

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم وېر زنده پک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهيم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهيم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپائی

consortiumnews.com

Ronald Reagan's Torture

By Robert Parry

September 8, 2009

Lost amid the attention given George W. Bush's "war on terror" torture policies was the CIA's cryptic admission that it also engaged in interrogation abuses during Ronald Reagan's anti-leftist wars in Central America, another era of torture and extra-judicial killings.

The 2004 CIA Inspector General's report, released last month, referenced as "background" to the Bush-era abuses the spy agency's "intermittent involvement in the interrogation of individuals whose interests are opposed to those of the United States." The report noted "a resurgence in interest" in teaching those techniques in the early 1980s "to foster foreign liaison relationships."

The report said, "because of political sensitivities," the CIA's top brass in the 1980s "forbade Agency officers from using the word 'interrogation' and substituted the phrase 'human resources exploitation' [HRE] in training programs for allied intelligence agencies.

The euphemism aside, the reality of these interrogation techniques remained brutal, with the CIA Inspector General conducting a 1984 investigation of alleged "misconduct on the part of two Agency officers who were involved in interrogations and the death of one individual," the report said (although the details were redacted in the version released last month).

In 1984, the CIA also was hit with a scandal over what became known as an "assassination manual" prepared by agency personnel for the Nicaraguan contras, a rebel group sponsored by the Reagan administration with the goal of ousting Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

Despite those two problems, the questionable training programs apparently continued for another two years. The 2004 IG report states that "in 1986, the Agency ended the HRE training program because of allegations of human rights abuses in Latin America."

While the report's references to this earlier era of torture are brief – and the abuses are little-remembered features of Ronald Reagan's glorified presidency – there have been other

glimpses into how Reagan unleashed this earlier “dark side” on the peasants, workers and students of Central America.

Project X

A sketchy history of the U.S. intelligence community’s participation in torture and other abuses surfaced in the mid-1990s with the release of a Pentagon report on what was known as “Project X,” a training program in harsh and anti-democratic practices which got its start in 1965 as the U.S. military build-up in Vietnam was underway.

The U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School at Fort Holabird, Maryland, began pulling together experiences from past counterinsurgency campaigns for the development of lesson plans which would “provide intelligence training to friendly foreign countries,” according to a brief history of Project X, which was prepared in 1991.

Called “a guide for the conduct of clandestine operations,” Project X “was first used by the U.S. Intelligence School on Okinawa to train Vietnamese and, presumably, other foreign nationals,” the history stated.

Linda Matthews of the Pentagon’s Counterintelligence Division recalled that in 1967-68, some of the Project X training material was prepared by officers connected to the so-called Phoenix program in Vietnam, an operation that involved targeting, interrogating and assassinating suspected Viet Cong.

“She suggested the possibility that some offending material from the Phoenix program may have found its way into the Project X materials at that time,” according to the Pentagon report.

In the 1970s, the U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School moved to Fort Huachuca in Arizona and began exporting Project X material to U.S. military assistance groups working with “friendly foreign countries.” By the mid-1970s, the Project X material was going to military forces all over the world.

But Reagan’s election in 1980 – and his determination to crush leftist movements in Central America – expanded the role of Project X.

In 1982, the Pentagon’s Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence ordered the Fort Huachuca center to supply lesson plans to the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, which human rights activists dubbed the School of the Assassins because it trained some of Latin America’s most notorious military officers.

“The working group decided to use Project X material because it had previously been cleared for foreign disclosure,” the Pentagon history stated.

According to surviving documents released in the mid-1990s under a Freedom of Information Act request, the Project X lessons contained a full range of intelligence techniques. A 1972 listing of Project X lesson plans included electronic eavesdropping, interrogation, counterintelligence, break-ins and censorship.

Citizens of a country were put on “‘black, gray or white lists’ for the purpose of identifying

and prioritizing adversary targets." The lessons suggested creation of inventories of families and their assets to keep tabs on the population.

The manuals suggested coercive methods for recruiting counterintelligence operatives, including arresting a target's parents or beating him until he agreed to infiltrate a guerrilla organization. To undermine guerrilla forces, the training manuals countenanced "executions" and operations "to eliminate a potential rival among the guerrillas."

Cheney Intercedes

The internal U.S. government review of Project X began in 1991 when the Pentagon discovered that the Spanish-language manuals were advising Latin American trainees on assassinations, torture and other "objectionable" counter-insurgency techniques.

By summer 1991, the investigation of Project X was raising concerns inside George H.W. Bush's administration about an adverse public reaction to evidence that the U.S. government had long sanctioned – and even encouraged – brutal methods of repression.

But the PR problem was contained when the office of then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney ordered that all relevant Project X material be collected and brought to the Pentagon under a recommendation that most of it be destroyed.

The recommendation received approval from senior Pentagon officials, presumably with Cheney's blessings. Some of the more innocuous Project X lesson plans – and the historical summary – were spared, but the Project X manuals that dealt with the sensitive human rights violations were destroyed in 1992, the Pentagon reported. [For details, see Robert Parry's [Lost History](#).]

Even after the Cold War ended, the United States refused to examine this ugly history in any systematic way. Though Democrat Bill Clinton was the first President elected after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he ignored calls for serious examinations of that historical era out of a desire to look forward, not backward.

However, public complaints about the mass slaughter of Guatemalan peasants by a Reagan-backed regime in the 1980s did prompt an examination by the President Intelligence Oversight Board, which issued a "[Report on the Guatemala Review](#)" in mid-1996.

The review found that CIA funding – ranging from \$1 million to \$3.5 million – was "vital" to the operations of the Guatemalan intelligence services including D-2 military intelligence and the "Archivos" unit, which was infamous for political torture and assassinations.

As the Oversight Board noted, the human rights records of the Guatemalan intelligence agencies "were generally known to have been reprehensible by all who were familiar with Guatemala." The report added:

"We learned that in the period since 1984, several CIA assets were credibly alleged to have ordered, planned, or participated in serious human rights violations such as assassination, extrajudicial execution, torture, or kidnapping while they were assets – and that the CIA was contemporaneously aware of many of the allegations."

History of Slaughter

The Clinton administration also released documents in the late 1990s revealing the grim history of U.S. complicity in Guatemala's dirty wars that claimed an estimated 200,000 lives from the 1960s through the 1980s.

According to those documents, the original Guatemalan death squads took shape in the mid-1960s under anti-terrorist training provided by a U.S. public safety adviser named John Longon. Longon's operation within the Guatemalan presidential compound was the starting point for the "Archivos" intelligence unit.

Within weeks, the CIA was sending cables back to headquarters in Langley, Virginia, about the clandestine execution of several Guatemalan "communists and terrorists" on the night of March 6, 1966.

By the end of the year, the Guatemalan government was bold enough to request U.S. help in establishing special kidnapping squads, according to a cable from the U.S. Southern Command that was sent to Washington on Dec. 3, 1966.

By 1967, the Guatemalan counterinsurgency terror had gained a fierce momentum. On Oct. 23, 1967, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research noted the "accumulating evidence that the [Guatemalan] counterinsurgency machine is out of control."

The report noted that Guatemalan "counter-terror" units were carrying out abductions, bombings, torture and summary executions "of real and alleged communists."

The mounting death toll in Guatemala disturbed some American officials assigned to the country. The embassy's deputy chief of mission, Viron Vaky, expressed his concerns in a remarkably candid report that he submitted on March 29, 1968, after returning to Washington.

"The official squads are guilty of atrocities. Interrogations are brutal, torture is used and bodies are mutilated," Vaky wrote. "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 encouraged them. Therefore our image is being tarnished and the credibility of our claims to want a better and more just world are increasingly placed in doubt."

Self-Deception

Vaky also noted the deceptions within the U.S. government that resulted from its complicity in state-sponsored terror.

"This leads to an aspect I personally find the most disturbing of all – that we have not been honest with ourselves," Vaky said. "We have condoned counter-terror; we may even in effect have encouraged or blessed it. We have been so obsessed with the fear of insurgency that we have rationalized away our qualms and uneasiness.

"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.

“After all hasn't man been a savage from the beginning of time so let us not be too queasy about terror. I have literally heard these arguments from our people.”

Though kept secret from the American public for three decades, the Vaky memo obliterated any claim that Washington simply didn't know the reality in Guatemala. Still, with Vaky's memo squirreled away in State Department files, the killing went on.

The repression was noted almost routinely in reports from the field. On Jan. 12, 1971, for instance, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that Guatemalan forces had "quietly eliminated" hundreds of "terrorists and bandits" in the countryside. On Feb. 4, 1974, a State Department cable reported resumption of "death squad" activities.

On Dec. 17, 1974, a DIA biography of one U.S.-trained Guatemalan officer gave an insight into how U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine had imbued the Guatemalan strategies.

According to the biography, Lt. Col. Elias Osmundo Ramirez Cervantes, chief of security section for Guatemala's president, had trained at the U.S. Army School of Intelligence at Fort Holabird in Maryland. Back in Guatemala, Ramirez Cervantes was put in charge of plotting raids on suspected subversives as well as their interrogations.

The Reagan Bloodbath

As brutal as the Guatemalan security forces were in the 1960s and 1970s, the worst was yet to come. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan army escalated its slaughter of political dissidents and their suspected supporters to unprecedented levels.

Ronald Reagan's election in November 1980 set off celebrations in the well-to-do communities of Central America. After four years of President Jimmy Carter's human rights nagging, the region's hard-liners were thrilled that they had someone in the White House who understood their problems.

The oligarchs and the generals had good reason for optimism. For years, Reagan had been a staunch defender of right-wing regimes that engaged in bloody counterinsurgency against leftist enemies.

In the late 1970s, when Carter's human rights coordinator, Patricia Derian, criticized the Argentine military for its "dirty war" – tens of thousands of "disappearances," tortures and murders – then-political commentator Reagan joshed that she should “walk a mile in the moccasins” of the Argentine generals before criticizing them. [For details, see Martin Edwin Andersen's *Dossier Secreto*.]

After his election in 1980, Reagan pushed to overturn an arms embargo imposed on Guatemala by Carter. Yet as Reagan was moving to loosen up the military aid ban, the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies were confirming new Guatemalan government massacres.

In April 1981, a secret CIA cable described a massacre at Cocob, near Nebaj in the Ixil Indian territory. On April 17, 1981, government troops attacked the area believed to support leftist guerrillas, the cable said.

According to a CIA source, "the social population appeared to fully support the guerrillas" and "the soldiers were forced to fire at anything that moved." The CIA cable added that "the Guatemalan authorities admitted that 'many civilians' were killed in Cocob, many of whom undoubtedly were non-combatants."

Despite the CIA account and other similar reports, Reagan permitted Guatemala's army to buy \$3.2 million in military trucks and jeeps in June 1981. To permit the sale, Reagan removed the vehicles from a list of military equipment that was covered by the human rights embargo.

No Regrets

Apparently confident of Reagan's sympathies, the Guatemalan government continued its political repression without apology.

According to a State Department cable on Oct. 5, 1981, Guatemalan leaders met with Reagan's roving ambassador, retired Gen. Vernon Walters, and left no doubt about their plans. Guatemala's military leader, Gen. Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia, "made clear that his government will continue as before – that the repression will continue."

Human rights groups saw the same picture. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission released a report on Oct. 15, 1981, blaming the Guatemalan government for "thousands of illegal executions." [Washington Post, Oct. 16, 1981]

But the Reagan administration was set on whitewashing the ugly scene. A State Department "white paper," released in December 1981, blamed the violence on leftist "extremist groups" and their "terrorist methods," inspired and supported by Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Yet, even as these rationalizations were pitched to the American people, U.S. intelligence agencies in Guatemala continued to learn of government-sponsored massacres.

One CIA report in February 1982 described an army sweep through the so-called Ixil Triangle in central El Quiche province.

"The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor [known as the EGP] and eliminate all sources of resistance," the report stated. "Since the operation began, several villages have been burned to the ground, and a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed."

The CIA report explained the army's modus operandi: "When an army patrol meets resistance and takes fire from a town or village, it is assumed that the entire town is hostile and it is subsequently destroyed."

When the army encountered an empty village, it was "assumed to have been supporting the EGP, and it is destroyed. There are hundreds, possibly thousands of refugees in the hills with no homes to return to. ...

"The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike."

Rios Montt

In March 1982, Gen. Efraim Rios Montt seized power in a coup d'état. An avowed fundamentalist Christian, he immediately impressed official Washington, where Reagan hailed Rios Montt as "a man of great personal integrity."

By July 1982, however, Rios Montt had begun a new scorched-earth campaign called his "rifles and beans" policy. The slogan meant that pacified Indians would get "beans," while all others could expect to be the target of army "rifles."

In October 1982, Rios Montt secretly gave *carte blanche* to the feared "Archivos" intelligence unit to expand "death squad" operations, internal U.S. government cables revealed.

Despite the widespread evidence of Guatemalan government atrocities cited in the internal U.S. government cables, political operatives for the Reagan administration sought to conceal the crimes. On Oct. 22, 1982, for instance, the U.S. Embassy claimed the Guatemalan government was the victim of a communist-inspired "disinformation campaign."

Reagan personally took that position in December 1982 when he met with Rios Montt and claimed that his regime was getting a "bum rap" on human rights.

On Jan. 7, 1983, Reagan lifted the ban on military aid to Guatemala and authorized the sale of \$6 million in military hardware. Approval covered spare parts for UH-1H helicopters and A-37 aircraft used in counterinsurgency operations.

State Department spokesman John Hughes said the sales were justified because political violence in the cities had "declined dramatically" and that rural conditions had improved too.

In February 1983, however, a secret CIA cable noted a rise in "suspect right-wing violence" with kidnappings of students and teachers. Bodies of victims were appearing in ditches and gullies.

CIA sources traced these political murders to Rios Montt's order to the "Archivos" in October to "apprehend, hold, interrogate and dispose of suspected guerrillas as they saw fit."

Sugarcoating

Despite these grisly facts on the ground, the annual State Department human rights survey sugarcoated the facts for the American public and praised the supposedly improved human rights situation in Guatemala.

"The overall conduct of the armed forces had improved by late in the year" 1982, the report stated.

A different picture – far closer to the secret information held by the U.S. government – was coming from independent human rights investigators. On March 17, 1983, Americas Watch representatives condemned the Guatemalan army for human rights atrocities against the Indian population.

New York attorney Stephen L. Kass said these findings included proof that the government carried out "virtually indiscriminate murder of men, women and children of any farm regarded by the army as possibly supportive of guerrilla insurgents."

Rural women suspected of guerrilla sympathies were raped before execution, Kass said. Children were "thrown into burning homes. They are thrown in the air and speared with bayonets. We heard many, many stories of children being picked up by the ankles and swung against poles so their heads are destroyed." [AP, March 17, 1983]

Publicly, however, senior Reagan officials continued to put on a happy face.

On June 12, 1983, special envoy Richard B. Stone praised "positive changes" in Rios Montt's government. But Rios Montt's vengeful Christian fundamentalism was hurtling out of control, even by Guatemalan standards. In August 1983, Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores seized power in another coup.

Despite the power shift, Guatemalan security forces continued to kill those who were deemed subversives or terrorists.

When three Guatemalans working for the U.S. Agency for International Development were slain in November 1983, U.S. Ambassador Frederic Chapin suspected that "Archivos" hit squads were sending a message to the United States to back off even the mild pressure for human rights improvements.

In late November 1983, in a brief show of displeasure, the administration postponed the sale of \$2 million in helicopter spare parts. The next month, however, Reagan sent the spare parts anyway. In 1984, Reagan succeeded, too, in pressuring Congress to approve \$300,000 in military training for the Guatemalan army.

By mid-1984, Chapin, who had grown bitter about the army's stubborn brutality, was gone, replaced by a far-right political appointee named Alberto Piedra, who was all for increased military assistance to Guatemala.

In January 1985, Americas Watch issued a report observing that Reagan's State Department "is apparently more concerned with improving Guatemala's image than in improving its human rights."

Death Camp

Other examples of Guatemala's "death squad" strategy came to light later. For example, a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency cable in 1994 reported that the Guatemalan military had used an air base in Retalhuleu during the mid-1980s as a center for coordinating the

counterinsurgency campaign in southwest Guatemala – and for torturing and burying prisoners.

At the base, pits were filled with water to hold captured suspects. "Reportedly there were cages over the pits and the water level was such that the individuals held within them were forced to hold on to the bars in order to keep their heads above water and avoid drowning," the DIA report stated.

The Guatemalan military used the Pacific Ocean as another dumping spot for political victims, according to the DIA report.

Bodies of insurgents tortured to death and live prisoners marked for “disappearance” were loaded onto planes that flew out over the ocean where the soldiers would shove the victims into the water to drown, a tactic that had been a favorite disposal technique of the Argentine military in the 1970s.

The history of the Retalhuleu death camp was uncovered by accident in the early 1990s when a Guatemalan officer wanted to let soldiers cultivate their own vegetables on a corner of the base. But the officer was taken aside and told to drop the request "because the locations he had wanted to cultivate were burial sites that had been used by the D-2 [military intelligence] during the mid-eighties," the DIA report said.

Guatemala, of course, was not the only Central American country where Reagan and his administration supported brutal counterinsurgency operations and then sought to cover up the bloody facts.

Deception of the American public – a strategy that the administration internally called “perception management” – was as much a part of the Central American story as the Bush administration’s lies and distortions about weapons of mass destruction were to the lead-up to the war in Iraq.

Reagan's falsification of the historical record became a hallmark of the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua as well as Guatemala. In one case, Reagan personally lashed out at a human rights investigator named Reed Brody, a New York lawyer who had collected affidavits from more than 100 witnesses to atrocities carried out by the U.S.-supported contras in Nicaragua.

Angered by the revelations about his contra "freedom-fighters," Reagan denounced Brody in a speech on April 15, 1985, calling him "one of dictator [Daniel] Ortega's supporters, a sympathizer who has openly embraced Sandinismo."

Privately, Reagan had a far more accurate understanding of the true nature of the contras. At one point in the contra war, Reagan turned to CIA official Duane Clarridge and demanded that the contras be used to destroy some Soviet-supplied helicopters that had arrived in Nicaragua.

Clarridge recalled that "President Reagan pulled me aside and asked, 'Dewey, can't you get those vandals of yours to do this job.'" [See Clarridge's *A Spy for All Seasons*.]

Genocide Alleged

On Feb. 25, 1999, a Guatemalan truth commission issued a report on the staggering human rights crimes that Reagan and his administration had aided, abetted and concealed.

The Historical Clarification Commission, an independent human rights body, estimated that the Guatemalan conflict claimed the lives of some 200,000 people with the most savage bloodletting occurring in the 1980s.

Based on a review of about 20 percent of the dead, the panel blamed the army for 93 percent of the killings and leftist guerrillas for three percent. Four percent were listed as unresolved.

The report documented that in the 1980s, the army committed 626 massacres against Mayan villages. "The massacres that eliminated entire Mayan villages ... are neither perfidious allegations nor figments of the imagination, but an authentic chapter in Guatemala's history," the commission concluded.

The army "completely exterminated Mayan communities, destroyed their livestock and crops," the report said. In the northern highlands, the report termed the slaughter "genocide."

Besides carrying out murder and "disappearances," the army routinely engaged in torture and rape. "The rape of women, during torture or before being murdered, was a common practice" by the military and paramilitary forces, the report found.

The report added that the "government of the United States, through various agencies including the CIA, provided direct and indirect support for some [of these] state operations." The report concluded that the U.S. government also gave money and training to a Guatemalan military that committed "acts of genocide" against the Mayans.

"Believing that the ends justified everything, the military and the state security forces blindly pursued the anticommunist struggle, without respect for any legal principles or the most elemental ethical and religious values, and in this way, completely lost any semblance of human morals," said the commission chairman, Christian Tomuschat, a German jurist.

"Within the framework of the counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, in certain regions of the country agents of the Guatemalan state committed acts of genocide against groups of the Mayan people," Tomuschat said.

Admitting a 'Mistake'

During a visit to Central America, on March 10, 1999, President Bill Clinton apologized for the past U.S. support of right-wing regimes in Guatemala.

"For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake," Clinton said.

Though Clinton did admit that U.S. policy in Guatemala was "wrong" -- and the evidence of a U.S.-backed "genocide" might have been considered startling -- the news was treated mostly as a one-day story in the U.S. press.

By the late 1990s, Ronald Reagan had been transformed into a national icon, with the Republican-controlled Congress attaching his name to public buildings around the country and to National Airport in Washington.

Democrats mostly approached this deification of Reagan as harmless, an easy concession to the Republicans in the name of bipartisanship. Some Democrats would even try to cite Reagan as supportive of some of their positions as a way to protect themselves from attacks launched by the increasingly powerful right-wing news media.

The Democratic goal of looking to the future, not the past, had negative consequences, however. With Reagan and his brutal policies put beyond serious criticism, the path was left open for President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to return to the “dark side” after the 9/11 attacks, authorizing torture and extra-judicial killings.

Now, President Obama is reprising toward Bush and Cheney the conflict-avoidance strategy that President Clinton took toward Reagan, looking forward as much as possible and backward as little as can be justified.

This year, the Democratic-controlled Congress passed -- and Obama signed at a special White House ceremony with Nancy Reagan -- a resolution to create a commission that will plan a centennial celebration in 2011 of Ronald Reagan’s birth.