

1944-1989, Making Guatemala a killing field: The coup and US intervention in Guatemala

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Noam Chomsky on the US intervention and coup following the 1944 revolution which overthrew Guatemala's brutal dictator.

There was one place in Central America that did get some US media coverage before the Sandinista revolution and the contra war in Nicaragua, and that was Guatemala. In 1944, a revolution there overthrew a vicious tyrant, leading to the establishment of a democratic government that basically modelled itself on Roosevelt's social democratic New Deal. In the ten-year democratic interlude that followed, there were the beginnings of successful independent economic development.

That caused virtual hysteria in Washington. Eisenhower and Dulles warned that the "self-defence and self-preservation" of the United States was at stake unless the virus was exterminated. US intelligence reports were very candid about the dangers posed by capitalist democracy in Guatemala.

A CIA memorandum of 1952 described the situation in Guatemala as "adverse to US interests" because of the "Communist influence...based on militant advocacy of social reforms and nationalistic policies." The memo warned that Guatemala "has recently stepped-up substantially its support of Communist and anti-American activities in other Central American countries." One prime example cited was an alleged gift of \$300,000 to José Figueres.

As mentioned above, José Figueres was the founder of Costa Rican democracy and a leading democratic figure in Central America. Although he cooperated enthusiastically with the CIA, had called the United States "the standard-bearer of our cause" and was regarded by the US ambassador to Costa Rica as "the best advertising agency that the United Fruit Company could find in Latin America," Figueres had an independent streak and was therefore not considered as reliable as Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza or other gangsters in our employ.

In the political rhetoric of the United States, this made him possibly a "Communist." So if Guatemala gave him money to help him win an election, that showed Guatemala supported Communists.

Worse yet, the same CIA memorandum continued, the "radical and nationalist policies" of the democratic capitalist government, including the "persecution of foreign economic interests, especially the United Fruit Company," had gained "the support or acquiescence of almost all Guatemalans." The government was proceeding "to mobilise the hitherto politically inert peasantry" while undermining the power of large landholders.

Furthermore, the 1944 revolution had aroused "a strong national movement to free Guatemala from the military dictatorship, social backwardness, and 'economic colonialism' which had been the pattern of the past," and "inspired the loyalty and conformed to the self-interest of most politically conscious Guatemalans." Things became still worse after a successful land reform began to threaten "stability" in neighbouring countries where suffering people did not fail to take notice.

In short, the situation was pretty awful. So the CIA carried out a successful coup. Guatemala was turned into the slaughterhouse it remains today, with regular US intervention whenever things threaten to get out of line.

By the late 1970s, atrocities were again mounting beyond the terrible norm, eliciting verbal protests. And yet, contrary to what many people believe, military aid to Guatemala continued at virtually the same level under the Carter “human rights” administration. Our allies have been enlisted in the cause as well - notably Israel, which is regarded as a “strategic asset” in part because of its success in guiding state terrorism.

Under Reagan, support for near-genocide in Guatemala became positively ecstatic. The most extreme of the Guatemalan Hitlers we’ve backed there, Rios Montt, was lauded by Reagan as a man totally dedicated to democracy. In the early 1980s, Washington’s friends slaughtered tens of thousands of Guatemalans, mostly Indians in the highlands, with countless others tortured and raped. Large regions were decimated.

In 1988, a newly opened Guatemalan newspaper called *La Epoca* was blown up by government terrorists. At the time, the media here were very much exercised over the fact that the US-funded journal in Nicaragua, *La Prensa*, which was openly calling for the overthrow of the government and supporting the US-run terrorist army, had been forced to miss a couple of issues due to a shortage of newsprint. That led to a torrent of outrage and abuse, in the *Washington Post* and elsewhere, about Sandinista totalitarianism.

On the other hand, the destruction of *La Epoca* aroused no interest whatsoever and was not reported here, although it was well-known to US journalists. Naturally the US media couldn’t be expected to notice that US-funded security forces had silenced the one, tiny independent voice that had tried, a few weeks earlier, to speak up in Guatemala.

A year later, a journalist from *La Epoca*, Julio Godoy, who had fled after the bombing, went back to Guatemala for a brief visit. When he returned to the US, he contrasted the situation in Central America with that in Eastern Europe. Eastern Europeans are “luckier than Central Americans,” Godoy wrote, because while the Moscow-imposed government in Prague would degrade and humiliate reformers, the Washington-made government in Guatemala would kill them. It still does, in a virtual genocide that has taken more than 150,000 victims [in what Amnesty International calls] “a government program of political murder.”

The press either conforms or, as in the case of *La Epoca*, disappears.

“One is tempted to believe,” Godoy continued, “that some people in the White House worship Aztec gods - with the offering of Central American blood.” And he quoted a Western European diplomat who said: “As long as the Americans don’t change their attitude towards the region, there’s no space here for the truth or for hope.”

Noam Chomsky

P.S.

• <https://libcom.org/history/articles/guatemala-us-intervention>

From What Uncle Sam Really Wants, by Noam Chomsky:

<https://www.zmag.org/chomsky/sam/sam-contents.html>

- Chomsky is of course an American citizen, and so “we” and “our” refers to the US. The article has been edited slightly by libcom - US to UK spellings and a few small details have been added for the reader new to the topic.