calling it an institution "with a profound idealism, but as a result in some cases, vulnerable to subversive penetration."[58] The view that Catholicism was being used by foreign radicals in Guatemala thus resonated not only with the

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[53] Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation* (trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson). New York: Orbis Books, 1973, as quoted in McPherson, p. 164.

[54] "Iglesia y Subversión: Las Declaraciones de Sandvoal A." *La República de China*. April 30, 1977.

[55] The E.S.A. (ejército secreto anticomunista) issued anonymous threats to politically-inclined Church leaders, particularly foreigners, demanding that they leave the country. . The Guatemalan government also criticized leftist Catholics, declaring that "political Jesuits lie in order to contribute to the subversion. They throw on the cassock to do politics Meanwhile, private groups like Fundación de Padres de Familia (Parents' Foundation) bought advertisements in national newspapers calling for the government to enforce the full rule of law against religious schoolteachers who had given in to "the poison of communist indoctrination," and for parents to remove their children from "schools in which Marxist doctrine is taught." "Gobierno Responde a la Compañia de Jesús," "Jesuitas amenazados de muerte por el ejercito secreto anticomunista." *Politicas*. January 24, 1980 "Los Religiosos No Deben Intervenir en Política." *Diario El Imparcial*. January 25, 1980.

[56] Calderón, José S. "Acusan de ser Marxistas a los Padres Maristas de Guatemala." *Excelsior de Mexico*. October 19, 1979; "Comunicado de Prensa de la Diocesis de la Verapaz." *Diario Gráfico*. May 13, 1980; "Jornada de Ayuno y Oración por el Asesinato del Padre Walter Voordeckers…" *Diaro La Tarde*. May 15, 1980; "Statement of the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC), ante el Asesinato del P. Hermogenes López y ante los Atropellos que Suere el Pueblo de Guatemala." Though undated, the CUC statement most likely comes from late 1978, when López was killed.

[57] In a widely published declaration, Jesuit anthropologist Ricardo Falla wrote that "the C.I.A. has advised Latin American governments on a strategy to keep fighting the progressive movements of the Catholic Church…" Salazar, José Calderon. "Represión de la CIA contra Movimientos Progresistas de la Iglesia: un Jesuita." *El Excelsior de Mexico*. April 9, 1977.

[58] Rockefeller, Nelson A. *The Rockefeller Report on the Americas: The official report of a United States presidential mission for the western hemisphere*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969, pp. 31, 35.

Guatemalan right, but also with President Nixon[59] and subsequent American presidential administrations.[60] Public condemnation of the Catholic Church and the resulting cycle of radicalization opened the doors for a new presence in the Guatemalan religious sphere: Evangelical Protestantism.

The Evangelical Explosion

Though Protestantism's roots in Guatemala can be traced back to the 19th century when the Liberal president Justo Rufino Barrios invited North American missionaries to the country to help "civilize" the Indians, it remained on the fringe of the nation's religious scene for nearly a century. However, on February 4, 1976, an earthquake devastated Guatemala, killing 20,000 and leaving over one million homeless. The Catholic Church, internally fractured and externally targeted, was not able to organize a mass relief effort. Likewise, the Guatemalan state, distracted by the guerrilla resurgence and financially in ruin, was in no shape to deal with the humanitarian crisis. Guatemalan Protestant groups were small and divided. North American Protestant missionaries took up the cause and orchestrated reconstruction programs hoping to "rebuild Guatemala physically and retrofit it spiritually." Numerous groups rushed into Guatemala, and those that stayed in the United States held rallies and fund-raisers in support of the relief efforts. Thus, although the earthquake took place in Chimaltenango, the relief efforts' epicenter was in the United States.

American Evangelical involvement beginning in 1976 had a significant impact on both the earthquake recovery effort as well as the fabric of Guatemalan society. Almost immediately, thousands of Guatemalans converted to Evangelical Protestantism. Though critics saw the radical changes being made to the nation's religious profile as the natural consequence of material benefits (in the form of Church aid), Virginia Garrard-Burnett points out that these converts were no Vietnamese-style "Rice Christians." On the contrary, Evangelicalism's message resonated with Guatemalans and the Protestant revolution continued well after the short-term mission trips that came as a result of the earthquake had left.[61]

With the devastating nature of the earthquake and the already "precarious material condition of the beaten masses," Guatemalans were apt to "adopt a message that 'rationalized' theodicy."[62] As one American missionary group's leaders wrote, "the disturbing moral, economic, social, and religious situation in which our country and the world live is precisely the fulfillment of the prophecy of

[59] The Rockefeller Report "became the basis of Nixon's Latin American policy." Lernoux, pp. 58-59.
[60] Concerned about communist infiltration in the Church, Jimmy Carter requested increased intelligence services surveillance of Catholic "religious and lay movements" in 1979. Fernandez, F.P. "Pide Carter Espiar a Religosos Liberales." *El Excelsior*. February 3, 1979.
[61] Garrard-Burnett, Virginia. *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem.* Austin: Univesity of Texas Press, 1998, pp. 12, 121.
[62] Bastián, Jean Pierre. "Protestantismo Popular y Política en Guatemala y Nicaragua." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 48, 3, July-September, 1986, p. 133.

humanity's last days."[63] In a process similar to the Christianization of the Americas following the rapid demographic decline that resulted from European diseases, cataclysmic events facilitated foreign conversion efforts since those not suffering seemed to enjoy some sort of "divine" protection. And though proponents of these changes argued that conversion was a natural process stemming from an encounter with the power of faith, it cannot be denied that association to an American Evangelical church in the aftermath of the earthquake had its material benefits. In what Stoll calls "disaster evangelism," groups' attracted members both for the ideological and social changes that they offered. [64] Indeed, at the crux of the enormous conversion rates of 1976 was the combination of "material and spiritual improvement."[65] In 1976 alone, membership to Evangelical Protestant Churches shot up 14%.[66]

The Evangelical explosion changed more than just Guatemala's religious landscape. The majority of groups participating in the relief efforts were American Evangelicals that identified with one or another variant of Pentecostalism.[67] These missionaries brought with them not only conservative religious principles but also staunchly American values, and they almost universally saw communism as anti-Christian. They read the Bible literally, and understood events like the worsening guerrilla war and the earthquake as signs of a coming apocalypse. Though they claimed to be apolitical, that eschewal of politics was itself a political act and meant de facto support for the repressive the regimes of Laugerud and Lucas-García. Indeed, by making the switch to Protestantism, converts shed off the association with an organization that the State considered "subversive" (the Catholic Church), and were therefore less likely to be targeted by the army or paramilitary organizations. Thus, both the civil war and the earthquake can be understood as events that hastened Guatemala's transition to Evangelicalism.

That fundamentalist efforts were met with approval by the oppressive government in no way troubled missionaries since the prerogative of conversion superceded that of social reform. After all, as Stoll again shows us, even the fundamentalist reading of the Bible called for non-confrontation with the State.[68] The Evangelical view of the Church as separate from society engendered a

[63] Campus Crusade for Christ, an organization based in California, offered outreach programs in the years following the earthquake. The quote comes the leaders of the group's Guatemala branch. "Private Organizations with U.S. Connections – Guatemala." The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center. Albuquerque, 1998, p. 126.
[64] Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* p. 10.
[65] Martin, David. *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*. Blackwell: Cambridge, 1990, p. 219.
[66] Huntington, p. 41.
[67] In the early 1970s, less than 20% of Guatemalan Protestants were Pentecostal. By the mid 1980s, not only had the number of Protestants increased dramatically, but also the percentage of Protestants that were Pentecostal rose to over 80%. "El Crecimiento de la Derecha Religiosa en Centroamérica." *El Boletín*. Albuquerque: The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 1987, p. 7.
[68] Stoll points out that there are two basic tenants to the "apolitical" nature of Evangelicalism in Latin America. The first is a respect for the United States since its material wealth demonstrates its position as "the world capital of true religion." The second is a reading of the Bible, namely Romans 13:1, which calls for obedience to existing governments since they are divinely-ordained. Stoll, David. *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire? The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America*. Cambridge: Zed Press, 1982, p. 7.

political shift from contentious action to passivity.[69] Thus, the expansion of Evangelicalism in Guatemala coincided neatly with American interests in the region as well as those of the Guatemalan ruling classes and military. The focus on personal, as opposed to structural, sin de-radicalized the converted masses. The emphasis on otherworldly salvation translated itself into a decrease in political strife. The acceptance of government power as divine authority meant a distancing from the dangerous tenants of liberation theology, and the promotion of religion as a means to material advancement melded well with the concerns of many Guatemalans in the economic climate of the post-earthquake years. Evangelical expansion in Guatemala meant an endorsement of capitalism and a rejection of communism. By "preaching individual conversion, the glories of military and political authority, the virtues of capitalism, and the value of inequality," Evangelical organizations were an important counter to leftist Catholicism.[70]

The expansion of Evangelical Churches in Guatemala coincided with the interests of North American intelligence programs. A 1975 article in *Christianity Today* points out that up to 25% of American foreign missionaries had given information to American intelligence services. The same article says that Luis Palau (a popular Latin American evangelist at the time) was regularly debriefed, along with nearly his entire staff, by the CIA.[71] Prior to 1976, the CIA went so far as to directly recruit missionaries.[72] Though a secret program, neither the CIA nor their religious accomplices saw the program as problematic – after all, "most missionaries shared the concerns of their government, particularly about the spread of communism."[73] When the program was exposed, the CIA agreed to stop paying informants but would continue permitting "voluntary contacts or voluntary exchange of information."[74]

Evangelical schools, which conveyed both obedience to the State as well as allegiance to capitalism, shot through the roof during this period.. As Susan D. Rose and Steve Brouwer's study of Evangelical education in Guatemala shows, "the materials, organization and funding [came] largely… from North American religious and business organizations." If Catholic high schools were indeed "centers of Marxist indoctrination" (as the Guatemalan government said), then Protestant schools served to counter those tendencies in what the authors call "Fundamentalist Americanism".[75] Curricula came largely from North American corporations like Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), and taught that "Catholics are non-Christians and Jews are not accepted by God [and] that secular

[69] Dominguez, Enrique and Huntington, Deborah. "The Salvation Brokers: Conservative Evangelicals in Central America." *The North American Congress on Latin America Report on the Americas* 18/1, January/February, 1984, p. 19.
[70] Lafeber, p. 224.
[71] Diamond, Sara. "Holy Warriors." *NACLA Report on the Americas*. New York, 1998.
[72] Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?* p. 7.
[73] Lernoux, p. 283.
[74] Quoted in Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?* p. 7.
[75] Quoted in "From Jesuit to Murderer: The Case of Pellecer Faena." REMHI: Archdiocese of Guatemala, Human Rights Office. "Recovery of Hisotrical Memory Project." 1998, p. 169.

humanism and relativism are diabolical dangers in the public schools." [76] Even Churches without official schools engaged in informal educational programs using radio, television, and books from partner or parent teachers in the United States.[77]

In this climate, El Verbo, Ríos Montt's own church, was established. Five weeks after the earthquake struck American Carlos Ramirez led a group of members from Gospel Outreach in Eureka, California to Guatemala. There they established a small church that quickly grew within middle- and upper-class circles. Alvaro Contreras, an advertising executive, supported the group and convinced the manager of Guatemala's Channel Eleven, Francisco Bianchi, to join. Through Luis Chang, Bianchi's friend and Ríos Montt's former soldier, the General himself was brought in. Ríos Montt was quick to become active in the church; he attended rallies and Bible studies, and became Academic Director of the Church's school.[78] Verbo preachers and teachers, like those in other Evangelical schools at the time, relied on "the twin themes of obedience and discipline… reflect[ing] the primary demands of God and state."[79]

Publications from Verbo members are useful for shedding light on Ríos Montt's mindset in the years leading up to and during his presidency. In 1980, Gospel Outreach pastor Jim Durkin, along with Joseph Anfuso and David Sczepanski, published *The Coming World Crisis*. The book is permeated with Biblical quotes and prophesizes "earth-shaking events." It states that war is inevitable since "war is in the heart of man," and calls on its readers to prepare by stocking wheat, milk, beans, salt, nutritional supplements, and peanut butter. Its apocalyptic tone is complemented by a cover that portrays Soviet soldiers with Muslim militants on one side, and George Washington and the statue of liberty on the other. The book attacks humanism and relativism as the causes of society's ills and portrays knowledge of God as society's only hope.

Another book by Anfuso and Sczepanski, published after Ríos Montt's tenure in office, paints the dictator as a gentle, quiet, and pensive Christian who fell victim to an international "smear campaign." According to the authors, Ríos Montt's critics were "feeding exclusively on a diet of highly politicized propaganda," from "religious organizations sympathetic to revolutionary movements." The book blames "terrorist organizations" for brainwashing the press and human rights organizations, and accuses Amnesty International of being a communist cover group.[80] Verbo leaders intentionally and actively promoted Ríos Montt's regime. These books were part of a concerted campaign to discredit Ríos Montt's opponenents by paining the picture of an honest, Christian man who had fallen victim to merciless attacks from communists.

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[76] Rose, Susan D. and Brouwer, Steve. "The Export of Fundamentalist Americanism: U.S. Evangelical Education in Guatemala." *Latin American Perspectives* 17, 4, Autumn, 1990, pp. 42-56.
[77] Dominguez and Huntington, p. 19.
[78] Anfuso and Sczepanski, pp. 82-101.
[79] Rose and Brouwer, p. 50.
[80] Durkin, Jim and Joseph Anfuso, David Sczepanski. *The Coming World Crisis: How You Can* Prepare. Plainfield: Haven Books, 1980, p. 14, 84-94, back cover, 134, 136.

Evangelical expansion in Guatemala resulted in profound social transformations that would alter the political make-up of society in the years leading up to the Ríos Montt coup. Foreign missionaries brought with them conservative political and fundamentalist religious ideologies that were spread in the aftermath of the earthquake through relief efforts and schools. Many of the temporary Churches established after the quake remained, and Evangelical Protestantism grew even in places where missionaries had not been. As the nation splintered, political division manifested itself in the realm of religion. The escalating violence between the military and the guerrillas mirrored a process of religious polarization in which Catholics identified more closely with the former group and Evangelicals with the latter. The Guatemalan government was welcoming Rightist Evangelicals into the country just as it was kicking leftist Jesuits out (with the Pope's support).[81] Both government and guerrillas saw religion as central to winning the war; anti-communist Evangelicals condemned Catholic radicals for putting politics before spirituality, and Catholics charged Evangelicals with dividing and "confusing" the masses, "fabricating" conservative political doctrines, and being "accomplices… to the causes of men's suffering."[82] Civil society became polarized, and the stakes of the war took on religious significance. Though the apocalyptic mindset of men like those that started El Verbo was still the exception in the late 1970s, fundamentalist forms of Christianity were rapidly growing in the country; these movements would be granted unprecedented access to power with Reagan and Ríos Montt's ascendancy to the presidencies of their respective nations in the 1980s.

The Santa Fe Report and the Kirkpatrick Doctrine

The problem is not human rights. The problem is leftist humans.[83]
A Guatemalan Colonel, 1982

In 1980, soon-to-be president Ronald Reagan met with influential conservatives from the Council for Inter-American Security (of whom three would later receive posts in the Reagan administration).[84] They presented to him their recently published "A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties." The document, commonly known as the Santa Fe Report, would become for Reagan was the Rockefeller Report was for Nixon: the basis of many of his foreign policy decisions. Using the same apocalyptic language as Ríos Montt's Evangelical

[81] In addition to threats from the aforementioned anonymous death squads and the military itself, Catholic priests, the majority of whom were foreign, faced the possibility of expulsion from the country for being "extranjeros indeseables" (undesirable foreigners). "Mensaje de los grupos Cristianos al pueblo de Guatemala ante la expulsion del padre Carlos Stetter y la situación de injusticia que vive el país. *La Nacion*. January 5, 1979.
[82] De Avile, Monica Buse. "Para Reflexionar Sobre Las Sectas." Published by the Bishopric of Cajamarca, Peru.
[83] Quoted in Nairn, Allan. "Guatemala Can't Take Two Roads." *The New York Times*. July 20, 1982.
[84] Among the committee members that were tapped for posts under Reagan were Patrick Buchanan, Lewis Tambs, Gordon Sumner, Roger Fontaine. Lowy, Michael (trans. Pompan, Claudia). "Marxism and Christianity in Latin America." *Latin American Perspectives* 20/4, Autumn, 1993, p. 28; "Council for Inter-American Security." From *International Relations Center Online*. Accessed through http://rightweb.irc-online.org/gw/1588 on 24 October 2007.

brethren, the CIS declared that communist infiltration in Latin America threatened American "sovereignty and… cultural identity," and that "survival demands a new U.S. foreign policy." Rather than give evidence of Soviet infiltration in either the Church or insurgent organizations, the Committee argued that *internal* groups were the threat to hemispheric security. Finally, the committee endorsed U.S.-friendly rulers, even authoritarian ones, as better than the alternative (communists). After all, the committee argued that "human rights is a culturally and politically relative concept [that] must be abandoned and replaced by … a policy of ethical realism."[85] The "cultural" justification for violence and repression was nothing new;[86] since the 1950s, American interventionists had rationalized their cause with the belief that it was impossible to "democratize governments, anytime, anywhere, under any circumstances."[87] Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations, made clear in a 1979 essay how the administration would handle human rights objections to its support for authoritarian regimes. Since residents of Third World nations only "intermittently enjoyed the rights accorded to the citizens in the Western Democracies," it was inappropriate to apply the same human rights standards to these countries' leaders.[88] In short, human rights had to be sacrificed as a casualty in the mighty war of good versus evil. The result was that "human rights plummeted in importance," during the Reagan administration.[89]

The blatant disregard that Washington political thinkers espoused for human rights, the social changes brought on by the Evangelical explosion, the increase in guerrilla support from the indigenous population, and the Guatemalan populace's growing weariness of the Lucas-García regime set the stage for Ríos Montt's presidency. All the pieces were in place except for a friendly American president – though Jimmy Carter supported efforts to stop Soviet expansion in Central America, his "absolute" commitment to human rights meant Guatemala was no longer receiving military aid from the United States. And while the next American president, Ronald Reagan, was unable to restore aid to the extent he wished, he was able to reverse Carter's more significant strikes "at the Guatemalan government's reputation.[90]

In part, the Committee's report was a reaction to the changes happening in Latin America's influential Catholic Church. In 1979, Bishops had met in Puebla, Mexico, where they issued a document condemning injustice and authoritarianism just as they had at Medellín a decade earlier. In response, the Santa Fe Report attacked the Catholic Church for "the subversive quality of liberation theology."[91] It echoed the sentiments of Ríos Montt's congregants Anfuso and Sczepanski who

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[85] The Committee of Santa Fe. *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties.* Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, 1980. In Mcpherson, pp. 91, 92

[86] See Stokes in James, p. 247.

[87] Quoted in Carter, Jimmy. *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005, p. 99.

[88] Kirkpatrick, Jeanne J. "Dictatorships and Double Standards." *Commentary Magazine*. November, 1979. Commentary Magazine Online. http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm?id=6189 Accessed November 11, 2007.

[89] Lafeber, p. 276.

[90] Ibid, pp. 210.

[91] Budde, Michael L. *The Two Chuches: Catholicism & Capitalism in the World-system.* Raleigh: Duke University Press, 1992, p. 46.

charged "a network of 'solidarity' groups, 'peace and justice committees,' and even religious organizations," with communist collaboration.[92] The report said that the United States needed to "begin to counter… liberation theology as it is utilized in Latin America by the 'liberation theology' clergy." It went on to claim that "Marxist-Leninist forces have used the Church as a political weapon against private property and productive capitalism, infiltrating the religious community with ideas that are less Christian than Communist."[93] After publication, the committee ran advertisements advocating the report's goals on Christian radio networks.[94] The Rockefeller report showed concern over the potential for communist infiltration while the Santa Fe document argued that infiltration had already occurred. Its accusations stigmatized Guatemalan Catholic leaders and aligned American political leadership against the Church. The Catholic Church's perceived "infiltration" is significant because the Church was one of few domestic institutions to speak out against the human rights' abuses of the 1980s. But the conservative elements within the Church, and Evangelical opponents from the outside refused to listen to what they saw as a tool of Soviet-Cuban Marxism.

Reagan and Evangelicals

He is totally dedicated to democracy.[95]

Ronald Reagan on whether Efraín Ríos Montt should get U.S. military aid, 1982

[Democracy] is the most absurd, the stupidest thing. Democracy is a system of government created by people who were thinking of ways to handle those that were not thinking… A select group of people controls a mass, that's it. What do you want me to say? Government of the people, by the people, for the people is nothing more than French stupidity.[96]

Efraín Ríos Montt in an interview with a Costa Rican Newspaper, 1986

Central to Reagan's Guatemala policy was his ardent desire to squelch the communist insurgency. Historians have correctly highlighted the extent to which Reagan's worldview was diametrically divided into American-style democracy and Soviet-style totalitarianism, free-market capitalism and wicked communism. To Reagan, Central American governments were either free or anti-free, and those

[92] Anfuso and Sczepanski, p. 134.
[93] Quoted in Casanova, Pablo González. *Latin America Today*. Tokyo: United Nations University press, 1993, p. 229.
[94] "Group Watch Profile: Council for Inter-American Security." *Right Web*. http://rightweb.irc-online.org/gw/1588 Accessed November 12, 2007.
[95] Quoted in Lafeber,, p. 322.
[96] The Spanish text is: "… eso es lo mas absurdo, lo mas estúpido. La democracia es un sistema de gobierno creado por gentes que pensaban para manejar a lo que no pensaban… Hay un grupo selecto que manda a una masa, eso es todo. ¿Que quiere que le conteste? Que el gobierno del pueblo, por el pueblo, para el pueblo no es más que una estupidéz francesa que nunca se ha hecho." Cortes, Carlos. "San Efraín, Héroe y Mártir." *Rumbo Centroamericano*, 13 March 1986. CIRMA.

rebelling against a government that fell into this first category were necessarily promoters of the second. What historians have failed to note is how much Reagan owed his black and white worldview, as well as his presidency, to religious conviction. Reagan's anti-communist rhetoric was couched in Evangelical language, and it is notable that his first reference to the U.S.S.R. as an "evil empire," was made at a meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals. In the same vane, Ríos Montt referred to communism as the "antichrist" in one of his televised speeches to the nation.[97] To many in Guatemala, the lines between Soviet-style communism and indigenous Mayan communalism were blurred, and this confusion had considerable effects in the Ríos Montt years. From a perspective that divided governments into either good or bad, and people into either saved or dammed, Reagan, like Ríos Montt, saw the conflict in Guatemala in cosmic terms. His rationalization for re-instating support for an oppressive regime made sense in the framework of a war between good and evil, and his belief that Armageddon could occur "1,000 years away or the day after tomorrow,"[98] justified brazen defiance of international law and human rights.[99]

In the years leading up to Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, anti-Carter conservatives and Christian Evangelicals formed a promising political alliance. No longer did American fundamentalists feel called to being "apolitical" like Ríos Montt felt prior to assuming the presidency. At the urging of Republican Party consultants, Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" endorsed Reagan's run for the presidency. Falwell bought ads for the Reagan campaign and used his rapidly growing congregation as a medium for pro-Reagan speeches.[100] In turn, Reagan appointed fundamentalists to important administration posts, like Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of Defense.[101] Just as Guatemalan Evangelicals could emerge from the fringes of public politics after the 1976 earthquake, so too were American Evangelicals able to make the transition from the margins to the spotlight after Reagan's inauguration in 1981. Evangelicals were given "unprecedented access to power."[102] In the symbiotic relationship between conservative Christians and the newly inaugurated head of state, Evangelicals buttressed Reagan's religious and political worldview, which in turn reinforced his support for Evangelicals. The dynamics of this mutual reinforcement are key to understanding Reagan's support for the Ríos Montt regime.

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[97] Quoted in Black, p. 140.
[98] Weber, Timothy P. *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, pp. 201, 202.
[99] Calvert, Peter. *Guatemala: A Nation in Turmoil*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1985, p. 183.
[100] Duffy, Michael. "Jerry Falwell, Political Innovator." *Time*. May 15, 2007.
[101] Weber, p. 201.
[102] Weber, p. 200.

Efraín the Saint, Efraín the Devil

To turn a nation around as he has… that has got to be the helping hand of God[103]. Luis Palau, Latin American evangelist, 1983

The 1982 coup that ushered Ríos Montt into office occurred at a particularly important political juncture in Guatemala's history. The guerrilla movement, newly unified under the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) had grown substantially during the Lucas García regime and occupied swaths of area in at least seven of the nation's 22 departments.[104] The government's reputation was tarnished because of its human rights abuses. Progressives and radicals on the left were demanding political concessions, while the right was putting pressure on the government to stand strong in the face of rebellion. Reagan was eagerly looking for an opening through which he could pitch a proposal to Congress for reinstating aid to Guatemala. Meanwhile, American business leaders, like their Guatemalan counterparts, wanted a quick defeat of the guerrilla insurgency and were fully aware of the centrality of American aid to this goal. As Bank of American regional manager Keith Parker pointed out, "When you've got a situation like you have here, you need the strongest government you can get. If you use human rights in a country with guerrillas, you're not going to get anywhere… What they should do is declare martial law…. You're guilty, you're shot. It works very well."[105]

To Reagan and the business community's delight, Ríos Montt did just that. After dissolving the junta that brought him to power, he suspended basic civil liberties and authorized special courts to legally carry out public executions. In an effort to crush the guerrillas, Ríos Montt banned any political and union activity, removed all elected municipal authorities from office and replaced them with military men, approved searches without warrants, called up the army reserves, and prohibited the press from propagating any news that "may cause confusion." He promised that the guerrillas would be defeated by the end of the year and justified the repressive measures under the notion that "if there is subversion… there needs to be a state of siege."[106] In addition, Ríos Montt succeeded in ending much of the

[103] Quoted in Anfuso and Scezpanski, p. 155.
[104] Russell, George. "Surprise in the Sermon." *Time*. May 23, 1983.
[105] Quoted in Black, p. 56.
[106] Bonner, Raymond (editorial page). *The New York Times*. July 15, 1982. Also, Blachman, Morris and Kenneth Sharpe, William M. Leogrande. *Confronting Revolution: Security Through Diplomacy in Central America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986, p. 39.

violence in the cities,[107] giving the appearance of a leader truly dedicated to the principles espoused in his "14 Points of Government," issued in April.[108]

Within weeks of taking power in the coup, Ríos Montt's junta issued a request to the international media to "serve…in the destruction" of the insurgency by dropping the use of the word "guerrilla" in favor of the word "terrorist," not referring to any of the guerrilla organizations by their full name and "not giving importance," to any actions committed by the subversives.[109] By and large, the press obliged. And despite the state of siege, the American media's reaction to Ríos Montt was overwhelmingly positive. The Wall Street Journal noted Ríos Montt's success in cracking down on right wing death squads,[110] the Washington Post said "there is no doubt… that the carnage has been sharply reduced,"[111] and the Economist called attention to the fact that "for the first time in years, people are venturing out at night."[112]

The United States government was even friendlier in its portrayal of Ríos Montt. Once it became clear that he had a firm grasp on the presidency, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders declared that Ríos Montt "improved the human rights situation and opened the way for a more effective counterinsurgency."[113] Concomitantly, the American ambassador to Guatemala, Frederick Chapin claimed that Ríos Montt managed to stop army killings of civilians,[114] and that his government had "come out of the darkness and into the light."[115] Barely a month after Ríos Montt suspended the constitution, President Reagan ironically noted that "his government is moving in a direction towards the return of constitutionality."[116] Even the democrats, who were highly critical of Reagan's handling of affairs in Central America, voiced approval for Ríos Montt.[117] By the end of the year, the United States' position towards the Guatemalan president had been made clear; following a visit in December of 1982, Reagan called Ríos Montt "a man of great personal integrity and commitment." He went on to note that, "his country is confronting a brutal challenge from guerrillas armed and supported by others outside Guatemala… My country will do all it can to support his progressive

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[107] Brockett, Charles. *Land, Power, and Poverty*, p. 118.

[108] The 14 goals issued by the three man junta in April of 1982 included, among others: reconciliation, the recovery of national dignity, an allegiance to capitalism, a restructuring of the judicial system, an improvement in living standards, and most significantly, "an absolute respect for human rights."

[109] "The Guatemalan Government Requests Press Use Precise Terms to Inform About Subversion." *Diario de las Américas*. May 8, 1982.

[110] Frazier.

[111] Oberdorfer, Don (editorial page). *The Washington Post*. April 18, 1982. In "Asistencia Estadounidense a la Contrainsurgencia en Guatemala." July, 1988. CIRMA

[112] "Hallelujah." *The Economist*. May 1, 1982. .

[113] Quoted in Jonas, p. 199.

[114] "Halleluja." *The Economist*.

[115] "Asistencia Estadounidense a la Contrainsurgencia en Guatemala."

[116] "Reagan Admitió Acciones Positivas de Ríos Montt." *El Excelsior*. July 31, 1982.

[117] At the June 1982 Democratic National Party Conference, Representative Michael Barnes, the Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, proposed a resolution that criticized "the right wing of the Republican Party," for not pressing for peace in El Salvador, and for its "hostility to Nicaragua." As far as Guatemala was concerned, Barnes called for the United States to "provide economic aid to the nrew regime [Ríos Montt] in Guatemala in order to help it carry out the reforms necessary to reduce the appeal of the guerrillas." Barnes, Michael D. "Draft Statement on Central America for Workshop on Foreign Policy, Defense and Arms Control, 1982 Democratic National Party Conference."

efforts." When confronted on whether this support meant that the United States should reinstate aid to Guatemala, Reagan answered in the affirmative, declaring that Ríos Montt had "been getting a bum rap." [118]

Though the American press and administration unmistakably backed Guatemala's new president, the international community was less unanimous in their support. A few days after Reagan made clear his stance on Ríos Montt, the U.N., noting "frequent acts of repression, killings, and massive dislocations of rural and indigenous populations," expressed "profound preoccupation" about the situation in Guatemala.[119]

Of course, gross human rights violations were nothing new in Guatemala. What was shocking under Ríos Montt were the scale of the violations and the extent to which the government went out of its way to deny or justify them. When Amnesty International published a document about extrajudicial executions under Ríos Montt, the government made no attempt to deny the accusations; after all, Amnesty International was a "communist" organization.[120] When the Ríos Montt junta tried nine minors (the youngest a 14 year-old) as leftist subversives,[121] Evangelicals justified it with a mindset which proclaimed that "he who resists authority is resisting that which has been established by God."[122] And a year into Ríos Montt's presidency, after it had become clear that administration saw massive government-sponsored killings as necessary to defeating the insurgency, the National Religious Broadcasters convention awarded Ríos Montt for "meritorious Christian service."[123]

Ríos Montt's positive reception was in no small part due to the sway he held with Evangelicals in the United States. As we have seen, the Christian Right was instrumental in Reagan's 1980 election. These same Evangelicals sponsored missions to Guatemala and rejoiced at the ascendancy of a "Christian" president in both the United States (1981) and Guatemala (1982). Pat Robertson called the Ríos Montt presidency an alternative to "the oppression of corrupt oligarchies and

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[118] "Remarks in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Following a Meeting with President José Efraín Ríos Montt of Guatemala." *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/82dec.htm. Accessed October 27, 2007.

[119] Reports had come in about massacres in el Quiché, Chichicastenango, Patzul, and Chipiacul. Despite the early commitment to early elections and human rights, Ríos Montt seemed to be faltering on both. The day after taking power, Ríos Montt promised "to respect human rights and fundamental liberties." Within months, however, the constitution was abolished and the nation went under a state of siege. Ríos Montt skirted questions about election date specifics ("six months or six years") and withdrew his commitment to human rights: "The General tried to avoid answering questions about human rights. When pressed about whether Government forces continue to violate human rights in rural areas, he said, 'Yes.' But he added quickly, 'As in all parts of the world.' Asked about local newspaper reports of unarmed women and children being killed, he said, 'It is a war, a permanent war.'" *El Día*. December 12, 1982. Quoted in "Asistencia Estadounidense a la Contrainsurgencia en Guatemala," p. 5; Gabriel, Leo. "Report from a Guatemalan Massacre Site." *The Guardian*. June 30, 1982; *Latin American Weekly Report*. June 25, 1982, pp. 4-5; Aguilar, Eloy O. "Guatemalan Indians recount mass slayings." *Dallas Morning News*. May 16, 1982, p. 39A; Asistencia Estadounidense a la Contrainsurgencia Guatemalteca. p. 3; *El Gráfico*. May 18, 1982; Davidson; *The New York Times*. May 20, 1982.

[120] Anfuso and Sczepanski, p. 136.

[121] *New York Times*. June 8, 1962. In "On the Road to Democracy? A Chronology of Human Rights and U.S.-Guatemalan Relations, January 1978 – April 1985." CIRMA

[122] The quote comes from Francisco Bache, an Assembly of God preacher in El Quiché. In Black, p. 142.

[123] Stoll. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* p. 55.

the tyranny of Russian-backed Communist totalitarianism,"[124] and state Representative Jack Kemp joined Robertson on a crusade to raise money for the regime.[125]

To account for the gap between Ríos Montt's actions and his reception we must understand the political and social priorities of his supporters. Fundamentalist Evangelicals, like Ríos Montt, saw the world in terms of a war between good and evil, and often drew the lines between the two at one's religious beliefs. Pat Robertson, for example, was able to look beyond reports of massacres and political oppression and focus on Ríos Montt's faith. After a visit to the country a few days after the coup, Robertson called Ríos Montt "a man of humility simplicity, impeccable personal integrity, and a deep faith in Jesus Christ.[126] The apocalyptic language employed by writers from Ríos Montt's California-based Church found a ready audience in Washington as well as other parts of the United States. The religiosity of Reagan's administration was never in question; Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, told the House Interior Committee that he did "not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." And Reagan's Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, told reporters that he believed the book of Revelation and that the world was going to end soon.[127]

Meanwhile, the breach between the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Guatemala was growing, and reports about state repression against the largely Catholic rural population were met with skepticism by Evangelicals. Likewise, since Ríos Montt's critics with the most access to an international audience were most often Catholic, they too were brushed aside.[128] International human rights groups held little sway with the many Evangelicals who saw them as infiltrated by communists; the outright denial of atrocities by influential American Evangelicals' served to legitimize Ríos Montt's power. As Ríos Montt himself put it, "the subject of human rights is an international topic which they use to annoy a government or a people which is against communism."[129] Thanks to Ríos Montt's Christian connections, the issue of human rights amounted to just that for his administration: an "annoyance."

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[124] Quoted in Stoll, David. "Evangelicals, Guerrillas, and the Army: The Ixil Triangle Under Ríos Montt." In Carmack, Robert M. (editor). *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,1988, p. 91

[125] Perera, Victor. *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 88

[126] Anfuso and Sczepanski, p. ix.

[127] Weber, p. 201.

[128] In late May, Guatemalan Bishops released a statement proclaiming that "not even the lives of the old people, pregnant women, or innocent children [are] respected." In October, a panel presented a report about Guatemalan refugees fleeing into southern Mexico. Included as those presenting the report was a Maryknoll missionary (Maryknoll is a Catholic order). Meanwhile, the testimony of a Catholic Priest from the Guatemalan Committee of Patriotic Unity figured prominently in the introduction. The report was made with the assistance of the Christian Solidarity Committee of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas, . "Message of the Bishops to the People of Guatemala." May 27, 1982. Quoted in "On the Road to Democracy? A Chronology of Human Rights and U.S.-Guatemalan Relations, January 1978 – April 1985."; "Guatemala: Government Against the People – Witnesses of Indian Massacres, March-September, 1982." October 21, 1982 CIRMA.

[129] *Prensa Libre*. May 10, 1982. Quoted in "Asistencia Estadounidense a la Contrainusrgencia en Guatemala." Appendix A.

Evangelicals and the Model Villages

The guerrillas won over many Indian collaborators. Therefore, the Indians were subversives, right? And how do you fight subversives? Clearly, you had to kill Indians because they were collaborating with the subversion. And then they would say, 'you're massacring innocent people.' But they weren't innocent. They had sold out to subversion[130].

> Francisco Bianchi, Verbo congregant and Ríos Montt's Press Secretary, 1982

In July 1982, the EGP successfully blocked over sixty-two miles of highway in el Quiché and Alta Verapaz, a move that indicated strong guerrilla support from the population (or at least the guerrillas' effective organizational tactics). Realizing the difficulties of fighting a popular guerrilla insurgency with an army lacking in funds, Ríos Montt reoriented military strategy. Since guerrilla organizations (the EGP in particular)[131] had been successful at grass roots organizing, the definition of what constituted an "enemy" needed to be expanded; no longer could the army focus its efforts solely on military excursions at the expense of neglecting a possibly rebellious civilian population. Rather than attack the guerrillas themselves, the army needed to target the civil sphere and to prevent conditions under which the rebels most often gained support.

The URNG had done best in the rural highlands, and Ríos Montt was fully aware of the necessity of separating guerrillas from their indigenous support base. "The problem is not merely a question of who fires," he pointed out in 1982. "For each man that is firing, there are 10 more working behind him."[132] As a Guatemalan army communiqué put it,

> The terrorist organizations have based their military strategy on the premise that 'the sea is to the fish what the population is to the guerrillas.' The terrorist criminals hoist their banner of taking the land from the rich and offering it to the poor… this is compounded by the beliefs of certain priests influenced by liberation theology.[133]

Thus, Ríos Montt and the army were seeking to respond to the challenge of confronting a popular movement that garnered support from a popular church. On July 1, 1982, Ríos Montt initiated his *frijoles y fusiles* (beans and bullets) strategy. Intended as a means for fighting the insurgency socially (by alleviating economic tension and ill-will with humanitarian support – *beans*) and militarily (with *bullets*), the program was part of Plan Victory 82, a holistic approach to defeating

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[130] Quoted in Nairn, Allan. "Guatemala Can't Take Two Roads."
[131] REMHI, pp. 219, 238-239.
[132] Quoted in *The New York Times*. May 20, 1982.
[133] Ejército de Guatemala. Inforpress Centroamericana Centroamérica. 1990, Anexo capítulo 3. Quoted in REMHI, p. 230

the insurgency by the end of the year. One Guatemalan army official described the strategy more simply: "If you are with us, we'll feed you; if you're against us, we'll kill you."[134] The plan itself called for the war "to be fought on all fronts… [since] the mind of the population [was] the main objective."[135]

In the months leading up to Ríos Montt's coup, the guerrillas gained increasing control in indigenous areas. The army reacted by accusing all residents of collaboration in any area that saw guerrilla success. Thus, Mayas were pressured into joining the Civil Patrols not only for the immediate repercussions of refusing the army, but also for the perceived long-term consequences that might come along with a possible guerrilla victory.[136] Civil Patrols were established throughout the Western highlands, and the program enjoyed a great deal of success during its expansive phase under Ríos Montt. The project was massive and its results were tangible; only a few months after Ríos Montt took power, the number of Civil Patrollers shot up to over 40,000.[137]

The success in the Model Villages lay not in villagers' enthusiasm for the program nor in the massive financial effort on behalf of the Guatemalan government to ensure their survival. Rather, it depended on foreign support. Mayas separated from their crops had to eat, and since the cost of providing basic necessities to previously self-sufficient people was much higher than the dictatorship was able to pay, Ríos Montt called on the international Evangelical community to take up the slack.

To accomplish his goal of "destroying the insurgents' base of support" [138] Ríos Montt relied on his own base of support. Evangelicals were vital to the success of Ríos Montt's effort to completely reorganize rural society in a way that favored Evangelical conversion and prevented Indian-guerrilla collaboration. Evangelical fundamentalists cooperated in a massive effort to completely reorganize civil society. This holistic approach to fighting rebellion took the form of two military-controlled institutions: the Model Village and the Civil Patrol. Since there were high levels of guerrilla collaboration and resistance to the military in the certain regions, the army began by destroying towns that were geographically remote along with those that had clearly allied with the guerrillas.[139] The program's goal was not only immediately to defeat guerrillas and their collaborators in the area, but also to "eliminat[e] future capacity for opposition."[140] Thus, the army sought military, territorial, and psychological control over the population.[141] Massacres ensued in Santa Cruz del Quiché,[142]

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[134] Quoted in Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose, p. 56.
[135] Quoted in REMHI, p. 229.
[136] Stoll, David. *Between Two Armies*, p. 100.
[137] Black, p. 148
[138] Manz, Beatriz. *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 17.
[139] Black, p. 146.
[140] Manz, p. 17.
[141] A 1982 army publication advocated coordination between military and psychological operations, and emphasized how "subversion must be fought with its own methods." "Estado Mayor General del Ejército-Centro de Estudios Militares (Comisión de trabajo). *Plan Nacional de Seguridad y Desarollo.* Guatemala, April 1, 1982. Mimeo. In REMHI, p. 230.

Chupol, Chucalibal, Chuhuexá, La Unión, and Ixcán.[143] Those that did not flee to Mexico (over 30,000 had by the end of 1982),[144] and were not killed at the hands of the army (as nearly as many were), were sent to re-inhabit the towns that the government had destroyed. These Model Villages, built and controlled by the army, distanced Mayas from the land that they previously farmed and made them dependent on the State for food. Under the ongoing state of siege, close government supervision meant that Mayas who had previously not been affected by the State's encroachment on rights now dealt with it on a daily basis. By 1983, in an effort to "ensure the security and trust of the population," the army resettled thousands of Mayas into government-monitored villages.[145]

At least six members of the president's rapidly growing church were given official positions in the Model Village program. Harris Whitbeck, a Verbo missionary, worked on counterinsurgency techniques; Jesse Camey headed the PAAC (Program of Aid to Conflictive Areas); Ray Elliot Jr. was appointed PAAC envoi to the town of Nebaj; and George Hughes constructed military air strips in the Ixil region.[146] But Verbo was not large enough to garner the funds and manpower that the program needed; instead, Ríos Montt had to solicit other North American allies. Evangelical groups like AMG International, the Bible Society of Guatemala, Campus Crusade for Christ, Gospel Outreach (Verbo's parent church), and World Vision gathered around the Ríos Montt cause. These organizations both amassed funds for Ríos Montt's rural projects and countered human rights groups that were providing bad publicity for Guatemala. Campus Crusade for Christ's founder called Ríos Montt a man of "high ethical Christian standard…a man of integrity, patriotism, and love for his people."[147] Pat Robertson, who had visited the Guatemalan president only five days after the coup, came back to tell his viewers on the 700 Club that Ríos Montt was a "fervent Christian"[148] and needed their support. Verbo member Harris Whitbeck was put in charge of coordinating private aid, and only a few months after the coup, Whitbeck oversaw the creation of the Foundation for Aid to the Indigenous People (FUNDAPI).[149]

Ostensibly a private relief group, FUNDAPI combined diverse groups' contributions with close government supervision and cooperation. Under the guise of a non-interested relief organization, FUNDAPI was successful at channeling $200,000 to government-sponsored "reconstruction" efforts like the Model Villages.[150] For the Ríos Montt government, FUNDAPI was the perfect solution to its many political and economic problems: not only could the organization provide funding that the United States congress would not, it served to supply a positive

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[142] REMHI, p. 238.
[143] ; "Guatemala: Government Against the People – Witnesses of Indian Massacres, March-September, 1982."
[144] Davis, Shelton H. "Sowing the Seeds of Violence." In Carmack, p. 10.
[145] Quoted in REMHI, p. 230.
[146] REMHI, p. 241.
[147] "Private Organizations with U.S. Connections – Guatemala." The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center. Albuquerque, July 1988.
[148] Anfuso and Sczepanski, p. xi.
[149] Stoll, David. "Evangelicals, Guerrillas, and the Army." In Carmack, p. 100
[150] Ibid, p. 109.

image for a government beleaguered with accusations about human rights abuses. Politics and economy aside, FUNDAPI also coincided with Ríos Montt's personal religious beliefs. At the heart of FUNDAPI's efforts were the Evangelical missionaries that created it, and at the heart of these missionaries' motives was the sincere desire to transform a nation through religious conversion.

In Model Villages, conversion to Evangelicalism became a "pragmatic" decision.[151] As one villager put it, "it's best to change religion... because they can come and... kill all of you."[152] Though the reality of Model Villages was not one in which non-Evangelicals were killed for religious reasons, it cannot be denied that conversion brought tangible benefits to the believer, and that the national mood under Ríos Montt was decisively anti-Catholic. In his weekly televised address to the nation, Ríos Montt intertwined political ramblings with religious sermon, regularly calling on his viewers to embrace Christ's message of personal redemption. When the Pope (who was vocally anti-communist himself) visited Guatemala nearly a year after the coup, Ríos Montt flatly rejected his pleas to halt plans for a state execution. FUNDAPI's funding stemmed primarily from Evangelical groups in the United States, and these groups made sure that food and material relief did not go without a healthy dose of spiritual instruction. To become involved in FUNDAPI's structural apparatus (and thus to be able to advance socially), one had to be associated with an Evangelical church or ministry.

The Road to Genocide

Our mission requires the integration of all Guatemalans. We must do away with the words "indigenous" and "Indian" because we are all Guatemalans.[153]
Oscar Mejía Victores, Ríos Montt's defense minister, 1982

Fusiles y frijoles outlined plans for the Civil Patrol program, which involved obligatory military service by civilian men in rural areas. Like the Model Villages, the Civil Patrols put a humanitarian mask on a repressive program. By providing the material and organization needed for villagers to "protect themselves" from the guerrillas, Civil Patrols legitimized the Ríos Montt regime, supposedly demonstrating the extent to which the government was dedicated to the interests of the people. At its core, though, the program was a mandatory draft that resulted in the extreme militarization of society.

The twin institutions of the Model Village and the Civil Patrol used coercive measures to subdue an insurgent (or potentially insurgent) indigenous population. Despite accusations from the left that the Model Villages and Civil Patrols were

[151] Quoted in Rose, Susan D., Grifford, Paul, and Brouwer, Steve, p. 56.
[152] Quoted in Alberch, Enric Casetllnou i. "Guatemala: Segona Oportunitat." Tesi Doctoral, Programa de Doctorat en Ciència Políticai de l'Administriació.Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona. May 2002. p. 75.
[153] "Radio-Televisión Guatemala." September 2, 1983. FBIS. Quoted in "On the Road to Democracy? A Chronology of Human Rights and U.S.-Guatemalan Relations, January 1978 – April 1985."

part of a "campaign of ethnic cleansing," many Evangelicals defended them as humanitarian efforts to save the indigenous population from a "guerrilla war."[154] Some defenders in academia claim that the Model Villages and Civil Patrols were justified in that they "served the needs of the population,"[155] and that villagers invariably preferred state control to guerrilla collaboration,[156] but they often fail to note the extent to which the population itself could have fulfilled these "needs" were it not for government-generated violence and forced relocation. From this narrow perspective, the mythical image of the Civil Patrols and Model Villages as humanitarian organizations emerges whereas the reality of these institutions as a government-controlled oppressive apparatus is downplayed. Having lost their homes and crops to the military's policy of "scorched earth," Mayas were forced to flee the country, accept government supervision and service, or join the guerrillas. Since some chose the latter option, Mayas began to become directly associated with guerrillas. Thus, in a country made up of 50% indigenous peoples, 83% of the government's victims were indigenous, a fact which has led numerous lawyers and academicians to term the Ríos Montt period one of "genocide."[157]

Reagan followers found in FUNDAPI and the Civil Patrols the perfect intersection of humanitarianism (to counter critiques from outside of Guatemala) and militarism (to counter the insurgency from within). One year after Ríos Montt had taken office, the guerrilla insurgency had been largely defeated, and the success owed itself to the effectiveness of the Model Villages and Civil Patrols. When the international press publicized massacres committed by the Guatemalan army under Ríos Montt a few years later, Richard Raushenbush of the CIS (Council for Inter-American Security), echoing the sentiments of Ríos Montt's Evangelical apologists, proclaimed that "terrorist organizations [had] effectively used political and humanitarian front organizations to shift attention from the death, destruction, and economic ruination perpetrated by the terrorists to an intense examination of the deficiencies of a Guatemalan regime now engaged in a major terrorist war."[158]

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church remained an object of suspicion and catechists continued to be killed under the assumption that they were working for the guerrillas (to be fair, many were). The steady political and social radicalization that occurred at the *macro* level in Guatemala in the sixties and seventies was accelerated and exacerbated at the *micro* level in Model Villages. Worse still, specific cases of human rights violations against indigenous peoples shot through the roof. The eighties saw the blurring of lines between perceived indigenousness and militarism.[159] To the Guatemalan government, Catholic prayer books indicated

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[154] "Justice for Genocide." *Latin America Solidarity Centre*. www.lasc.ie/enlace/enlace10/justice-genocide.html Accessed November 14, 2007.
[155] Stoll. *Between Two Armies*, p. 157.
[156] Sherman, Amy L. *The Soul of Development: Biblical Christianity and Economic Transformation in Guatemala*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 148.
[157] CEH: Guatemala: Memory of Silence: Report to the Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999.
[158] Anfuso and Sczepanski, p. 155, 147, 133.
[159] Davis, Shelton H. "Introduction: Sowing the Seeds of Violence." In Carmack, p. 25.

leftist theology, agricultural tools were construed as guerrilla weapons, Mayan languages were perceived as subversive, and even traditional indigenous dress was seen as a means to hide arms or supplies for the insurgency. Thus, Mayan markers of cultural identity proved to be an obstacle to state supervision, and began to be associated with guerrillas. It was in this environment of anti-communist hysteria, religious zeal, and close government supervision and paranoia that the Guatemalan army made the transition from counterrevolutionary to genocidal tactics.

The Final Piece: Israel

The success of Ríos Montt's social plan for Guatemala (in the form of Model Villages) depended on providing food and houses, a fact which made government coercion impossible without money. Luckily for the administration, North American Evangelicals intervened with money and labor to ensure that the Model Villages program did not go unsupported. In addition, these transnational Evangelical advocates for the Model Villages served to legitimize the administration to the world press. Militarily, however, the Guatemalan government needed more than just good public relations and mission trips to pursue its strategic goals. Just as villagers had to eat, Civil Patrols had to be armed, and international law and American embargos prevented men like Pat Robertson from sending weapons as easily as food.

The Reagan administration wanted desperately to restore funding to Guatemala after the Ríos Montt coup. A month after his December 1982 visit to the country, Reagan petitioned Congress $10 million in military credits and $6.3 million in spare parts for the Guatemalan military. Despite Evangelicals' efforts to convince otherwise, by now Congress had heard of gross human rights violations in Guatemala and denied Reagan's request. The administration, however, managed to channel $10 million through the Economic Support Fund designated for the Caribbean Basin Initiative, and $6 million more by removing certain kinds of military hardware from the list of embargo materials, effectively bypassing Congress' rejection. [160] It also allotted $3 million for road construction in guerrilla-affected rural areas.[161]

Fortunately for Ríos Montt, the fact that Reagan could not convince Congress to legally restore assistance to Guatemala did not mean he was without allies. Where Reagan's illegal ventures into the Central American arms trade ended, Israel's began. A decade earlier Israel had emerged as one of the world's most important arms dealers. By 1983, Israel was ranked seventh worldwide in arms exportation; its military sector accounted for 37% of the nation's budget, and more than 300,000 Israelis (25% of the workforce) were employed in industries

[160] Sanford; Parry, Robert. "Reagan and Guatemala's Death Files." *The Consortium Online*. May 26, 1999. Accessed through http://www.consortiumnews.com/1999/052699a1.html on October 29, 2007.
[161] "Asistencia Estadounidense a la Contrainsurgencia en Guatemala," p. 5.

tied to the military. Israel provided weapons to nations around the world, from Argentina to Zaire, and a substantial portion of its economy depended on "pariah states," like Guatemala, which other arms suppliers like the Soviet Union, France, and the United States rejected on the basis of human rights violations.[162]

Israels' massive investment in the arms industry following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War would not have been feasible without support from the United States. And this support would not have been possible were it not for growing domestic support for the Israeli government, spearheaded by the Evangelical movement. From its founding in 1948, Israel garnered support from American Christians that perceived the nation's survival as a prerequisite for the return of Christ. In their eyes, the survival of a Jewish State in the Middle East was a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, and that survival relied on Israel's military strength.[163] Just as the seventies saw a budding alliance between Washington conservatives and the Evangelical lobby, so did Evangelicals ally themselves with the Zionist cause.

The fundamentalist groups that supported Ríos Montt lobbied American lawmakers to support Israel for the same religious reasons. Jerry Falwell sponsored Holy Land Church tours in the seventies and eighties and became close enough with the Israeli government to receive an award from its Prime Minister in 1980.[164] Just as Pat Robertson's 700 Club called on viewers to support Ríos Montt, so did his National Association of Evangelicals promote Israel's cause to their congregations. Meanwhile, government officials like Paul Wolfowitz in the Department of Defense, received "VIP treatment" from the Israeli government for taking stands on its behalf.[165] Evangelicals counted on Israel to provide the scene in which the Second Coming would occur, and Israel counted on Evangelicals to, in the words of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in a 1981 phone conversation with Jerry Falwell, "get to work for me."[166] As Fundamentalist Evangelicals gained more power in the United States in the 1970s, America's foreign policy in regards to Israel tended to reflect these Evangelicals' goals. In Ronald Reagan's memoirs, Israel is mentioned not for its strategic significance but for its "moral" importance.[167] Like so many Evangelicals, Reagan fell under the enchanting spell of the possibility of fulfilling Biblical prophecy. Accordingly, he continued in his predecessors' tradition of providing heavy U.S. aid to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and even increased that aid during his administration.

In the sixties and seventies, Israel was forced into deficit spending due to costly wars with its Arab neighbors. Burdened economically, the nation agreed to territorial concessions extracted by Henry Kissinger following the 1973 war. In return, the United States greatly increased military assistance to Israel, giving

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[162] Howard, Esther. "Israel: The Sorcerer's Apprentice." *MERIP Reports* 12, February, 1983, p. 22; "Arms Suppliers to the Dictators." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12/3, Spring 1983, pp. 226-227.
[163] Weber, p. 168.
[164] Weber, p. 218.
[165] Weber, p. 221.
[166] Quoted in Walt, Stephen M. and John J. Mearsheimer. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007, p. 136.
[167] Walt, Stephen M. and John J. Mearsheimer, p. 57.

$2.19 billion in military grants and credits from 1976 to 1980. American generosity towards Israel spurred a 500% growth in Israel's military exports during that same period.[168]

Israel had been central to providing Guatemala with military assistance beginning a decade before Ríos Montt took power in 1982. As Ríos Montt's predecessor said, "it was the only country that gave us support in our battle against the guerrillas." In addition to weapons, it was not uncommon for Israel to send military officers to Guatemala to help in training, build army outposts, install technological equipment, and even construct an airfield.[169] Though Reagan was incapable of convincing Congress to restore funds to Guatemala's military, members of his administration "urged Israel to help Guatemala."

And that it did. Israelis helped the Guatemalan military on a (failed) project to electronically register all Guatemalans, and the (successful) project to re-organize civil society in Model Villages, which were modeled after the kibbutz. It sold weapons, airplanes, and advice.[170] Were it not for Israeli support, the massive rural counterinsurgency campaigns of the Ríos Montt administration could not have been carried out in their fullness. Thus, Israel was part and parcel of the Guatemalan genocide. And though the Israeli government cooperated with the Guatemalan army for economic reasons, it was largely made possible through support stemming from American Evangelicals with ideological reasons. The Guatemalan genocide saw the intersection of two primary concerns of fundamentalist Evangelicals: the support of Israel and the installation of "Christian" heads of state.

Conclusion

Reactionary religion, then, was at the crux of the Guatemalan civil war and the Rios Montt saga. The unique marriage of Israeli assistance, Guatemalan militarism, American anti-communism, and worldwide born-again Christianity during the administration of Ríos Montt had a lethal result for Guatemala's civilian population. Fundamentalist movements both within and outside of Guatemala played a crucial role in creating the social and political environment that allowed for Rios Montt's dictatorship. David Stoll points out that "if religious commitments are dismissed as mere reflections of political interests, we lose sight of the new and creative responses they produce."[171] Evangelicals who lobbied their senators to financially support Israeli's military, who went to Guatemala to spread the Gospel in Model Villages,, who heeded Pat Robertson's call to send money to Rios Montt, and who lamented the end of Guatemala's first "Christian" presidency did so as "creative responses" to various concerns, with (mostly) the

[168] Howard, Esther. "Israel: The Sorcerer's Apprentice," pp. 17, 24.
[169] Quoted in Hunter, Jane. *Israeli Foreign Policy: South Africa and Central America*. Boston: South End Press, 1987, pp. 113-114.
[170] Quoted in Ibid, p. 115, p. 120.
[171] Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* p. xv.

best of intentions and rightfully clean consciences. The purpose of this paper is not simply to point fingers; Rios Montt is responsible for his own crimes, as numerous legal and historical investigations have shown.[172] Rather, my paper stems from an effort to illustrate the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate worlds, particularly in the framework of what Greg Grandin calls an "imperial" model.[173] Stoll's maxim that we should not understand religion in solely political terms does not mean, in this historian's opinion, that we should ignore the politics of religiosity. In the case of the Rios Montt dictatorship, fundamentalism was fundamental to the success of counterrevolution, a success which one contemporary American senator said "was achieved through the use of tactics which had the effect of killing thousands of civilian non-combatants."[174] I submit that historians should not separate ideological and religious movements from their sociopolitical implications. At its core, my paper is an attempt to explain and clarify ways that religion has an impact on politics, and how chance intersections of certain social groups can have disastrous political results.

[172] CEH

[173] An imperial project is never solely political, and although United States' military intervention in Latin America is a testament to the political dimensions of imperialism, my paper focuses on its social elements. As Greg Grandin points out, the mobilization of the religious right has been fundamental to "giv[ing] today's imperialism its moral force," and "back[ing] up these ideals with social power." Grandin, Greg. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006, p. 6-7.

[174] Sanford, Jonathan E. "Guatemala: U.S. Foreign Assistance Facts." *Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division. Congressional Research Service.* Updated December 8, 1987.

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