

## Links between Economic and Military Violence

### Lesson 1: Guatemala

**Standards Addressed by Lesson:** **CIVICS** Standard 3.2 Students understand how the United States develops foreign policy. (b) Standard 3.3 Students understand the domestic and foreign policy influence the United States has on other nations and how the actions of other nations influence politics and society of the United States. **HISTORY** Standard 3.1 Students know how various societies were affected by contacts and exchanges among diverse peoples. (b) Standard 4.2 Students understand how economic factors have influenced historical events. (c,d) **GEOGRAPHY** Standard 4.5 Students know how cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface.

**Objectives of Lesson:** To give students an overview of Guatemala's history, and make them aware of the past and ongoing political, economic and social struggles.

**Instructional Strategies:** Discussion, skit, group activity

**Vocabulary:** Colonialism, underdevelopment, globalization, paramilitaries, guerrillas, United Fruit Company, peace accords, civil war, massacre, refugees, indigenous, mestizo

**Suggested Time:** Between 60 and 90 minutes

**Suggested Resources to Obtain:**

- 1 copy of each act of the Guatemala Skits
- Scrap paper, crayons
- 2 copies of the "Two Women" poem in *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Social Justice* (Bill Bigelow, Rethinking Schools Ltd., 1994)

**Attachments:**

- A. Guatemala Skits
- B. Skit Cheat Sheet for Educator
- C. Guatemala – A Brief History
- D. Guatemala History Notes

### Lesson Outline

#### Icebreaker / Quick Activity to Assess Prior Learning:

Ask students what they know about Guatemala and write comments on board or a flip chart. Educator and students may want to refer back to this list as they gain more knowledge.

#### Introduction to Lesson:

This lesson is an overview of Guatemala from the perspective of Guatemala's recent history and includes some cultural context and current events. Students are given a brief overview of

Global Solutions to Violence Guatemala Lesson

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Guatemalan history and are then asked to act out key events (Activities 1 and 2). Students will be asked to reflect on the skits performed by their classmates and respond to questions asked by the educator. The educator should stress the importance of active participation from each student because it is essential to the success of the lesson.

## **Activities**

### **Activity 1:**

### **Guatemala History and Slide Show**

The educator begins by doing a presentation on Guatemalan history using the Guatemalan History Notes (Attachment C) as a guide. Allow students to ask questions and inform them that they will be using this information to perform skits after the presentation.

### **Activity 2:**

### **Skits**

Divide students up into five groups to perform skits in front of the class. Each group should be given a copy of the skit descriptions (Attachment A) and will perform one act. Allow the students at least 15 minutes to choose roles and create a script for the act that they will be performing. The skit does not have to be more than 2 or 3 minutes. Stress to them that each member of the group should be involved and suggest that they use props if they are available or make them with the paper and crayons you provide. After each act, review the scenario that was just performed. Prompt the class by asking them the discussion questions in the Skit Cheat Sheet for the Educator (Attachment B) and also highlight the points mentioned. After all the skits have been performed, continue the discussion with the class and allow them to ask questions that may have come up during the skits.

### **Activity 3:**

### **“Two Women” Poem**

Ask for two female volunteers and give them each a copy of the “Two Women” poem. Ask them to read the alternating dialogue. When they are finished, ask each how she felt playing her respective role. Ask other students to respond to the poem. You can use the following questions to prompt discussion:

- What was your first reaction to the roles in the poem? Did the roles go in the direction that you expected?
- What situation is described in the two roles? Where in the world could this have taken place?
- Do you see yourself in the story? In which character(s)? In which situation?
- What do you think are the resources of social and political ferment that brought on the situation described? What helps to perpetuate the problems?
- How would the rich woman define freedom? How would the poor woman define freedom?
- What can we in the U.S. do to change the situations that set the stage for violent acts of desperation at home or abroad?

DJPC 2004

## **Attachment A: Guatemala Skit**

### **Act 1 - “The Conquest”**

In 1524, Spanish explorer Pedro de Alvarado began exploring the region of Guatemala. The goal of de Alvarado and his crew was to conquer Guatemala and her people, claim the country for themselves, and steal her riches to send back to Spain. What the explorers found when reaching the shores of Guatemala was an advanced Maya civilization represented by 25 different ethnic groups each speaking its own indigenous language.

Mal, a woman from the Quiché people, was deeply saddened by how cruel the Spanish were when they arrived. Many indigenous people were killed and their lands were taken from them. (Between 75% and 90% of the Maya were killed by war or disease.) Mal’s family, like many others, was forced to work on the coffee plantations where they were treated like slaves. Mal and her brothers would get up before sunrise to go to work in the fields and did not leave their coffee picking until after dark. Life was hard and cruel. To keep their spirits up, Mal’s husband Lu would tell the children stories of how grand the Maya civilization was before the Spaniards came. Lu told them that the Maya were a very advanced people. They had developed a calendar, mathematics, astronomy and architecture before the Spaniards came.

### **Act 2 - “The Colonial Era”**

Guatemala remained under Spanish rule for more than two centuries. During this time, the Spanish invaders made a lot of money selling crops that the native Guatemalan people were forced to produce to other countries.

After Guatemala gained its independence from Spain in 1821, the exportation of agricultural products increased even more. Huge amounts of coffee were sold to foreign countries, and soon bananas, cotton, tobacco, cocoa beans, spices, and cattle were also big exports. Businesses in foreign countries wanted to profit from this production and so invested more and more money in Guatemala.

Even though Guatemala was independent from Spain, this did not mean that the Guatemalan people were free from suffering. In many ways the country was still controlled by the wealthy Spanish colonists who stayed in Guatemala. Many indigenous people had their land taken away by the Spanish settlers. With no land and little opportunity, many Guatemalans had to work on banana, coffee and cotton plantations under the same awful conditions as before.

### **Act 3 – “The U.S. Goes Bananas”**

(Remember, from Act 1, that indigenous people had their land stolen from them by the Spanish and were forced to work like slaves on the plantations)

By the early 1900’s, more foreign companies began investing in Guatemala. These companies tried to create friendships with Guatemala’s ruling class of landowners and with the Guatemalan government. John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen, were both part of the U.S. government and had control over the United Fruit Company, a banana grower in Guatemala. This company was owned by U.S. businessmen, but it owned more land in Guatemala than anyone else! U.S.

businessmen also owned Guatemala's railway company AND Guatemala's electrical facilities. Much of the country's economy was controlled by U.S. interests.

Workers on the banana plantations were treated badly. They were yelled at, they could not take breaks, and they were paid very, very little. They worked long, hard hours under the hot sun, and were frightened and abused.

Jorge Ubico was the president of Guatemala from 1931-1944. He had a good relationship with the U.S. – especially since the U.S. helped him win the presidency. Ubico offered substantial help to foreign companies a lot: he made sure they had the best land, he did not charge them much in taxes, and he did not enforce laws to protect workers. Ubico's presidency was a fearful time for many Guatemalans—much of the population lived in poverty and had no land. The government was repressive, especially toward labor, executing some labor leaders who caused too much trouble for the government's friends, such as the banana company.

#### **Act 4 – “The Revolutionary Years”**

When the poverty, suffering, and abuse by the government became too much, the people demanded justice. Workers went out on strike, and students and other citizens protested demanding government change.

In 1951, Jacobo Arbenz became president. (His presidency and that of his predecessor, Juan José Arévalo, were known as the “10 Years of Spring.”). The changes he put into place were an attempt to confront the two main power holders in Guatemala: large landholders and foreign companies. He passed laws to help the poor in Guatemala. He wanted the owners of the United Fruit Company (*From Act 3: This is the banana grower, owned by U.S. interests, that controlled most of Guatemala's land.*) and other foreign companies to pay taxes to the Guatemalan government, pay workers the legal wage and, most of all, let workers join unions if they wanted to.

Arbenz also passed a law to help Guatemalans without land. (*From Act 1: Indigenous people's land was stolen from them by the Spaniards who forced them to work like slaves on the coffee plantations.*) This law meant landowners like the United Fruit Company that had huge farms had to sell part of their land to the government. The government redistributed this land to approximately 100,000 families who did not have land to live and grow food on.

#### **Act 5 – “The End of Guatemala's 10 Years of Spring and the Beginning of War”**

*(From Acts 3 and 4: The United Fruit Company, a U.S. owned banana plantation, owns most of the land in Guatemala. President Jacobo Arbenz wants to help Guatemala's poor and landless. He passes laws to make large landowners like the United Fruit Company sell some of its land to the Guatemalan government AND respect workers.)*

John Foster Dulles, his brother Allen (members of the U.S. government and part owners of the United Fruit Company) and the U.S. government felt threatened by Jacobo Arbenz. They did not like that the new government was taking away U.S. land and forcing the United Fruit Company to respect workers and pay taxes. Their power over Guatemala was being taken away. Wealthy Guatemalan landowners were also angered by the changes Arbenz made.

The CIA began training Guatemalans who opposed Arbenz so that they could overthrow his government. They trained in Honduras for almost a year. In 1954, the trained forces, along with the CIA planes flown by U.S. pilots, bombed Guatemala City. After the invasion, a U.S. Embassy plane brought the new Guatemalan President Castillo Armas to the capital and Arbenz fled the country.

Castillo Armas took the land away from poor Guatemalans and gave it back to the rich landowners. Foreign companies were no longer forced to pay their workers fair wages or allow them to form unions.

### **Act 6 – “Rebuilding Lives”**

At the end of Guatemala’s 36-year long civil war, many refugees who had been in Mexico began returning to Guatemala.

Juan was one of these refugees. In 1983, when he was six years old, Juan witnessed his mother, grandparents, sisters and brothers being killed by soldiers. That day, 14 others from his village were also murdered. Juan fled to Mexico with his father and uncle. They settled in a refugee camp just across the border from Guatemala. When the Peace Accords were signed in 1996, Juan’s family decided to return to live in the village of Santa Maria.

They have been resettled now for almost seven years, but life is still hard. The land that they have is not enough to support the family. There are no doctors in the village, only a clinic run by a few people who have a little healthcare training. There is an elementary school, but no middle school or high school. If kids want to study in a middle school, their parents have to have enough money to send them to the neighboring town of Cantabal. Juan is a teacher at the school in the village but the government does not pay his salary every month. Up until now, he has felt lucky to have this job because he can stay in the village with his wife, Cecilia, and their two children, Maria and José. Some of his friends have had to take their whole family south to work on coffee plantations for part of the year. It is very hard work, the owners do not pay well, and the children cannot go to school.

Lately, Juan has been thinking about trying to go ‘North.’ He heard that in the United States there is much work, and they pay you well. He would be sad to leave his family but if the government doesn’t pay his wages soon, he does not know what other options he might have. His friends, Manuel and Ricardo, left the village last year to go to the United States and are sending money home to their families.

## **Attachment B: Skit Cheat Sheet for Educator**

### **Act 1 – “The Conquest”**

#### **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS:**

Have students describe what is happening in this act.

Who has the power?

Is it the Guatemalans or external powers or governments?

How were the indigenous people treated? What happened to their land?

**POINTS TO HIGHLIGHT:** There were patterns set up during the conquest that impacted the recent civil war as well as present day Guatemala:

- Indigenous people had their lands taken from them pushing them deep into poverty. (Land was used not only to live on but also to grow food.)
- The indigenous were forced to work on coffee plantations.
- Racism was instilled into the society.
- Resources flowed out of Guatemala to the Spanish.

### **Act 2 - “The Colonial Era”**

#### **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS:**

Have students describe what is happening in this act.

What were the dynamics between the Spanish and the indigenous before independence?

How did they change after independence?

What options were available to the indigenous?

### **Act 3 – “The U.S. Goes Bananas”**

#### **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS:**

Have students describe what is happening in this act.

How are workers treated?

Whose interests did the Guatemalan government represent?

### **Act 4 – “The Revolutionary Years”**

What changes took place during these years?

Who stood to benefit and lose from these changes?

Why would this period be described as the “10 Years of Spring”?

### **Act 5 – “The End of Guatemala’s 10 Years of Spring and the Beginning of War”**

#### **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS:**

Have students describe what is happening in this act.

What changes took place when Armas came to power?

Who benefited, who lost?

Why did the U.S. get involved?

## **Act 6 – “Rebuilding Lives”**

### **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS:**

Have students describe what is happening in this act.

What are some of the challenges that Guatemalans face today?

What institutions in society (e.g. schools, hospitals, etc.) are required to ensure that all citizens have equal opportunities to succeed personally and collectively? Who should guarantee their accessibility?



## Attachment C: Guatemala – A Brief History

The Mayan civilization flourished throughout much of Guatemala and the surrounding region long before the Spanish arrived, but it was already in decline when the Mayans were defeated by Pedro de Alvarado in 1523-24. During Spanish colonial rule, most of Central America came under the control of the Captaincy General of Guatemala.

Guatemala gained independence from Spain on September 15, 1821; it briefly became part of the Mexican Empire and then for a period belonged to a federation called the United Provinces of Central America. From the mid-19th century until the mid-1980s, the country passed through a series of dictatorships, insurgencies (particularly beginning in the 1960s), coups, and stretches of military rule with only occasional periods of representative government.

From 1944-1954, Guatemalan society enjoyed what is now referred to as the "Ten Years of Spring" with two popularly elected and reformist Presidents. President Arbenz, himself a former military officer, permitted free expression, legalized unions and diverse political parties, and initiated basic socio-economic reforms. One key program was a moderate land reform effort aimed at alleviating the suffering of the rural poor. Pursuant to this plan, only plantations of very high acreage were affected; and only in cases where a certain percentage of such acreage was in fact lying unused. In these extreme cases, the unused portions of the land were not expropriated, but simply purchased by the Guatemalan government at the same value declared on the owner's tax forms. The property was then resold at low rates to peasant cooperatives. To set an example, President Arbenz started with his own lands.

Unfortunately for the people of Guatemala, the United Fruit Company was, at that time, one of the largest landowners in the country. Moreover, the "Frutera" had greatly undervalued the value of its holdings on its tax returns to the Guatemalan government. The executives were thus highly displeased when their fallow lands were forcibly bought back by the government at the price they themselves had declared. In 1954, at the height of the McCarthy era, the Company leaders hurried to Washington and cried "Communism." The results were swift and predictable. The CIA promptly organized a group of Guatemalan military dissidents, trained, armed and funded them, and helped them to plan and carry out a violent *coup d'etat* against the legally and popularly elected Arbenz. Arbenz himself was driven out of Guatemala and died heartbroken in exile. A blood bath ensued, peasant cooperatives were destroyed, unions and political parties crushed, and dissidents hunted down. Thousands were killed and many more fled the country. Recently released CIA documents include a CIA hit list prepared before the coup, identifying political and intellectual leaders as military targets. A military dictatorship was installed in the presidency and remained there until the 1986 election of civilian President Venizio Cerezo. A horrified young physician known as Che fled the country with the others, and moved to Cuba to help Fidel fight what he had seen for himself of "Yankee Imperialism."

Although the "Ten Years of Spring" attempt lay in ruins, the experience had whetted the popular appetite for reforms. Church leaders began to lead landless peasants to the swamplands of the Ixcán, helping them to establish cooperative villages and start a new life. Rural literacy campaigns flourished, and health promoter teams set to work in the *aldeas*. Cautious efforts to



unionize in the cities began anew, and social commentary and criticism emanated from the University circles. A Mayan civil rights movement began, with demands for equality and an end to the repression. Simultaneously, a fledgling armed resistance movement laid roots in countryside. The FAR organized in the northeastern jungles of the Peten, while the EGP and ORPA organized in the western Mayan regions. All three groups later merged with the PGT of the capital, forming a united front called the U.R.N.G. in 1981.

By the late 1970s, the powers that be were alarmed by the growing popular demands for reforms. As had happened so many times in the past, they responded with great cruelty and force. The Guatemalan military set about to wipe out all such "subversive" activities for once and for all. Father William Woods, a U.S. citizen and a Maryknoll priest who had led the cooperative movement in the Ixcán region, received numerous death threats. In 1978 he was flying his small plane out of the region with three other Americans on board, including a young volunteer, a physician, and a journalist for a Church publication. The plane was shot down and all four were killed. In 1981 small group of Mayan leaders marched to the capital and peacefully occupied the Spanish Embassy to protest the repression against their people. Despite the calls of the Spanish Ambassador to leave them in peace, the authorities burned the building to the ground, killing all of the protesters as well as all of the Embassy staff. The Ambassador, badly injured, was the only survivor.

These horrifying events have become symbolic of the wave of repression carried out by the Guatemalan military against the civilian population throughout the 1980s. Often referred to as the "Silent Holocaust", the campaign left 200,000 civilians dead at the hands of the military death squads, and 440 Mayan villages wiped from the map. Extreme torture became commonplace as a method of coercion and intimidation. The union movement in the capital was crushed, and the literacy and rural health movements were destroyed as well. Repression against leaders of the Catholic Church was so intense that nuns and priests were finally evacuated from the Mayan highlands, their abandoned Churches used as barracks and often torture centers by the military. Thousands of *catechistas* were "disappeared". Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans either fled the country or fled inwards into the jungles, forming the CPRs, or civilian resistance populations. Many others chose to pick up weapons and leave for the mountains to join the U.R.N.G. forces.

The United States role throughout this time period was hardly illustrious. Despite the extreme and obvious repression, the U.S. continued to send massive military aid throughout most of the war. Even when such aid was temporarily suspended, arms and equipment supplies continued. The School of the Americas continued to train and graduate Guatemalan officers who became notorious for their human rights violations. Training manuals used clearly indicate practices which would violate human rights. Meanwhile, CIA officials worked closely with Guatemalan intelligence officers linked to death squad activities. Many such officers were on CIA payroll as "assets" or paid informants, despite their well known record for serious human right violations. The CIA, moreover, knowingly paid "assets" for information obtained through the use of kidnapping, torture and extrajudicial execution. Worse yet, it was not unusual for North Americans to enter areas where prisoners were being secretly detained and tortured, ask some questions, then leave the victims to their fates. The Red Cross, United Nations, police and family members were never notified.

The civil war continued for more than thirty five years, the final peace accords being signed in December 1996. The United Nations sponsored Truth Commission, or Commission for Historical Clarification, ("CEH"), presented its findings in March 1999. The Commission found that the Guatemalan army had committed some 93% of the total war crimes, and had carried out over 600 massacres. Moreover, the army's counterinsurgency campaign had legally constituted genocide against the Mayan people. The U.R.N.G. forces were charged with 3% of the violations.

A key finding of the report was the conclusion that the United States government had directly contributed to this thirty year genocidal campaign. This included not only the 1954 CIA coup against President Arbenz, but also included the training of known human rights violators at the School of the Americas and other military centers, the continued financing of such human rights violators, and the close collaboration with military intelligence units which carried out death squad activities.

<http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/guatemala/history.html>

<http://www.ncbuy.com/reference/country/backgrounds.html?code=gt&sec=backhistory>

## **Attachment D: Guatemala History Notes**

### **Maya Civilization**

Earliest Mayan culture dates back to the Formative Period of Mesoamerican civilizations from 300 BC to 100 AD, but it did not reach its peak until the Classic Period (200-925 AD).

In 600 AD, as Teotihuacán (of the Toltecs of Central Mexico) was in decline, Maya civilization was making cultural advances never before seen on this continent; especially in the fields of astronomy, architecture, mathematics, and the calendar.

Around 790 AD, they began to mysteriously decline. Village after village was abandoned until the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the civilization disappeared entirely. Why? Different theories include: a population explosion placed unsustainable demands on resources; a misuse of land; or invasions from northern groups.

From 900 AD until the Spanish invasion, there was an almost total decline. But, this period saw the onset of class systems (priests, merchants, and serfs), government regulation and taxation.

### **The Conquest**

In 1524, Pedro de Alvarado began exploring the region of Guatemala. He led an expedition against the Quiché people, who were at that point the most powerful and wealthy ethnic group in the region.

When the Spaniards arrived, they by no means encountered a primitive society. Although the height of the Maya Civilization had long vanished, it was still a complex society-in-transition, with multiple social tensions to be manipulated in Spain's favor.

Similar to what happened in Mexico, Alvarado was able to manipulate feuds between indigenous groups to defeat them. He conquered the indigenous peoples and went about setting up his colonial empire and converting the indigenous to Catholicism.

Guatemala was not near as rich in gold as Mexico, so it was somewhat of a disappointment in that aspect. The Spanish made up for it by using forced indigenous labor to establish large coffee plantations. After the conquest, between 75% and 90% of the Mayan population was killed by war and European diseases.

### **Colonial Period**

In 1821, Guatemala (with the rest of Central America) gained independence from Spain, but Guatemalan conservatives decided they would rather be "the tail of a lion than the head of a mouse," and joined the Mexican empire. It did not last and, in 1823, they formed the Federation of Central American States. By 1847, the Federation was totally dissolved, and Guatemala's political borders looked pretty much as they do today.

The colonial period in Guatemala brought with it all the same seeds of inequality, exploitation, and "underdevelopment" as it did everywhere else in Latin America. Economic, social, and political priorities were determined by the interests of the ruling class in Spain. Production was based on Spanish, not Guatemalan needs, and was subject (as it is today) to market fluctuations, etc.

Indigenous communities had to pay tributes, and land (the primary source of wealth) was expropriated from them by the Spanish settlers. The hacienda system (*latifundia-minifundia*) was created, and it was a mono-export economy (coffee). They exploited the indigenous workforce through coercion and terror to ensure the “smooth” functioning of the economic system.

The Catholic Church, a huge landholder, functioned as part of the repressive state apparatus and provided, with its skewed interpretation of the Beatitudes, the ideological underpinning for the pacification of the indigenous population.

Indigenous resistance manifested itself in numerous uprisings quashed by military force. The rape of indigenous women led to the racial intermixing and the ladino population.

The colonial period was marked by power struggles between “Liberals” and “Conservatives.”

The importance of coffee led to the greater concentration of land because coffee requires large tracts of land. It also required more infrastructure and other state support of private enterprise. The police state enforced mandatory labor and seasonal migration to the coast for harvests. (Vagrancy laws made it illegal for people to be in one place too long, sanctioning police actions.)

### **The Onset of Economic Globalization**

By the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, enormous increases in global trade brought even more foreign investment to Guatemala, with the foreign firms of the imperialist powers seeking alliances with Guatemalan elite.

- **United Fruit Company (UFCO)** –the largest land-holder in all of Guatemala, a monopoly in banana production. Its subsidiary, **International Railways of Central America (IRCA)**, the company’s railway, monopolized transport facilities. **Electric Bond and Share** completely controlled Guatemala’s electrical facilities.
- Until the 1944 October Revolution, these 3 companies enjoyed unchallenged privileges, including tax exemptions, the best land, government-financed infrastructure made exclusively for them, and non-regulation of their activities. The first half of the 1900’s saw increasing ties between U.S. political and economic interests and the Guatemalan oligarchy.
- 1931-1944 – All these arrangements culminated in the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, who came to power with U.S. support. U.S. maneuvering helped to secure his elections against “undesirable” (or “nationalistic”) candidates. (His 1936 re-election “coincided” with renewed contracts and new privileges for both UFCO and IRCA.)
- Under this “liberalism,” the strong state was consolidated to protect investment rather than citizens. However, the stock market crash of 1929 and the resultant global recession deeply affected world coffee prices, which had a devastating affect on the Guatemalan economy.
- Also, World War II effectively closed Guatemala off from the European market, increasing its dependence on the U.S., which was allowed set prices almost unilaterally, resulting in a significant loss of export earnings for Guatemala.
- Under Ubico, unemployment increased, smaller producers lost property, and the state reduced expenditures.

- While other Latin America countries (like Mexico) experimented with ISI ( Import Substitution Industrialization) during this time, Ubico attempted to reinforce the *status quo* in Guatemala, implementing repressive labor legislation, executions of labor and oppositions leaders, etc.

### **The Revolution**

The exacerbation of poverty and repression under Ubico spurred discontent among the petty bourgeoisie – mostly middle-class university students, intellectuals, small businessmen, and junior army officers.

Discontent manifested itself in strikes and protests that led to the October 20, 1944 revolution that overthrew Ubico. Elections were held in 1944, and Juan José Arévalo was elected president.

From March 1945 – March 1951, Arévalo served as president. He instituted moderate reforms that paved the way for deeper changes later.

- Universal suffrage was granted to all adults except illiterate women (which in those days was, of course, most women);
- Basic freedoms were guaranteed;
- Political parties were allowed to function freely (except the Communist party – Arévalo was clearly anti-Communist and fairly supportive of international capital.);
- One-third of state expenditures went to social spending;
- Labor legislation to protect workers was enacted; and
- Labor organizing began in UFCO and IRCA!

In 1951, Jacobo Arbenz succeeded Arévalo as President and had the support of organized labor, the revolutionary parties, and the communists. Arbenz was committed to breaking Guatemala's economic dependence, meaning he had to confront two main power holders left untouched by Arévalo—foreign monopolies and the land oligarchy.

Arbenz had not initially planned on nationalizing foreign firms, but rather on enforcing the new labor and tax legislation, and competing with the private firms on government projects to challenge their monopolies. When UFCO responded, however, by firing large numbers of workers who demanded compliance with labor laws, Arbenz confiscated 26,000 acres of land from UFCO as a guarantee for payment of back wages. But all of this would be overshadowed by what was about to happen in response to Arbenz's 1952 Agrarian Reform Law.

Expropriations began in 1953, and by June 1954, approximately 100,000 peasant families had received land and rural social services had increased. Big land owners were infuriated, and retaliated against the peasants. In turn, the peasants reacted by occupying land and sometimes they, too, reacted with violence. The Agrarian Reform polarized the entire country as either pro- or anti-revolution.

At this time, UFCO was the largest land-holder. However, of its 550,000+ acres, less than 15% was under cultivation. The government expropriated 400,000 acres (much of it unused) and offered it as compensation at the seriously undervalued amount that UFCO had used to value its land for tax (evasion) purposes. Meanwhile, the U.S. was becoming aggravated because the Guatemala government refused to “modify” the labor codes that “discriminated” against UFCO

and the protectionist oil laws that closed the door to foreign oil investment. The U.S. press denounced the Arbenz administration as communist. Arbenz refused to conform to World Bank recommendations, which alienated Guatemala from international credit sources.

### **The Coups**

By early 1954, powerful, conservative sectors of Guatemala society had mobilized. Meanwhile, the CIA was training Guatemalan counter-revolutionary forces on UFCO plantations in Honduras and Nicaragua. The U.S.' role was further compromised by the fact that John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, had been a partner in UFCO's law firm. His brother, Allen, the CIA Director, had served on UFCO's Board of Directors. While certainly a product of U.S. interventionism, there was a lot of division in Guatemala and support for the counter-revolution.

Sensing U.S. maneuvering and manipulation of hemispheric and global politics, Arbenz called a state of siege, but it was too late. In June, the invasion from Honduras, backed by CIA aerial support (CIA planes flown by U.S. pilots), began a regular bombing of Guatemala City and other cities to undermine the Arbenz government. On July 8, 1954, the CIA-chosen Col. Castillo Armas was flown to Guatemala City in a U.S. Embassy plane and became President. The U.S. justification for this action was "to make the world safe for democracy" (i.e. investment) and "to destroy the Communist menace."

### **Era of Political, Economic, and Social Repression and *La Violencia***

A witch hunt ensued to eliminate all progressives through torture, disappearances, and killing. The new government completely repealed all nationalist, protective legislation and opened up Guatemala to oil exploration by foreign firms.

Export-led growth became more entrenched as Guatemala's answer to its economic woes. They diversified agriculture through investment in sugar, cotton, and cattle, in addition to coffee. At the same time, the country began to import basic grains for internal consumption. Industrialization increased, mainly through foreign investment, thereby increasing the domination of foreign capital in determining the rules of the country.

The 1980s were characterized by economic shocks and sharp declines in world prices for Guatemala's export agricultural goods, with a simultaneous rise in oil prices (resulting in increased prices for rural Guatemalans). The trade deficit increase was financed by the accumulation of foreign debt. There was also a huge fiscal deficit because of Guatemala's seriously skewed tax structure—the most unequal in all of Latin America.

The country was also affected by the ravages of so many years of war—massive displacement of the populations and food shortages because of crop destruction by the army. This was made worse by neoliberal economic policy prescriptions advocated by the U.S. and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through wage restraints, social spending cuts, privatizations, and policies favoring foreign investment, especially in the maquila sector. There was a macro-economic "growth" on one hand, but accompanied on the other hand by extreme deprivation and poverty. Society was even more polarized as a result.

As the counter-insurgency war continued, the military was the spinal column of the ruling coalition, made up of alliances between the state, the armed forces, and the landed elite.



In the 1970s, the guerilla movement began to incorporate the highlands indigenous population into their ranks. As a result, in the early years of the 1980s, the rural indigenous regions suffered enormously from the worst period of violence—the “scorched earth” campaign waged by dictator Rios Montt. It was a time of genocide:

- Destruction of 440 villages
- Killing of 100,000+ civilians
- 10-12% of the country’s population (or 1 million people) displaced
- 150,000 fled to Mexico
- Internally displaced often forced into army controlled villages
- Razing of forests and crops to deny coverage and food to the guerillas
- Destruction of indigenous economic autonomy making that population available for migrant work on the south coast

This escalated war effort sucked up more of the state’s resources making even less money available for social spending.

The resurgence of the guerilla forces occurred as a result of massive expulsions of peasants from their land and their exploitation as migrant workers. Their consciousness was raised by their subjugation making them a labor force with nothing to lose.

The guerilla movement of the 1960s had been in the east and virtually ignored the needs of the indigenous population. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the guerilla movement embraced the ethnic-national question and began to develop a broad social base. They had the support of the Liberation Theologians of the Catholic Church (“the Church of the Poor”). The Church also was split into radical and conservative components.

In 1982, the four guerilla forces united into the URNG (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*), a significant achievement. But under the army holocaust of the indigenous population, the insurgents were critically weakened and did not regain strength again until the late 1980s.

Gen. Rios Montt was overthrown in 1983, and there was a return to rule by the army high command. 1983-1985 marked the emergence of the PACs (paramilitary units), designed to pit indigenous villagers against indigenous villagers in order to eradicate the guerilla movement. The PACs carried out massacres of their own villagers. Participation in the PACs was forced, not voluntary, and involved brutal indoctrination and even torture.

When the army would destroy crops and livelihoods of the peasants, it would then offer them social work services and food as a way to win them over (“beans and bullets”). Peasants were often relocated to “model villages,” where the army could exercise better control over them.

### **A Changing Tide?**

With the presidency of “civilian” Vinicio Cerezo from 1986-1990, there was a supposed return to civilian power and democracy. But the change was only cosmetic, not substantive, in nature. Its purpose was to achieve some semblance of legitimacy in the international community, which by this time had cut off most direct aid to Guatemala. It was also meant to reactivate confidence



in the private sector and stimulate much needed investment after earlier capital flight during *la Violencia*. i.e., There was no real transfer of power from the military to civilian authorities.

Meanwhile, the inequality of resource and income distribution grew, with untold wealth amidst a landscape of grinding poverty. The URNG presented Cerezo with its minimum requirements for a democratic solution to the conflict. The government responded by escalating military offensives and said it would not negotiate until the URNG laid down its arms. Peace negotiations between the government and the URNG finally began in 1987 and continued sporadically until 1994 when the parties agreed to an agenda to guide subsequent talks. The final accord was signed in December 1996. Refugees began to return in organized groups in the early 1990s. The Peace Accords mandated many things:

- Redefined the military role to be one of external defense rather than internal security, and mandated its reduction by 1/3 in both numbers and budget;
- Mandated the creation of the CEH Truth Commission;
- Authorized an increase in tax collection to pay for the implementation of accords;
- Called for market-based “land reform”;
- Directed respect for Indigenous Rights and Culture, i.e. indigenous justice systems, bilingual education, official recognition of language groups, respect for sacred sites, etc.

Many of the changes called for in the Peace Accords, especially in the Accord on Indigenous Rights and Culture, required constitutional changes through a Constitutional Referendum. But the Referendum failed for many reasons, namely a defamation campaign by the wealthy powerful sector and by awkward, complex wording of the questions for an illiterate population, a lack of education about the issues at stake, etc.

Developed by Catherine Raveczky

Source: *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* (Susanne Jonas, Westview Press, 1991)