



Guerrilla armies in Guatemala during the Guatemalan Civil War Source: Getty Images (through [ThoughtCo](#))

## The Role of the United States in the Guatemalan Genocide

Danielle Valdevit

**D**URING THE GUATEMALAN CIVIL WAR, the government and communist guerilla groups inflicted brutal violence across the country due to their political and economic ideological differences. Civilian populations, specifically Maya indigenous groups, suffered from this internal political conflict and eventually became the victims of the Guatemalan Genocide. Violence reached its peak from 1981 to 1983, under the rule of General Efraín Ríos Montt, during Operation Victory 82.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the mission was to “cleanse” Maya areas of alleged communist threat, as its inhabitants were accused of collaborating with the guerilla armies.<sup>2</sup> The Maya population in Guatemala had suffered from racism and discrimination in the past. Both the Guatemalan military and the left wing guerillas used the Maya to

advance their political agendas, which subjected them to violence and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> During Operation Victory 82, General Ríos Montt caused the deaths of 1,771 innocent civilians, the displacement of 29,000 people, and the forced relocation of 1,383 people.<sup>4</sup> The Guatemalan military depicted the Maya population as a threat to the well-being of the country. The United States played a significant role in the violence inflicted upon the Maya through their support of the Guatemalan military during the Civil War.

The United States, as a capitalist country with business interests in Guatemala, deemed it necessary to instigate the Guatemalan Civil War and support the anti-communist military to prevent the alleged rise of global communism. The US was also

<sup>1</sup> Roddy Brett, *The Origins and Dynamics of Genocide: Political Violence in Guatemala* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016), 134.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

motivated by the fear of Soviet influence and the potential to use Guatemala to advance its political agenda. In 1952 the United States developed a plan to overthrow communist President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, as they assumed that his regime threatened American corporations, such as the United Fruit Company.<sup>5</sup> The Central Intelligence Agency devised plans for the assassination of Guatemalan pro-communist officials. In 1952, the CIA decided to launch the PBFORTUNE operation to overthrow the Arbenz government, which planned to redistribute the United Fruit Company's land.<sup>6</sup> The United States trained Guatemalan exiles to stage a coup against the communist government.<sup>7</sup> Carlos Castillo Armas was designated as the potential leader of a new pro-US government.<sup>8</sup> The United States had compiled a "hit list" of communists and communist sympathizers to be assassinated and planned to use Castillo Armas and other Guatemalan exiles to eliminate potential communist threats in Guatemala.<sup>9</sup>

Operation PBFORTUNE was never carried out, since the plans were leaked.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the United States implemented PBSUCCESS as an alternative way of dealing with the communist threat in Guatemala. The plan focused on stopping the rise of communism with "combined psychological warfare, economic, diplomatic and parliamentary actions against Guatemala."<sup>11</sup> The CIA did not consider democracy to be a viable option for the future of Guatemala and made it one of their goals to implement a "moderate, authoritarian regime."<sup>12</sup> The purpose of Operation PBSUCCESS was to "remove covertly, and without bloodshed, if possible, the menace of the present communist-controlled government of Guatemala."<sup>13</sup> While they pretended to combat the rise of communism through non-violent means, the United States provided Castillo Armas with weapons and training for assassinations.<sup>14</sup> This

plan included sending death threats to prominent communists in Guatemalan politics. The United States was successful in overthrowing the Arbenz regime and replacing it with the rule of Castillo Armas, but not all of their goals were achieved at this point, and the United States continued to assist anti-communist leaders in Guatemala for the remainder of the Cold War. As I will argue, eventually this led to the United States' involvement in the genocide that was carried out by the Guatemalan military in the 1980s.<sup>15</sup>



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During the Guatemalan Civil War in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States maintained close contact with the Guatemalan military to help combat the rise of communism but failed to denounce the state-sponsored violence taking place. The Carter Administration officially ended United States aid to Guatemala in 1977 due to human rights violations against civilians during the war, but the policy changed again after his presidency.<sup>16</sup> Under the Reagan Administration in 1983, the United States communicated directly with General Rios Montt, reversing the

<sup>5</sup> Gerald K. Haines, "CIA and Guatemala Assassination Proposals 1952-1954," *Center for the Study of Intelligence*, (June 1995):

<https://search.proquest.com/dnsa/docview/1679122282/1556CB7773F24CE9PQ/3?accountid=14214> (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>13</sup> Haines, "CIA and Guatemala", 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. Meislin, "US Military Aid for Guatemala Continuing Despite Official Curbs," *New York Times*, December 19, 1982.

human rights progress that had been made during the Carter Administration policy changes. In the early 1980s, President Reagan ensured General Montt would be given the resources he needed to perform what he considered necessary actions to combat the communist threat in Guatemala.<sup>17</sup> The United States provided resources to the Guatemalan state to destroy the Maya and rationalized their role in what turned out to become a genocide as a method to prevent the rise of communism.

Under the presidency of Lucas Garcia (1978-1982), Guatemala faced economic hardships, and the government felt increased pressure to suppress the rebel guerilla groups which controlled parts of the country.<sup>18</sup> President Garcia implemented a “reactionary strategy” which included torture, disappearance, and killings of members of rebel groups, but it failed to end the activities of the guerilla forces and many alleged Maya supporters.<sup>19</sup> In October 1981, Garcia led the “scorched earth campaign” to systematically “cleanse” the areas under rebel control by attacking the Maya and re-establishing the control of the military.<sup>20</sup> The campaign failed, as it forced the Maya to join forces with the guerilla groups out of fear. President Garcia’s failure called for a shift in political power. General Rios Montt staged a coup against him and carried out the final stage of the genocide in 1982.<sup>21</sup> He led Operation Victory 82, which referred to the “formal strategic framework for the annihilation of the insurgency’s principally indigenous support base,” claiming that the Maya were supporting communist efforts.<sup>22</sup> The brutal attack of the Maya under the rule of General Rios Montt is considered the darkest chapter of the long-lasting Guatemalan Civil War. The operation “successfully” ended rebel opposition and communist influence in Guatemala.<sup>23</sup>

The United States holds responsibility for the Guatemalan Genocide, as it supported the anti-communist military financially and politically. At an early stage, the Central Intelligence Agency devised plans to interfere with the democratically elected political leadership in Guatemala with the intention of preventing the rise of communism.<sup>24</sup> The government maintained close relationships with the Guatemalan military during the Civil War and only ended aid when faced with accusations of human rights violations. Under the Reagan Administration, the United States directly supported the cause of General Rios Montt and contributed to the success of Operation Victory 82.<sup>25</sup> The United States government failed to denounce the genocidal destruction of the Maya population, contributed resources to the military throughout the Civil War, and demonstrated that they valued maintaining a capitalist interests over the rights of the indigenous people of Guatemala. After providing this outline, I will now continue to closely examine additional primary source documents.

On June 1, 1955, the Operations Coordinating Board of the United States wrote the “Outline Plan of Operations for Guatemala.”<sup>26</sup> The plan identified the problems the United States faced because of the communist policies of President Arbenz. The report describes Guatemala as politically unstable and blames the suffering economy on “years of hostility to business, especially foreign investment; irresponsible, corrupt and ignorant public administration; and the advent of prolonged periods of extreme political tension.”<sup>27</sup> The United States made clear that it had economic motivations for maintaining a presence in Guatemala.

One section of the document titled “Actions Agreed Upon” focuses on the measures that would be taken to maintain a capitalist economy in Guatemala. Objective 4 of the section on “Political

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Reagan. Executive Office of the President, “Support for Guatemala.” by DNSA Collection: Guatemala and the U.S., April 15, 1983. <https://search-proquest-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/docview/1679121416/fulltextPDF/3CDB0FAE5E454724PQ/1?accountid=14214> (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Brett, *The Origins and Dynamics*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>24</sup> Haines, “CIA and Guatemala”, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Meislin, “US Military Aid”.

<sup>26</sup> United States National Security Council Operations Coordinating Board, “Outline Plan of Operations for Guatemala”. by DSNA collection: Guatemala and the U.S. June 1, 1955. (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020) <https://search-proquest-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/dnsa/docview/1679096047/1556/CB7773F24CE9PQ/17?accountid=14214>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Objective” states that the United States would “help Guatemala strengthen its security agencies against communist subversion of the country with special attention given to technical training and ideological orientation of the police force.”<sup>28</sup> The United States provided resources to the Guatemalan state to prevent any rise in the influence of communism in the country.



General Rios Montt in court, Photograph by Elena Hermosa, [Wikimedia commons](#)

In 1967, the US Department of State received a letter from Thomas L. Hughes, a member of the Intelligence and Research Team.<sup>29</sup> He expressed concern about the actions of the counterinsurgency in Guatemala and the success of the military to control the communists. He also stated that the Special Unit, which included both military and civilian members, “carried out abductions, bombings, street assassinations, and executions of real and alleged communists, and occasionally has also acted against other vaguely defined “enemies of the government.”<sup>30</sup> The letter shows the United States government’s knowledge of the violent methods used by Guatemalan military against alleged communist threats in Guatemala that would lead to genocide in 1981.

In 1968, as United States government officials maintained constant contact with Guatemalan

government leaders, some US personnel raised concerns.<sup>31</sup> Viron Vaky, US Deputy Chief of Mission in Guatemala, sent a letter to express concern about the reputation of the United States because of the violence that occurred in Guatemala. He stated in the letter, “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 to have encouraged them.”<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the United States failed to denounce the violence committed by the Guatemalan military. Officials feared that the public would learn of the support the United States gave to Guatemala for the purpose of the Guatemalan Civil War, which led to the genocidal destruction of the Maya. In his letter, Vaky also addressed the anti-interventionist statements made by his colleagues. He wrote:

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.<sup>33</sup>

Vaky claimed that United States government officials felt this way about the situation in Guatemala, which demonstrates the United States prioritized the protection of a capitalist Guatemala over the safety and security of the civilian population. He criticized of the stance of other United States officials regarding the human rights violations taking place. By ignoring the state terror that took place, the United States made the genocide of the Maya in Guatemala possible in 1981.

The policy shift on aid to Guatemala under the Carter administration in 1977 demonstrates the United States’ knowledge of the human rights violations perpetrated by the Guatemalan military. A letter from J. Brian Atwood, Assistant Secretary of

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Department of State, Secret intelligence note, “Guatemala: A Counter-insurgency Running Wild?” by U.S. Policy in Guatemala, 1966-1996, October 23, 1967. (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020)

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/doc04.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Department of State, Secret memorandum, “Guatemala and Counter Terror.” by U.S. Policy in Guatemala, 1966-1996, March 29, 1968. (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020).

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/doc05.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Congressional Relations, responded to a member of the House of Representatives who inquired about potential future aid to Guatemala.<sup>34</sup> On behalf of the Carter Administration, he stated:

The Department has raised the problems of human rights abuses at the highest levels of the Guatemalan Government and will continue to do so ... The United States has provided no military assistance to Guatemala since 1977. No new military assistance programs are being contemplated at the present time.<sup>35</sup>

While the United States provided aid to Guatemala throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the document suggested that they began prioritizing human rights of the people of Guatemala under the Carter Administration due to external political pressures. The document demonstrates the complicity of the Reagan Administration and the awareness of the United States government of the violations that took place in the 1980s as they changed these policies in the years to come.

In 1982, when Guatemala was under the leadership of Lucas Garcia, President Ronald Reagan supported his efforts and maintained regular contact with him. In a drafted letter from the United States to Lucas Garcia from February 25, 1982, President Reagan wrote that, “as you are aware, there is substantial opposition within our Congress and the general public to any military assistance to Guatemala without a corresponding improvement in the human rights situation in your country.”<sup>36</sup> Despite Lucas Garcia’s involvement in the violent actions against the Maya, President Reagan blamed the US Congress and their reluctance to working with him for the failure to control the violence taking place. Reagan indicated that he disagreed with the congressional position by stating, “I must be able to show the Congress that your Government has reduced violence and brought to justice the real perpetrators of violent

crimes.”<sup>37</sup> He deflected blame onto rebel communist groups for the violence against the indigenous groups rather than onto Lucas Garcia and failed to identify the Guatemalan military as the real agent of genocide.<sup>38</sup> Despite clear evidence of the Guatemalan military’s wrongdoing, the Reagan Administration conveyed its support for the anti-communist military during the Guatemalan Civil War.

The actions of the United States received media attention in 1982, when the Reagan Administration planned to resume providing military aid to Guatemala. The *New York Times* article, “U.S. Military Aid for Guatemala Continuing Despite Official Curbs,” from December 1982 explains that “United States military aid to Guatemala has been cut off since 1977, when the Government here refused assistance after the Carter Administration issued a report highly critical of the Guatemalans’ performance on human rights.”<sup>39</sup> While the previous United States administration recognized the violent action being taken against the Maya in Guatemala, the Reagan Administration overlooked these issues and decided to contribute to the protection of capitalism over the protection of the civilian population. As of 1982, the United States government conveyed that it would officially start to mend their diplomatic relationship with Guatemala by providing military support. The article reports, “loopholes in Congressional restrictions on aid to Guatemala have made it possible for the United States to continue to provide some military parts, instruction and informal advice to this country’s armed forces.”<sup>40</sup> Under the Reagan Administration, the United States government supported increased aid for Guatemala, despite the known violence inflicted on the Maya population.

President Reagan and other government officials justified their stance in supporting the Guatemalan military. The *New York Times* article states that “military aid appears increasingly likely to be restored at the request of President Reagan following reports that the violence in the countryside has eased

<sup>34</sup> United States. Department of State, “Response to Query on Human Rights in Guatemala” by DNSA collection: Guatemala and the U.S., October 11, 1979. (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020). <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1679095600?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=14214>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Reagan, “President Reagan’s Reply to Guatemalan President Lucas’ Letters” by DNSA collection: Guatemala and

the U.S., February 25, 2019. (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020). <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1679121828?accountid=14214>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Meislin, *New York Times*.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

after strong Government actions to control a guerilla insurgency there.”<sup>41</sup> The Reagan Administration pretended that they believed the human rights situation improved, due to the actions of the Guatemalan military, but in reality more violence had been brought upon the indigenous population under the leadership of General Rios Montt. The article refers to an Amnesty International report revealing that “more than 2,600 people had died since General Rios Montt took power in coup last March, most of them at the hands of Government security forces.”<sup>42</sup> Despite knowledge of the genocidal action against the Maya under the leadership of General Rios Montt, the Reagan Administration continued to defend their decision to provide military aid to Guatemala.



President Ronald Reagan,  
Source: [Wikimedia commons](#)

Under the rule of General Rios Montt after the “failed operations” of Lucas Garcia, the United States continued to report on the incidents taking place in Guatemala. Despite the fact that General Rios Montt was responsible for the genocidal destruction of the

Maya to end communist resistance during Operation Victory 82, the United States filed a report in 1982 that tried to exonerate the general and stated that he used his position of power to help the Maya. The report, entitled “Guatemala: Reports of Atrocities Mark Army Gains,” depicted General Rios Montt and the military as leaders who intended to help the Maya fulfill their basic needs. The report fabricated the idea that the general developed a peaceful relationship with the Maya, providing them with food and resources.<sup>43</sup> The report further defended these claims by stating, “The Embassy does not as yet to believe that there is sufficient evidence to link government troops to any of the reported massacres.”<sup>44</sup> The United States Embassy advocated for General Rios Montt and his military troops in an attempt to advance the anti-communist mission of the United States. Despite evidence that General Rios Montt held responsibility for the violence inflicted on the Maya during Victory 82, the United States denied the actions of the Guatemalan troops.

On November 20th, 1982, President Reagan received a briefing of what would be discussed with President Efraim Rios Montt during their scheduled meeting on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1982. One of the talking points includes the statement: “[W]e have been considering how we can sell you military equipment, but Congressional opposition is strong among those who fail to appreciate the effort you are making to improve the human rights situation.”<sup>45</sup> Despite the evidence that the Guatemalan military took genocidal action against the indigenous Maya under the leadership of General Rios Montt, President Reagan desired to support the efforts of the Guatemalan government.

The United States provided President Reagan with other talking points for the meeting which indicated that the United States supported Montt's efforts. The briefing stated, “USG understands that you are in a difficult guerilla war and we would like to support and assist you to prevent leftwing victory.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Department of State, Secret Report, “Guatemala: Reports of Atrocities Mark Army Gains.” by U.S. Policy in Guatemala, 1966-1996, 1982. (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020).<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/doc17.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> George P. Shultz. “Your Meeting with Guatemalan President Rios Montt on December 4.” *United States Department of State Secretary*, November 20, 1982. (accessed on Sept. 8, 2020).

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1679122013?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=14214>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

The letter suggests that it was important for Reagan to convey his belief that the guerillas were at fault for the political violence taking place and that the United States supported their efforts of combatting the violence. Another talking point stated, "We appreciate your efforts to end violence and corruption. We are pointing out your success to Congress."<sup>47</sup> Reagan identified Congress as a barrier to supporting Guatemalan troops and assured the general he would advocate for more support from the United States government. President Reagan depicted General Rios Montt as a leader in ending the violence in the country, despite the reluctance from Congress.

Although the talking points convey the idea that General Rios Montt helped to end the violence in Guatemala, the briefing of the situation given to President Reagan indicates evidence to the contrary.<sup>48</sup> George P. Shultz, a member of the Reagan Administration, wrote, "Key Congressmen continue to react negatively to numerous reports, many of them fabricated, others true, of government atrocities against noncombatants."<sup>49</sup> He admitted that some of the reports of the government violence were true, despite past attempts to portray the Guatemalan military as innocent during the war. Shultz also stated, "the Guatemalan military must impose greater discipline on its units and end the killing of innocents in disrupted [sic] or guerilla areas."<sup>50</sup> The Reagan Administration strived to increase support for Guatemalan aid, but by acknowledging that stricter rules needed to be implemented to stop military violence against civilians, the Administration admitted complicity in the violence occurred.

### Conclusion

The global political tensions that arose because of the Cold War motivated the United States to instigate the Guatemalan Civil War and insert itself into Guatemalan politics. The United States feared a loss in profit from its businesses in Guatemala as communist leaders began to take power and redistribute land. The potential for the Soviet Union to use Guatemala as a tool to advance their political agendas also

motivated the United States to interfere in the politics of Guatemala.<sup>51</sup> The United States supported coups to overthrow the communist President Jacobo Arbenz in the 1950s and replaced him with the anti-communist leader Castillo Armas.<sup>52</sup> This arrangement benefited the United States, which continued to maintain regular contact with Guatemalan officials with the goal of stopping communist powers. However, as political tension in Guatemala increased, civilian populations suffered, particularly the indigenous Maya of rural Guatemala. The long history of discrimination against Maya communities in Guatemala left the group vulnerable to political violence as the military and guerilla militia blamed them for the internal conflicts that occurred.<sup>53</sup> The United States collaborated with the Guatemalan military as a method of combatting the global rise of communism, protecting its business interests and limiting the rise of Soviet influence.<sup>54</sup> The United States, by supporting the Guatemalan military with finances, training, and advice throughout the Guatemalan Civil War bears responsibility for the genocidal destruction of the Maya.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Haines, "CIA and Guatemala", 1.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Haines, "CIA and Guatemala", 1.

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