

Ronald Reagan's Bloody 'Apocalypto'

From the Archive: As grotesque as it is to honor Christopher Columbus who set in motion a hemisphere-wide genocide against the indigenous population, it is also sickening to honor Ronald Reagan who aided and abetted genocide against Guatemalan tribes just last century, as Robert Parry reported in 2006.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on Dec. 17, 2006)

Columbus Day, honoring the Italian navigator who “discovered” the New World for Spain, may be a holiday for some Americans of European heritage, but it surely represents a less happy commemoration for Native Americans, the beginning of centuries of repression and extermination.

Ironically, however, the crimes of Christopher Columbus and other early conquerors of the New World are better known and more widely condemned than more recent atrocities inflicted on indigenous tribes of Latin America with the help of modern-day American heroes, like Ronald Reagan.

On Columbus Day 2015, in recognition of these more recent tragedies, we are republishing this 2006 article from our Archive:

Mel Gibson's “Apocalypto,” a violent capture-and-escape movie set 500 years ago in a brutal Mayan society, ends ironically when European explorers arrive and interrupt the final bloody chase.

The surprise appearance of the Europeans was good news for Gibson's hero distracting his last pursuers but, as history tells us, the arrival of the Europeans actually escalated the New World's violence, bringing a more mechanized form of slaughter that devastated the Mayas and other native populations.

An even greater irony, however, may be that the U.S. media has done a better job separating fact from fiction about Gibson's movie than in explaining to Americans how some of their most admired modern politicians, including Ronald Reagan, were implicated in a more recent genocide against Mayan tribes in Central America.

America's hand in the later-day slaughter of these Mayas traces back to Dwight Eisenhower's presidency in 1954 when a CIA-engineered coup overthrew the reform-minded Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz.

The coup set in motion waves of murder, torture and assassination against almost anyone or any group deemed leftist, including Mayan tribes in Guatemala's highlands. The violent repression often benefited from U.S. advice and

equipment, according to U.S. government documents that were released during the Clinton administration.

In the mid-1960s, for instance, the Guatemalan security forces suffered from disorganization, internal divisions and possible infiltration by leftist operatives. So, the administration of President Lyndon Johnson dispatched U.S. public safety adviser John Longon from his base in Venezuela.

Arriving in late 1965, Longon sized up the problem and began restructuring the Guatemalan security forces into a more efficient and ultimately, more lethal organization. In a Jan. 4, 1966, report on his activities, Longon said he recommended both overt and covert components to the military's battle against "terrorism."

One of Longon's strategies was to seal off sections of Guatemala City and begin house-to-house searches. "The idea behind this was to force some of the wanted communists out of hiding and into police hands, as well as to convince the Guatemalan public that the authorities were doing something to control the situation," the report said.

On the covert side, Longon pressed for "a safe house [to] be immediately set up" for coordination of security intelligence. "A room was immediately prepared in the [Presidential] Palace for this purpose and Guatemalans were immediately designated to put this operation into effect," the report said.

Longon's operation within the presidential compound was the starting point for the infamous "Archivos" intelligence unit that became the clearinghouse for political assassinations.

Longon's final recommendations sought assignment of special U.S. advisers to assist in covert operations and delivery of special intelligence equipment, presumably for spying on Guatemalan citizens. With the American input, the Guatemalan security forces soon became one of the most feared counterinsurgency operations in Latin America.

Just two months after Longon's report, a secret CIA cable noted the clandestine execution of several Guatemalan "communists and terrorists" on the night of March 6, 1966. By the end of the year, the Guatemalan government was bold enough to request U.S. help in establishing special kidnapping squads, according to a cable from the U.S. Southern Command that was forwarded to Washington on Dec. 3, 1966.

Counter-Terror

By 1967, the Guatemalan counterinsurgency terror had gained a fierce momentum.

On Oct. 23, 1967, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research noted the "accumulating evidence that the [Guatemalan] counter-insurgency machine is out of control." The report said Guatemalan "counter-terror" units were carrying out abductions, bombings, torture and summary executions "of real and alleged communists."

The mounting death toll in Guatemala disturbed some of the American officials assigned to the country. One official, the embassy's deputy chief of mission Viron Vaky, expressed his concerns in a remarkably candid report that he submitted on March 29, 1968, after returning to Washington.

Vaky framed his arguments in pragmatic, rather than moral, terms, but his personal anguish broke through.

"The official squads are guilty of atrocities. Interrogations are brutal, torture is used and bodies are mutilated," Vaky wrote. "In the minds of many in Latin America, and, tragically, especially in the sensitive, articulate youth, we are believed to have condoned these tactics, if not actually encouraged them.

"Therefore our image is being tarnished and the credibility of our claims to want a better and more just world are increasingly placed in doubt.

"This leads to an aspect I personally find the most disturbing of all that we have not been honest with ourselves. We have condoned counter-terror; we may even in effect have encouraged or blessed it. We have been so obsessed with the fear of insurgency that we have rationalized away our qualms and uneasiness.

"This is not only because we have concluded we cannot do anything about it, for we never really tried. Rather we suspected that maybe it is a good tactic, and that as long as Communists are being killed it is alright. Murder, torture and mutilation are alright if our side is doing it and the victims are Communists.

"After all hasn't man been a savage from the beginning of time so let us not be too queasy about terror. I have literally heard these arguments from our people.

"Have our values been so twisted by our adversary concept of politics in the hemisphere? Is it conceivable that we are so obsessed with insurgency that we are prepared to rationalize murder as an acceptable counter-insurgency weapon? Is it possible that a nation which so reverses the principle of due process of law has so easily acquiesced in this sort of terror tactic?"

Though kept secret from the American public for three decades, the Vaky memo obliterated any claim that Washington simply didn't know the reality in Guatemala. Still, with Vaky's memo squirreled away in State Department files, the killing went on. The repression was noted almost routinely in reports from

the field.

On Jan. 12, 1971, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that Guatemalan forces had “quietly eliminated” hundreds of “terrorists and bandits” in the countryside. On Feb. 4, 1974, a State Department cable reported resumption of “death squad” activities.

Yet, as brutal as the security forces were in the 1960s and 1970s, the worst was yet to come. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan army escalated its slaughter of political dissidents and their suspected supporters to unprecedented levels.

Reagan’s Arrival

Ronald Reagan’s election in November 1980 set off celebrations in the well-to-do communities of Central America. After four years of Jimmy Carter’s human rights nagging, the region’s hard-liners were thrilled that they had someone in the White House who understood their problems.

The oligarchs and the generals had good reason for optimism. For years, Reagan had been a staunch defender of right-wing regimes that engaged in bloody counterinsurgency against leftist enemies.

In the late 1970s, when Carter’s human rights coordinator, Patricia Derian, criticized the Argentine military for its “dirty war” which included tens of thousands of “disappearances,” tortures and murders then-political commentator Reagan joshed that she should “walk a mile in the moccasins” of the Argentine generals before criticizing them. [For details, see Martin Edwin Andersen’s *Dossier Secreto*.]

After his election in 1980, Reagan pushed to overturn an arms embargo imposed on Guatemala by Carter because of its ghastly human rights record. Yet even as Reagan was moving to loosen up the military aid ban, the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies were confirming new Guatemalan government massacres.

In April 1981, a secret CIA cable described a massacre at Cocob, near Nebaj in the Ixil Indian territory. On April 17, 1981, government troops attacked the area, which was believed to support leftist guerrillas, the cable said.

According to a CIA source, “the social population appeared to fully support the guerrillas” and “the soldiers were forced to fire at anything that moved.” The CIA cable added that “the Guatemalan authorities admitted that ‘many civilians’ were killed in Cocob, many of whom undoubtedly were non-combatants.”

Despite the CIA account and similar reports, Reagan permitted Guatemala’s army to buy \$3.2 million in military trucks and jeeps in June 1981. To permit the

sale, Reagan removed the vehicles from a list of military equipment that was prohibited by the human rights embargo.

Confident of Reagan's sympathies, the Guatemalan government continued its political repression without apology.

According to a State Department cable on Oct. 5, 1981, Guatemalan leaders met with Reagan's roving ambassador, retired Gen. Vernon Walters, and left no doubt about their plans. Guatemala's military dictator, Gen. Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia, "made clear that his government will continue as before that the repression will continue."

Human rights groups saw the same picture. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission released a report on Oct. 15, 1981, blaming the Guatemalan government for "thousands of illegal executions." [Washington Post, Oct. 16, 1981]

But the Reagan administration was set on whitewashing the ugly scene. A State Department "white paper," released in December 1981, blamed the violence on leftist "extremist groups" and their "terrorist methods," inspired and supported by Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Yet, even as these rationalizations were sold to the American people, U.S. intelligence agencies in Guatemala continued to learn about government-sponsored massacres.

One CIA report in February 1982 described an army sweep through the so-called Ixil Triangle in central El Quiche province, an area where descendants of the ancient Maya lived.

"The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor [known as the EGP] and eliminate all sources of resistance," the report stated. "Since the operation began, several villages have been burned to the ground, and a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed."

The CIA report explained the army's *modus operandi*: "When an army patrol meets resistance and takes fire from a town or village, it is assumed that the entire town is hostile and it is subsequently destroyed."

When the army encountered an empty village, it was "assumed to have been supporting the EGP, and it is destroyed. There are hundreds, possibly thousands of refugees in the hills with no homes to return to. The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike."

Rios Montt's Coup

In March 1982, the violence continued to ratchet up when Gen. Efraim Rios Montt seized power in a *coup d'état*. An avowed fundamentalist Christian, he was hailed by Reagan as "a man of great personal integrity."

By July 1982, Rios Montt had begun a new scorched-earth campaign called his "rifles and beans" policy. The slogan meant that pacified Indians would get "beans," while all others could expect to be the target of army "rifles." In October, he secretly gave *carte blanche* to the feared "Archivos" intelligence unit to expand "death squad" operations.

The U.S. embassy was soon hearing more accounts of the army conducting Indian massacres. But the political officers knew that such grim news was not welcome back in Washington and to report it would only damage their careers.

So, the embassy cables increasingly began to spin the evidence in ways that would best serve Reagan's hard-line foreign policy. On Oct. 22, 1982, the embassy sought to explain away the mounting evidence of genocide by arguing that the Rios Montt government was the victim of a communist-inspired "disinformation campaign."

President Reagan picked up on that theme. During a swing through Latin America, Reagan discounted the growing evidence that hundreds of Mayan villages were being eradicated.

On Dec. 4, 1982, after meeting with Rios Montt, Reagan hailed the general as "totally dedicated to democracy" and declared that the Rios Montt government was "getting a bum rap."

On Jan. 7, 1983, Reagan lifted the ban on military aid to Guatemala and authorized the sale of \$6 million in military hardware. Approval covered spare parts for UH-1H helicopters and A-37 aircraft used in counterinsurgency operations.

State Department spokesman John Hughes said political violence in the cities had "declined dramatically" and that rural conditions had improved too.

In February 1983, however, a secret CIA cable noted a rise in "suspect right-wing violence" with kidnappings of students and teachers. Bodies of victims were appearing in ditches and gullies. CIA sources traced these political murders to Rios Montt's order to the "Archivos" in October 1982 to "apprehend, hold, interrogate and dispose of suspected guerrillas as they saw fit."

Sugarcoating

Despite these grisly facts on the ground, the annual State Department human rights survey sugarcoated the facts for the American public and praised the supposedly improved human rights situation in Guatemala. "The overall conduct of the armed forces had improved by late in the year" 1982, the report stated.

A different picture far closer to the secret information held by the U.S. government was coming from independent human rights investigators. On March 17, 1983, Americas Watch representatives condemned the Guatemalan army for human rights atrocities against the Indian population.

New York attorney Stephen L. Kass said these findings included proof that the government carried out "virtually indiscriminate murder of men, women and children of any farm regarded by the army as possibly supportive of guerrilla insurgents."

Rural women suspected of guerrilla sympathies were raped before execution, Kass said. Children were "thrown into burning homes. They are thrown in the air and speared with bayonets. We heard many, many stories of children being picked up by the ankles and swung against poles so their heads are destroyed." [AP, March 17, 1983]

Publicly, however, senior Reagan officials continued to put on a happy face.

On June 12, 1983, special envoy Richard B. Stone praised "positive changes" in Rios Montt's government. But, in reality, Rios Montt's vengeful Christian fundamentalism was hurtling out of control, even by Guatemalan standards. In August 1983, Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores seized power in another coup.

Despite the power shift, Guatemalan security forces continued the killings.

When three Guatemalans working for the U.S. Agency for International Development were slain in November 1983, U.S. Ambassador Frederic Chapin suspected that "Archivos" hit squads were sending a message to the United States to back off even mild pressure for human rights improvements.

In late November 1983, in a brief show of displeasure, the administration postponed the sale of \$2 million in helicopter spare parts. The next month, however, Reagan sent the spare parts. In 1984, Reagan succeeded, too, in pressuring Congress to approve \$300,000 in military training for the Guatemalan army.

By mid-1984, Chapin, who had grown bitter about the army's stubborn brutality, was gone, replaced by a far-right political appointee named Alberto Piedra, who was all for increased military assistance to Guatemala.

In January 1985, Americas Watch issued a report observing that Reagan's State Department "is apparently more concerned with improving Guatemala's image than in improving its human rights."

Death Camp

Other examples of Guatemala's "death squad" strategy came to light later. For example, a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency cable in 1994 reported that the Guatemalan military had used an air base in Retalhuleu during the mid-1980s as a center for coordinating the counterinsurgency campaign in southwest Guatemala and for torturing and burying prisoners.

At the base, pits were filled with water to hold captured suspects. "Reportedly there were cages over the pits and the water level was such that the individuals held within them were forced to hold on to the bars in order to keep their heads above water and avoid drowning," the DIA report stated.

The Guatemalan military used the Pacific Ocean as another dumping spot for political victims, according to the DIA report. Bodies of insurgents tortured to death and live prisoners marked for "disappearance" were loaded onto planes that flew out over the ocean where the soldiers would shove the victims into the water to drown, a tactic that had been a favorite disposal technique of the Argentine military in the 1970s.

The history of the Retalhuleu death camp was uncovered by accident in the early 1990s when a Guatemalan officer wanted to let soldiers cultivate their own vegetables on a corner of the base. But the officer was taken aside and told to drop the request "because the locations he had wanted to cultivate were burial sites that had been used by the D-2 [military intelligence] during the mid-eighties," the DIA report said.

Guatemala, of course, was not the only Central American country where Reagan and his administration supported brutal counterinsurgency operations and then sought to cover up the bloody facts.

Reagan's falsification of the historical record became a hallmark of the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua as well as Guatemala. In one case, Reagan personally lashed out at a human rights investigator named Reed Brody, a New York lawyer who had collected affidavits from more than 100 witnesses to atrocities carried out by the U.S.-supported contras in Nicaragua.

Angered by the revelations about his contra "freedom-fighters," Reagan denounced Brody in a speech on April 15, 1985, calling him "one of dictator [Daniel] Ortega's supporters, a sympathizer who has openly embraced Sandinismo."

Privately, Reagan had a far more accurate understanding of the true nature of the contras. At one point in the contra war, Reagan turned to CIA official Duane Clarridge and demanded that the contras be used to destroy some Soviet-supplied helicopters that had arrived in Nicaragua.

Clarridge recalled that "President Reagan pulled me aside and asked, 'Dewey, can't you get those vandals of yours to do this job.'" [See Clarridge's *A Spy for All Seasons*.]

To manage U.S. public perceptions of the wars in Central America, Reagan also authorized a systematic program of distorting information and intimidating American journalists. Called "public diplomacy" or "perception management," the project was run by a CIA propaganda veteran, Walter Raymond Jr., who was assigned to the National Security Council staff.

The project's key operatives developed propaganda "themes," selected "hot buttons" to excite the American people, cultivated pliable journalists who would cooperate, and bullied reporters who wouldn't go along. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

So, when the Reagan presidency came to an end, not only did U.S. officials who sponsored and encouraged war crimes escape accountability, they became highly respected figures in Washington. In the 1990s, the Republican congressional majority pushed to have scores of buildings and other facilities named after Reagan, including National Airport in Washington.

Modern 'Apocalyptos'

An honest accounting of what actually happened under Reagan's presidency became a political taboo in the United States. Even when hard evidence surfaced about those human rights crimes, the information was quickly brushed aside and forgotten.

On Feb. 25, 1999, for instance, a Guatemalan truth commission issued a report on the human rights catastrophe that Reagan and his administration had aided, abetted and concealed.

The Historical Clarification Commission, an independent human rights body, estimated that the Guatemalan conflict claimed the lives of some 200,000 people with the most savage bloodletting occurring in the 1980s. Based on a review of about 20 percent of the dead, the panel blamed the army for 93 percent of the killings and leftist guerrillas for three percent. Four percent were listed as unresolved.

The report documented that in the 1980s, the army committed 626 massacres

against Mayan villages. "The massacres that eliminated entire Mayan villages are neither perfidious allegations nor figments of the imagination, but an authentic chapter in Guatemala's history," the commission concluded.

The army "completely exterminated Mayan communities, destroyed their livestock and crops," the report said. In the northern highlands, the report termed the slaughter a "genocide."

Besides carrying out murder and "disappearances," the army routinely engaged in torture and rape. "The rape of women, during torture or before being murdered, was a common practice" by the military and paramilitary forces, the report found.

The report added that the "government of the United States, through various agencies including the CIA, provided direct and indirect support for some [of these] state operations." The report concluded that the U.S. government also gave money and training to Guatemalan military units that committed "acts of genocide" against the Mayas.

"Believing that the ends justified everything, the military and the state security forces blindly pursued the anticommunist struggle, without respect for any legal principles or the most elemental ethical and religious values, and in this way, completely lost any semblance of human morals," said the commission chairman, Christian Tomuschat, a German jurist.

"Within the framework of the counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, in certain regions of the country agents of the Guatemalan state committed acts of genocide against groups of the Mayan people," Tomuschat said.

In other words, the Reagan-supported Guatemalan security forces had conducted many *apocalyptos* against the descendants of the Mayas whose torment five centuries earlier was fictionalized in Mel Gibson's box office blockbuster.

Like their ancestors in the movie, these Mayas had their communities surrounded and attacked, albeit with more efficient weapons and vastly more lethality. As in the movie, young women were dragged off to be raped, but in the 1980s, the attackers were more interested in killing everyone in the village rather than enslaving them.

If anything, the actions by Ronald Reagan's allies were more ruthless, more bloodthirsty and more barbaric than the actions of Gibson's fictionalized Mayan city-state. Instead of a crazed priest hungry for human sacrifices to appease the gods, the Reagan-era slaughters were justified by well-dressed politicians and bureaucrats back in Washington eager to score some geopolitical points against their Cold War adversaries in Moscow.

During a visit to Central America, on March 10, 1999, President Bill Clinton apologized for the past U.S. support of right-wing regimes in Guatemala.

“For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake,” Clinton said.

But the story of the Reagan-supported genocide of the Mayan Indians was quickly forgotten, as Republicans and the Washington press corps wrapped Reagan’s legacy in a fuzzy blanket of heroic mythology. The atrocities inflicted on actual Mayan descendants late last century are now less real to many Americans than the abuses suffered by the fictional Mayas in Mel Gibson’s made-up story of five centuries ago.

[Many of the declassified Guatemalan documents have been posted on the Internet by the [National Security Archive](#).]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).
