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Waiting for the Full Truth About Guatemala

- *CIA reluctantly begins to lift the curtain on the full extent of its involvement in Guatemala, including the murder of U.S. citizens*
- *Guatemalan Truth Commission still hobbled by lack of funds to adequately investigate war time atrocities, and lack of leadership by President Arzu*
- *Amendment to be introduced today to reduce funding for the School of the Americas because of its curriculum and the flawed record of its alumni*
- *Colonel Aljirez along with other Guatemalan CIA informants, as well as their U.S. supervisors, must be held accountable for their unacceptable actions*

Neither the Clinton Administration nor President Alvaro Arzu are prepared to provide the necessary leadership to engage in a credible effort to reverse the role of both countries' security forces in the mayhem that has ravished Guatemala for forty years. Arzu's failure of courage is particularly disappointing, because he previously had displayed considerable fortitude in ramming through a peaceful end to decades of brutality on the part of his military establishment and facing down the enemy on several occasions.

The recent release by the CIA of roughly 5 percent of the documents in its possession which pertain to its 40 year-old controversial role in Guatemala provides extraordinary insights into the lengths which the U.S. government was prepared to go in order to achieve its Cold War "anti-subversive" goals. The documents provide a good argument for the need to close institutions like the School of the Americas, a product of an era in which a growing consensus of critics say Washington's paranoia was enshrined as its official Guatemalan policy. The \$20 million annual budget for the SOA could be usefully diverted to the half-crippled Guatemalan Truth Commission whose mission is to investigate atrocities committed during the country's 36-year Civil War.

Bitter Legacy

Throughout the Cold War, U.S. authorities sponsored a series of undercover operations whose central purpose was to contain the spread of communism in the Western Hemisphere. One such example of this was in Cuba, when during the Kennedy presidency the CIA offered the Mafia \$150,000 to arrange for Castro's assassination. Covert operations, including kidnappings, tortures and political murders were an integral part of a interventionist policy which profoundly undermined Guatemala's possibilities of creating authentic democratic institutions during this period. Penetration and control of key figures in the Guatemalan army during this period was crucial to Washington's successful implementation of its game plan. During this epoch, not only did the CIA pay and train scores of major human rights abusers, but actually conspired in the creation of lists of civilian political targets to be later gunned down. While it is no surprise that much of the information about CIA clandestine operations in Guatemala was kept from the average American, the same apparently was the case regarding senior State Department officials, as well as the White House.

Torres Amendment

The School of the Americas was instrumental in providing the venue for covert liaisons with key Guatemalan army personnel which often resulted in long-standing, if stealthy, relationships. By training their young officials, and subsequently recruiting some of them for the CIA's payroll, Washington was able to ensure cooperation with its anti-Communist policy, even at the eventual cost of a friendly country's sovereignty and democratic institutions. Today, July 9, Rep. Esteban Torres(D-CA) intends to introduce an amendment to the Foreign Aid Appropriations bill which will prohibit funding for the School of the Americas. Approval of this amendment would be an important step in ending a legacy of human rights violations by U.S.-trained members of the Guatemalan armed forces.

To facilitate this move, all of the documents concerning CIA involvement in Guatemala should be immediately released in a form in which they can be read and comprehended. The papers already released are so heavily censored that many are all but unreadable. Although the reputations of political figures, institutions and national security personnel may be sullied or embarrassed by such revelations, personal interests must not be confused with U.S. national interests.

CIA involvement in Guatemala began when the country's popularly-elected president Jacobo Arbenz threatened in the early 1950's to nationalize mainly under-utilized land holdings controlled by the United Fruit Company and offered to remunerate the U.S. Goliath at the artificially low rate of assessment that the company itself had placed on its land for tax purposes. With strong personal connections to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles, the company was able to arrange for the CIA to inaugurate an effective scenario in response to fast-breaking developments in the country. By backing Lt. Colonel Castillo Armas, one of its contacts in the Guatemalan army, the State Department, along with the CIA, orchestrated a successful coup against Arbenz in 1954. Forty years of terror, torture and death squad activity followed, often in part funded and directed by Washington, which resulted in the deaths of more than 150,000 innocent civilians.

Handicapped Truth Commission

On June 1, the Truth Commission was to begin its inquiry into these atrocities, but proceedings had to be delayed at least until the

beginning of the coming month due to a lack of funding. The Historical Clarification Commission, as it is officially called, was a part of the peace accord signed in December by President Arzu and leaders of the country's leftist guerrillas. Christian Tomuschat, a German law professor and leader of the Truth Commission, estimates that \$8 million is needed to complete the investigations. The U.S. and Norway have each donated \$1 million, while Guatemalan authorities only have promised \$800,000. The lack of monetary support by the Guatemalan government for the Commission raises serious questions about its general commitment to the peace effort, especially considering the 6-month time constraint placed on the Commission for the completion of its investigations and its inability to subpoena potential witnesses or name individual perpetrators of human rights violations.

Mysterious Deaths

The most recent instance of CIA activity in the country involved the suspicious deaths of Michael DeVine in 1990, and Peter Tiscione and Efraïn B maca Vel squez in 1992. DeVine, a U.S. citizen, was an innkeeper residing in the Peten, a heavily forested region of the country known for its Mayan antiquities and valuable hardwood. Later, it was established that he had been assassinated and beheaded by a Guatemalan military unit in June 1990, perhaps after he happened upon a smuggling operation being run out of the zone's military compound. In response to this grisly incident, and to the Guatemalan military's failure to comply with a promised vigorous investigation into the circumstances behind DeVine's death, Congress ceased aid shipments to the Central American country. However, the CIA was quick to replenish the funding gap. Both the Clinton and Bush Administrations admit that 5 to 7 million dollars were secretly funneled annually to the Guatemalan armed forces, though Bush officials insist the funds were used to pay CIA sources and placate the armed forces, not for the purchase of weapons.

In 1992, Peter Tiscione, an archeologist from New York, was found dead in his hotel room. According to The New York Times, Guatemalan authorities officially determined that Tiscione "stabbed himself to death with a machete," a finding accepted by U.S. Embassy officials at the time. However, then-Representative Robert Torricelli, a New Jersey Democrat, pointed out, "you do not have to be an expert to see that you can't commit suicide with a machete." Torricelli offered a hypothesis that Tiscione may have found a mass grave while he was working in Aguacat n in the Mayan altiplano region of the country. Most disconcerting to his friends and family was that the morning before his death, Tiscione had gone to the U.S. Embassy seeking help because he feared for his life. By 11pm that night Tiscione was found dead after having been sent home by skeptical embassy officials.

Another victim of the violence was Efraïn B maca Vel squez, a leftist guerilla leader married to Washington, D.C. lawyer Jennifer Harbury. Contrary to information provided at first by Guatemalan military reports as well as U.S. diplomats, a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency document stated that "B maca was not killed during a fire-fight with army troops, but was captured, interrogated, and killed."

Putative murderer remains a free man

Colonel Julio Roberto Alpi rez, a senior intelligence officer and SOA alumnus, implicated in the murders of both B maca and DeVine, acknowledges that he "routinely exchanged information with CIA officials." White House officials also have conceded that Alpi rez received at least \$60,000 from the CIA during 1990-1992. In July of 1992, shortly after embarrassing details of Alpi rez's complicity in B maca's execution had surfaced, the agency terminated his contract, awarding him \$44,000 in severance pay. While a later report by the CIA's Intelligence Oversight Board found that its agents neither had ordered nor had prior knowledge of DeVine's death, and that there was no way to definitively determine responsibility for B maca's killing, Justice Department officials did admit Alpi rez was involved in DeVine's murder. Even though further evidence had indicated that the colonel ordered the death of DeVine and supervised the torture and execution of B maca, he was later exonerated by Guatemalan officials. Outside observers maintain that it is astonishing that the agency claims to have had no knowledge of the murder of the U.S. citizen, even though one of its paid informers was involved in his death. This is especially so in the case of the guerrilla fighter B maca, whose cause the agency was spending millions of dollars annually to eliminate. Critics speculate that the CIA station chief felt it important that B maca be neutralized, so the agency sanctioned local Guatemalan authorities led by Alpi rez, to have him tortured and killed.

School of the Americas

Colonel Alpi rez received important training at the ill-reputed School of the Americas, located at Fort Benning, Georgia, but then based in Panama. In fact, he attended the school twice, once in the Combat, Arms and Support Services in 1970, and later at the Command and General Staff College in 1989, just before he was involved in the high-profile murders. This institution has earned the nicknames "School of Coups" and "School of Assassins" because of the activities of many of its alumni (some of whom later gained renown as the worst human rights abusers in Latin America). Former Panamanian president, Jorge Illueca, had no trouble terming the school the "biggest base for destabilization in Latin America."

The institution teaches combat skills, counterinsurgency operations, sniper fire, military intelligence, commando tactics and psychological operations. When the Pentagon finally released the controversial training manuals used at the facility after their contents already had begun to leak, pages were found in them advocating such interrogation techniques as blackmail, detaining the innocent relatives of those being questioned, torture and murder.

The clandestine policies promoted by the CIA coincided with the some of the training being offered at the institution. Subsequently, many SOA graduates, after having been signed on by the CIA, almost routinely were responsible for the torture and disappearance of "subversives" during the region's civil wars. According to the advocacy group, School of the Americas Watch, the school's alumni have been responsible for choosing targets for assassination, fashioning genocidal strategies which essentially legalized military atrocities throughout the eighties, helped plan and implement ex-President Sermon's 1993 auto-coup and were the architects behind numerous extrajudicial executions. In addition, General Edgar Godoy Gait n, General Luis Francisco Ortega Menaldo, and Colonel Otto Perez Molina were some of the SOA Guatemalan alumni who were on the CIA payroll as well as implicated in right-wing death squad killings.

The Nation magazine (April 17, 1997) reported that U.S. undercover agents on the CIA payroll for decades had worked inside the Guatemalan G-2 army unit, one of the two "brains behind the terror state," and which was known to have been responsible for the torture and murders of thousands of civilians. According to former military strongman Oscar Huberto Mejia Victores, Guatemala's death squads were initiated "in the 1960's by the CIA." Ortega Menaldo and Perez Molina both served as leaders of the G-2 forces during the eighties and nineties, at a time when its death squad activities and drug trafficking roles already were established.

The Newly Released CIA Documents

Recently, additional CIA documents have been declassified revealing that while the official public policy was one of "firm persuasion" in order to uphold high human rights standards, the policy on the ground was different: support of clandestine death squads in the "anti-subversive" wars against the "surrogates" of the Soviet Union and its allies. The impetus behind Truman's assistance of the 1954 coup was the CIA's concern that the Arbenz government in Guatemala was rapidly moving towards the Soviet camp. Among its strategies, the CIA strongly considered assassination as a way to eliminate both suspected as well as confirmed subversives. Early in 1954, the CIA proposed forming several assassin squads ("K groups") to be trained by sabotage teams. A January 11, 1954 cable requested that the CIA headquarters send 20 silencers for .22 caliber rifles to trainees in Honduras, and the documents indicate that in fact "headquarters sent the rifles."

Another attempt to oust the Arbenz regime included an "intensive psychological warfare program [to] parallel the planning for paramilitary action." Called the "Nerve War Against Individuals," the scheme included sending "mourning cards to top Communist leaders, death threats to communists... wooden coffins, hangman's nooses, and phony bombs to selected individuals." The "violent disposal" of a top Communist leader was also discussed because of its "positive effect on the resistance movement."

Shortly before the coup was launched, Castillo Armas provided the CIA with a hit list of 58 names to be eliminated. Criteria for the targets included "high government and organizational leaders irrevocably implicated in Communist doctrine and policy, out and out proven Communist leaders, and those whose removal for psychological, organizational, or other reasons is mandatory for the success of military action." Assassination, at the time an authorized procedure of the CIA, "was considered until the day of the coup." When discussing the possibility of completed assassinations, one document read that "there is no evidence to suggest" that they occurred and those plans "appear never to have been implemented." Although the plan was never ultimately approved, an agency official told his staff that the consensus in Washington was, "Arbenz must go; how does not matter." Considering that there were at least five hit lists floating around Guatemala at the time, it is very plausible that some people were killed without the CIA's knowledge or without reports to Washington.

Further actions necessary

President Clinton has boasted of the declassification and release of 200,000 documents. Yet half of these are newspaper clippings and some are even chapters of books, all information that already was to be found in the public domain. While releasing even a small amount of information surrounding the 1954 coup is a step in the right direction, the government still has a long way to go. The papers were not made public until 50 years after the fact, and many of them are so vaguely worded and extensively marked by excisions that they are all but useless; virtually all names of people and places have been deleted along with definitions of code words used in the report.

In the same way the U.S. government denied knowledge of B maca's death, they did not admit some of the subject matter taught at the SOA. Only after then-Rep. Torrecelli revealed the details of the rebel's death was the White House forced to confess its connections with the Guatemalan operations and its knowledge of the circumstances of B maca's death. It was not until a "dirty tricks" training manual was discovered and made public that Washington was forced to confess that it teaches torture methods.

Final closure to Guatemala's endless civil war will not occur until the School of the Americas is shut down and culpable military and political figures are held accountable for their actions in the murders of U.S. and Guatemalan citizens. This will not be complete until investigations of all the atrocities carried out are completed by the Truth Commission, which remain dubious.

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Founded in 1975 as a non-partisan research and information organization, COHA has been described on the Senate floor as "one of our nation's most respected bodies of scholars and policy makers."

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