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# THE 1980s: DECADE OF CONFRONTATION?

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE EIGHTH ANNUAL NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS CONFERENCE 13-15 JULY 1981

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Lucas Garcia to change its nature. The Guatemalan ruling class—one of the most brutal of the hemisphere—was asked to transform itself into a “modernizing right” regime, by granting some social reforms, renouncing indiscriminate repression, and tolerating the development of the feeble centrist parties.

Washington's efforts were rooted in both human rights considerations and political expediency: the administration realized that the ruling class' long-trusted methods of maintaining “social peace” in Guatemala had become counterproductive. Indiscriminate violence would exasperate rather than cow an increasingly combative populace, forcing many of those who would have been content with a modicum of economic concessions and physical security into active opposition.

Carter's efforts failed miserably. The Guatemalan ruling class—never noted for its political sophistication—became increasingly convinced that the State Department was dominated by Marxists like William Bowdler and James Cheek, who harassed and finally removed the staunch anticommunist Frank Ortiz from his post as US Ambassador to Guatemala. Continuing pressure and chastening by Washington led only to a break in communications between the two governments, while within Guatemala a few cosmetic reforms were engulfed in a wave of repression that has now reached a level of violence unprecedented even by Guatemalan standards. In the course of this mayhem, the Lucas government has managed to destroy the political center. But the leftwing opposition, now regrouped within the *Frente Democrático contra la Represión* (FDCR), has been gathering strength, replacing its losses with the increasing numbers of those who see that passivity is no protection against the regime's blind wrath. While guerrilla groups are spreading through several departments, the labor movement is showing a combativeness and a degree of organization which a few cosmetic reforms will not assuage. Meanwhile, in ever larger groups, Guatemalan Indians (about half of the country's population) are reaching out to support or join the guerrillas and leftwing mass organizations. Thus, for the first time in the country's history, the caste division is being overshadowed through the realization of a common class interest. This evolution represents a potentially devastating blow to the ruling class, which has traditionally profited from the division created by caste prejudices.

By 1980, a debate had begun in earnest within the Carter administration. The Defense Department, the NSC, and the “hardliners” within the State Department argued that the policy of the “stick” toward the Lucas administration had failed. They therefore advocated an improvement in relations and the resumption of military assistance. By proffering the “carrot”—and thus resuming the dialogue—the Carter administration, they argued, would be able to regain the confidence of the Guatemalan regime, and could eventually persuade it to adopt some reforms. Although this proposed policy shift was rejected, it is important to understand the rationale of those State Department “liberals” who opposed it. They, too, strongly preferred a continuation of the Lucas regime (however unredeemed) to a Sandinista-type victory in Guatemala. They would have advocated military assistance for the regime, had they believed that it was necessary for its survival. But in their eyes the Guatemalan regime was not yet seriously threatened—hence the United States could afford to wait (while military as-

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sistance was provided by Israel, Argentina, and other countries). In this fashion, the Carter administration would avoid "dirtying its hands" as long as possible, thus preserving the facade of its "human rights" policy. Meanwhile, the frustrating effort to moderate the Lucas government continued in an atmosphere of increasing unreality.

### CARTER AND EL SALVADOR

On 2 December 1980, the murder of three nuns and a lay worker shocked US public opinion from its torpor—the victims were American citizens. Yet, except for the victims' nationality, the assassination was a banal incident in the Salvadoran context: over 16,000 persons, most of them non-combatants, had been killed since General Romero's overthrow in October 1979.

This wave of terror was harshly condemned by the human rights-conscious Carter administration. Claiming a high degree of impartiality, the administration decried the atrocities of the leftwing guerrillas (the main culprits); it also inveighed against the death squads of the far right and "maverick" elements of the security forces (indeed, the first military assistance provided by the Carter administration—mainly jeeps and communications equipment—was justified on the grounds that it was needed to improve the control of the Salvadoran High Command over its own forces in the field). As for Colonels Garcia, Gutierrez, and other members of the High Command, Carter's former Ambassador to El Salvador, Bob White, reassured Congress as recently as April 1981 that they are all honorable men.<sup>6</sup>

White's testimony was contradicted, a few days later, by that of several former Junta supporters, who argued that the so-called death squads do not operate independently of the security forces, but are sponsored and controlled by the military high command.<sup>6</sup>

This testimony might be dismissed as the misstatements of disgruntled defectors, but it is consistently supported by the investigations of independent and impartial sources. Thus, Amnesty International has repeatedly stressed that "although the government of El Salvador continues to claim that assassination squads are 'independent' of government control," there is "no evidence that such groups exist or operate independent of the government's own security forces."<sup>7</sup> The same conclusions are reached by the only Salvadoran human rights organization still operating within the country, the Legal Aid Office of the Archbishop of El Salvador, which has documented, month after month, the joint responsibility that the security forces and the military high command hold in the wave of terror. The guerrillas' excesses pale in comparison to those of the government.

In the eyes of the Carter administration, however, the Salvadoran government deserved support not only for its commitment to human rights, but also for the reformist credentials it gained by undertaking a "sweeping land reform program, one of the most significant in Latin America's history."<sup>8</sup> Through "Phase One" of the Agrarian Reform, all properties larger than 500 hectares were expropriated and distributed in cooperatives to about 63,000 peasant families. In addition, through the "Land to the Tiller" decree, "all of El Salvador's 150,000 tenant and sharecropper families were given the land they tilled . . . . The reform was basically self-implementing."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the

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In Italy, Soviet support for the Red Brigades has been channeled principally through its Czechoslovakian satellite. This has been verified by Jan Sejna, former Secretary General of the Czech Defense Committee, who has described, in detail, the establishment of Soviet training camps in Czechoslovakia as early as 1964.<sup>52</sup> This has continued through the 1970s.<sup>53</sup> The most sensational Soviet connection in Italy was through Giampaolo Feltrinelli, the eccentric publisher.<sup>54</sup>

The most substantial evidence of Soviet involvement in terrorism is in the Middle East, where they support training camps in Libya, Iraq, South Yemen, and Syria. In addition to the Palestinians, guerrillas and terrorists from other Middle Eastern countries, Latin America, Asia, and Europe have received instruction and support in these training facilities. Most recently, Libya has emerged as a pivotal supporter of international terrorism, with Soviet backing. In addition to supporting the Palestinian PFLP and PDFLP, Colonel Kaddafi is reported to have provided aid and training to the IRA, Basque ETA, as well as Turks, Germans, Italians, Spaniards, and Greeks.<sup>55</sup> Recent accounts claim that Libya is supporting terrorism or subversion in as many as forty countries.<sup>56</sup> Of course, the most important group the Soviets support in the Middle East is Fatah and other Palestinian factions. This is thoroughly discussed in many sources and needs no recounting for the purposes of this study.<sup>57</sup>

In Southern Africa, the Soviets have focused their support on rural guerrilla movements that are somewhat similar to the liberation movements of the 1960s, except that there is significantly more emphasis on terrorist tactics. Using Angola, Mozambique, and Zambia as training sites and weapons distribution points, Soviet, Cuban, and East German advisors worked closely with guerrilla groups (Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU)) operating in Rhodesia before the settlement.<sup>58</sup> Cuban and East German surrogates are reported to have trained the terrorists who raided Shaba province of Zaire in 1978.<sup>59</sup> Finally, the Soviets have been involved for some time in the escalation of terrorism directed against the South African Government, through their support for the African National Congress (ANC) and the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO).<sup>60</sup>

Finally, since the early 1970s, the Soviets have relied on their Cuban surrogates to stimulate Latin American insurgency and terrorism. Their involvement in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala has been well documented by a number of analysts.<sup>61</sup> Less well known is Soviet clandestine support to such Latin American terrorists as the Colombian FARC, or the Cuban-sponsored Junta for Revolutionary Coordination, which was composed of elements from Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile.

What we have presented here is only a sketch of the involvement of the Soviets and their surrogates. What emerges from this encapsulated summary, drawn from a much larger body of evidence, is a pattern of indirect, but numerous, associations between the Soviets and various international terrorist groups. This support for terrorism is simply the most recent tactical addition to the indirect side of Soviet strategy.

The major point of controversy in the debate over Soviet support for terrorism is the issue of control—do the Soviets directly coordinate and