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WR 13300

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### El Paseo de la Sexta

**Situation:** As a Guatemalan Citizen, I am writing a speech to my Writing and Rhetoric class about a recent disturbance that occurred in the Sexta Avenida of the Zona 1 (Historical Center) of Guatemala. I have lived there for 18 years and I am aware of the socioeconomic problems the country has faced throughout history. My audience's knowledge on the recent disturbance and the issues Guatemala is facing is varied. Some may have studied Central America's socioeconomic problems during high school, while others may know nothing about the country. I want to inform them of the main causes and consequences of this tragic incident and, ultimately, convince them that the riot was a terrible act with no positive outcome.

Good afternoon, and thank you all for being here today in our very last day of class together. There is only one week left to go! I know you are probably all stressed out about finals. I know I am. However, I hope the excitement to finally be going back home for the holidays beats the stress. I can barely believe we have already spent five months here at Notre Dame. It feels like it was just a month ago that my parents were here helping me bunk my bed, unpack my luggage, and clean my wardrobe. Yet, like many of you, I don't think I can keep eating at the dining hall for much longer and I long to go back home and have some homemade food.

I realize we are not all at the same distance from home. Some of you are international, like me, and others are from the US. However, no matter how close or far we are from home, we all strive to stay informed about our town and worry if anything goes south. This is why I got really concerned when I heard a riot had occurred back in Guatemala.

### *Background*

I am aware that you are not Guatemalan citizens as I am. This is why, in order to help you understand the causes of the riot, I will give you a quick summary of the current socioeconomic state of Guatemala City. The informal sector, which is the part of the economy that is not regulated by the state, plays a big role in Guatemala's economy (ENEI 1-2016). One of the jobs comprised in the informal sector is street vending. Street vendors all over the city depend on their day to day sales for a living. The problem is, their trade is illegal for they avoid taxes. However, Guatemala's leaders are aware that for most of the population this trade constitutes their only source of income. Hence, the Municipality of Guatemala City allows them to set their merchandise on certain streets.

For several years now, there have been small confrontations between street vendors and the Municipal Transit Policemen, or PMT. This occurs because the street vendors set their merchandise in banned streets and are reluctant to leave when asked. One of the streets that has been banned of street vendors is the Sexta Avenida.

The Sexta Avenida, or Sexta for short, is an avenue in Zona 1, the Historical Center of Guatemala. Forty years ago, the Sexta was the main attraction of the city. It was "the place to be if you wanted to buy something, spend some time with friends, or meet new people" as my grandmother, Mercedes Mosquera, described it. Sadly, as the years went by the city grew and the Avenue got crowded by street vendors, making the Sexta look like a public market. Nine years ago Álvaro Arzú, the city's mayor since 2004, decided it was time to restore the avenue to its old glory and so, banned the street vendors from the Sexta (Ortiz). Since then he has made many improvements, not only to the Sexta, but to the whole Historical Center.

Here is where the problem begins. This past November 10th a group of PMT was sent by the mayor of the city to clear the street vendors off the Sexta. Enraged by the request, a group of vendors started throwing stones at the PMT. Given that the traffic policemen don't carry weapons or have the authority to arrest civilians, they could do nothing but shield themselves. The group of street vendors then started destroying street lights, traffic cameras, sidewalks, benches, windows, and sculptures of the Sexta Avenida. Later, they mobilized toward the Central Municipality. On their way there, they destroyed a Transmetro (bus) stop and burned down a nativity scene that was placed in the Central Plaza. By the time they reached the Central Municipality, the National Civil Policemen, or PNC for short, had arrived. A group of the policemen formed a rank blocking the Municipality's entrance, while others threw tear gas to the vendors, stopping them from causing further damage. Some of the vendors that damaged public property were identified and caught by the PNC. Hours later, the crowd dissipated (Juárez).

### *Opposing Opinions or Division*

Many opinions have been published in the Newspapers, broadcasted on the TV, and circulated in social media since the riot. The events of that day started a discussion on economy, law enforcement, and society. Adriana López, an analyst in the República.gt news, expressed that "A project like the Sexta Avenida, that strives to achieve a sophisticated, safe, and street vendor free area would work for a first world country, not a third world country like Guatemala." She gave reason to vendor's reaction by stating that "People are more worried about earning the daily bread than they are about having a nice place to recreate." She also suggested the best idea would probably be to "rethink the whole concept of the project" (López). Haroldo Sánchez, a journalist of Guatevisión, classified the riot as "the common momentary and irrational rant through which the poor make themselves heard." He is a supporter of the idea that the violence

shown was merely the inevitable consequence of the current socioeconomic problems in the country (Sánchez).

On the other hand, Juan Diego Godoy strongly classified the disturbance occurred as “A terrorist act that attempted against the national history, the human intellect, and the social coexistence.” Thus, he expressed that “every single person involved in this terrorist act should not only pay for all the damage they caused, but face trial and be held responsible for the all crimes they committed that, according to the law, are 20.” The opinions that I just presented account only for a small portion of the broad spectrum of thoughts on the disturbance.

### *Refutation*

Since the incident brings about social, economic, and political issues, it lends itself to be evaluated from many different points of view. As a Guatemalan citizen that has lived in the city for 18 years, I believe the riot was a terrible act of unwarranted violence that bore no positive outcome. It is true that Guatemala’s unemployment rate is high. Every year the government runs a study called ENEI. According to the results of the 2016 study, 3.1% of Guatemala’s population is unemployed and 69.8% of the employed population is employed in the informal sector (“ENEI 1-2016”). This means that most of Guatemala’s population depends on the informal economy to make a living; as you probably remember, this population comprises street vendors amongst others. However, Arzú never asked the street vendors to stop selling their merchandise, but merely to move to other streets where they were granted permission to sell.

Furthermore, freeing the Sexta of vendors helps boost the commerce on the avenue. It is a recurrent problem that, when many vendors settle on the street, they cover most of the sidewalk and ultimately block the entrances to the shops. When this happens the stores experience a noticeable drop in sales. Moving the vendors allows the shops that are paying taxes to take full

advantage of their location and increase their profit, which will in turn lead to a higher employment rate.

Likewise, it is a reality that Guatemala is not a first world country, and is far from being one. However, no progress can ever be made if we just accept our current situation and settle. Just nine years ago, the Sexta Avenida was basically forgotten; the historical houses were in bad state and no one walked by it just to recreate. It wasn't until Arzú restored and embellished the avenue that the Sexta recovered its original appeal and the stores their clientele. Guatemala took a step forward at that time and letting the street vendors crowd the avenue would be to take a step back.

Moreover, the people of Guatemala have shown they want to maintain the Sexta as it was, without street vendors. This was reflected in the results of a survey Arzú did through twitter two days after the riot. He asked "Should we allow the Sexta Avenida to be occupied by street vendors to make it a market again?" to which 16,179 people answered no and only 1,407 answered yes. As you can see, the overwhelming majority, accounting for 92% of the surveyed, want the Sexta to be an area free of street vendors. The fact that we are not a first world country should not be a reason to deprive the citizens of Guatemala from enjoying the Sexta Avenida as safe and beautiful recreational space.

### *Proof*

Now that I have addressed the main reasons why the Sexta Avenida should not be occupied by street vendors, I would like to talk about the ways in which the vendor's reaction caused more harm than good. Analyzing the incident from a purely material standpoint, it caused Guatemala City to be in a worse state than it was before. The Municipality estimated 2 million Quetzales (approximately 250 thousand US Dollars) worth of public property was destroyed by

the vendors during the riot (Ríos). This doesn't only affect the government but the whole city's population. The public property that was destroyed was bought with the money from the city employee's taxes; the money that will be used to repair the damages will also have to come from those. This means that 2 million Quetzales generated by the citizens' hard work will have be used to undo the mess caused by the vendors, instead of being used to make other much needed improvements to the city's infrastructure.

The money that will have to be spent on repairs is but one of the negative impacts that the riot had on Guatemala's economy. Because of the disturbances, many stores in the Sexta Avenida and the Historical Center closed their doors on the day following the incident. Moreover, the number of people visiting and shopping at the Sexta has lowered considerably since November 10th, for the riot generated a sense of insecurity amongst the population. Just yesterday I was talking with Isabella Garcia, my sister, about the riot when she told me "my friends and I haven't been to the Sexta since that [riot] happened, and I don't think we'll be going any time soon." She backed up her decision by stating "We are scared something might happen while we are there." Guatemala as a country can't afford these kinds of setbacks given that, in 2015, we had an external debt of 7,484.8 million US Dollars that has only increased since ("Deuda").

Putting the money talk aside and looking at the disturbance from a moral standpoint, its aftermath in no way favors the vendors or helps solve Guatemala's socioeconomic problems. The vendors that participated in the riot "broke 20 laws that attempt against the public security and national heritage" (Ramos). Some of this infractions where relatively minor such as disobedience and public disorder. While others were quite major like insult to national symbols,

depredation of cultural property, fire and contamination, assault, and terrorism (Ramos).

Furthermore, the riot left 15 wounded people, amongst which were both policemen and civilians.

The gravity of the destruction and harm the vendors caused made an impression on every Guatemalan citizen. Just a day after the riot several names, with really bad connotation, were assigned to the group of vendors responsible for the disturbance. For instance, Juan Diego Godoy wrote “they [vendors] will forever be remembered as the savages that destroyed a whole avenue for not knowing how to dialogue” in his article titled “Cavemen in the Sexta”. On a similar note, Charlie Logar went as far as to call them “disgusting “indios”” on social media, which is one of the most racist and harshest insults that could be used against someone in Guatemala. I am telling you this to show how, by reacting the way they did, the vendors ruined their reputation amongst both civilians and politicians.

This rant also lost the vendors any chance they had at negotiating for better terms with Arzú, who, when interviewed about the incident, stated “We will not negotiate with criminals. On the contrary, we will denounce them so that they face justice and answer to the law” (Ríos). I was not surprised by Arzú’s reaction, since he of all people understands the amount of work embellishing and restoring the Sexta took. As you will remember, he is the one who led that effort. However, our mayor was not the only one asking for justice, the archbishop Óscar Julio Vian commented “I believe they [vendors] should receive some punishment for their actions because they have harmed our town, and destroyed the work and money our people has given for our Guatemala” (Rojas).

So far, three vendors accused of taking part in the riot have been captured and are currently imprisoned and awaiting trial (Ramos). This line of action is necessary since the vendors’ actions were not morally right. However, it doesn’t help solve any of the

socioeconomic problems of the country. The vendor's actions led the citizens and politicians to focus on punishing the violent acts rather than addressing the employment issues in the country.

### *Conclusion*

When the vendors rioted that day in November, I realized they probably thought their actions would lead to raising awareness of their current situation, which they would most likely classify as a social injustice. Everyone has the right to stand up for what they believe in. However, there is a time, a place, and a way for everything. The manner in which the vendors reacted was inappropriate and unwarranted. After all the PMT was only enforcing the law. It is not uncommon for the people disagree with the government. When this is the case, a peaceful protest is the right way to go. It is the moral manner to go about change.

The damages the vendors caused will not be easily forgotten by the citizens of Guatemala. The actions they took only brought about financial and cultural losses. They set back not only the Sexta Avenida project, but Guatemala as a whole. By reacting in such a violent way, the vendors lost their argument and their credibility. Granted, the lack of employment is a serious issue that needs to be taken care of. However, the riot only diverted the attention of the politicians to punishing the imminent law transgressions of the vendors. The events occurred in Guatemala this past November were tragic to say the least. The riot was a terrible act with no positive outcome.

In just seven days I am heading back home. I am very excited about seeing my family again. However, I am extremely worried about the state in which I will find Guatemala. Walking the Sexta Avenida during Christmas season has always been an enjoyable experience; I fear this year it might not be so. Thank you.



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