

Sembramos, Comemos, Sembramos

Learning Solidarity on Mayan Time

By Jeff Smith



Introduction

"Fray Diego de Landa throws into the flames, one after the other, the books of the Mayas. The Inquisitor curses Satan, and the fire crackles and devours. Around the incinerator, heretics howl with their heads down. Hung by the feet, flayed with whips, Indians are doused with boiling wax as the fire flares up and the books snap, as if complaining. Tonight, eight centuries of Mayan literature turn to ashes."

Memory of Fire: Volume 1 - Genesis, Eduardo Galeano

In January of 1992, just days before the cease-fire in El Salvador, I was sitting in the Central Plaza watching the crowds of people with my traveling partners. We noticed a large crowd in the center listening to a man speaking in English who was accompanied by a translator. I decided to walk over to investigate what was going on when I realized that the man speaking was a preacher from the US. No sooner did I realize this that I turned around and rejoined my friends shaking my head in disgust.

When the crowd finally dispersed I noticed that the street preacher was headed in our direction. Right away he began to speak to us in English and inquired about our being in El Salvador. We told him we were tourists because one never knows when there are people listening in (*orejas*) on your conversations. Before we could say any more this guy began asking us if we had "come to know the Lord." We all said no, much to his disappointment, but we were curious enough to know what he was doing here. He said "to spread the Gospel and to win souls for Christ." We asked him if he was doing anything for these people in the way of food, housing, jobs, ect. He told us no and that those things were not relevant as long as people saved their souls. At that point I remember telling him that he was no different than the long line of Christians who had come here to impose their will on these people. I said if you wanted to preach religion, maybe he might want to follow the model of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero.(1) Looking at me with a confused expression, our missionary friend simply said, "Who was he?"

This encounter reflects for me a fundamental tenet of the relationship that Euro-Americans have had and continue to have with people throughout Latin America. Over the past 500 years Mayans and many other people have had various forms of intervention in their communities by people claiming to know what is best for them. Whether they have been missionaries, statesmen, Peace Corp workers, anthropologists, relief agencies or even solidarity organizations - all of them, in some form or another, have gone to these countries with the position that they were going to "help these people", "show them how it is done", make their lives better or simply to "save" them from themselves. The corporate owned media in this country has contributed to this view since it rarely puts into context why there is rampant poverty, street children sniffing glue, political violence, government corruption and ecological devastation. The cumulative effect of watching news stories about Latin America that is mostly disaster related can leave viewers with the sense that "these" people can not take care of themselves. Whether it is on the nightly

news or a CARE ad showing malnourished children, the North American public is fed images of dependency and backwardness. From my studies of the local TV news coverage of Latin America it is rare that we are given the opinions and perspectives of Latin Americans on what is happening there and a virtually nonexistent view from Latin Americans who hold no positions of power. (www.grcmc.org/griid/reports)

More and more people are beginning to question this notion of superiority and imperial mentality that permeates all social institutions in this country. Beginning with the observations that took place surrounding the 500 years of resistance by Indigenous peoples throughout the Western hemisphere, some people in the US are confronting their own relationships with the First Nations of North, Central and South America. This is due in part to an increase in solidarity groups sending people to various countries by way of invitation to stand with people in their struggles for justice. Attitudes are also changing because people are becoming more familiar with the rich literary and cultural traditions that give a radically different view of the past 500 years. This transition has not been without resistance, some of it which wants to aggressively cling to the history of the victors, while others are scrambling to find "examples" of well intentioned people that they can hold up so as to not feel completely guilty about being in positions of privilege.

One such example, which is even being elevated by the religious left and some solidarity groups, is Bartolome de las Casas. Las Casas, a Dominican priest/bishop who once enslaved Indians himself has been canonized as the "Defender of the Indians." It is true that Las Casas denounced the enslavement of Indians, argued that they had souls, and left us with a detailed account of the consequences of the genocidal policies directed towards Indians in the Caribbean, Meso-American and South American regions. These are contributions that should not be quickly dismissed when critiquing his involvement in the early years of the European invasion, but they are not adequate reasons for blindly embracing him as the great "Defender."

What must be challenged are Las Casas's motives for speaking out on behalf of indigenous peoples. In a collection of propositions that he wrote entitled *Rules of Confession*, the Bishop of Chiapas said "...once the native rulers have voluntarily and freely accepted the faith and been baptized as Christians, they become bound by another title than before to acknowledge the Spanish sovereignty." (*Las Casas*, by MacNutt, pg. 282) Las Casas's intention was to convert these people to the "true" faith, which in my mind is a blatant display of imperialist thinking. Several scholars have also pointed out that Las Casas advocated for the enslavement of Blacks and Moors instead of Indians to work for the Spaniards. (*Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*, Katz & *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, Forbes)

Las Casas was also guilty of participating and in some ways developing an economic and social system that devastated Indigenous groups throughout the hemisphere. Osage/Cherokee scholar George Tinker says "We must never forget that Las Casas, the hero of the 1992 Quincentenary, was just as committed to the conquest of Native Americans as were Cortes and Pizarro. He only hoped to do it less violently. He accomplished much of his goal by creating the *reduccion* missionary system (2), used so effectively - and destructively - by later generations of European Jesuits, Franciscans, and even Protestants in both the northern and southern hemispheres." (*Missionary Conquest*, pg. 19)

Las Casas is an example of what I would call a liberal conquistador, one that seeks to

dominate others in a fashion less brutal than a mercenary, but just as devastating when one considers the long term effects. I chose Las Casas, not because I wanted to single out a religious figure, but because he incarnates the best and the worst of European and Euro-Americans that have come to the Americas with the best of intentions. He can act as an interior mirror for all of us who honestly want to be a part of the liberation of the Americas, by challenging our motivations for what we do and who it ultimately benefits. For me this is fundamental to the work of solidarity.

What I have sought to do in this book is to reflect on the fact that it has been I who have been "saved" because of the people I have worked with in Guatemala/Chiapas and those in Grand Rapids who are from Guatemala. In many ways it is I who have been transformed by these people and the experiences I had with them. I do not want to give the impression that I have some romanticized notion of who Guatemalans/Chiapans are, rather I am saying that it is I who really gained from these encounters. It is sort of a reversal of the missionary position, where instead of going to change others I became changed. Who I am today and what I do is in large part because of my encounters with the people of Guatemala and Chiapas.

What I hope to communicate in these pages is that solidarity was not just something I participated in on my journeys to Guatemala and Chiapas, it was something I learned and am learning because of the struggles they have allowed me to participate in. They have taught me profound lessons on community, organizing, and the importance of having a vision. I learned that for them to obtain real freedom I had to learn to listen to what it was that they wanted. I was taught solidarity by not wanting to impose my will, my desires on them. In religious terms, it is as if I was being proselytized by them and sent back to the US to make converts here. I could not simply come back from my trips and claim that I had done "my time." No, this is not solidarity. Solidarity requires an ongoing relationship and doing whatever it takes to improve, to build upon that relationship. The kind of solidarity that the Guatemalans/Chiapans have taught me is *learned solidarity*. This type of solidarity requires that after standing with the people in Guatemala/Chiapas that I work here in the US to change the policies that make it nearly impossible to achieve lasting change in their countries. The main difference between dogmatic religion or political ideologies and learned solidarity for me is that learned solidarity is based on real principles of democracy, equality and mutual respect, not just paying lip service to it. Learned solidarity is the desire and the experience of standing with people, of having a presence with them regardless of differences or world-views.

One experience I had of learned solidarity came during my first stint in Guatemala while working with Peace Brigades International. I was working with a newly formed group of Guatemalan widows called CONAVIGUA. They were meeting in a church courtyard in Chichicastenago one afternoon when a group of soldiers entered and made threats. The women defiantly stood their ground and the soldiers left. That night one of the women said to me that they were grateful for our presence that day, but then she went on to tell me something that I can never forget nor ignore. She said, "It is important that you are here, but more important that you return to your country to tell the people what is going on here. The way you live determines how we live."

This book is the product of learned solidarity. It is divided into three sections, each reflecting on the various ways that this learned solidarity has impacted me. Part I of the

book is entitled *Q'anjobal Mayans Invade Amway Territory*. I share thoughts on being bit by the Central America bug, part of the Sanctuary movement in the 80's and how I negotiated cultural solidarity in an area permeated with Christian conservatism.

Part II is called *Sembramos, Comemos, Sembramos - We Plant, in order to Eat, in order to Plant*. This is a saying I learned from a Mayan farmer that reflects the simplicity and consistency in the lives of the Mayans I met in Guatemala and Chiapas. Here I gleaned sections from my journal entrees from various trips between 1988 to 2001, where I have had numerous opportunities to accompany and observe the relentless persistence of the Guatemalan popular movements and the participatory democracy of the Zapatista communities.

Part III, *The Way You Live, Determines How We Live*, is a collection of articles that I have written over the years on various aspects of how US policy impacts Guatemala and Chiapas and what we might do to change those policies. As Noam Chomsky has always pointed out, the responsibility of the citizens of countries that dictate global policies are key in determining the outcome of many liberation struggles around the world.

I am forever indebted to the people I have met and learned from in these pages. My encounters with them have transformed my life forever. It is because of them that I am the person I am today. It is for them that I dedicate this book.

- (1) Romero devoted the last years of his life to the poor of El Salvador, but also spoke out vehemently against the injustice committed by the government and the army. He also criticized the US support of both these institutions, a criticism that probably led to his assassination on March 24, 1980.
- (2) The *reduccion* system was implemented by the Dominicans in 1543 as a way to bring the Indians into centralized areas after the displacement caused by the violence from the initial years of the conquest. The Dominicans argued that this was a way to protect the Indians from further harm. The result, however, was that the concentration of Indians made it possible for the church to "christianize" them and for the Spaniards to further confiscate their lands. (Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, pages. 21-24 and Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, pages. 18-20.)

Part I

Q'anjobal Mayans Invade Amway Territory

Bitten by the Central America Bug

It was the spring of 1983, and I was working as a youth minister in a Catholic Church on the westside of Grand Rapids. A close friend of mine Tim Pieri, who was the chair of the social justice committee, organized a public forum with two local priest who had just returned from Nicaragua. They had been there during the Pope's visit, when priests were chastised for their involvement in the revolutionary government's cabinet.

For me, all of this was new. I had never read about Nicaragua or any other Central American country up until this time. Being a recent convert to Catholicism I was impressed by the stories that these two priests shared about the faith and commitment to gospel principles the Christian base communities engaged in. At the same time I was perplexed as to why the Pope would criticize people who wanted justice and freedom. Little did I know that this incident would be the beginning of a long journey that would take me places I never dreamed of.

Church politics can be an ugly thing and i soon found out. The priest at the church I worked at was a part of the charismatic movement, a movement that seemed populace, but was very conservative and dogmatic at its core. To counter-act the public meeting with the two priests just back from Nicaragua, our parish priest brought to town two Nicaraguan men living in Ann Arbor, Michigan at the Sword of the Spirit community. They preached at all the masses one Sunday and spoke of the "horrible" realities that plagued the Nicaraguans under the Sandinistas.

After mass both Tim and I made a point to speak with these two men about their comments. Not knowing enough about what was going on their I felt reluctant to challenge their views. Tim, knowing that what they were sharing was basically the State Department line began to question the two men. The conversation lasted for some time and the one thing that i do remember was that both of these men had not been in Nicaragua since the days of the Somoza dynasty. At the time I was not able to make any conclusions based on their and my lack of knowledge on the Sandinista revolution, but Tim seemed to be disgusted with the misinformation they shared with the congregation throughout the day.

A week later I found out that our priest was so upset by Tim's challenge to their message that he was fired from the position as chair of the social justice committee. This further confused my perspective on the matter and only created tension between the priest and myself.

In mid-June I had just returned from a week-long high school retreat for catholic youth. It was an uplifting experience that gave me a chance to meet more new faces in the Grand

Rapids area. There was a planned reunion of sorts a few weeks later that I was looking forward to. One afternoon the parish priest called me into his office. He sat me down and told me that he had arraigned for me to go spend a week in Ann Arbor with the Sword in the Spirit community to have a better chance to hear their perspective. I told the priest that that was not possible since I was already committed to other projects in the parish and the retreat reunion. He was insistent that I go and questioned my priorities. I told him that my work with the youth of this community was my priority and he told me that obeying his authority was the priority. I still refused. His response was to fire me from my position and throw me out on the street that afternoon.

It was not until years later that I found out that the Sword in the Spirit community in Ann Arbor were Contra supporters who had close ties with the anti-Sandinista Bishop of Nicaragua, Obando y Bravo. I also learned that this community had as one of its mentor's Humberto Belli, former editor of *La Prensa*, who published an anti-Sandinista book in the early 80's that was funded by the CIA. (see *Spiritual Warfare* by Sara Diamond, pg. 155) This community also had ties and was being bankrolled in part by pizza magnate Tom Monaghan, owner of Dominos Pizza, another Contra supporter.

My quick departure from St. James only landed me in the undergraduate seminary program for the Catholic diocese of Grand Rapids. While studying at Aquinas College I became very active in the Social Action Committee on campus. We would engage the campus body on justice issues on a regular basis, either by holding vigils or putting on education programs. This was during Reagan's first term, which meant that Central America became a focus.

I quickly learned about Archbishop Oscar Romero and the 4 church women who had been assassinated in El Salvador. We read often of Contra atrocities, especially in the publication put out by Witness for Peace an organization that sent North Americans to Nicaragua to have a presence in communities that were under attack from the US-backed Contras. I began to read the Liberation theologians and was acclimated to the further divisions between Rome and Christians who wanted justice. It was during this time and because of my own experience at St. James that I became bitten by, what so many people I came to know through this movement as, the Central America bug.

Suggested Reading

- *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right*, by Sara Diamond.
- *The Religious Right in Michigan Politics*, by Russ Bellant

Taking the Next Step: Becoming a Sanctuary

In December of 1984, while in jail, I became a part of a community house that came to be known as Koinonia. Modeled after the Catholic Worker houses in the US, we attempted to live simple lives, offer hospitality to the homeless, and to challenge the militaristic policies of the US government. Being that Central America was an obsession with the Reagan administration we focused heavily on that part of the world.

Our course of public action took us from weekly vigils, to conferences, lectures, public fasting, lobbying and demonstrations at the local federal building. We engaged in

numerous acts of civil disobedience, from occupying legislator's offices to making citizen's arrests, and from digging graves to planting crosses with Contra victim names on the federal building lawn. At times we would have significant community support and media coverage, but mostly we felt like solitary voices in a political wasteland.

One thing that seemed to be missing from the resistance was the personal element. Many of us had become familiar with the work of Witness For Peace, where US citizens would personally go to Nicaragua and stand with the people amidst Contra terrorism. This organization brought us the names and faces of people who were the direct victims of the US financed proxy war in Nicaragua. Putting a human face on this policy deeply impacted our community and it was with this that we began to explore the possibility of becoming a part of the Sanctuary Movement.

We became familiar with the movement through the solidarity work we were doing, but mostly through the trial that took place in Arizona, where Sanctuary workers were arrested for violating US immigration laws. This led us to read a book by Renny Golden and Michael McConnell entitled *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad*. It was the stories in this text, stories of Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees who suffered at the hand of US backed terrorism that spoke to us.

Making the decision to declare ourselves a sanctuary was not something that we took lightly. We knew that this was going to be a long-term commitment, unlike the hospitality we had been doing up until then. We had numerous meetings to discuss the possibility, both amongst ourselves and with people in the larger community that had been supporting us since our beginning. This was a helpful process, since questions were raised that may not have been if we excluded input from others in the community. We were also seen as "rookies" to the peace & justice movement, I was the old man of the house at 24. Therefore, it was essential that the broader community be included in the process.

The next step was to go to Chicago and meet with folks from the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America. This was the national clearing-house for the Sanctuary work being done in the US. The whole household went on a road trip to talk about our future and to take in an Amnesty International concert that happened to be the same weekend. Our meeting was helpful and encouraging. We found the folks in Chicago very supportive. They mainly stressed that we seek as much community support as possible. Issue like health care and legal assistance were brought up. Language barriers would be an ongoing problem, as well as cultural issues. From this meeting it was made clear that we would need more people in the community who would be willing to come forth and offer some assistance.

From there we set out to do two things; to learn Spanish and to get community letters of support. Through the letters of support we would be laying the foundation for financial support and any other services that people in the community could offer. Without this support we could not have done what we did, therefore I would like to share some excerpts from the collection of letters of support we received the Summer of 1986:

"We, of the Grand Rapids Friends Meeting, are led to join hands with others in need and give our endorsement, spiritual support, and encouragement to the Koinonia Community in their declaration to offer sanctuary to fleeing Central American war victims. We affirm their act of faith to respond to the needs of others and to address the issues of being a

world citizen, working towards the abolishment of inhumane conditions."

"As Christians and as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we feel it is our duty to go on record as being in complete opposition to the deportation policies that have been set and are currently being implemented by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, as they affect aliens entering this country from El Salvador and other Central American countries.....Thus the Dominican Friars commend you for your courageous expression of compassion and service and pledge to you whatever assistance we can offer."

"We have four young children who are not daily confronted with the realities of war and violence. Our children have always had enough food to eat, enough clothes to wear, shelter from the storm, and some resemblance of peace.

On the other hand, we are too painfully aware that our comfort is usually at the expense of those less fortunate than ourselves. As our government has directed, on a number of fronts, a war against the peoples of Central America, we must direct our efforts at stopping and changing those policies of our government.

We support in the deepest sense the work of these our friends, who now declare Sanctuary for the victims of our government's policies in Central America. We pledge our help in every way we might give it." Tim & Deb Pieri

Many letters of support came to us that summer convincing us that we could take on this challenge. We then set out to declare ourselves a Sanctuary on October 9, 1986, a week after attending the national Sanctuary Movement gathering in DC. We were all very excited about being a part of this movement and in a sense history, but we were not fully prepared for what was to come, nor did we know how it would change our lives.

Suggested Reading

- *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad*, by Renny Golden & Michael McConnel
- *Sanctuary: A Resource Guide for Understanding and Participating in the Central American Refugee Struggle*, by Gary MacEoin
- *Resisting Reagan: The US Central American Peace Movement*, by Christian Smith

The First Families Arrive: Not all refugees are alike

Once the euphoria of becoming a Sanctuary was over our community needed to get to work. We continued to build our base of support and were now meeting with the statewide Sanctuary movement. We became the fifth community to declare, after Detroit, Kalamazoo, Lansing and Ann Arbor. All the refugees in these sanctuaries were from El Salvador, which made the statewide meetings easy to facilitate up to this point. Another thing that worked to our advantage was the acquisition of an additional house.

Friends of ours who used to live in a community house in Grand Rapids had moved to the East coast. When they found out that we became a Sanctuary they decided to sell us

their house for next to nothing. In early 1987 we then began the process of transferring title and getting other financial support for mortgage payments and house repairs. I continued to work on Spanish and having a greater understanding of Central American history and politics. If there was one failure early on it was in this arena. The community was not collectively engaged in broadening its understanding of whom we would be offering Sanctuary to. This failure became quite apparent once the first families arrived.

Just before Easter of 1987, we received a call from the folks in Chicago about a group of seven Guatemalans who were willing to be a part of the Sanctuary movement. They had been living in Colorado for half a year but ran into difficulties finding work and a supportive community. The Chicago office called us because they knew we had this extra house and felt that we were one of the only new Sanctuaries that had adequate space for seven people. The folks in Chicago made arraignments to get them to Chicago where we would meet them to bring back to Michigan.

The original meeting was somewhat awkward, since none of us had a great handle on Spanish. We did bring a friend along who was *Latina*, but that proved to be inadequate, since the group was from a small village in Northwestern Guatemala where Q'anjobal was spoken. This was the first in a series of rude awakenings simply based on the fact that we had a narrowly preconceived notion of what refugees seeking Sanctuary were supposed to be like.

For the first two months the Guatemalans lived with us as we got the other house livable. This was a very difficult time again because of the language barrier, but also because they we were all in a transitional state just trying to get situated. We had an immigration lawyer who was beginning some legal processes for them, however, since none of them had any legal work papers they were subjected to hanging out with us most days.

Within the group there were two couples (Pedro & Angelica, Armando & Maria), one couple with a little girl, and two single men. One of the single men was Armando's brother, Felipe. Also, Angelica was several months pregnant, this helped us move on making more medical connections in the community. Most of them spoke limited Spanish, especially the women and Felipe, who was the oldest in the group. The younger men had more exposure to Spanish within Guatemala, since they did seasonal work outside of their village of San Rafael de Independencia.

Just two weeks after they had arrived we were given our first lesson in government harassment. I was upstairs one day working on a new addition in the house. The Guatemalans were downstairs in the living room relaxing. Our dog Moses barked in such a way that told me someone was at the door. I did not hear anything for a few moments and then Armando came upstairs to tell me that we had a visitor.

I came downstairs to find two men in suits standing in front of the door. Before introducing themselves these men asked me "where are these folks from?" At that point it became obvious that these men were with the INS. Not sure how to respond I simply threw it back at them by stating that "you know where they're from." They began to ask other questions and I interrupted by saying "if you do not have a warrant to be in my house, you need to leave." They then proceeded to tell me that the Guatemalans let them in. This was almost a comical moment, despite the fact that they were there to harass us. I then went on to say that they needed to leave and that if they didn't we would make a stink about this incident. Fortunately, other friends of ours showed up which made their

presence even more embarrassing. After more demands from me the INS officers left and i came back in the house to see how the Guatemalans were doing.

I quickly discovered that they had no idea who these two men were and did not seem to be alarmed by their presence. After i thought about it, it made some sense since the whole exchange took place in English. I asked them why they let these men in the house and they told me that it was customary practice for them to invite visitors into their home. I smiled and realized that they had just taught me a lesson in hospitality. Had I not let the INS officials in the situation could have been worse. By inviting them in I believe it disarmed the men who probably did not expect to be invited into the house, especially by the people they sought to harass.

This was the first of a series of incidents that showed me that my expectations about who the refugees should be were unfair. Many of us had this image of who these people were going to be based upon the encounters we had had with refugees who had a high-profile in the Sanctuary Movement. These folks were very outspoken and articulate due to their political involvement in their home countries. We also had this impression that any Central American wanting to be in Sanctuary would be politically active. What we discovered was that these folks from Guatemala were simple *campesino/as* who left because of the political/economic violence. They were not victims because of their active role in challenging the repressive policies in Guatemala, they were victims because the counterinsurgency policies in Guatemala were directed at the rural indigenous population that were potential guerrilla supporters. This revelation about their experience was accentuated when we participated in the other aspect of Sanctuary work: public education.

When we facilitated public speaking engagements with them, they could only speak to the specifics of their village, not the entire country. This challenged us to re-evaluate our expectations and knowledge of them and their circumstances. None of them had ever engaged in formal education, nor could they read or write. In fact, none of them had ever seen their language in print. They had not been particularly active in the local church nor the Christian base community movement throughout the region. The brother of Armando was a catchiest who had been found dead hanging from a rope in the church, but no one in our group was active in these religious movements.

So, here we were with a group of simple, subsistence Mayan farmers who were victims because of their status in life. This is not what we had hoped for, it did not fit into our political/theological vision for doing Sanctuary. What it did do was to give us a slap on the face about our privileged notions about what political refugees were. It made us realize that working with political refugees was not as "sexy" an undertaking as we had expected. We were taught that offering sanctuary can not include any definitions or limitations on who would be welcomed. This was a lesson that we were continually reminded of as the years went by.

Suggested Reading

- *Break-Ins, Death Threats and the FBI: The Covert War Against the Central America Movement*, by Ross Gelbman
- *Mayans in Exile: Guatemalans in Florida*, by Allan Burns

Learning Cultural Sensitivity

Possibly the most difficult aspect of working with Guatemalan refugees over the years has been sensitivity to cultural issues and cultural needs. I remember a discussion that our household had one time when one of the first families was deciding on whether or not to send their daughter to a public school. Some people felt that she should go no matter what, that if she didn't she would not become acculturated to society. Others argued that that is precisely why they might consider not sending. Some of us thought that it might make it more difficult for the children if they ever returned to Guatemala. Some also expressed concern over how this might put more distance between the children and the mother, since most mothers only spoke an indigenous language and putting them in school might facilitate the children's gradual inability to speak in their family's first language. It was these kinds of issues, not especially "big political" issues, the kinds of issues we thought we would be dealing with, that confronted us after becoming a Sanctuary.

For all the reading about the Sanctuary movement and all of the meetings we went to, not much of it prepared us for the kind of issues that we would be faced with on a daily basis, especially cultural issues. These issues would challenge my own sense of identity, as well as my political vision. Almost every public encounter I have had while accompanying Guatemalans has laid bare the very roots of what motivated my political resistance. What follows are stories about those encounters and the lessons I learned.

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All of the Guatemalan children that have come with adults or have been born here have gone to public schools. Most of them seem to do well, in part because of an ever growing Latino/a population that is forcing the school system to deal with language and cultural differences. However, there have been limits to the system's level of understanding. Over the years I have acted as a translator for parents during parent-teacher conferences. Even though I've explained to the teachers every year that these people are Mayan and Spanish is their second language, they still want to lump them into the category of "Hispanics". Many Latino/a people I know feel frustrated that there is this narrow understanding of people who speak Spanish, but it is doubly difficult for Guatemalans who are indigenous. Within the family dynamic the father tends to speak better Spanish than the mother, mostly because he has had more work experiences outside of the house, bringing him into contact with other Latino/as. Therefore, even if the children are in a bi-lingual school it is difficult for the mother to be involved with school work since it is a language that she is less familiar with.

In the homes the family tends to speak the Mayan language that they know, especially when adults speak to each other or with their children. The children engage in a mix of languages, sometimes changing languages in mid-sentence, as do many children in a multi-lingual setting. I am always amazed at this dynamic and feel humble since it was not until my late 20's that I learned another language. The parents are limited in what they can do in assisting the children in school-work, since most do not read or write any language. Still, the school system doesn't seem to get this, they continue to send messages home to the parents in either English or Spanish and then wonder why there is

little parental involvement. I would not expect the schools to learn Q'anjobal, but if they are aware of it and acknowledge these significant language differences, then they might be more sensitive to the children's needs at school.

These language barriers effect all other social dynamics that they come in contact with. Many of the women have had babies while in Grand Rapids. I have had the privilege of being present for most of the deliveries. Even though we have 3 major hospitals in Grand Rapids, none of them have (in 1992) full-time staff who speak Spanish to help in the delivery. Even when they find someone, usually a custodial person, it is someone from Mexico or Puerto Rico who has difficulty in communicating to the Guatemalans because of differences in Spanish or the limited Spanish that the women speak.

On one occasion we were fortunate that the husband was able to get off from work. In the delivery room it was like a language assembly line. The doctor talked to me in English, I talked to the husband in Spanish, and he communicated to his wife in Q'anjobal. To some this may not seem like a big deal, but ask a woman how important it is to communicate while giving birth. I found out quickly that the dominant culture limits people's access to having a healthy functioning life if you do not conform to their plan. Even having a baby must be done within an imperialist framework.

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The first refugee family to have a baby in Grand Rapids that we worked with had an especially difficult time. You have to understand that women who have money in Guatemala are usually the only ones that can afford to have babies in a hospital. Most of them have it in their homes or in the *milpa* (plot of land where food is grown, land that is often owned communally). Mayan women are built very different that Anglo-women, they tend to be short and stocky. An indigenous pediatrician told me that it is easier for Guatemalan women to give birth because of the way their pelvis is structured. Many of them will just squat when delivering. It is true that children die at birth in Guatemala, but that is due more to the poverty and not necessarily to the low-tech forms of delivery. The women who are here however, told me that they wanted to go to a hospital because "that is where rich women in Guatemala go and where nothing bad happens."

When Odilia went to the hospital to have her baby many of her views about hospitals changed. She was uncomfortable with the very sanitized atmosphere, where nothing was familiar. She also was frightened by the fact that she knew none of the doctors or nurses. All this, one top of the language barriers, made the hospital a scary place for her. During the delivery she had complications and the baby did not start breathing until some 12 minutes after birth. The indigenous pediatrician that I know told me it was because the doctors were treating her like any other Anglo woman.....flat on her back.

Needless to say, both Odilia and Armando were in shock, not only because the child was brain-damaged, but because they thought that these things did not happen in hospitals because that is where rich people went. For days the meetings with hospital people and the family were difficult and painful. Not once did the hospital provide a translator, despite the emotional trauma the family was enduring. They made no offer of counseling to the family, instead they made the issue of payment a priority. To top it off I overheard hospital staff making nasty comments about the Guatemalan's appearance as well as elitist comments about not having the money to pay for hospital expenses. I may

have thought about some of the difficulties that the families would experience being refugees, but I did not expect this much. The whole experience really showed me how racist and elitist our system is.

One day after leaving the hospital with Armando and his brother Felipe, we were walking to the parking lot when the hospital helicopter was approaching the landing-pad. All of a sudden the brothers ran towards the car like something was after them. Then it dawned on me. Their experience of helicopters in Guatemala was that whenever one appeared they were shot at or soldiers were arriving. This whole experience hit me like a ton of bricks. It clarified for me the deep chasm that existed between my experiences and theirs. It taught me that there was so much more I needed to know about them if I was going to have a healthy relationship with them. It also gave me another reason to despise my government's policies and to know that it is because of their policies that these people were doomed to fear whenever a helicopter, even a medical helicopter appeared.

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When my foster-son, Juan Carlos, was in high school I became interested in what he was learning. In his English class one-year they were studying Shakespeare, literature he had difficulty with and in his history class they of course studied US history from the viewpoint of the conquerors. Again, we ran into roadblocks with the school when discussing the issues of US foreign policy towards Guatemala and how we are not taught in this country that the US led and sponsored a military coup in Guatemala in 1954 that overthrew a democratically elected government. The teacher told me that they can not cover all these "nuances". I said it was not a nuance and how do you think it makes people like Juan-Carlos feel when he is told lies and is given misinformation about his own country? I also asked him why they did not incorporate Guatemalan or other Latin American literature instead of just teaching Shakespeare?

I never got anywhere with this in the school system, but I could tell it was creating some problems for Juan Carlos. Carlos was having bouts of depression and I wondered how much of it had to do with being in a culture that fundamentally despised who he was. I knew that separation from his family and the familiarity of his hometown made him depressed at times, but he always told me that it was people's lack of understanding about what was going on in his country that hurt him the most, especially since it was the US government who was primarily determining his country's future. I quickly learned that virtually everything about the system here is antithetical to other cultural/political worldviews. I realize that the movement towards multiculturalism is attempting to change that, but it seems to me that what most of its proponents are asking for is only acceptance.

In many cases the system is happy to accommodate, especially when they can use multiculturalism to further their marketing techniques. What would seem more authentic would be to say that it is because of this system that other cultures have been brutalized, exploited and displaced. Any real multi-cultural education would inherently challenge the very existence of the dominant culture in our society. Juan helped me to see it that way.

* * * * *

Anyone who has investigated the impact that US television has on immigrant communities knows how racist and dangerous it can be. Over the years we have wavered between having a TV and not having one. When the Guatemalans first lived with us we did not have one so it was never an issue. When they moved into the other house one of the local supporters thought it would be nice if they had a TV, so she bought one for them. Some of us had serious reservations about this, but there was really nothing we could do. Being that TV is so much a part of the dominant culture, we in some ways were seen as being out of the loop. Also, given the fact that the daily routine for the Guatemalan families was now radically different than in their homeland, it seemed "natural" to fill their days with television.

Those that have TV's also get cable, which enables them to watch the Miami-based, Mexican owned Univision. This allows them to watch the news and other programming in Spanish. The downside of this is that Univision is really only representative of elite Mexican values, values that despise the poor, Indians, and objectifies women. Most of the "entertainment" programming are spin-offs of US talk shows like Jenny Jones with a Mexican twist. The shows tend to be even more outrageous than their US counterparts and virtually nude women are used as props in most of the talk and game show programs.

Imagine then a Q'anjobal speaking woman, who is short, stocky, with dark skin, coal-black eyes, long black hair watching these tall, blond, thin, make-up wearing women. Imagine an indigenous woman who grew up in a highland community growing her own food and weaving her own clothing, and then watching a Mexican *novela* on TV. I have spent several afternoons doing just that as I sat through these *novelas* with Angelica. Most times she just looks at me and laughs when there is some adulterous scene with some catty woman screaming or crying. It seems as though this all seems quite comical to her and yet in some ways it acts as a re-enforcer to the dominant cultural ideologies.

As in US daytime soap operas, *novelas* are sandwiched between a litany of commercials, some with the same actors, selling a plethora of modern convenience items. In this sense the Guatemalan women are being bombarded on two fronts. They are taught that to be a modern woman that they must consume certain goods, goods that will make their lives blissful. Just as devastating though, is the pressure to see beauty as that which is reflected by the tall, thin, blond woman, which is the only real image of women they will see on TV. On rare occasions they will see a darker skinned Mestiza woman on these programs, but only in the role of a maid or a rural incompetent.

I talk to Angelica and ask her how it makes her feel to see these women that are not representative of her. She tells me that it doesn't really bother her, because it seems too ridiculous. I agree with her and then she tells me that where it creates problems, is with the children. It is the children that are being infected with the images of women on the TV, such that they are participating in various forms of self-loathing. It also has created tensions between them and their mothers who in no way represent the "modern woman".

One might be tempted to say that they should just turn the TV off or not have one. This is a privileged response that does not take into account the fact that the adults, women in particular, are not used to the type of idleness that we have here. Women in Guatemala, in addition to being the primary care-givers with children, also prepare the food. Food preparation there is quite labor intensive in that meals are made from scratch. Beans are

separated from their shells then cooked. Tortillas are made by soaking the corn, grinding it and then fashioning them by hand to be cooked over an open flame. The clothes are washed by hand and water is obtained by going to a local pump or stream and then carried several kilometers to their homes. In some ways life is easier for them, since the domestic work is not as demanding. The trade-off however, is that Guatemalan women here are isolated from other women, since very little of what they do here is traditional.

In Guatemala women would gather at the local *pila* where they would wash cloths together. They gather at the marketplace to buy their food, most of which is sold by other women, or they go to another woman's home to have their corn ground for making tortillas. The point being is that the work was done communally, thus enabling the women to share information. This is where a significant amount of organizing work is done amongst women in Guatemala. This avenue for support and advocacy does not exist here. Here they are stuck in homes watching ditzy or manipulating women that have been created for them in order "to bring them into the 21st century."

It was we who received in 1992

Like many other privileged people in North America 1992 was an interesting year. We had to come to terms with our historical role in the ongoing genocidal policies against Indigenous peoples in this hemisphere. We read the books and essays, got the organizing materials, and participated in "alternative" 500 years celebrations. In a real, but mostly symbolic gesture we signed title to the sanctuary house over to Pedro and Ashuel (people know her as Angelina, but Ashuel is her Mayan name that I can tell she prefers). They had been living there since 1987 and the house had been paid off for a few years with the help of the broader community, so we felt it necessary to give them complete freedom to do whatever they wished with the house. Thus, we thought that would probably be the extent to which we would contribute to counter the past 500 years of plunder against Indigenous peoples. We were not only soon to be wrong, but discovered that in this Quincentennial year we again gained from one of the descendants of the Mayas.

Over the years our community has been fortunate to attract all kinds of people doing great things in the community. In 1991 Bruce Mossburg came into our household. Bruce is a dear friend and social worker with the Bethany Refugee Agency. He had been to Nicaragua and Guatemala previously and sought us out because of the Central American connection.

In the fall of 1992 Bruce's agency asked us if we would be willing to house a young Guatemalan man who was in detention in Texas waiting deportation. If we would be willing to house him, the agency would fight to get him a J-Minor status, since he was only 16 at the time. This was not a typical request of the agency, they normally matched young people from Central America and the Caribbean to foster families in the area. We would not be receiving any financial assistance, it was an arraignment meant to give the lawyers time to postpone or eliminated his deportation. It was also not typical in that we were not typical. We were not a family, rather a community we no blood related

members, but Bethany felt that is was a good option since most of us could speak Spanish and more importantly, we had been to Guatemala and were able to related to the young Guatemalan.

Juan Carlos Gonzalez, more affectionately known to us as Presidente Gonzalo, was recruited into the Guatemalan military as a young teenager. He left Guatemala after witnessing the deaths of some of his fellow combatants. Juan is one of millions of young men in the world who has been denied his youth and forced to participate in the plans of powerful and the greedy. Juan was never really allowed to enjoy the country that so many of us have come to love, to stroll in the countryside or to sip hot *atole* and eat sweet bread in the marketplace. Like so many other Mayas, Juan was taught to despise his Indian roots. Juan is also a torture survivor.

Up to this point our community has either given hospitality to families or older single men and women. We had never had an unaccompanied teenager that we were completely responsible for. We had to assume the role that most parents take with a teenager. We had to worry about his dealing with a new environment and meeting new people. We had to talk about how we were going to deal with issues of drugs, alcohol, and sex. And we had to help him with homework and attend parent-teacher conferences. Sounds like the typical responsibilities of any parent...right? Fortunately in the US most parents do not have to deal with the issues that a torture survivor faces, nor the pain of separation from ones family. We expected the worst.

To our constant amazement Juan displayed incredible resilience throughout the 2 years he lived with us. Juan adjusted well to the school environment he was in and made friends quickly. He played on the soccer team and learned English at a remarkable pace. At times he would be frustrated by the immaturity of the other students who could not relate to his experiences, but at the same time Juan acted like any typical teenager. Juan always made us laugh with his innocent sense of humor and gave us love with his unhesitating affection. Without a doubt, there were times that Juan struggled with depression, frustration and isolation from family, but Juan taught us all with his courage to get through these difficult times, with his discipline to learn, and the willingness to give, from someone who had so much taken away. Thank You Juan, for allowing me to be a Dad for a few years and to grow from your vibrant life!

Where the Hell is Guatemala?

Investigating the Grand Rapids Press's coverage of a US client state

(In 1986 and 1990, a fellow local activist and I decided to investigate the local monopoly daily newspaper's coverage of Central America for both of those years. We published two separate reports, *Aggravations* and *Misinformation*, that eventually led us to starting our own newspaper. The following are some excerpted comments from the 1990 report as it relates to Guatemala. Copies of the report can be obtained through the author.)

Basic Data

There were 318 articles on Central America in 1990. Nicaragua (including Iran-Contra stories) was the country most written about, 131 articles, then Panama 125, El Salvador

26, Guatemala 10, Costa Rica 6, Honduras 4, Belize 3, with 13 on the entire region.

Guatemala

Guatemala was one of those Central American countries that was virtually forgotten by the Press in 1990. The Press had 10 articles that in some way dealt with or mentioned this country with the largest indigenous population in the region. Two articles were about an organization called Heal the Children, which sends medical teams to countries without funds or medical resources to do surgery on children. Both articles, written by Press reporters, were of fair length and accompanied by color photos. It was mentioned that most of these children lived in poverty but never questioned why, especially as Guatemala receives USA "assistance".

There were two other articles that accused Guatemalan guerrillas of being trained by the CIA for drug smuggling purposes and that they may have been working with the Contras. No sources were given in regards to the accusations.

To those of us even moderately knowledgeable about Guatemala and the CIA, such accusations are highly questionable. We do know, however, that the CIA and other USA government agencies have a long history of fabricating stories and otherwise distorting information for political purposes. The Press, by failing to put such a charge in context, has once again misinformed its readers.

1990 was an election year in Guatemala and like most Guatemalan election years it was a violent one. Early in the year Americas Watch, a respected human rights organization, released a report charging "...a significant increase in extra-judicial executions, disappearances, and kidnappings..." (A Voice of the Voiceless, April 1990, pg. 6) The Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman reported "276 extra-judicial killings since the beginning of the year til Oct. 3, and 145 disappearances." (Peace Brigades International newsletter, Nov. 1990, pg. 2) As of the end of September the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission/US reported 335 extra-judicial killings (Peace Brigades International newsletter, Nov. 1990, pg.2), and these are only the documented in a country where such documenting tends to be difficult and dangerous. NISGUA's statistics are even more sobering: "...at least 16 candidates were assassinated and the death toll for the year (up to the elections) reached over 1,000." (Report on Guatemala, Winter 1990, pg.2)

The Press only included 2 articles for the year about the election (Nov. 12 & 13), both of which had little information about the election process, unlike Nicaragua's election coverage, which received 25 articles. There seemed to be no great concern about the fairness of the elections. Prior to these elections there was a lot of coverage, in other sources, of Rios Montt's desire to run for president. Rios Montt, a former dictator who came to power via a military coup, had some popular support, but was constitutionally excluded from the elections because of his participation in the coup. More human rights violations occurred during Rios Montt's 18 months in power than occurred in Panama during Noreiga's many years in power there, but this comparison was not made in the Press.

A short article on page 12 of the Dec. 3 Press titled "10 killed as troops, Guatemalans battle", began by saying: "A group of villagers clashed with government troops in western Guatemala on Sunday." With that first sentence and the heading one would think that the villagers were armed and may have provoked the attack. Nowhere in the article does it say that villagers were or were not armed, nor did it state who provoked the

violence. Every other source we have checked gave a less misleading version. NISGUA reports "Late Saturday night a group of drunken soldiers in civilian clothes tried to rob or abduct a shopkeeper. His family and neighbors came to his aid. They rang bells of the town's Catholic church and about 2,000 townspeople, mostly local Tzutujil-speaking Indians gathered. At midnight, led by the mayor, they marched two kilometers to the Panaboj infantry barracks to protest the incident." (Report on Guatemala, Winter 1990, pg. 4) They were fired upon leaving 15 dead (3 children) and over 20 wounded. Within hours 20,000 people in the town of 45,000 had signed a petition for removal of the army garrison, and by January nearly everyone had signed.

This Press article perpetuates ignorance about the nature of such human rights abuses. If the Guatemalan guerrillas had murdered the townspeople we could have expected a significant article with an accompanied denunciation of such acts by one or more USA government spokesperson. Is it possible that Guatemala continues to be largely ignored because there is no immediate threat to the established order, only the continued killing of mostly unarmed innocent civilians by a repressive military? And most of the victims are only Indians anyway, right?

The Press carried quite a few stories on struggles for greater freedom in Eastern Europe. There were some obvious comparisons to be made between those struggles and the struggles in Central America against US domination. For instance, Julio Godoy, a Guatemalan journalist who was living in exile in Europe after his independent newspaper was bombed, wrote, "...while the Moscow-imposed government in Prague would degrade and humiliate reformers, the Washington-made government in Guatemala would kill them." Godoy wrote that the military forces in Eastern Europe proved to be "apolitical and obedient to their national government, be it Communist or not." He said it was not at all like that in Guatemala (or El Salvador), where "the army is the power," Godoy continued; "In addition...in Eastern Europe...no personal conflicts over property arise today as the new regimes introduce economic reform. In Guatemala and El Salvador, the illegitimacy of private property is at the heart of the conflict. Army officers and a few civilian families own the land, the factories, and real estate. They came to own the countries through virtual robbery, either by expropriation and exploitation of peasant land and work in the countryside or by downright corruption." (Central America Report, Feb. 1991, pg.3) The Press made no such comparison.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that it is interesting that the Press followed the national trend by choosing to print stories on Nicaragua (131 times) and only 26 for El Salvador and 10 for Guatemala. Nicaragua during 1990, whether it was the Sandinistas-led government or the UNO-led government, never made it a policy practice to systematically engage in brutalizing their own population. On the other hand, both the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala both were documented as having participated in significant human rights abuses as policy. People only relying on the Press for information on these realities would be terribly misled as to who in the region is a defender of democracy and who is not.

Suggested Reading

- *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, by Noam Chomsky

- *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Ed Herman & Noam Chomsky
- *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media*, by Martin Lee & Norman Solomon
- *By Invitation Only: How the Media Limit Political Debate*, David Croteau & William Hoynes

Cultural Sensitivity Rejects Exploitation: What to do when receiving a capitalist's invitation?

Over the past decade I have been involved in public awareness about USA policies in Central America, have traveled and worked there on 4 occasions and have been an advocate for refugees, particularly from Guatemala. Because of this work I have had the opportunity to speak about Central America and the refugees from those countries that have landed in Grand Rapids. Most of these speaking engagements have usually been to university classes or church groups. Recently however, I have been asked to share some of my knowledge and experience with a totally different crowd, an experience that sheds light on current trends in this country.

A Grand Valley State student who heard me speak in her social work class called me in May to see if I could speak to a group of people at the Goodwill headquarters just off Chicago Drive. I was under the assumption that I would be addressing a group of Goodwill managers and executives on some of the issues that they might face when hiring Central American refugees. To my surprise I walked into a room full of people that were a part of a local business association.

It seems that Goodwill has been contracting out workers to other businesses in recent years and many of their applicants, as well as those of the other businesses present for the meeting, have been Mexican and Central Americans new to the area. Many of these businesses were having difficulty in communicating with applicants (because of the lack of Spanish speakers in managerial positions, but also with Guatemalans who spoke one of the 22 Indigenous languages that almost no one in the area can speak), as well as concerns about their legal status (they just wanted to cover their butts). I decided to stay not knowing if I would ever have another opportunity like this one to address a group of suits in a relatively pleasant environment. Fortunately I had forwarded a letter describing my involvement over the years which one of the members of the meeting read at the beginning of the meeting. This helped to solidify my credibility since I was already under suspicion because of my attire.

I began by telling them that many of these people had left their countries because they had either suffered directly at the hands of brutal military repression or that they could no longer survive the present neo-liberal economic models that gave the 1980g's the title of the "lost decade". Many of them made the trek to *El Norte* by working their way up, in awful conditions, and making portions of their trip on foot. Most of them are aware of the legal restrictions for working in the USA, thus causing them to be very cautious about giving out information during job interviews. This hesitation was not due to shyness or just difficulty in communicating, rather it is due to the fact that if deported, imprisonment or death could await them.

Most of them were here with families, both immediate and extended. They prefer to work together so as to have someone that they can relate to while at work. Many of them

will take any job since they are just trying to survive and adjust to life in Gringoland. If the employees were noticing any signs of depression or regular absenteeism, that could be due to the ongoing struggle of individuals dealing, not only with a radically different environment, but also from being torture survivors. What perked the business people's attention most, however, was when I talked about them being hard workers.

"Of course," I said, "you must understand that they are used to a more totalitarian work environment." For many of them the work here is easier and pays so much more than they are used to. They have not been used to the standards of most US employees, standards that were gained by worker struggles, not as gifts from corporations. These are standards however, that were gained by workers struggles, not as gifts from corporations. These standards are standards, however, that are quickly deteriorating. Many of these people also send whatever money they can to family members that are still in their respective countries. For El Salvador, money sent from relatives in the US ranks second only to coffee in money generated for that country. So here you have workers who are willing to work hard, long hours and not likely to complain about the pay or working conditions, because they need a job and have a legitimate fear of deportation. At this point I could see that the suits who were present were thinking that they were sitting on a gold mine. Not exactly fertile ground for labor organizing, or is it?

What I told these business folk was that they would be doing people a great disservice if they took advantage of these dynamics, that it would only create more hysteria in the growing anti-immigrant camps. Of course, what I said, no doubt, had little impact on whether or not they will treat their employees with any dignity or not. This is precisely why any labor organizers and working class people in general, whether born here or not, need to work together to deal with the issues of employment and economics right here in West Michigan and not let the business community pit these groups against each other. If anything, this is one of the possible positives outcomes of the present economic dilemma that we are faced with. Needless to say that after this was all over none of them stayed around to ask questions or make comments.

Two weeks later I received an incredible call from a Lonnie Gesen. He works as a hiring manager in Iowa for IBP (Iowa Beef Packers), one of the largest meat monopolies in the country. He got my name from a man who was at the Goodwill sponsored meeting that works for the MESCC, a local government agency that helps people find work. Mr. Gesen was calling me for the specific purpose of asking me to help him locate Guatemalan workers in West Michigan who might want to relocate to Iowa and work for him. I played dumb for awhile and let him give me the details. He said that he was willing to fly to Grand Rapids to meet with a group of Guatemalans who were willing to relocate. The company would put them up for one week free at a local hotel, until they found their own housing. Base pay was \$6.50 an hour and would go to \$8.55 within a year. Insurance and vacation time would be available after 6 months on the job. He might even be able to pay me a stipend if I could arrange such a meeting. First, I told him that I was a vegetarian and then proceeded to say that I would not act as a pimp for him so he could find newly immigrant workers that he could take advantage of when there were surely plenty of locally unemployed workers in Iowa he should recruit. I have not heard from him since. He did give me his number in case I change my mind. Maybe we should contact him and tell him we are ready to deal. Upon arrival we could take him around to migrant camps to educate him on the racist practices of businesses who hire migrant workers. Here is his

number 1-800-978-5643.

What is important in all this is that we need to first of all be aware of the cultural imperialism that pervades most of the institutions in our society. I still get called upon to translate at hospitals and in the courts by refugees who have no money to hire someone to translate for them. In a city that has roughly 10% of its population that speaks Spanish, surely they should provide these services for free.

Aside from the cultural imperialism, we need to not get sucked into the capitalist game of fighting with other working class people. We need to turn the anti-immigrant, anti-labor hysteria around and create structures that will welcome diversity, not punish it and will protect people's basic right to work and enjoy a healthy meaningful life.

Suggested Reading

- *Newcomers in the Workplace: Immigrants and the Restructuring of the US Economy*, edited by Lamphere, Stepick & Grenier
- *Meatpackers and Beef Barons*, by Carol Andreas
- *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture*, by Jeremy Rifkin
- *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of an All-American Meal*, by Eric Schlosser

Organizing on Mayan Time

One likes to think that during the course of their life they have control over what they do. While it is certain that we all make choices to a degree, there are times when you do things that you never would have guessed when you were younger. A great deal of what I have shared in these pages came about with a certain level of reluctance on my part. Over time you begin to realize that you do not really act independently, but in relation to your experiences and encounters with others.

For almost two decades I have been doing organizing work. I have even had the fortune over the past 6 years to actually get paid to organize. However, much of my organizing experience has been taught to me from the Mayans in Grand Rapids, Guatemala and southern Mexico. What I hope to convey here are some reflections on actions that I have been part of over the years, actions that have taught me to organize on Mayan time.

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Since becoming a Sanctuary in 1986, I have had numerous occasions to do public speaking on Guatemala and Chiapas. Many times I have spoken after returning from a trip, but I have also been invited to speak on immigrations issues, human rights and US Policy in Latin America. The later has been the most difficult. Quite often audiences could not understand that if people were fleeing Guatemala because of political repression caused by the government, why would the US provide economic and military support to that same government.

I have come to learn that many in the US have a very limited sense of their own history. What I have learned over the years is that you need to provide that background information and be ready to deal with the consequences. Background information usually

means you must begin with the CIA-led coup in 1954, a coup that overthrew a democratically elected government. The consequences are that many people are resistant to the knowledge that our government would engage in anti-democratic activities. To respond to such denial with any clarity has led me to many years of research and study on history in Guatemala and Chiapas. I have learned that if you are going to deal with complex issues like US foreign policy, you need to be able to speak confidently and be able to substantiate your position with adequate documentation.

This requires that you read more than just *Bitter Fruit* or *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. There has been a steady stream of literature over the past 20 years (see bibliography) that has deepened our understanding of the Mayan world, both historically and culturally. The de-classification of US government documentation has also helped us have a better sense of what they knew and what role they played since the 1954 coup. The National Security Archives has been the best source for this information, Kate Doyle in particular. Their web link on Guatemala is http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/latin_america/guatemala.html.

The other source of new literature that has been extremely helpful in my education are the newly published books by Guatemalans and Mayans. There are several good publishers in Guatemala that are giving voice to perspectives that have been silent for too long. I have even visited the Mayan publisher Cholsamaj, in Guatemala City, and was impressed with not only the amount of literature they were publishing, but that they were publishing in 4 major Mayan languages. We no longer need limit our understanding to what US scholars nor anthropologists have written and observed.

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I have been asked on many occasions, "how do you translate what you learned in Guatemala (or Chiapas) into ways that make sense here in the US." Not an easy question to answer. I have always found it difficult to incorporate my experience abroad into ways that make sense in my community. In fact, there is usually always a period of weeks after returning where I experience depression and my own form of culture shock.

What I have always done right away is to try to share information, whether in print, video or public presentation. The information always comes with a sense of urgency. It may be specific to a human rights abuse or a campaign that needs international support. Understanding the urgency of matters helps to maintain focus, but it is important to always see these issues in a larger historical context. I remember once speaking with some members of the autonomous community of Oventic, Chiapas. I asked them if they felt like they were going to win the struggle they are in. They thought for a moment and said that they already have. I asked them what they meant by that and they said that, "for 500 years they have been struggling against various conquistadors and that they still were Mayan. We may have been oppressed and killed, but they have not defeated us. They can do whatever they want to us but they can not win." I am still trying to understand this concept of history, a concept that says that struggle never ends.

Over the years friends, house-members and other activists in the community have tried to draw attention to the violence that occurs in Guatemala, with particular attention to US government or US-based business connections. We have organized marches, sit-ins, vigils, fund-raisers, lobbied Congressional representatives, leafleted outside stores and protested US military aid to Guatemala and Mexico.

I remember one action in particular where we tried to draw attention to the attacks against popular movement leaders in Guatemala. We organized a demonstration in front of the Federal building in downtown Grand Rapids. People held signs and handed out informational flyers. I, having just come back from Guatemala, felt I needed to do something a bit more aggressive, so I made a coffin and dug a grave in the Federal building lawn. I thought this action would surely land me in jail, instead the security officers just tackled me and took my shovel. This became a more common practice on their part in order to not draw any "unneeded" attention to the issue. The local media was also not inclined to cover our actions so we covered them.

As I mentioned previously a friend of mine and I published a two reports on the *Grand Rapids Press*' coverage of Central America. We knew that this day would be no different and when they did not respond to my grave-digging we decided to continue the action in front of the *Grand Rapids Press*, which was conveniently located across the street from the Federal building. We made a banner that said Propaganda and draped it over the word Press on their sign. This quickly got their attention, but the story never made it to print. However, it did make for a great photo op that we put on the cover of our second report.

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One of the easiest ways to help people in the US understand and connect to struggles abroad is to host speakers. Don't get me wrong, there is a great deal of work involved in organizing a public presentation, but to have an audience here directly from someone involved in the struggle can make all the difference.

Over the years I have been part of hosting dozens of speakers from Guatemala. We have had representatives from labor groups, human rights and popular movement organizations. Since the late 80's we have hosted people from CERJ, CONIC, the Permanent Refugee Committee, Mujb'ab'l Yol and GAM. The speaking tours have most often been coordinated through the national Guatemalan Solidarity group NISGUA.

Most often we have partnered with universities or churches for speaking venues, but labor halls and other community groups have also provided space. Whatever space you use make sure that there is some connection that the audience will make before the days end. If you are talking about sweatshops, make sure the local labor people are involved. If the speaker is Mayan invite the local Native community and if the theme is a broader human rights issue, let the local global justice/human rights activists know.

One year we hosted a representative from the Permanent Refugee Committee, an organization that was negotiating the safe return of Guatemalans who had been living in southern Mexico since the early 1980's. They spoke at a local university that has a Latin American studies department and at a church that does relief work abroad. We also utilized the local NPR affiliate radio stations for an interview and the local Public Access station to produce a TV show in both English and Spanish. We also made a point to invite some of the Guatemalan community that lives in Grand Rapids to have dinner with the speaker, so as to provide an avenue for them to talk and share information.

If there is a refugee/recent immigrant population living in your area it is a must that you include them in this kind of work. They may not want to have much to do with things that are overtly political, but the invitation should always be there. I have found that to

be extremely important for many reasons, but one thing that stands out is that it matured the trust that I have been able to develop with the local Guatemalan community. They have come to see me as not only interested in their families here, but their families still in Guatemala. Demonstrating that I was invested in understanding the ongoing struggles in Guatemala and taking some action to challenge my government's involvement has made me a friend, not just some do-gooder.

* * * * *

One of the more interesting and frustrating things that I have participating over the past eight years has been speaking as an expert witness in Asylum cases for Guatemalans. Being an expert on anything seems a bit awkward, but in light of what the government uses as its "sources" I have come to embrace my experience and understanding as more honest than what the State Department says.

Being asked by immigration lawyers to speak to the current situation in Guatemala is one thing, whether or not the judge will allow you to speak in an expert capacity is another. It is a given that the prosecuting attorney for the government will question my credibility, but when judges have done so it has been frustrating. They are quick to point out that I do not have a degree in Latin American studies. I was not aware that having degrees in anything made you an expert. I have been to Guatemala 9 times in the past 13 years and always on trips that were information gathering at a fairly rigorous pace. I have interviewed hundreds of Guatemalans on their personal experiences with human rights abuses. I have written articles on the subject for various publications in the state and have spoken on Guatemala in over 100 different occasions in churches, schools, forums and as a conference presenter. I also try to read current scholarship as can be seen by the list of titles in the bibliography.

"The State Department Report for such and a year says that, even though Guatemala is experiencing a difficult transition to democracy, there is no real evidence that would support an asylum applicants well founded fear of persecution upon return." This is how the government attorney usually argues. They only rely on the State Department documents, unquestionably a credible source. Granted it has been even more difficult to argue for asylum since the 1996 peace accords were signed between the Guatemalan government and the URNG, but that has primarily meant a cease-fire, more specifically the dismantling of the armed insurgent group. The military has not downgraded its forces, despite that being an accord agreement and they continue to intervene in domestic affairs. Political violence continues to be a problem. Popular movement groups continue to targeted and the murder of Bishop Gerardi the day after he presented the Catholic Church's report on who was responsible for the violence during the 36-year war is a clear indication that the military does not want the truth to be known. Gerardi's murderers were recently found guilty in Guatemalan courts, a huge victory considering the problem of impunity. One of the guilty parties was Col. Lima Estrada was a graduate of the US Army School of the Americas.

I agree that making a case for Guatemalans seeking political asylum is not easy, but the government's reasoning is equally not substantial. Even during the worst years of the political violence, the Lucas Garcia/Rios Montt years, it was rare for Guatemalans to be granted asylum. The State Department has considered Guatemala a "democracy" since

1954, so for any Guatemalan to claim a well founded fear of persecution would mean to question the political relationship that the US claims it has with this Central American nation.

In addition to the political inequities that exist at these asylum cases there are also other issues that are problematic. Every case I have been involved in has required a translator, since most Guatemalans do not speak English. Quite often the applicant has limited Spanish, so a Mayan translator is required. This raises further complications, in that during any translation it is difficult to have complete accuracy. I have witnessed the judge address the applicant in English, the lawyer address the applicant in Spanish and the translator address the applicant in Q'anjobal. Words and ideas are bound to get lost, hell I don't claim to understand most of what judges have to say in English let alone through a translator.

One case I remember was an applicant from Huehuetenango who was in fear of returning because of his refusal to participate in the civil patrols during the 80's and 90's. (Civil patrols were created during Rios Montt's dictatorship as a way of using Mayan males as a buffer between the army and the guerillas. See *Persecution By Proxy: The Civil Patrols in Guatemala*, Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, 1993) This young man spoke Q'anjobal, so a translator based in California was flown in for the case. The translator was from the same part of Huehuetenango and had no problem communicating the judge, nor the lawyers' questions.

When the government lawyer was attempting to discredit the applicant I could tell that the translator was becoming quite agitated. For every comment that was dismissing the young Guatemalans position I could see that this Q'anjobal translator wanted to jump up and offer his perspective on the matter. I could see him shake his head in dismay at the government's reasoning for asylum denial.

When all side were presented we went to the lobby to await the judge's decision. No sooner were we all out the door, when the translator let out what he had to suppress in the court room. He couldn't believe that the judge would actually believe the government lawyer, a lawyer who had no particular knowledge of Guatemala and had never visited there. What this man had to say corroborated what the asylum applicant stated were his reasons for well founded fear of persecution. He said my statements and experience were honest and accurate, but then realized that these proceedings were not about the truth. He said quite simply that this case, like many asylum cases was more about politics than about justice.

I remember leaving the courthouse that day feeling like I have on many occasions embarrassed to be a citizen of the US. The lawyer did request an appeal which was granted, giving the Guatemalan man an additional 6 months to work and maybe save money before his eventual deportation. In the end he had resigned himself to this fate, but I could tell by the look on his face that he would do his best to survive. If anything, to survive is what Mayans have done better than most in recent history. I saw in this young Mayan no consuming rage, rather a sense that he would make the best of his situation and embrace it with dignity. Once again I came away from this experience learning a great deal, not just about our so called justice system, but about what it means to struggle in this world and to live with hope.

From West Michigan to Central America

April 18, 2005

What follows is a slightly altered article I submitted for the Grand Rapids Press Sunday essay column. As you might have guessed, it was rejected. After the essay, there is a response from one of the Press editors, my e-mail response, and a longer response which will appear in the May issue of Recoil magazine.

It was 25 years ago as I write these thoughts that the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, was gunned down while saying mass in San Salvador. Romero, was assassinated just weeks after he sent a letter to then President Jimmy Carter demanding that the US stop sending weapons. "I ask you, if you truly wanted to defend human rights, to forbid that military aid be given to the Salvadoran government, to guarantee that your government will not intervene directly or indirectly, with military, economic, diplomatic, or other pressures, in determining the destiny of the Salvadoran people. It would be unjust and deplorable for foreign powers to intervene and frustrate the Salvadoran people, to repress them and keep them from deciding autonomously the economic and political course that our nation should follow." (1) As a response, Carter sent an emissary to Rome in order to get Romero in line(2), a detail that was not reported in the US media. So it was that on March 24, 1980 that Romero was shot while saying mass in San Salvador. It was [Romero's death](#) and later [that of the 4 US women religious workers in December of 1980 in El Salvador](#) that propelled me to become involved in the Central American solidarity movement.

In 1986 the community house I live in became part of the Sanctuary Movement, which offered a safe haven to political refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala. We have been working with Guatemalan refugees ever since and they number several thousand now in West Michigan. Moved by their stories I began to travel to Guatemala in 1988, as did many people in the Grand Rapids area. I know dozens of people from here who traveled to Central America in the 1980s with church delegations, as human rights workers, journalists and filmmakers. Many were moved by the courage and conviction of Archbishop Romero, the popular church, labor organizers, campesinos, and Indigenous people. By the mid 1980s Central America solidarity week became a fixture in movement organizing, with the anniversary of Romero's death, March 24, the cornerstone of that week.

In the 1990s Central America began to see the end of several counter-insurgency wars, with peace accords signed in El Salvador and Guatemala. A Truth Commission was set up in both [Guatemala](#) and [El Salvador](#) to investigate those responsible for the brutal war crimes, massacres, and death squad activities. Soon Central America began to fade from the international scene, and since the "War on Terror" is focused in the Middle East, countries like Nicaragua and Guatemala are way down the list of current political "hot spots." Beginning last year, that started to change. When the White House began proposing CAFTA, the Central America Free Trade Agreement, a renewed interest began for our neighbors to the South. I myself had not been to Central America since 2001, so I decided I needed to have a first hand update and find out what people in Central America thought about this new trade proposal. [I spent a month in Guatemala interviewing](#)

[hundreds of people and dozens of organizations on human rights issues](#) in general, but I was particularly interested in their thoughts on CAFTA.

The first day I was there on December 14, I was greeted by several thousand people on the streets protesting the TLC, the Spanish acronym for CAFTA. From there on I could not find one person in favor of CAFTA. I spoke with human rights organizations, teachers, farmers, student groups, indigenous organizations, women's groups, foundations, labor groups, even street vendors and not one of them supported CAFTA. I was amazed at the level of understanding on an issue that was virtually an unknown in the US. I could talk with women on the street corner selling orange juice and they knew what CAFTA was. I soon found out that there was [a lively broad-based coalition organizing around this issue](#) that made public education about CAFTA a priority.

Without losing you on the details of their opposition let me just share one major aspect of why Guatemalans are opposed to CAFTA. Much of Guatemala is still a rural society. Most of that rural population is Mayan, which still grows much of its own food on small plots of land known as milpas. The major Mayan crop is corn, elote in Spanish. Corn not only is used to make tortillas, but tamales, a hot beverage called atole, and corn on the cob with a whole array of toppings known as elote loco "crazy corn. Corn also has tremendous spiritual significance, since in [the Mayan creation story, the Popol Vuh](#), humans are made from corn. If CAFTA goes through, the US will be allowed to flood Central America with cheap subsidized corn grown here that will undercut the ability of small farmers there to compete with lower prices. This will result is thousands of small farmers being forced off their land and either coming to urban centers like Guatemala City or flee north to Mexico or eventually to the US. [A similar scenario happened in Mexico](#), particularly around corn.

In early March Guatemala became the third country to ratify CAFTA despite strong public opposition. Friends in Guatemala sent me e-mails about the public demonstrations the happened as a result of the vote and thousands of people have taken to the streets. The Catholic Bishop of San Marcos, Bishop Ramazzini, has been one of the most out spoken critics of CAFTA saying "CAFTA is much more than a simple trade agreement, as it includes a range of mechanisms that combine prohibitions on governments with rights for foreign investors on such issues as investment, national treatment, intellectual-property rights, market access, public services and access to bidding on public contracts. If implemented, CAFTA will transfer privileges for corporations into rights. CAFTA was negotiated behind peoples' backs, and this is the reason that people today are now protesting." Like Archbishop Romero, who was assassinated for speaking out of economic injustice in El Salvador, Ramazzini is now receiving death threats in Guatemala. As a reward for ratification of this trade agreement, [the US is considering the renewal of military aid to Guatemala](#), something that had not happened for the better part of a decade.

Back here in the US, CAFTA is still not a topic on people's minds, but that is beginning to change. Recently, a broad-based coalition of unions, environmental organizations, farmers, human rights activists and fair trade advocates have [banded together to stop CAFTA and to promote fair trade policies](#). You don't need to go far to find people who have been impacted by job loss in West Michigan, particularly those

jobs that have gone out of state, particularly to Mexico. NAFTA for many of our families and communities has been disastrous. If there is anything we learned from NAFTA it was that we can not assume that trade negotiations are decided with the public's best interest.

Before our government decides on another trade agreement, on CAFTA, it is important for all of us to find out what we can about this trade proposal. We need to ask hard questions of our representatives about what CAFTA means, and demand to be included in the process. Twenty Five years from now I don't want to be observing an anniversary for another Central American martyr. Twenty Five years from now I want to look back and know that the American people organized to fight against an unjust trade policy and defended farmers rights, workers rights and environmental sustainability for Central American and communities in West Michigan.

1. School of Assassins: Guns, Greed, and Globalization by Jack Nelson Pallmeyer, Orbis Press, 2001.

2. Manufacturing Consent: The Political economy of the Mass Media, Chomsky & Herman, page 55.

Response from the GR Press - April 7

Thank you for your essay submission. It is a bit hard to place because it is more an op ed piece than what we would normally run as an Essay. It doesn't quite work as op ed, because it provides a surface look at the issue. Surely there is another side. For instance, if it is unquestionably bad for Guatemala, why also would it be bad for West Michigan?

From what I know of CAFTA, it appears to be a negative for Guatemala, especially since their goods largely enjoy unlimited access to the U.S. already. But without CAFTA, is that situation sustainable? In the long run, doesn't a free market provide the better path to higher living standards? Might this result in the importation of improved farming methods so Guatemalans might increase corn production?

I don't pretend to know the answers to these questions, but I think they are questions a reader would ask after giving a thoughtful read to your essay. Surely there is a reason the government there voted overwhelmingly to approve it.

While this is too long for a guest editorial in its current form, a trimmed-down version might work as a Saturday guest column or a daily op-ed piece. But a stronger case would be made if you provided both sides to the issue.

Mark Allen Press Essay editor

My response to Mark Allen

Mark, thanks for responding to my submission. You make many assumptions about trade and the market. I have spent quite a bit of time in Mexico as well and have not found many people who think NAFTA was beneficial for them. The market, whatever that is defined as, often does not lead to a higher standard of living. The government of Guatemala voted for it in part because the US was pressuring them to do so - small

countries don't often challenge the US, since they know there would be consequences â€“ but they also voted for it because they don't tend to listen to the wishes of the public. The government is made up of Ladinos, who are mostly Spanish descendants, whereas the public is made up mostly of Mayans which are treated as second class citizens.

I understand that you might want something written that presents both sides, but don't most of what is run in the Sunday essay column represent a one-sided perspective? I wrote a piece that the Press ran in 1996 about men who picked up women in prostitution in my neighborhood. That article did not provide the "johns" point of view.

I also submitted the article in part since there has been virtually no coverage of this issue in the local media, yet it will impact everyone of us as all trade policy does.

Thanks again for responding, but I hope you reconsider running it. If need be I can make it shorter. Let me know.

Jeff Smith

Part II

Sembramos, Comemos, Sembramos

(We plant, in order to eat, in order to plant.)

Journal Entries 1988 - 2005

Taking the Plunge

Guatemala, Sept. - Dec., 1988

During my first trip to Guatemala I worked for Peace Brigades International (PBI) doing what was called escort work. PBI had a project in Guatemala since 1983, when people within the popular movement who wanted international assistance with challenging government repression invited it there. To work with PBI I had to take a one-week training course in Albany, New York. We were trained in non-violent tactics, role-

playing, and the political history of Guatemala and cultural sensitivity. At that time PBI allowed short-term workers, anything from 1 month to 1 year. PBI was working mostly in Guatemala City with Grupo Apoyo de Mutuo (GAM), but that summer began projects with CERJ - Consejo de Comunidades Etnicas, that was resisting forced participation in Civil Patrols, and CONAVIGUA, a widows organization at that time based in Quiche.

October 12, Guatemala City

We were invited to escort some 800 people who marched from the Trebol to the National Palace. The marchers walked for about an hour and a half and then had a rally in the Parque Central. Union groups, students, civil patrol resisters, widows, indigenous people and of course GAM members made up the majority of the marchers. Marchers carried banners and chanted slogans that were received well by citizens all along the march route. There were no apparent hassles from the police or other government authorities, but you can bet that names were taken and faces were filmed. Previous experience has taught them that to participate in such an activity can get one kidnapped or killed. Orejas are everywhere.

The march was in protest of the 45% increase in electricity rates and a call for minimum wage hikes (the minimum ranges from Q3.20 a day to Q10 a day depending on what job you have, at that time Q2.80 was equal to \$1) It just amazes me that these people take such risks, especially those who travel from far away, like the widows from Quiche. Many of them lost a day's wages by coming, plus another days wages were lost on the bus fair.....what commitment. It was also quite evident that people brought their children with them. I don't know if this was out of necessity, but it seemed to add to the integrity of the march. The contrast of Mayans marching, many wearing traditional clothes, with the "modern" background of the capital seem strange to this outsider. The look on the faces of many was as if they were as afraid of "urban life" as they were of government repression.

"One USAID official commented in a 1989 interview with me, 'You can't maintain a traditional society and have better education for kids, roads so they can get to the hospital if they have to. Maintaining Mayan peasant culture and progress are incompatible.'"

*Fear as a Way of Life -
Linda Green*

October 16, Guatemala City

A union leader was murdered yesterday in Zone 1.....the closeness of it all. This is one aspect of Guatemala I hope never to encounter close up, but what thoughts it stirs in me. Despite its closeness it still seems distant, distant in reality to what I know. For the people that I accompany it is the "norm", a frequent reality that has left virtually everyone in the country affected. More importantly, what is it that enables these people to continue on? These are the insights that I hope to take back with me.

October 18, Guatemala City

The union folks are really making a stink about the assassination of fellow worker Carlos Martinez Godoy. There was a vigil yesterday and today all of the banks will be closed for a half an hour as a protest to denounce the murder. It is amazing that they get such support so fast....clearly a reflection of the commitment and solidarity that exists in the country. There is also another march on Thursday that is being organized by UASP. PBI was requested to accompany them, so I know where I will be.

October 20, Guatemala City

It is about 9:00pm as I sit outside a building on the campus of University San Carlos that workers have occupied to push for better working conditions. Upon our arrival today we were given a round of applause....incredible, it is we who need to do the applauding, but this is the type of attitude that many Guatemalans exhibit. Priscilla and I are on the overnight shift here. The tension in the air is thick, because of a letter that arrived here earlier today. The workers told us that two soldiers came by with a letter that said that if the workers did not leave that the military would raid the university.

The workers decided to stay, so we are waiting here for a possible invasion....needless to say I am not having any difficulty in staying awake. What a predicament to be in. We all know that blood could be shed and yet these people stay put. The integrity and courage that these simple working people show is impressive. It is not genetic however; it came with years of organizing, often in clandestine situations.The military never came. I for one am happy they do not keep their promises all the time. One of the workers came out to tell us that it was just an intimidation tactic.... it didn't seem to deter the workers from their goals, but it sure worked on me.

October 21, Santa Cruz de Quiche

The bus ride to Quiche was wonderful, no smog, no buildings, just lush green and the smell of the *campo*. Along the way we made several stops. The beauty of this bus system is that anywhere along the road is a bus stop. They even let people on who are selling food and drink....it's like a social event. I stood out in the crowd, the only gringo, that seemed to tower over the mostly indigenous passengers. My bland clothes also distinguished me from the gorgeous hand woven clothing that the Mayans wear. Each area has different colors and weaving patterns. My favorite is the *traje* from Nebaj. It is a simple dark red shirt that has a multi-colored stripe that runs down both sides.

Just after passing Los Encuentros we had to get fumigated by the military. They say that it is to stop the spread of insects and other viruses, but I wonder if there aren't other motives. Either way it can not be healthy, since people have to get back on the bus right after it was sprayed.

On the edge of Santa Cruz de Quiche there is a military base that has some buildings that look quite modern compared to most of the civilian areas. There are speed bumps in front of the base with soldiers placed at several strategic points along the road. These soldiers are no doubt conscripts, since most of them appear to be indigenous. Isn't this what Franz Fannon said was necessary for colonial powers, to get some members of the local population to guard the rest of the population from resisting imperial control....here the

indigena are recruited by the *ladino* to keep the *indigena* in line. The military also engages in its own propaganda campaign. The main wall surrounding the base says “For the Development, Health and Peace of Quiche”. It’s not a “Be all you can be” commercial, but just as effective.

The town is beautiful, simple, not like Antigua, without the heavy Spanish influence. The market place is in the heart of the town right next to the Catholic Church that has had 3 priests killed in the past 10 years. PBI has a house here near the home of Amilcar Mendez, a CERJ organizer that has been receiving death threats for some time. I arrived late, so there was only time to catch up with other team members and a little night cap. Tomorrow we will be with CONAVIGUA.

"Tourists rarely see this side of Guatemala: the systematic de-humanization of the indigenous people. The economic system in Guatemala is based on maintaining a cheap labor supply. In order to legitimate the exploitation of indigenous, we are characterized as lazy, cowardly, submissive and inferior. In this way, the *criollos* and rich *ladinos* have for centuries organized Guatemalan society as if five million indigenous people did not exist. This myth helps the dominant classes believe that we are dispensable."

The New Politics of Survival - Rigoberta Menchu Tum

October 22, Santa Cruz de Quiche

For 3 hours we were having a presence with the women of CONAVIGUA in the courtyard of the Catholic Church in Chichicastenago. Chichicastenago is a beautiful small town that is included in the “Gringo-tour”, those areas of the country that tourists will

visit. They have one of the most colorful market places in the country, with an impressive variety of local hand crafted goods. On the steps of the church many people gather to burn incense and offer prayers. The incense, known as *pom*, is made from corn stalks and creates a haze effect around the entrance to the church.

The meeting today was to discuss the purpose and focus of the organization. The discussion was lively, but not understandable to me since the women spoke in Quiche. I just spent the time admiring the appearance of the women. They are all considerably shorter than I, probably just around 5 foot tall on average. They all were wearing the traditional *huipil* and *traje*, making the courtyard look like a modern tapestry. Indigenous women also don’t generally cut their hair. Most of them braid their hair that hangs down close to their waists. Some of them also weave a colorful material into the braid, accenting the rest of their appearance.

The other thing that I thought about, with hesitation, was the common plight of these women. Their common denominator was that they were all widows, and not because of old age. These women were widows because their husbands had been disappeared and/or murdered by the military/death squads. This adds new meaning to women meeting at church for me.

October 23, Santa Cruz de Quiche

It is late evening and I am exhausted, not from physical exertion, but from listening to the words of Maria. We had invited some of the women from CONAVIGUA to have dinner

with us. Two women came, one brought their daughter with. Maria, one of the leaders of CONAVIGUA, spoke eloquently and passionately to us for 2 hours. She told us that there are some 3,000 widows because of political violence in the area of Quiche alone. Maria talked emphatically about their suffering, explaining that it was the history of their people. First, she spoke about the struggle with the church, its silence and their historical justification for the plight of the people. "Wait for justice in heaven,' they told us." She also said that they have suffered because of language barriers. First, the mass was in Latin, then Spanish, making it virtually impossible for people to understand what was going on. "If you do not speak Spanish you are nobody," Maria said. She continued by saying that the Protestant churches come with their own complicity and urgings to wait for peace in the next life.

The other area of great suffering has been at the hands of the military and Civil Patrols. The violence is blamed on the guerillas, of course, but everyone knows that this is just propaganda, Maria tells us. "The Military tells us there is peace, but where is the peace? In addition to the crimes we suffer at their hands, we are also suffering the constant threat that they will come and take our sons from us to serve in the military, or take our daughters to rape." The other woman, Angelina, spoke only on occasion to enforce a point made by Maria, but she spoke constantly with her face. Her eyes spoke of pain and rage and cried out throughout the night. She told us that she lost one child from hunger. After this night I will never be the same. Their words and faces are forever imprinted on my mind.

October 25, Guatemala City

It is my first stint here at the home of Nineth Garcia, one of the leaders of GAM. I spent the morning hanging out with Ed....so glad he is here. We both seem to get along real

well and have a strong affinity for intellectual stimulation. Ed has been here for awhile and will probably go to El Salvador next with the PBI project there. The emotional support he offers is essential. It is so important to have an outlet to be able to express the myriad of emotions that one encounters with this work.

Nineth is one of the many Guatemalans who became involved in the struggle because of the loss of a family member. Her husband was disappeared years ago. Like the other members of GAM she has been working to get the government to investigate the whereabouts of her husband and the 48,000 other disappeared, as well as documenting ongoing human rights abuses.

We take turns being in her home since death threats come regularly via the phone or mail. She is not here since she has a job as a school teacher, but her daughter and housekeeper are here. Nineth told me that she fears that the death squads will do something to her little girl before they do anything to her. This is a tactic they have employed on a more regular basis in recent years....intimidate the movement leaders by going after family members.

"In the highlands after the massacres we watched the widows: how many were there, how they obtained their food, who gave them food, and where the orphans were located and who took care of them in order to determine who and where the subversives were. "

Hector Gramajo in Schirmer 1993

Yesterday I talked with Piedad at the GAM office. She is from Chimaltenago, a department just west of Guatemala City. She has been with GAM for 5 years and working as the secretary for 2 years. She speaks Cakchiquel and lives with her parents. Her brother was disappeared 5 years ago. It seems that everywhere you go there is a common theme in people's stories....disappearance, torture, death.

October 29, Guatemala City

There is talk that Rios Montt may run for president in 1990.....on the ticket from heaven. The union movement is still incredibly dissatisfied with Cerezo and Congress. There will be a regional peace march in November going through all of Central America and I was told yesterday that the work at the university is coming to an end.

Yesterday I brought it upon myself to visit the all too familiar garbage dump in Zone 3. As I approached the dump from several blocks away I was alerted to its exact whereabouts by the circling *Zapilotes*, the vulture of Guatemala. It had rained the evening before, which made the journey all the more difficult, since there are no roads or walkways here, just mud and garbage. No doubt I stood out amongst the shanties and squatters, but no one seemed too alarmed by my presence. There must have been one hundred shacks erected around the dump made of anything and everything that can withstand the elements. Several groups of people were collecting glass and plastic bags for what I do not know. Most of the other people were just rummaging for anything they could find that would be useful. As I approached the center I saw a line of trucks waiting to dump their waste in a huge pit.

People were waiting near the edge of this landfill as if on a treasure hunt. I have read and was told by several Guatemalans that the bodies of political victims are also thrown in the pit. It also has been said that people rummaging in the trash are sometimes buried alive under the mounds of trash brought in daily. It was above the pit that the *Zapilotes* were most active in competing with the people for food scraps. The whole place smelled awful, with insects everywhere.....it was nothing more than a vast disease spreading environment.

What came to mind for me was the Gehenna that Jesus was to have spoken about in the gospels. According to scholarship, Gehenna was a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem where trash and dead bodies were dumped and burned. The stench, disease, insects, vultures, mud, waste, humiliation and death of this place leaves one speechless. How can anyone allow people to live like this? I asked one woman if the government will give them any assistance....she did everything she could not to laugh. This experience was definitely proof that we need not create doctrines about a place of suffering in some after life....we have already created it here.

November 7, Guatemala City

I'm sitting here outside the GAM office on the eve of the US presidential elections. Children are playing soccer in the street with a deflated ball, which doesn't seem to lessen the excitement for them. They asked me to sit outside today because of the special gathering that is taking place. Several representatives from groups within the popular

movement are meeting to strategize for the future. At one point they asked me about the US elections. It was the consensus among this group that George Bush would win and that this concerned them greatly. When I asked why, they said it was because of Bush's history as a CIA insider. Their understanding and awareness of US foreign policy impressed me immensely. If only US citizens were this politically astute. On several occasions during the meeting military helicopters flew overhead brandishing searchlights. I sat quietly outside trying to enjoy the sunset that illuminated the horizon and *Volcan de Agua* to the South.

November 8, Guatemala City

I found out today that 2 GAM members were kidnapped in Zone 1 by "armed men". A note was sent to Gen. Gramajo (Minister of Defense) yesterday by GAM to communicate their utter disgust with such actions, all of which is taking place during the so-called "National Dialogue" which started yesterday. The people that were *secuestrado* were from Quiche who had come with a contingent to express their frustration with the ongoing violence in the countryside by the military and Civil Patrols.

"The forced nature of the PAC system constitutes what the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has termed a 'genuine system of involuntary servitude,' and patrollers who do not fulfill the requirements of their PAC duty are often punished corporally or monetarily, or both. Patrollers who try to leave the system run the risk of being physically attacked, ostracized from the community or killed."

Institutional Violence: Civil Patrols in Guatemala
Kennedy Center

November 15, Santa Cruz de Quiche

The past few days in Quiche have been a delight. I had a chance to talk with Judith and Hans the other night at some length. We talked about

Guatemala, the CIA, Israel, Europe and non-violence. I brought up the issue of the lack of commitment on the part of US "peace" folks (myself included), but also the issue of what makes one stand up to the banality that exists everywhere without the use of violence. Many questions with few answers. We have spent most of our time here accompanying Amilcar and his family. He is, as Hans says, a dead man walking. Indeed, his time is short, while at dinner he received another death threat over the phone. After dinner other members of CERJ came to discuss future actions. We were all sitting in Amilcar's courtyard when the military came by and stopped in front of his house. A few moments passed by and they went on their way. Amilcar said this was just to let them know that they are watching. The meeting was long and lively. I listened with delight as these people talked about the hope that one day they will be free from the terror. The children played, the women sat on their weaving's and we all talked politics over beans and tortillas.

November 17, Guatemala City - GAM office

I spent some wonderful time today talking with a young man from Suchitepequez who is helping Miguel with a few things. He lives with his mother. His father has been disappeared for 7 years now. He had an inquisitive mind and good questions about the

US. After he left more people came in that talked with me from Quiche. There was a young mother of 24 with 4 children whose husband was off at the coast trying to earn some extra money. Their reason for being here today was not a pleasant one. One of the men in the group had his wife and daughter taken by the military, from what I gathered, to work on the base. They have come to the city because that is where the mother and daughter are now. I have no idea if there is any hope of getting them released. One man said that things are definitely worse in the countryside these days. Yesterday another GAM member from the capitol was kidnapped in Zone 18. That makes the 3rd one in 2 weeks. I keep wondering what the future holds for these people. Will it be a slow covert type of terrorism or will the dam break like in the early 80's?

November 22, Santa Cruz de Quiche

.....we all listened to profound, heartfelt feelings about life during the early 80's. Bodies everywhere, heads hanging from the wires in the streets. It is because of this that after dark people do not leave the streets and say very little about the *ejercito*. Amilcar talked about the propaganda of the military with the Civil Patrols (PAC's). They showed films that indoctrinate members of the PAC's as part of the counterinsurgency campaign. These are animated films that depict human rights workers as the wolf, the people as chickens and the government as the mother hen. The military also send out groups of young troops or trainees. These men talk to the women of a village to try to win over their trust. Then the women get the children together to play games and receive candies from the soldiers. Once they've gotten some trust they ask things like "when does Dad leave for meetings" or "does he have any *Ladino* friends that he talks about." I wonder if these techniques were taught to their superiors at the US Army School of the Americas?

November 24, Guatemala City

I have just arrived at the house of a family in a barrio just outside of the capitol. The family asked for our presence because a few days ago the father was kidnapped in the presence of his oldest son. While waiting for the bus a car with tinted windows pulled up, grabbed the father and drove off. Fearing that the father is dead and that the boy got a good look at his kidnappers, the mother invited us to stay at the house round the clock in case they come back for the boy. The house is simple, a dirt floor with dogs and chickens running about. So how does one act in such situations? How do you respond to the pain? I am here today and possibly gone tomorrow, but what of them and their life? They are in a position of few choices. I am in a position of privilege. The family is incredible, the children are a delight. The older ones help out with the little ones and everyone has chores. Mom is a pillar of strength and fidelity. She will die in the service of her children. The son who saw what eyes should never have to see is very talented. He gave me a *pulsera* that he made himself just 30 minutes after I arrived. This makes any gesture of hospitality I have ever engaged in seem pitiful. After dinner they gave me the honor of chopping some wood for the stove. Mom makes tortillas to sell as a way of making some money for beans and other staples. At the end of the day she profits about Q2's.

November 28, Guatemala City

I'm about to leave the family after being here for 4 days. The older kids were up with the sun this morning, cleaning, washing clothes and getting the other kids ready for the day. Last night the neighbors were over for an evening of prayer for the father. People recited Hail Mary's and Our Father's deep into the night. Afterwards the mother gave everyone a hot rice and milk drink while people mingled offering condolences. I was watching the evening news with the oldest boy and they had a piece on the 22 people who were massacred the other day at El Aguacate. The government is saying that it was the guerillas, but even young Emilio knew better.

November 29, Guatemala City

Back at the PBI house we have heard that the government is now calling on all groups to denounce the massacre in Chimaltenago. They are even sending telegrams to various groups that work for human rights to denounce such actions. PBI received one. One has to believe that something is strange here. Everyone knows that the government military did it. It's almost as if they need to do this just for the international community, to give the perception that they are just as outraged by these acts as anyone else. Union groups are denouncing the act as a manifestation of the lack of land for the majority of *campesinos*. Father Giron says that most of the guerillas are *campesinos*, and *campesinos* don't usually massacre other *campesinos*.

December 1, San Rafael de Independencia

I had an interesting chat with a couple of guys on the bus ride to Huehuetenango last night. We talked about tourists, gringos, the land, politics and the most recent massacre. One of them did suspect the guerillas. The road to San Rafael is really rough. I mean we are not moving any faster than 10-15 mph. The view is beautiful, mountains and more mountains. The terrain is a lot like the Appalachians in Pennsylvania with all the pine trees. The temperature too is not what I would have expected.....it's around 50 degrees Fahrenheit. I got to San Rafael late and could not find a place to stay. There were no hotels or *hospedajes* to speak of, so I went to the marketplace and found a *comedor* still open so I could eat. I was joined by some members of the Civil Patrol and in the course of our discussion they told me that they knew the family that I was looking for. We finished our feast of beans and tortillas and were off to their house. When we arrived I discovered that it was the house of Odilia's father (Odilia was one of the first people who were in sanctuary with us in Grand Rapids). We quickly got acquainted and then I found out that Armando and Odilia are living in a small village just outside of Huehue. Last night I was just a stone's throw away from them.

December 2, Huehuetenango

We arrived this morning after riding all night long. Felipe took me right to where the family was. Before we even got to the house they came out to greet us, as if they knew we were coming. It was a glorious reunion. They were so delighted to be able to offer me hospitality in their own country. Armando and especially Odilia looked great, so much happier than in Grand Rapids. They have been here for about one week in order to help people out with running a machine that makes tortilla dough. They thought that they

might be coming back to the US in the spring. The sad news is that Gloria died a few months ago. In the afternoon we went into Huehue and met one of Odilia's sisters who owns' a small store. Afterwards we went to the ruins and had lunch in the *mercado*. Today is the anniversary of the assassination of the 4 women in El Salvador. What thoughts come to mind as I sit here surrounded by the children? From what I know the 4 women had their share of these experiences, with children born into poverty and scared from war.

The oldest child is teaching me some Q'anjobal as we eat some roasted *elote*. It is so radically different from Spanish and even Quiche. Here is just a sampling: land is *chuch*, corn is *ishim*, beans are u-pal, the moon is *ishchu-chich* and friend is *ca-miho-copa*. The night air here is so clean, with just a hint of smoke from the kitchen. The sky is so clear and big. There are a million stars that seem so illuminated without artificial light coming from the village. If one can forget about the poverty and violence for just a moment this seems like a paradise.

Felipe

wide smiles
smiling eyes
hands rough.....
open to mine
on the bus
we hold each other up
sleeping
beans and tortilla banquet
sharing elote under
a Mayan moon
walking in the plaza
marketplace communion
brothers on a dirt floor
semana santa
holy week
shot to death
not coming back from the dead

Return to the Land of Eternal Springs

Jan. - March, 1992

This trip was primarily an information-gathering trip. I went with 2 of my housemates, Jeff D. and Teofilo, and a friend, Liz. We traveled to Chiapas, Guatemala, El Salvador for the cease-fire and Honduras to visit a friend. As happens when one ventures South opportunities arise and life long friends are made. I was able to work on several occasions doing a variety of things. At one point i was by myself which allowed me to accompany people in Guatemala who requested my presence. I only include diary entries from Guatemala so as to keep with the theme of the rest of the book.

"They tore off our fruits,
they cut off our branches,
they burned our trunk,
but they were not able to
kill our roots."

CUC saying

Jan. 2, San Andres Itzapa

It is early evening here in San Andres. Teofilo and I have finally found work here and had a wonderful time of it today. We arrived around 10:00am and were promptly taken to the work sight by Ann, who is working in a school in Santa Maria near Lago Atitlan. She said we should come to visit her if we go to Santiago Atitlan.

There is a group of students here from Loyola University in Chicago, who are working on a project with a local Catholic church. The church project involves building a school for local orphans. Tom Benedino is the guy who is heading up the re-forestation project here that Barb told us about. He is working through the Brethren Volunteer Services and knows Jens and other friends of ours. His project involves two things, helping communities start tree nurseries and constructing more fuel efficient wood stoves so that people will use less wood for cooking. This is an incredibly valuable project since deforestation has devastated much of the country. Tom says they are planting three types of trees: trees to prevent soil erosion, fruit trees to provide more food and fast growing trees for firewood.

For the better part of this afternoon we filled small plastic bags that will be for tree seedlings. Each nursery will have about 2,000 trees to start with, but each community can decide if they want more and what kind of trees they prefer. It felt good to sweat today instead of just being an observer. After work Tom took us to El Aguacate, the site of the 1988 massacre of 22 male campesinos.

The government apparently built a school and homes for the families of the men killed. It is a total propaganda stunt, however, since the school is presently closed and the houses are so regimented. We talked with one of the daughters of the massacre victims. She seemed friendly and talked openly about what happened. We took her photo and hoped to come back when there is more light so we can get a picture of the graves at the cemetery. An incredible feeling that on one sunny afternoon just 4 years ago 22 men were gunned down for no reason.

Jan. 4, San Andres Itzapa

This morning was spent filling bags for the tree seedlings. After lunch we began to construct some kind of a simple cover to protect the young seedlings from the direct sun. We hopped in the truck with Pedro, Martin and some of the muchachos to look for bamboo for the structure.

Tom was telling us this morning that Padre Pancho worked with Fr. Stan Rother, the American priest who was murdered here in 1979. About 6 weeks before the assassination Padre Pancho moved here to San Andres to work. After that time he too began to receive death threats, but nothing has come to pass so far. He has decided to take a different position, one of working with the people without the public denunciations. He seems to be quite dedicated to the local folks and the orphaned children. He joined right in today with the work and later seemed happy to share our stories with a visiting priest. It seems we have won over his confidence.

Jan. 5, San Andres Itzapa

It's early Sunday morning and we just returned from mass. The bells began to ring this morning at 5:30am and by 6:15 the church was packed with people standing in the back and sitting in the isles. It was difficult to hear much since the sounding system left something to be desired, but I just enjoyed watching the people. Just looking at their faces was a joy....the women were all wearing shawls, brightly colored that gave the church an angelic panorama.

Jan. 6, San Jose Calderas

It has simply been a beautiful day today. Tom and I rose early and headed for a small village called Calderas. It took us about 4 ½ hours to walk there, but the whole journey was beautiful. We were greeted along the way by many people who were off to work in the fields, gather firewood, or just took the livestock to graze. Several people just stopped to chat for awhile. It is nice that the pace is not so fast here. There was one man with his son who was riding a horse. The horse chewed on grass while we talked a bit. It was an interesting conversation about how he was frustrated with the work in the fields, since more and more people were using chemical fertilizers. He said that chicken manure worked much better. He is forced to use it since so much of the topsoil is gone from erosion caused by the deforestation. For most of the rest of the trip Tom and I continued on this same theme which made the time fly by.

When we got to Calderas we went to the house where someone has an efficient wood stove that was built recently. Then a man named Don Pablo took us to the site where the nursery would go. We talked at length about the process and what kind of trees they would like to plant. It should be a good project that will greatly improve life for the people here. They already have a good number of peach trees and grow enough carrots to sell in other areas. Don Pablo invited us to his house for a lunch of beans and tortillas, which helped on the return.

They have a simple home with 4 beds and a bench, plus a little shrine of sorts with Jesus and some saints. He walked back with us part of the way and showed us a different route.

Along the way he was naming trees and telling us which flowers had medicinal uses.

Tom and I came across some incredibly large old growth trees that had all kinds of other plants growing on them. The last tree in this group reminded me of the Hobbit, with an immense trunk and long reaching limbs. On the rest of the way back we just admired the flowers and the birds.

"Q'eqchi' does not have a verb for being/essence,
only for to be located in a place. (waank)"

Maya Resurgence in Guatemala - Richard Wilson

Jan. 11, San Andres Itzapa

Well, we are back in Itzapa and trying to get some rest. Tom, Teofilo and I went back to Calderas to get the nursery started with some of the villagers. I am still feeling somewhat out of it in part because of where we slept last night. They opened the church for us to sleep in, which meant using the benches for beds. The floor was not an option since it was concrete and the temperature fell to about 40 degrees Fahrenheit....in others words it was cold as hell. We had no blankets and were not dressed all that well for the temp drop.

In the morning we were treated to a feast by Marco Tulio: beans, tortillas, eggs and some greens. Their house is equipped with a fuel-efficient wood stove, so I got to see one in action. As far as the work went, Teofilo and I were relegated to entertaining the children since there were many hands available on Saturday. After clearing an area for the nursery and filling 2,000 bags of soil for the seedlings, we were taken to the carrot fields at the edge of the village. Marco gleefully pulled some carrots for us, which we promptly devoured. He also gave us some for the trek home, but not after telling us of the land inequity that he and his fellow *campesinos* must endure. Wealthier folks own the land and receive at least half of what he makes off it. It is a wonder that they can survive off this and an even bigger wonder that they maintain the countenance that they do.

Jan. 15, Guatemala City

We left early this morning after having some *atole* for breakfast in the plaza near our *hospedaje*. We walked over to zone 3 to the national cemetery first. After a short hunt we were able to find at least one of the graves of the 32 Quiche Mayans who were burned alive in the Spanish Embassy in 1980. I talked to one of the grounds keepers and he said that the remains of the other people were removed last year since the grave space was not paid for. If you do not pay every six years they will remove the corpse.

With another half and hour of walking we found ourselves on the edge of the Zone 3 garbage dump. It seems that they are attempting to make a park out of the space, at least part of it. There is a newly constructed wall that encircles the entire area with a section of freshly planted trees. People at CONDEG told us that the government has instituted these programs to remove the squatters who have organized themselves and are now demanding basic services like water.....the nerve.

Next, we made our way to the GAM office where we were happily greeted by 2 members of the *directiva*. They gave us a short history of the organization, the present work of the group and some analysis of the present political situation. One of the presenters was a man from Chichi who had a brother disappeared. He spoke with a great deal of passion and did not hesitate to be perfectly clear about the banality here. Before leaving Miguel showed up, so we had a short reunion from my PBI days. I told him to say hello to Nineth. He nodded and said he will see her tomorrow.

before the sun ascends
upon the horizon
bringing light to the
misty terrain
the women begin the sacred ritual

elote is transformed into
paste by rock and hand
followed by the soft patting
of palms, that form their
daily sustenance

After the dawn communion
the men take leave
in order to pay tribute
to the earth
with moral and machete
they make pilgrimage
to that holy site

the sun brings sweat
as they turn over the
soil with patience
always asking forgiveness
for disrupting the land
and remembering whence they came

thanks be to Xyipacoc and Xmucane
Grandmother and Grandfather
who breathed life into us
and gave us the sacred dance

again the women follow the
cycle of the day
the bloated kernels perched
on their heads
like a balancing act
that no one pays to see

they pass by the long
tall stalks
which stand like angels
keeping their watch

over and over again
the maize is flipped and turned
tossed and folded
and we are happy to eat
of ourselves
that sacred corn which is us

I desire one day
to descend into the earth
to give myself up
only to rise again
in the work and the
hopes of the people

Jan 1992, Guatemala

For the next 5 weeks we were in El Salvador and then Honduras. I returned to Guatemala by myself with the hopes of finding some solidarity work.

Feb. 17, Guatemala City

Today was spent looking for ways to offer my time to whomever could use it. I went to the Witness For Peace office, but found out that there have been more delays in the refugee returns....at least a couple more months. Next, a visit to Casa Alianza for a short presentation of their work and then on to the Continental Campaign for the 500 Years office to get some literature. Finally, I showed up at the CERJ office and after a short wait was greeted by Amilcar and some of his brothers. He promptly invited me to stay at the office to have an international presence. He said that PBI was short handed these days and they could use the extra presence of solidarity folks.

Feb. 18, Guatemala City

Dick Cheney met with President Serrano yesterday for about 1 hour and gave his support for Guatemala's "improvement" of human rights as well as asking him for co-operation to fight the battle against narco-traffickers. Cheney also said that he is happy with the economic development that has occurred under the Serrano administration. The US recently gave \$170,000 to Guatemala for officer training at the School of the Americas.

Cheney says he wants to see Tikal tomorrow “to admire the Mayan culture”.....what an imperialist. Let’s go to a place to see the culture of the past while we annihilate the culture of the present.

Serrano was quoted in the press as saying that “Guatemala is not dependent on US aid”, but is glad that relations are positive, especially at the international level. He also said that they have been “struggling hard to deal with internal aggression and drug trafficking.” According to La Prensa Libre students have blocked the road in Zone 3 and smashed windows of cars in protest of the recent violence at 3 local schools.

Feb. 19, Guatemala City

Amilcar says that there will be no peace accords signed or if there are they will be only a show-piece. He said that the main things that the government will not concede to are the formation of a truth commission to investigate human rights abuses, nor the elimination of the Civil Patrols.

Today found Hillary and myself escorting folks to the national Palace. They were given the usual hassles at the door, so we ended up staying outside while they met with folks from Congress. For most of the afternoon i was with Amilcar in some restaurant with a reporter from *Sigilo 21* newspaper. It was an interesting conversation. The reporter seemed to be up on some aspects of the current political climate, but she is definitely coming from a position of privilege.

On Sunday we go to Quiche.....a welcomed change from Guate....peor.

Feb. 20, Guatemala City

General Samayoa says that the military is going to launch a counter-insurgency campaign against the supposed “rebel” attacks along the southern area of the country. The TV news says that guerillas have occupied a small *aldea* called Flores Costa Cuca and that 2 *campesinos* were found dead with their bodies burned in a cane field in La Finca Santa Irene.

Amilcar told me today that the last time he received any death threats was back on Feb. 5. The threat came by phone and was quite long. They told him that if he doesn’t stop what he is doing that they would kill him and his family. They said they are watching him and that they know he is a member of the guerillas. How one can work under this kind of psychological pressure is beyond me. People in the US like to talk about stress.....although I do not want to dismiss that stress it seems quite envious in this context.

Today people are commemorating the day that the last Quiche King Tecum Uman fell under the sword of the Spaniards. Many people used the day to speak to the 500 hundred years of resistance that indigenous people have participated in. It seems that at all the gatherings that I have attended on this trip start with that theme. I was surprised to even see billboards that proudly displayed the popular movement’s embrace of the 500 *Anos de Resistencia*.

The military even celebrated Tecum Uman day. In one sense this seems strange

considering that the Quiche King represents who the military loathes, but then again its a good propaganda ploy to try to convince the public that they are honoring a Mayan leader.

"We don't want it to be said 'it happened way back then', because it continues to happen today."

Rigoberta Menchu Tum

Feb. 24, Santa Cruz de Quiche

It is early Monday morning here in Quiche. I slept in today, no doubt to catch up on sleep lost during those nights of sleeping on the floor at the CERJ office. We arrived early evening, ate some dinner

and then attempted to watch a forum on the UNRG. The picture was clear but the sound was not so good, making it difficult for any of us to get much out of the program. I shared the room last night with a young man named Pedro, who has been with them since April of 89. He told me that his father was kidnapped years ago in the south where he and his father had been working on a plantation. Amilcar's family has taken him in to enable him to study instead of being a wage slave.

At 10:00am, Amilcar, David Holliday (from Americas Watch) and I went to Joyabaj. Our visit had to do with the investigation of a *campesino* who had been killed there in January by 3 men who have since left town. The local police and military knew something about it and did nothing. Numerous people came across the body early one morning, it was found near a bridge and the man had been strangled to death.

What complicates matters is that the local *Alcale* is indigenous, therefore the police and military will not co-operate with him. Instead, he has been accused of the murder and threatened numerous times since then. We talked to him for a bit and his associates. Clearly this is an incident that involves racism.

Feb. 25, Santa Cruz de Quiche

It is early Tuesday morning and I am just waiting to see what is in store for me. So far things have been slow, but one never knows with Amilcar or the political dynamics that exist here. People are always coming and going, either to report human rights abuses or for organizing meetings. Most often those who suffer the abuses end up participating in and leading the organizing meetings.

During lunch Amilcar told us that at 5:30am he received another death threat over the telephone. He also showed us a recent letter he received that criticized his character, CERJ and the internationalists who were with him. I guess that puts me in good company in a twisted sort of way.

Feb. 27, Guatemala City

At is about 3:30 in the afternoon and I am sitting in the CERJ office listening to the printer do its thing. Today has been mostly spent with Miguel, which has been a treat. He is simply marvelous, a great spirit and very light hearted, something that amazes me about people who have been through such hell. We have talked about the possibility of his coming to Michigan next Fall....which would be wonderful.

We went to the Archbishops office this morning where we met with folks from Solola who had been in a bus accident. Both the men had serious cuts in their heads and the women suffered several bruises. We took them back to the CERJ office and realize on the way up that they had never been on an elevator.....what a culture shock. Once we arrived on the 12th floor it was an even bigger surprise for them to look out the window to a view of the entire city. The rest of the day was spent in preparation for a press conference that will be held here tomorrow.

Feb. 28, Guatemala City

A group from Switzerland announced yesterday that after their findings it was impossible to conclude that the human rights situation was bad enough to condemn. Today's press conference tried to shatter that myth. In addition to the ongoing attacks against the popular movements, especially indigenous groups, many of the leadership in the popular movement have been specifically targeted. All of them are here today to denounce the most recent death threat that was delivered by mail. The death threats came from a death squad group known as the Jaguar of Justice. The letter named all of the representatives present and said that unless they cease their present activities they would all be silenced. Some of the TV stations ran a short noon sound bite and we will have to wait until tomorrow to see what the papers run.

In the evening we all went to participate in one of the National Dialogue meetings in Zone 10. It was well attended but the space was not adequate. People broke up into small groups to discuss certain proposals. This is one thing that has impressed me about the popular movement here. They value the process and invest a great deal of energy in discussion about, not only the present conditions, but what kind of a society they envision for the future. This is democracy in action. They are not waiting around for elected officials to make things better and they are well aware of the fact that this desire for change is a commitment for the long haul. I am humble to have witnessed this process first hand and hope that I can carry it home and apply the same passion for change that these people demonstrate.

March 2, Guatemala City

Death threats were made against Fr. Giron today. Shots were fired at his home.....at the moment I am sitting in a lawyer's office. Amilcar is meeting with him to discuss some cases involving Civil Patrol resisters. I bought my bus ticket this morning for the border and will head out tomorrow after visiting with the folks at *Majawil Oij*, an indigenous group whose name means "The New Dawn".

This morning I worked on putting the human rights abuses for the month of March on the computer for CERJ. Amilcar and I talked for awhile over lunch. He has not been

feeling well and is suffering from the stress. I told him that he should take his family and get out of the country for awhile. They could stay with us in Michigan.....it would be the least I could do after all the hospitality they have shown me. I will miss him and the other folks from CERJ. The memories of their faces are forever etched in my mind and on my heart.

My last escorting duty was to accompany members of the popular movement to the US Embassy to meet with Ambassador Thomas Strook. The Ambassador greeted us downstairs after being informed of our presence. To my surprise I was denied entrance to the meeting, despite the pleadings of my friends. I was told later that the good Ambassador did not know I was American.....right.

Not attending the meeting did give me a chance to sit and observe the daily comings and goings. There was this Marine who was in charge of the inner entrances that gave me the gaze of any normal brainwashed killing machine. A group of Guatemalan students entered at one point. They were quickly greeted by an Embassy attendant who passed out some pro-USA literature to help them better understand the nature of our government. The walls were filled with the usual icons of Bush and Qualye, but there was also this token indigenous painting that, I guess, is supposed to give one the impression that they are culturally sensitive. How does the saying go....all clean and bright on the outside, but on the inside they are filthy and full of dead Mayan bones.

Elections, Democracy and the Growth of the Popular Movements

Oct. 15 - Nov. 20, 1995

This trip came about in part because of a grant that I received for a small hand-held video camera that was to be used to document human rights abuses and then given to the CERJ organization to support their work. I went with a dear friend of mine, Kim, which made the trip easier and more delightful. We parted company at some point so that she could study Spanish and then work with street children.

Again I spent most of my time with the CERJ group and also as an election observer in the department of Quiche.

"Before they killed us in the name of progress and anti-communism. Now they kill us in the name of democracy."

Francisco Cali

Oct. 20, Mexican/Guatemalan Border

This morning we did not get to the border as planned. Apparently many citizens south of Comitán were unhappy with the election results in Chiapas last week. To demonstrate

their disgust with the outcome they blocked a bridge and would not let vehicles pass unless they paid a tax. Kim and I ended up walking across the bridge and then got a taxi to the border. We then took a bus to Huehue where we found a room and got some lunch in a small comedor near the mercado.

That afternoon we walked to the ruins on the edge of town. It was a beautiful day, not too hot, but with plenty of sun. The path that leads to the ruins, is such that you can not see them until you are right on top of them. They are gorgeous, the largest standing structures from the Mayan civilization in the country next to Tikal. Many people were here today just to relax, play football and have little picnics. I got some good footage of the ruins for the first time and hope to incorporate them into the video.

Oct. 21, Guatemala City

We are arrived in Guate this afternoon. The exhaust fumes and culturally dysfunctional allures from El Norte greeted us at every turn. The bus ride from Huehue was a bit longer than we anticipated. The bus broke down on 3 separate occasions. Finally we jumped bus and caught another one into the city. I did get some footage of the terrain along the way, especially the area in Chimaltenago, where a great deal of non-traditional export agriculture is done.

Once we got settled we headed to the CERJ office and were promptly greeted by Miguel. Kim got a chance to call home while Miguel and I got caught up on things. He said that CERJ was as busy as ever, especially because of the elections. Justina is in Europe right now on a speaking tour and will be back just before the elections. Miguel invited Kim and I to go to a small village in northern Quiche Monday to celebrate its one year anniversary of return from being in the mountains. They were a part of the CPR's (Popular Communities in Resistance). I do not look forward to the ride, but it will be a profound opportunity.

Oct. 22, Guatemala City

It's Sunday morning as we sit in the Parque Central. Already there is lots of activity, vendors of cosas tipicas, hordes of shoe shining boys, the clang of ice cream cart bells, manias, photos para recordar and just folks on their after church stroll.

Reading the Sunday paper (Siglo 21) we find that one candidate of the PLP was kidnapped and assassinated Friday (Otto Rene Romero). The paper also had a lead article on the increase in kidnapping this year. From March to October alone the government reports 118 kidnappings, no doubt a low estimate, with 51 victims eventually released and at least 4 killed. The article claims that the majority of these kidnapping have been for some economic reasons, but some, especially Bishop Renames, believe that political parties are involved. Some things have definitely not changed, but the present climate certainly is reflected in the expected escalation of violence before these elections.

Oct. 23, Guatemala City

Had time today to visit some places before the trip to Quiche. First, we went to the Archbishops office to get a copy of the 1994 human rights report.....it was distastefully thick. Later, we went to the Permanent Refugee Committee's Office to see if we could run into Sebastian. To our surprise he was and after a quick refresher he remembered this Gringo from his US tour last year.

Sebastian gave us a short update on the status of refugees in Chiapas, then gave us the details on the most recent massacre that took place just weeks before our arrival. One of the returned communities was living in Alta Verapaz in a village named Xaman. The military entered the village one-day, even though it is prohibited in the refugee accord agreements signed with the government 2 years ago. Some members of the community went to a nearby village to get representatives of the UN. While this group had left the military proceeded to harass the villagers, then opened fire killing 10 and wounding 25. Later, one of the wounded died in the hospital, bringing the total murdered to 11.

Oct. 25, Los Cimientos

The bus ride from Santa Cruz was hell, about 9 hours of bouncing about in the bus and sweating it out over the treacherous highland roads. At some points you can not see the edge of the road from the window seat while you look down to the valley below. The locals seemed to take it in stride. The road then ended at La Finca San Francisco where we bedded down for the night on a cold cement floor.

At 5:00am we were up and off to the village in a soft morning rain. The path was considerably muddy since we were just passing the rainy seasons. The walk early on was filled with the sounds of the water from a nearby river and the sites of lush flora everywhere. The walk up took us near 5 hours. At about the half-way point, Juan Diego pointed out that steam was rising off my body because i was so hot.

As we neared the village we were greeted by a group of children who had run out to welcome us. All of them shook our hands and then ran ahead to alert the other villagers. Several men came down the path to help us carry our gear and make the last several hundred yards delightful. After being taken to a hut where we could unload our stuff we were promptly taken to the main building in the village where the anniversary celebration had already begun.

Incense and candles filled one end of the room where many of the elders sat amidst the smoke. One of them beat slowly on a drum and another played a simple flute. Everyone there greeted us with such joy on their faces, while others looked at us with interest, since we were clearly the "other" here.

At first we were given some juice, but then they brought out the good stuff, a local moonshine of sorts called cusha. After walking all morning I was surprised that it did not go directly to my head, but it smelled stronger than it was. Soon after we had eaten a late breakfast the next phase of the day's festivities began.

The ceremony was simple with a fire in the middle of a circle consisting of wood and candles. Again the drummer and flute player began their simple yet beautiful melody that played background to the invocations of the priest. He gave thanks for the year here in

Los Cimientos and to the elements and all other living creatures. It was majestic, with incense, smoke, fire and the overwhelming magnitude of the misty mountains that surrounded us on all sides. The informality of it all was also a delight. Children ran around the fire and people talked casually during the entire ceremony. We were told later that this was a Catholic ceremony, it was preceded by a Mayan ceremony and later they will have an Evangelical one. The plurality and inclusiveness was profoundly evident.

After lunch I was able to interview one of the older members of the community about its history and the difficulties of the past decade. The whole village gathered again to here words of gratitude from the village elders to CERJ representatives who had helped them during the transition back to their land. Both Juan Diego and Felipa shared thanks and hopeful words about their collective futures. Then the villagers asked to hear from some of the international people there. Some students from El Salvador presented the community with a plaque that was quickly displayed in the center of the village. Juan Diego then coaxed me out to the center to share about my work with CERJ. I said that it was a privilege and an honor to be with them and that i would show the footage of this trip to many of the Guatemalans living in exile in Grand Rapids. The rest of the day saw us listening and dancing to marimba music. Soon after nightfall I was beat from all the days' activities and decided to go to bed early. I was put to sleep by the soft founds of the drum and the light rain the tapped on the metal roof of our quarters.

Traditional Q'eqchi's say that the mountains are living (yo'yo). They have the quality of wiinqilal, or personhood, a concept that applies only to mountains and people.

Maya Resurgence in Guatemala - Richard Wilson

Oct. 28, Guatemala City

Kim and I are getting ready to bed down for the night, but a few comments about what went one earlier today. In the early part of the morning wee went to the CERJ office in Quiche to see what was up. At 7:00 there was already much activity, with meetings going on and several people from the countryside there who came to report human rights abuses. Felipa was free, so I took the opportunity to interview her about the work they do in the office. She was a bit uncomfortable since this was her first interview, but she spoke quite dignified in front of a camera. I am always amazed at the purposefulness with which many Guatemalans speak about their sufferings.....it is very humbling.

Eventually Amilcar walked in and invited us to go with a FDNG group to Chichi. We rode in the back of a pickup and got there in only 15 minutes. As soon as we arrived people mobbed both vehicles wanting the flyers and calendars that were being distributed. I got out to film what was unfolding in front of us. Kim stayed in the truck and eventually began handing out flyers since the FDNG members could not keep up with the demands of the people. Who would have thought that she would be doing this within the first week of being in Guatemala for the first time?

After most of the flyers were handed out some of the Frente members began to make speeches from the back of the truck, in both Spanish and Quiche. Maria Tzuc, a member

of CUC, made most of the proclamations and was quite articulate. She spoke at length about the plight of both the indigenous people and women and how the Frente was the first party to represent them. Other parties made a showing that day, but none received the support nor attention of the townspeople that the Frente did.

When we got back to Santa Cruz Amilcar invited us to have some lunch. This was the first time in the trip that I had a chance to sit down with him and get caught up. We talked about PBI and how things were different now from when i was on the team. Then he talked about the elections. He felt that the Frente had a good chance, especially at the local level. He also talked about the fundamental difference in the FDNG and the rest of the parties. The FDNG, he said, is primarily interested in organizing the people, not recruiting votes. The rest of the parties are out for votes and after the elections they will be forgotten.

Tomorrow we need to get some laundry done and hope to visit folks at CONIC and the CCP. The paper today said that there is another group of 300 families that have occupied land in the south coast.....*Viva la lucha!*

Oct. 30, Guatemala City

The press today had some interesting notes. First, the initial arrival of election observers has commenced. 30 people from the OAS have begun its mission of making sure that the election process is without fraud. Yesterday the UNRG entered Zone 12 and distributed flyers calling for peace. The flyers made clear that they will not put down their arms until serious land redistribution takes place.

There were also some statements from CONAVIGUA director Rosalina Tuyuc, to the effect that she claims that some 30,000 Guatemalans are unable to vote because of registration red tape. She insisted that legislation needed to be implemented to favor the public on this matter.

Finally a short article stated that GAM is pushing for the justice tribunals to allow them to uncover a clandestine cemetery in the military zone of La Montanita, Malacatan, San Marcos. According to a GAM spokesperson it is a place that the military has taken people during the past 15 years of repression. They hope to go with an anthropological team in the upcoming days.

Oct. 31, Escuintla

The UN has released its 3rd report on human rights violations in Guatemala in recent years, this one covering the period of May 21-Aug. 21, 1995. A total of 424 human rights violations were verified by the UN mission. Both the UNRG and the government military forces were implicated, but clearly the government forces are implicated in the majority. Of course, the problem with all of this is the ongoing impunity. No one is prosecuted "especially as it applies to government forces," says the report. President De Leon Carpio is accusing the UNRG of campaigning for the FDNG. This is not a surprise.

It is just after 7:00pm and we are at one of the returned communities called Nuevo Mexico. We arrived via Escuintla with a companero named Marceleno, a member of this community and the Permanent Refugee Committee based in Guate. The weather is significantly different here. It's hot and humid, thus making the bus ride somewhat uncomfortable. However, after Los Cimientos, most trips seem short and sweet. Since our trip was somewhat unannounced we were not able to speak with the committee much before nightfall. This limited the discussion as well as the ability to tape it. The stories they shared are increasingly common to me, common only in theme not in content. Everywhere you turn people have suffered greatly and still have this tremendous capacity to resist and to hope.

When we arrived, Marceleno invited us to his house. His wife and children greeted us with open arms. Maria, only 18, was 5 when the military repression caused her family to flee. She now has 2 children with Marceleno, 2 very lively and energetic boys who did not waste any time wanting to play with us. As always they found the excessive hair on my body intriguing. No mechanical pacifiers for these children....just good honest creative play. Their hospitality, at times, is overwhelming. This is one of the great lessons.....how to treat strangers, or better yet....how to build solidarity. That is what hospitality is, building solidarity. They have taken us into their confidence, never asking our political views nor motives, only "how can we work together!" Certainly they are a community in great need, but they are able to give so much more in return. This is the cornerstone of solidarity...we will help each other, stand with each other, regardless of the outcome, but somehow knowing that the outcome will bring life anew.

I write these words on a makeshift bed, created by Marceleno, a bed that surpasses any at this point on the trip, complete with mosquito netting, which brings added joy to Kim. This is truly an example to model our hospitality on in the future. These are the moments and people that one can never forget. I delight in being a part of this journey. The candle illuminates part of the mosquito net that protects me from the blood suckers while the rain makes music on the tin roof here in the South coast.

Nov. 2, Santa Cruz de Quiche

It is late morning and I am once again in the company of Amilcar. This morning we went to Chichi for a meeting with other Frente members. It was almost laughable to drive past the military base in the truck with the Frente message blaring. As Amilcar said, "these are our Maya." Clearly the foot soldiers are of Mayan descent - forced to be a part of the system that terrorizes its own people.

On the way back to Santa Cruz, Amilcar and Maria were talking about recent acts of terror. Apparently in Chichi, a father and 2 or 3 children were killed by the military or an arm of that institution. Amilcar went to talk to the coroner and they were brutally murdered. Maria also echoed that many of the returned communities are experiencing increased repression and threats. Is there no end to this madness?

At 3:30 a young man of 19 arrived at CERJ's office, with family, a member of CUC and a witness to the young mans assault. Late last night 2 men from a small village in Quiche were on their way to the store when they were attacked by members of the PAC, so they

stated. One of the men was beaten, but managed to escape, but not before they had stolen more than Q1,000 that he had earned in Guate. After taking his testimony we all went to the local government human rights office to document the accusations. Testimony was again taken, along with pictures and a signature. Next we went to the local UN office, known as MINUGUA, for other documentation and denunciations. Amilcar and others put this act into context since CERJ and other popular groups had just been to this man's village to campaign for the Frente. It is believed that people who attended the rally or are associated with these groups are accused of being part of the UNRG. The UN officer present would not allow me to tape the presentation in the office and then took the 2 men from the village into a separate room for questions. Amilcar explained that this is contrary to the nature of a communal approach to dealing with these matters, as well as not taking into account the fear that these men may have telling their stories to strangers without those around they trust.

Nov. 3, Quiche

The night has fallen and my body is a bit weary. We left early this morning for Chajul in the Ixil Triangle. Even though it was quicker by truck, the ride was still uncomfortable. We dropped off the people who came to CERJ yesterday to report the PAC attacks. Along the way we stopped off at several towns to distribute flyers and posters for the Frente. In Sacapulas we met 3 people from Israel who were on their way to Uspantan. They were clearly tourists, but of the rustic mold. One of them asked me what I was doing here.....so I told him. He picked up on it real quick but still seemed a bit surprised by it all.

Up the mountain side we climbed to Chajul and there we met up with some CERJ friends who were happy to distribute Frente material. We also ran into Lucia and her daughter who were getting ready to head back to Guate. Amilcar says that only 40% of the indigenous population is registered to vote, and in some areas, like this one, many of the residents support Rios Montt's party....the PRG or Hector Gramajo's party alliance of FUN and DIA. It seems that from my reading and what people in this area have told me that this support is due to the years of militarization, the psychological warfare, model villages, terror and pacification campaigns. The counter-insurgency campaigns have been effective in addition to the type of internal colonization that Fanon spoke of.

Upon return to Santa Cruz we were greeted by Felipa who told us about newly found defamation directed against CERJ in Chichi. So we got back in the truck after a short respite and went there to film what we could find. What we know is that last week a mother and her three children were murdered here and now someone has placed posters in the town claiming that CERJ perpetrated these crimes. To dispel these lies Amilcar made a public denunciation in front of one of the posters. He then quickly realized that after we left someone might take them down and deny that it ever happened, so Amilcar sent Porfilio and I back to take pictures that could be sent to the press and MINUGUA for documentation purposes. Later that day we went back again, this time in the company of the police who took them down in front of everyone.

Nov. 4, Santa Cruz de Quiche

I have some free time on my hands so I thought I would comment on something different that I saw yesterday while we were in Chichi. While we were walking around taking pictures and talking with potential witnesses I stood around and was just taking in the scenes from the marketplace. What a visual delight! It's a panorama of colors and smells. You can buy just about anything; vegetables, fruits, pots, flowers, palm leaves, meats, live animals, weavings, hammocks and a litany of other items. More delightful for me is the social dynamics that the marketplace creates.

This is the kind of social activity that I love since it mostly revolves around food, then again I think all social activity should revolve around food. With the food comes great conversation, story telling, people watching and even organizing. In the US, people go to the mall to watch people because that is the most that they can do, minus the consumption. There is no real human interaction. People don't gather for communal reasons, they gather because of a de-facto economic system that has relegated most commerce to the margins of cities, away from where people live, play, and work. Here the market is rationally and compassionately located in the center of the town, in the midst of homes, offices, and a sitting park. Here people don't just look at each other they interact, with joy, pleasure and intimacy. They know the people who made the products, who grew the produce and hand crafted the tortillas and tamales.

Nov. 6, Santa Cruz de Quiche

It's early Monday morning and I just finished a small book by Americas Watch on CERJ from 1989. It provides good information that I can add to the text of the video I hope to do on CERJ upon return.

Yesterday's rally for the Frente went quite well. Presidential candidate del Valle, vice presidential candidate Juan Leon, Amilcar, the mayoral candidate for Santa Cruz and Maria Tuc all spoke with great clarity and courage. The presidential candidate hit several things right on the head. His historical perspectives were clear and his sensitivity towards women and indigenous was demonstrated well in his words. One of the things that impressed me mostly about the gathering was the near total translation of speeches and the Frente's platform into Quiche. This is where Maria Tuc played the most profound role, not only as a translator but as a model leader for the indigenous community.

The plaza area that was used for the gathering was packed. Some of the highland communities arrived late, but their arrival was greeted with great enthusiasm. Two large transportation trucks came filled with *campesinos* from small villages to the North. A representative from that area spoke briefly to tell the crowd that they had traveled all day as a demonstration of their support for the Frente.

During the rally a PAN caravan rode by displaying their obscene financial superiority with 15 vehicles and almost an exclusively *ladino* presence. Most were dressed as middle class people, with fairly new trucks, and most wore PAN T-shirts, hats and bandanas. One of the UASP representatives made remarks about the PAN caravan after it passed by

saying that “PAN is for the wealthy, but tortillas is the representative symbol of the Frente and the majority of the poor.

Nov. 9, Guatemala City

The press today says that the military has been implicated in the death of Myrna Mack.....NO SHIT!!

Well, the final public rally of the FDNG has happened. We showed up in Guate late yesterday afternoon. Keeping with Guatemalan time we got started late with the march, but of no importance. There was lots of energy, shouting, dancing and passing out of flyers. The public seemed to be very receptive and there was a significant international presence. It was refreshing and inspiring to see at one point Nineth, Rosalina, Byron, Amilcar, and others, walking together at one point in the march. Here was a group of people who have been targeted over the past 10 years or so by the government.....and now they are walking hand in hand as political candidates. This alone is a tremendous victory and an indication of what direction the grassroots popular groups are taking. They certainly did not have the numbers that PAN turned out yesterday, but that is because the majority of their supporters are rural and could not make the trek today. Also it must be kept in mind that this is a political party that has existed for 3 months. Parties that have been around for decades will not do as well in this election.

It was a joy to come into the city yesterday with the contingent from Quiche. The group was from all over the department. We talked and broke tortillas last night in the CERJ office after the rally. The young man who was attacked by the Civil Patrol, Adam, was with us, as well as Lucas, Porfilio, Lucia, a couple from Nebaj and others. The couple from Nebaj were very young and handsome. Both of them seemed very sure of themselves, with a look of confidence on their faces.....no identity crisis here.

I'm now waiting in the *parque central* before I go to the meeting for the international observers, but first some observations about free speech.

Again I can't help but be amazed at the activity that goes on here on a daily basis. It is sad that we don't have these dynamics.....how much more interesting it would be if we had food and drink vendors at every corner. Even though what goes on here is consumer oriented, people use the occasion more as a forum for socializing. I mean you've got shoe shiners, vendors, street preachers, story tellers, snake-oil salesmen, jugglers, comedians, and various other artists weaving their crafts through the social fabric.

The fact that people can and do take time out to sit and read the paper, talk, or just listen to someone on their soapbox is encouraging. We talk about free speech often in the States, but what we have are censored voices (sometimes self-censored), banal rhetoric, and for many a neglect for the honor to speak the truth. People here could end up in a ditch for speaking freely, but they do speak the truth. Freedom of speech is not only the right to express oneself. More importantly, it is the act or engagement of public discourse, regardless of the consequences. Surely societies should guarantee that right for everyone, but more importantly individuals and communities need to nurture the desire and ability to speak the truth in public. That should be the priority, not simply the right to do so.

The *campesinos* from Solola are still in the plaza with their demands for land. At times it seems that the only ears open to this are the informants.....and they don't give out land.

Nov. 11, Santa Cruz de Quiche

Yeah! I'm back in Quiche, away from the noise and the pollution. Yesterday morning I walked to the Hotel La Reforma for a gathering with other observers and representatives of the Frente. Jorge Gonzales del Valle spoke, as did Nineth and others. I saw Nineth's daughter there for the first time since my PBI days in 1988, she is about 16 I would guess now. After discussing some of our responsibilities as observers we were given red vests for identification and off we went. That morning I was also able to go to the Permanent Refugee Commission office for an interview with one of Sebastian's colleagues.

I had planned to take the bus back to Quiche, but I got a call from CONDEHUGUA and was asked to accompany a delegation from Italy to Quiche. They wanted to rent a vehicle, so we had to go to the airport for that. They rented a nice 4x4 jeep and then gave me the keys. This will be a first for me..... to drive in Guatemala, not exactly a pleasant thought.

When we arrived in Santa Cruz there were over a hundred people at Amilcar's preparing for Election day. All of the *fiscales*, party representatives, met one last time for instructions on what to look for at the voting tables. Again the discussion was in both Spanish and Quiche, with Maria providing the translation.

I did not get to bed early because of all the activity and people in the courtyard, but it did give me an opportunity to mingle with folks. Earlier in the day I went with some of the women to the marketplace to get food for all the *fiscales*. They had planned to make a big pot of black beans, a chicken based soup, and tortillas. The women were very curious about the status of Guatemalans in the US. We talked about the difficulties, especially the difficulties they face in a radically different culture. While they all certainly understood why people left the violence, most of them commented that they were glad that they still lived here.

When we got back to the house I spent time learning some Quiche from the women and then interviewed a few of them on their history and their work in the popular movements. One older woman told me how the army came and killed her husband, leaving her with 3 children to raise on her own. She said that the violence was worse on women because in addition to the terror, they had to take care of the children by themselves. This woman told me that she survived for years selling tortillas and braiding hair, which she earned a few pennies at.

Another woman who was only 19 talked about how she was involved in organizing for years. She was very articulate and had a very optimistic view of the future. I was impressed by her clarity and confidence. The rest of the day I just hung out eating and learning from the interactions of these brave people.

Nov. 13, Santa Cruz de Quiche

It is 6:00am and we are all sitting around waiting for the final election results. It is clear that Arzu won the most votes for president, but many of the other positions are as yet undetermined. In some respects the FDNG has been a surprise and a shock for other sectors. A party that has existed for roughly 4 months has probably won some seats in Congress and on the local level.....simply amazing.

Yesterday was an incredibly long day. We finally hook up with a contingent from the US, so it made my task easier.....just video work and observing. We went to several voting sites here in Santa Cruz, San Pedro Jocopilas, Patzute, and Chichicastenango. There were no overt acts of violence at the stations we visited, or fraud, but the voting process itself could be termed fraudulent.

People had to travel long distances, since many villages did not have voting stations, thus making it inconvenient to those with few resources. When arriving at the voting sites many could not find their names on the roster, this was due to computer failure we were told. The big problem for most people was that what information was posted was in Spanish, so those who could not read Spanish or read at all often spent hours in lines that they were not supposed to be in. What made this frustrating was that I saw few election workers assisting these people with where to go. Most of the election counsels were made up of men, most of whom were *ladino*. Many people after hours of frustration just simply left and went home. Whether or not this was intentional on the part of the government it meant that many rural people did not have the opportunity to participate. In spite of the gains made in recent years by the popular movements the government is still fundamentally in opposition to the indigenous population.

When the booths closed we were back in Santa Cruz to watch the ballot counting. Each table had a *fiscale* from as many parties that were on the ballot. People were to put a simple X with a black marker on the symbol of the party they were voting for. If the ballot had more than one mark, no matter how small the vote was disqualified. I stood for 2 hours and watch 3 tables in front of the city government building. At one point the power went off and we were forced to continue the vote count by candlelight. In this department it was clear that the PAN, FDNG, and Rios Montt's party were the big vote-getters, at least at these tables. Some people were already celebrating the Frente's victory, while the ballots were still being counted. Imagine that for the first time in your life that an election could actually make a difference.

For the rest of the night people remained vigilant, waiting for any word on the outcome. People ate and danced and set off firecrackers and I sat on the periphery, grateful for being witness to their history. Soon I will be gone with the hopes of bringing some of this truth to the Guatemalans in Grand Rapids and the general public with the hopes that something positive will be born.

When speaking of *la violencia* of the 1980s, I was struck by how frequently people used the metaphor of conquest to describe it: '*Lo mismo cuando se mato a Tecum Uman*' (it is the same when they killed Tecum Uman), *dona* Marta said when describing the recent whirlwind of death, alluding to the Maya-K'che hero who died valiantly in battle against the Spanish.

Fear as a Way of Life - Linda Green

Tierra o Muerte! Our Tax Dollars at Work in Chiapas

December 9 - 23, 1997

We have a very important weapon which the government does not have. That weapon is called dignity. With this weapon no one and nothing can defeat us. They can kill us or jail us, but they will never defeat us. EZLN Communique, Sept. 12, 1997

December 9, 1997

We finally found the right truck to bring us to La Realidad. We left early so as to avoid the *migra*. While on the trek the sun came up creating a panorama that was breathe taking. It warmed up quickly which made the ride more grueling. On the way we were passed by two different military convoys. After six hours we finally arrived and were questioned by representatives of the community on our possessions and credentials. After a brief rest and escape from the sun we were welcomed by the other internationals, most of whom have been here for just a few days.

The camp is simple, with a stream that flows through the middle, serving as a bathing, dish washing and cooling off area. There is a community room for meals and resting and a kitchen with a makeshift wood stove.

We were given an orientation by a woman who is a Mexican national and has been working here for 2 years. The rules are simple and the work is crystal clear - observe and document military activities. Twice daily the military passes through the village and we document the vehicles, soldiers, officers, radios, weapons, and who has the video camera. We take pictures of them and they take pictures of us - a mutual documentation.

The first night was good timing for us. The community had an exposition on history, traditional life, coffee, corn (*ajan*) and other aspects of communal life. One young man gave me a 500 year description of Mexico, especially Chiapas. It would have put most university educated North American to shame. Later there was marimba music and dancing.

December 12, 1997

It is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The village is alive with marimba and pots brewing the day's nourishment. We just got back from count soldiers as they made their daily trek through the village to do what Lucifer only knows. Packed with shovels, picks,

radios and chickens they rolled past on a wet morning. The rains came during the night to give us a more interesting mode of maneuvering in the compound.

Last night we were invited again to a short *baile*. It seemed that the whole village was there. The younger women were wearing their best clothes and sat in clusters waiting for the young men to ask for a dance. The rhythm of the marimba beat through our blood as the night wore on.

Earlier in the day we saw “runners” go through the town, apparently on a 30K trek through a few villages. The front man was carrying an icon of *Nuestra Senora* followed by those carrying torches, banners, and all cheering in unison - *Viva la Virgin, Viva! Viva La Realidad, Viva! Viva La Lucha, Que Viva!*

December 15, 1997

Yesterday we were invited by some of the young men to engage in a friendly game of soccer. It was the International *campamentistas* vs. *el equipo de La Realidad*. One can almost guess what the outcome was. Although we had good European representation, with some soccer experience, in the end it was *un massacre*, 9-2. The outcome meant that we had to buy the drinks.

As we were finishing off our feast of coffee, bananas and cookies this morning a lone Zapatista rode up on a horse out of the mist. He had strings of bullets across his chest and was wearing the trademark *posa-montana*. He greeted us all individually and then asked if he could borrow a tape recorder for a few days. Alas, no one had one to share. After speaking with the Mexican nationals he rode off as quickly and quietly as he came.

December 17, 1997

With the clear sky today the view is amazing. To the North and South of us are mountain ranges. The South being closer and the one that includes the road that the military descends and ascends daily. Apart from the community there are no openings in the *selva* - nothing but thick green foliage of trees and other plant life that creates a lush canopy in the horizon. With no industrial pollution the sky is incredibly clean and blue. At night the stars burn so bright that it makes for a constellation seekers paradise.

Hovering over the area where we *campamentistas* are is one of the ancient indigenous trees - *la cieba*. All around our compound are chickens, ducks and dogs. Most of the dogs are not in good health. Most are malnourished and some disease ridden. The entire political/economic dynamic makes this situation so difficult. How does one give care and attention to the animals when the people are barely surviving?

December 23, 1997

It took a lot less time to get back to San Cristobal than it did to get to the camp. Nikos, Marin and I were fortunate enough to find a smaller truck that we caught a ride in. Once back in San Cristobal we found some food and then a place to spend the night as the trip had wiped us out. What we work up to the next morning was our worst nightmare.

I went back to say goodbye to Mario and his wife this morning. We talked a bit and then I stayed on at their house to shower and get ready for the bus ride I scheduled for later in the afternoon to D.F. I had the radio on and was listening to some local folk music when I heard the news flash - para militaries had murdered civilians in Acteal. The radio announcement did not have an exact number, but said that several dozen unarmed people were killed.

I ran down to the Global Exchange office to see if they knew more, but everyone was gone. I went back to the house and called home to tell David and ask if the Media Center or IGE would send out a press release about the massacre. I also told him that I would wait by the phone in case the Grand Rapids media would want to do a phone interview. I waited for 3 hours and heard nothing back. By then I had to take the bus to D.F. and hope that the word was getting out. (I wrote a piece for the local daily newspaper upon my return, but they refused to print it.)



Sitting at the Feet of Children

Chiapas, December 15, 1998 - January 5, 1999

Monday, December 21

On 2 occasions so far today both the military and police helicopters flew over head. The army helicopter appeared to be a Huey, the kind used in Vietnam. Both circled several times around the camp, the military helicopter much lower. It is clear that these are tactics of intimidation.

One of the members of the community came to speak with us this morning about the possibility of leaving in the event of a military incursion into the camp. The urgency of things propelled us to quickly put more wooden spikes in the ground near the *aquascalientes*. During the process more helicopters came, first the police, then the army. Moises pleaded with us to stop working, since they could be taking pictures of us that would be used by the *migra*.

What a life to be constantly under surveillance, with the intent of eventual invasion and physical repression. What kind of psychological damage does this cause parents who must always worry about the safety of their children.....the fear of children playing too far away, unable to reach them before the soldiers come. The confusion that must fill children's heads due to the external fear displayed on their parent's faces. The disappointment of the little ones, whose space and time to play, has been robbed by soldiers desperate for pay.

Friday, December 25

People may wonder why I am here, especially at this time of the year. I say that to miss Christmas, with all its trappings, with all its shallow consumption and giving, is more than a blessing. It is a choice for sanity, compassion, and hope: sanity, because a sane person does not surround themselves with depression and envy; compassion, because a compassionate person does not negate others at the expense of their own pleasure; hope, because it is here, in these places of struggle that the light shines, that hope is born in the simple desires of these Tzotzil people.

I come here like some wayward magi in search of humanity, not so much to offer anything, but to receive.....to sit at the feet of these ancient peoples, in these ancient mountains, to learn, to discern, to come alive.

Monday, December 28

I just finished re-reading Holliway's article "The Concept of Power and the Zapatistas." A refreshing articulation of power, especially after reading Bishop Ruiz's piece in a magazine that Elisa loaned me. Ruiz has some important things to say about the marginalization of the indigenous populations, but he still advocates an evangelization "that incorporates age-old religious and mystical experiences of other peoples....Missionary action is not difficult when we know that the subjects are not us but them. They are the subjects of their own evangelization, embodied and experienced from within different cultural models." This is a nice articulation, one that reflects sensitivity, but premised on the expectation of missionary work as a necessary component of the work of Christians. For me, this still reflects a certain sense of superiority or monopolization of truth. If we are to come to terms with our role in 506 years of oppression these medieval notions must be abandoned.

Holliway frames it differently in talking about the *Zapatista* concept of power. "The power of the zapatistas is in the power of the YA Basta!....the negation of oppression, which exists in the depths of all of us." This is a radical departure from the missionary position which posits a sense that what I have to offer is better, richer, more truthful.

Tuesday, December 29

Preparations for the 5th anniversary of the uprising are coming together. The amphitheater is ready with plastic covering, branches tied to the posts, and a freshly painted basketball court. Cliff and Marcio showed up this morning. They were on their way to Union Progreso, so we only had a few minutes to visit. It is always nice to see familiar faces.

Some thoughts on the anniversary of the massacre at Wounded Knee

On a cold winter morning one hundred years ago the US Cavalry invaded Wounded Knee. Women, children, and the elderly were the majority of victims, as the men were off in search of buffalo for nourishment. Surprised by the invasion, the Native population fled on foot, resulting in most of the victims with bullet holes in their backs as troops ran them down on horseback. The blood stained fields wreaked for days until the Cavalry buried them in a mass grave. Even til today, this stands as the worst massacre on US soil, contrary to all the inaccurate hype of the Oklahoma City bombing.

To remember these victims as I sit in Chiapas has significant meaning. The communities here have become surrounded by official and proxy military forces. They have claimed autonomy in as bold a fashion as the Lakota ghost dances that threatened US hegemony. Many of these Mayans have been hunted down with jeeps and helicopters, only to end up in mass graves or disappeared from their communities.

The imposition of US will at Wounded Knee was a result of westward expansion, an expansion that was hungry for raw materials to fuel the organs of capitalism. So too is Chiapas, where US and Mexican elite interests have necessitated further exploration of

oil and uranium. In both cases this “need” for resources displaces and severs a people whose entire existence is tied to the reverence they have for a particular terrain; mountains, valleys, rivers, plants, and animals.

The lie of development is that their lives will be improved and their living standards raised. In truth, development deforms the mind, retards the body, and destroys the soul. Human development within the capitalist/neo-liberal model is nothing more than a glorified argument used for zoos. They will be safer, better off, and we will be able to study them closer. And like a tiger that frantically paces in its cage or a panther that become lethargic, so too do Indigenous communities become frantic with material consumption....only a shadow of their former selves.

In the cool December morning

I rise to greet the warmth of the sun

Dew drips off plants and roof

While barefooted Indians pass by

On the road below

Oventic, Aguascalientes of youth

Where children walk hand in hand

Or lean up against siblings

Their eyes are as dark

As the earth

Their smiles bring hope

From the mountains

Zedillo calls the young

Zapatistas terrorists

As they prepare the

New Years festival

pine needles are spread out

like a royal carpet

where musicians create ancient songs

with marimba and flute

their bodies sway in rhythm
like trees that bend in the wind
along a narrow path
the view of people gathered
is more beautiful than any
painted canopy or ecclesiastical ceiling
families sit proudly on benches
built for this open air arena of democracy
while helicopters fly above
monitoring games & ice cream vendors
as the night approaches
the Mayan moon illuminates
the court where dancing and Tzotzil speeches
fill our souls,
and even though we do not
understand the words
we know their truth the way lovers
know each other's touch
It is here that I understand
The meaning of justice
Its hunger satisfied
And like the mountains,
These proud people have
Withstood the weathering of history
and the cruelty of men...
walking in paths of freedom

Mayan Resurgence in a post war period

Guatemala, June 15 - 30, 1999

This trip came about as a result of a friend and fellow activist professor who received a grant to go to Guatemala and interview writers and members of the popular movements. We conducted over 16 hours of video interviews and have made several short documentaries with this footage. The main question that was on our minds was “What has changed since the signing of the Peace Accords?”

June 18, Guatemala
City

All this and much more has been kept quiet,
and there you are celebrating a banquet, toasting
peace that you have formulated without me, without
my voice or my presence.
Return of the Maya - Gaspar Pedro Gonzalez 1998

David and I have been fairly busy these past few days. Since our arrival we have spoken with CERJ, CONIC, GAM, MAJUIL QUJ and set up appointments with CONAVIGUA, Defensoria Maya and Fundacion Menchu. There are still many others with which we plan to speak, both in the capital and in the other provinces. As always the information and insight shared is enlightening.

The first full day in Guate led us to a small gathering of CERJ members from around the country. They came together to share information, strategies and attempt to create a vision for their work that moved beyond the war years. Miguel did the formal welcoming and then led into his own brand of no-nonsense commentary on current events and how that will effect the work of CERJ. He felt that CERJ had been moving from an organization that focused on challenging the forced recruitment of villagers in the PAC's to an organization with a larger human rights agenda. For him a larger human rights agenda was not just denouncing military repression, but looking at the rights of workers, women, children and Mayans. To denounce these violations of human rights CERJ felt it was extremely important to educate the people about exactly what rights they had, both according to the Guatemalan constitution and International standards. He said they were already doing this in several departments and in 4 different languages.

Miguel's overview set the tone for the day that was spent in small groups discussing different aspects of this collective vision. Before breaking into the small groups he pointed out David and myself, thanked us for joining them and then said quite calmly that yesterday the main office had received another death threat over the phone.

David and I also met and spoke with two newer members of CERJ, Elizabeth & Raul. Both of them spent many years in Mexico as refugees from the effects of the counter-insurgency war. Raul was a former teacher and fled with family members, Elizabeth was just a girl when her family left forcing her to spend most of her life as an exile from her homeland. Both were extremely articulate and passionate about the future of their people. Both felt that the hardest work was yet to come.

June 19, Guatemala City

Today we met with Mario from GAM. He agreed to a video interview with no hesitation, the same as he had done in 1995 just before the elections. Mario has been the director of GAM for several years now and is married to Nineth Montenegro.

Mario shared with us his own process of radicalization. He was a student at USAC and was heavily influenced by one teacher who taught revolutionary politics. This was in the 70's, just after the devastating earthquake of 1975, a pivotal year for both right-wing political forces and the armed resistance movement.

GAM has continued its work in the area of human rights and speaking out on behalf of the families and relatives of the disappeared. Mario said that even though the Truth Commission and the Catholic Church's report have confirmed their positions all along, they have not been effective tools for bringing the perpetrators to justice. As he spoke these words I was reminded of one of the many political posters that covered the walls of GAM's reception area. The poster has a wall that is lined with images and words attesting to who the criminals responsible for the genocidal policies were and an angry group of civil society with hammers and picks ready to tear down this wall of impunity. As our interview came to a close, Mario then told us of their plans for the June 21 day of the Disappeared event to be held at the outdoor stage just off the main plaza in Zone 1.

Just after leaving the GAM office we came upon a demonstration organized by various labor groups. The issue they were bringing to attention was the increase in electricity and phone rates, due in part to privatization. Fiery speeches were made and threats to break down the doors were almost realized until the metal bars were pulled down. David and I interviewed a PLP candidate who spoke at the demo and seemed to have significant labor support based on the applause after his remarks. We were told that a much larger demo would take place in a few days continuing on the same theme.

CONAVIGUA co-founder and Congresswoman Rosalina Tuyuc has been cited in the papers as being critical of both the Frente and Alianza ANA. Her criticism lies with the structure of these organizations and their not making indigenous issues central to their mandate.

June 20, Guatemala City

The Secret Death Squad Dossier is continuing to gain attention here. The Guate ambassador to the US has confirmed with the US State Department the authenticity of the diary, but both the National Security Archives and specifically Kate Doyle have come under significant fire for their role in making the Dossier public.

A clandestine cemetery was discovered in a convent in Sacapulas, Quiche. According to the newspaper article during the 80's the military took over the convent and used it as a torture/death center. Mario from GAM told us the walls were stained with blood, as were statues and crucifixes. Ropes were reported to still be hanging from the ceiling that were used for torture purposes and local townspeople said that the military was very public

about these activities. When you have the element of inflicting terror into the hearts of the community there doesn't seem to be any point in hiding the atrocities.

June 21, Guatemala City

The labor demonstration yesterday was very interesting. Not as big of a turnout as expected, but there was plenty of action. Again the focus was on the increase in electricity and phone rates. The demo was organized primarily by labor, but there was significant popular movement presence there as well. The march began at Parque Colon and from there marched around the Parque Centenario to the "official residence" of the President, then to the electricity bill payment center and finally to the GUATEL.

Congressman Amilcar Mendez made a speech at the "Presidential residency." Shortly afterwards a young *ladino* dressed in black, with a bandana covering his face and a USAC T-shirt set fire to newspapers that were strewn in front of the doors. The fire went up quick with a great deal of black smoke, which would indicate that the papers were soaked in gas or kerosene.

As the march proceeded towards the electricity bill payment center a bus was stopped. The same young man began hitting the bus with a hammer, smashing a few windows. All the passengers fled when armed guards (with MP bans on their arms) entered the bus. As it drove off one of the soldiers shot his rifle off into the air several times to prevent any further damage committed against the bus or its driver. All the while I was video taping these events and feeling like they were from a distance newsreel, since my perspective was from that of the viewfinder.

Once the march reached the payment office building some in the crowd attempted to break down the door. A representative finally came out to speak with the demonstrators. He eventually walked out into the street, when suddenly someone began to hit him. Others quickly intervened to prevent further violence and then the crowd moved on to the GUATEL.

Along the way several young men began smashing public phone booths that lined the streets. It is helpful to note that whenever someone decided to take their rage out on property the march organizers made it a point to urge participants to remain non-violent. The next day the newspapers focused on the violence of a few and not what caused the march to happen in the first place. So it goes with advertiser-driven journalism.

June 22, Guatemala City

Today we met with members of FAMDEGUA, another organization that works with the families of the disappeared. In essence they do much of the same work as GAM, but somewhere along the way they have parted company to do their own thing. It seems that factionalism infests even the best of movements. Again we had no appointment, but two members of the *directiva* agreed to meet with us in just a few short moments. While waiting one of the office attendants offered her analysis of the day's headlines. A photo showed a long line of people outside a government building that issued gun licenses. Her comment to this phenomena went something like this "how are we ever to achieve peace with this kind of a mentality,".....astute analysis indeed.

The interview was extremely moving. Both members of the *directiva* spoke eloquently as to the current situation and the direction of the “peace process.” Both were critical of the government’s back peddling and failure to implement the agreements in the peace accords and both talked about what they viewed as a major roadblock.....impunity. They also spoke about the ongoing harassment and intimidation that many of the popular movement groups are experiencing. With us in the room was a woman who just that morning received a death threat by phone, because she was still investigating the whereabouts of her husband who had been disappeared over a year ago. In the death threat they told her that if she continued they would rip her head off.

At one point in the interview one of the women made reference to the US Army School of the Americas and the role it played in destabilizing her country. She also said that if the US was serious about helping Guatemala make the transition to a peaceful democracy that sending soldiers to the SOA was not going to help that process. (*David and I had not intended to ask folks in the popular movement about their thoughts on the SOA, but this woman’s comment made it clear to us that not only was it an important question, it was also important for us to document what Guatemalans thought about the SOA. Much of the information both in print and on video in the US was from the perspective of gringos. Since the trip we have made a short documentary about the SOA from the perspective of many Guatemalans and other Latin Americans who were in Guatemala as representatives of various country members of FEDEFAM.*)

June 23, Guatemala City

It is a warm morning here as I sit in the *Parque Central* waiting for our meetings today with UNSITRAGUA, CONDEG and CONIC. I just had my fill of fresh squeezed orange juice from a vender who is just up the street from where we are staying. It is such a treat to be able to get fresh juice that was made right before your eyes. This is not a Tropicana moment.

A few quick thoughts about the activities from yesterday’s Day of the Disappeared event organized by GAM. The whole event was extremely moving, sort of a artistic smorgasbord of expressions that spoke to the pain and the rage of so many of Guatemala’s inhabitants. First there was a short ceremony conducted by two Mayan priests, with incense and fire they prayed for justice as they invoked the spirits of five centuries of their people who have suffered from violence. The outdoor area was filled with banners, photo exhibits and the trademark GAM lists of *Los Deseparados*. Perhaps the most moving aspect of the day was a short play done by two women and three men. This play was a synopsis of the worst years of *la guerra* and had the artistic impact of the entire 4 volumes of the Catholic Church’s Historical Memory Project. One thing I notice about how they did theatre that I had not seen as much in the US was the interaction between the crowd and the actors. People felt free to engage in a form of talk back, an element that gave the play a more organic life. David felt it was important to interview the actors, both for their comments on the importance of popular theatre in social change movements and as a resource for the testimonial literature project that these interviews would contribute to.

As we were preparing to leave for our next interview appointments I saw Nineth Montenegro come near the stage. I waited a bit to go up and speak with her as many

others had already gotten her ear. When she finally seemed free David and I went up to greet her and introduce ourselves. I said “You probably don’t remember me but I worked with PBI in 1988 and stayed at the GAM office and your home on many occasions.” She paused for a moment and then reached out to grab my hand. While holding it gently she turned to David and said, “You know, all those years when I was receiving death threats.....it is amazing to me that people like this, complete strangers, would come here to put themselves at risk by standing with us in our struggle.” She then turned to me and said thank you with her eyes. I nearly began crying, as this was one of the most gracious affirmations of my work as an accompaniment person over the past ten years.

June 25, Guatemala City

Our time here is quickly coming to an end. We have only a few more days to do interviews and try to digest as much information as possible about life since the signing of the peace accords. The meetings have been tremendous with every group we have gone to. Their sense of hospitality is boundless. Sometimes I wonder if it is just a strong cultural trait to welcome people in to their lives or if it is just a savvy political strategy, since our dissemination of information on their situation can give them lots of solidarity miles.....no doubt a combination of both.

We met with a woman through UNSITRAGUA this morning who is a union organizer on the Atlantic coast on the banana *fincas*. Right now, she said they are having a tough time with the companies. She said they are constantly being accused of being lazy, since they complain of working 14-20 hour days. The arrogance on the part of the banana barons is just incredible. Even more so after reading the documentation on the Chiquita scandal and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Not much has changed since the days of Minor Keith.

Our economic aid is directed at the rural poor, especially the Indians and addresses the underlying social/economic conditions which fan insurgency.

AID spokesperson
in *The Soft War* -
Tom Barry & Deb
Preusch

June 28, Guatemala City

Yesterday we had some very impressive meetings with various Mayan organizations. As I was saying to David last night over dinner, the emergence of distinctly Mayan groups is probably the most visible change I have seen in the past 10 years here. We met with Demetrio Rodriguez Guajan who is with CHOLSAMAJ, a Mayan publishing co-operative. It was somewhat ironic since I had just read his essay a few days earlier in Fischer & Brown’s Maya

Cultural Activism. He spoke about the importance of beginning to publish literature and textbooks in various Mayan languages. At present they are publishing in four of the larger language groups, but hoped that that would expand over time. It was wonderful to see the pages marked with the Mayan numerical system and and authors use of their

traditional names. Demetrio's Mayan name is Raxche. He also gave us a tour of the printing room, which is also completely run by Mayans. I even bought a Spanish/Q'anqobal dictionary with the hopes that it might help me learn more of the language spoken by folks in GR.

Later in the day we went to the offices of COPMAGUA, which acts as sort of an umbrella organization or clearinghouse for many Mayan groups. Two men agreed to be interviewed. One of them was clearly more articulate or maybe he was just more comfortable with strangers and cameras. Again David and I were amazed at the depth of their understanding and analysis. One of them made an interesting point that is not necessary a new idea, but the way he communicated made sense for the first time. He was saying that whenever the peace accord signing was mentioned, it was accompanied by the comment that this ended Guatemala's 36 year civil war. With sincerity and fire this little man said "for us it has been a 500 years war....a 500 hundred years war."

The last group we met with that day were representatives from *Defensoria Maya*. The leadership from this group was mostly women, who worked to promote not only the rights of Mayans but the rights of Mayan women. As they shared with us Mayan women face triple discrimination: they are Mayan, *campesinas* and women. Their conversation with us was a bit more eventful than with the men, since we had the added presence of children during the interview. These women did not have the luxury of doing the popular movement work without their responsibilities as mothers. Listening to the tone in their voices you could here a strain, a tiredness that wasn't as apparent in the men. I don't mean to suggest that the men aren't tired, but that tone in the women's voices reflected for me a certain level of emotional exhaustion from the daily tasks of preparing food, washing clothes, carrying children, going to the market, chopping wood, making tortillas.....and organizing for dignity and change. Even the *ladina* feminists didn't have that tone.



June 30, somewhere over the US

It seems strange now making our descent back to Michigan. Just a few short hours ago we stood in the central plaza with thousands of other people on what is called National Army Day. Strangely enough in this post-war period, the military still feels the need to show its might. The plaza was filled with regular army soldiers, palace guards, tanks, military brass and even some of the elite killing troops known as the *Kaibil*. Above the assembled sea of soldiers hung banners that proclaimed in eerie fashion that the army was the won that brought the peace.

Fortunately, this display of deception did not go unnoticed by members of the popular movement. GAM organized a silent protest just to the right of the festivities main stage. People gathered with banners, lists of disappeared and stood there silently as a witness to the thirst for justice that still struggles to be won. Again members of FEDEFAM joined GAM in their silent protest, so David and I took advantage of the opportunity to interview these courageous souls about the SOA. What better place to hear their skillful damnation of the SOA than at an event that still celebrated the efficiency of repressive institutions. We had representatives from Peru, Argentina, Mexico and Colombia offer up their denunciations. The women from Argentinean were both with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, one a founding member. She was a grandmother, not unlike my own, with the exception that she had to live with the knowledge that she will probably never know what happened to her disappeared family members. At the end of her comments I said thank you, but before I walked away she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. This kiss was yet another example of how I was on the receiving end of the strength and wisdom of the people that have changed my life forever.



*"Let the day begin, let the dawn come.
Give us many good paths, clear and straight....
Let the people have peace, peace in abundance,
and be happy, and give us good life and a
useful existence."* Pop Wuj

Learning Solidarity on Mayan Time

December, 2000

December 5, 2000

We are sitting down for a bit of breakfast before heading off to the office of GAM and CERJ. Bruce and I stopped off at CERJ yesterday and spoke with Juan Diego and Elizabeth briefly. Apparently CERJ is suffering due to a lack of funds, especially from the international community. They are only able to maintain the office and do occasional projects when requested. The positive thing is that more groups are organizing in the communities, with smaller cells applying what they learned from CERJ training's and *foros*. Today we will be going with Juan Diego to a capacity building gathering on the issue of Mayan education.

It's about 6pm and we are having a beverage at some swanky establishment near the US Embassy. It's a café that is attached to a book store. The book store has some interesting titles, both US and Guatemalan authors. However, I can't imagine that the folks who come here would necessarily ascribe to notions of critical thinking, especially when it has to do with recent history and that pesky indigenous question.

Earlier today we met with Mario at GAM. We chatted briefly and found out about an activity on Thursday. Next we stopped off at UNSITRAGUA. We spoke with Jorge and had a brief update on worker struggles in both the banana and *maquila* industries. We are to contact him about going to a *finca* near Puerto Barrios and possibly a sweatshop near Antigua. Both would be very useful in what we share with the community upon return, especially the Global Trade with Justice Coalition.

December 6

Early this morning we found the memorial that was erected in April for the 2nd anniversary of the assassination of Bishop Gerardi. I immortalized the images on tape, then took shots of San Sebastian and the entrance from which he was assassinated. There was also a small plaque by the door and a vase of flowers left by someone paying respects. As we were walking away Bruce said "that was sobering." Indeed, to stand in the spot were the man who brought to fruition the Catholic Church's *Nunca Mas* project was murdered stops one in their tracks. I am not sure to date if anyone has been indicted with the crime, although a Colonel was arrested and charged. The Colonel in question was also a graduate of the US Army School of the Americas - no surprise there.

We went back to UNSITRAGUA and encountered Daniel, whom David and I had interviewed last year. We talked about the *maquilas* and soon found out that a group of women who worked at one of the factories were going with UNSITRAGUA to the Supreme Court building to submit a list of denunciations. As is the case with the "justice" system they were given the run around. The blame is placed on someone else for the delays and people just happened to be gone for X-mas vacation. After one hour of office and building hopping we finally had an opportunity to interview some of the women. We did this outside of the court building so the sound quality on the video may be shaky.

Much of what they said was what we have been hearing since the young woman in Honduras blew the whistle on Kathy Lee Gifford. What I think is important and what has been running through my head all day is the possibility to build solidarity between UNSITRAGUA and the Global Trade with Justice Coalition in Grand Rapids. It would certainly put a human face on much of the campaigns that people know about. It also would facilitate a concrete exchange between Guatemalans and Grand Rapidians and maybe ensure ongoing communication.

December 8

It's early morning and we are being serenaded with radio music and diesel engines. After breakfast we will head out to Antigua for a day and then to Xela.

Yesterday we paid a visit to Cholsamaj in the morning and spoke with Joel about a possible project for the future. He asked us to call him next week when we return to Guate for further discussion. Raxche was not there, but may be around next week. I did buy a copy of Pedro Gaspar's novel *A Mayan Life*.

We also stopped by Tierra Viva to deliver a video and make inquiries for Jennifer on volunteer possibilities. I picked up a copy of FAMDEGUA's journal *Nunca Mas* and got their new address. After lunch I stopped by the Zone 2 office, but no one was around. Next week I will hope to have a chance to talk with them and inquire as to taping opportunities.

Late in the afternoon we went to the central plaza for the *dia de diablo* event that Mario told us about. True to Guate time we were able to look at books and read in the shade, while things got set up. I was sitting on the fringe and did not notice right a way, but within minutes I saw a young couple who were both sniffing glue. They quickly noticed me and sent their young son over to solicit for money. It was another encounter with the wonders of the neo-liberal model. In many ways it was the perfect preface to the demonstration that followed. Various sectors of the popular movement made 22 *pinata* devils representing the 22 FRG *diputados* that they claim are acting illegally. There was also a noticeably larger *pinata* that represented Rios Montt. In fact, all the *pinatas* had photos of the FRG politicians.

Music, speeches and chants made up the agenda and then a funeral pier was decorated with fireworks and gas-soaked hay. What impressed me most about the gathering was the insistence of the organizers that this be a fun/festive function. Too often the seriousness of such activities can stifle the spirit. The other thing was just the creative aspect - something we need to embrace more of in the US.

December 9

I just finished reading a web document from the National Security Archives entitled "Lessons Learned from US Humanitarian Interventions Abroad." I only had the first 20 pages of an 80-page document, but it had some interesting summary statements and conclusions. First, there is an acknowledgement that humanitarian efforts are lacking because there is no clout within the Secretary of State and the DOD voices. This was the only positive aspect I noted of the report which was written by AID's James Michel State's policy planning Director Morton Halperin. Another interesting comment was the suggestion that USAID, the State Dept. and the DOD must coordinate better on humanitarian interventions and that "multilateral humanitarian interventions must be integrated with peacekeeping strategies." The report also suggests that with further humanitarian efforts the USAID must "put in writing mutually acceptable baseline criterion and mechanisms for use of DOD support for humanitarian assistance." In other words, it can not conflict with the understood role of the military in foreign intervention.

The only other observation, notwithstanding the case studies, is the attitude towards the media. The report states that “because of intensified media coverage and accelerated communications directly from inside crisis zones, the harsh reality(ies) of mass human suffering are now transmitted swiftly into multiple official channels...and America’s living rooms.”

This is an interesting observation and suggests that policy makers continue to be concerned about public perception. It also suggests that the coverage may even be antagonistic towards the actions of the interventions themselves. There is certainly little concern here since press antagonism has been minimal and is not likely to change considering the nature of its ownership.

December 13

It is late morning as I sit here in the Hotel Octavo Real. I just made an appointment with FAMDEGUA for tomorrow morning. I should be able to conduct another interview and maybe find out if there are other activities happening that I should know about. I also would like to find an address or contact with HIJOS.

I was able to interview Mario yesterday about the recent death threats. He said that not only did they occur last Friday, as reported in the Press, but he has received several other threats since. In addition to stealing his car, people have been parked outside his house almost constantly as another form of intimidation. He seems to be taking it all in stride, which never ceases to amaze me - their ability to focus and thrive in these conditions.

I asked about why he thinks they are still the target of death threats, who it is that is carrying out the threats and why do they find GAM (and other popular movement orgs) a threat? The govt/military can no longer use the rationale that they are an extension of the URNG. Mario said that they were never an arm of the URNG and that the current attacks are for the same reason as always. “We are continuing to demand the whereabouts of our disappeared, to denounce government injustices, to speak out against impunity and to defend human rights. They can’t use the URNG as an excuse because, even though the guerrillas are now a political party, the government has basically ignored them.” They are no longer, in the context of Gramajo’s thesis, a “forceful opponent.”

We also talked about their work around the issue of clandestine cemeteries, which continue to be discovered. He said that this is an area for the international community to support. Not only the work to discover and exhume the remains, but the cost of forensic specialists and other technical people. Then there is the process of identifying remains that may help in determining how these people were killed and who they are. This can assist in the thousands of cases that GAM and other groups have been fighting for over the years. This process also creates renewed trauma for the victim’s family and then the enormous cost of re-burying the remains. The consequences and costs of the war never seem to end, which underscores the importance of ongoing solidarity despite the signing of the accords.

December 15

I just came from a press conference with various representatives of the human rights community - Fundacion Menchu, Myrna Mack Foundation, FAMDEGUA, GAM, Alianza Contra Impunidad and others. They presented a 6-point response to the Spanish court's refusal to proceed with the legal application filed by Rigoberta Menchu against Rios Montt and various members of the army, who they claim are the most responsible for the genocidal policies of the late 70's - early 80's.

Afterwards I asked both Elena Farfán (FAMDEGUA) and Claudia Samoyoa (Fundacion Menchu) if they thought that there was sufficient evidence to prove that Rios Montt, et al. Were responsible for the genocide. Both emphatically said yes and Claudia also said that the role of the US was important. In part, the US was responsible, as has been documented in declassified documents of the US on what they knew during the killings and what role they played. Claudia also said that this issue is significant for the US, since some of the military personnel directly responsible for the massacres now reside in the States. She did not give names and unfortunately I did not ask.

The courage of this group was again a humbling experience for me. Their persistence is truly inspiring and their sense of clarity on these matters is amazing.

December 16

Bruce has gone home and I have moved to another hotel. In the early afternoon I was able to meet with 5 members of HIJOS. They were a delightful and passionate bunch - artists at heart, but highly committed to the struggle for justice. Wendy and Raul each gave personal testimonies. Wendy left the country at an early age to live in exile with her Aunt in Canada. Many in her family were killed by the military. Raul was also very young when the surviving members of his family left for Mexico where they lived for many years. Both spoke about the formation of HIJOS and their current activities. The idea came to some of them on June 30th, annual military day. They thought that having a presence near the families of soldiers was a way of making a powerful statement about how these family members killed their parents and relatives. The first year they had a presence was in 1999, the same year that David and I filled the GAM organized demonstration. Paco said that they wanted to be closer to the military families, but also to respect the protest of the more established groups. Since then they have participated in demonstrations, forums, street theatre, created public murals and connected with other youth in the country in attempts to create more HIJOS chapters.

December 17

Last night while watching TV I saw an interesting commercial on one of the local channels. It was a military promo that began with someone planting a tree and hands gently patting the soil around it. A voice-over said that "we are all cultivators of a new

Guatemala.” Then it showed an army helmet with a dove in front of it, followed by a final voice-over that said “The Guatemalan Army - Protagonist of a new way of thinking.”

It was as if I was looking at the work of Hill & Knowlton, or some other PR specialist. Incredible - not just that they made the commercial, but especially now when the country is in desperate need of a new way of thinking. The military’s “new” way of thinking may only be an extension of Gramajo’s thesis or another evolution in this post-counterinsurgency era. Very ironic in light of the army’s failure to reduce its size as was agreed to in the accords and the fact that the US just finalized a new joint military plan that begins in January and will run through April.

December 20

Today’s press has some interesting news that is worth repeating here. The Federation of International Journalists released its year-end report, which states that 62 journalists were murdered in 2000. Colombia was the worst with 11 journalists assassinated. The article states that para-militaries on the right and left were responsible for most of the deaths. Russia was in second with 8 reporters dead. Interestingly enough the accompanying photo is of a Colombia guerrilla.

Others news is the annual report from MINUGUA on lynching, which are still high - 52 killed (337 since the accords were signed) and several hundred more were beat up or wounded from attempted lynching.

I also read an editorial piece from the Mayan writer Sam Colop in the Prensa Libre. It was a response to the legal proceedings with Spain and Rigoberta’s case. Spain did not make a decision, they just threw it back into the lap of the Guatemalan courts. Colop’s question is “where is there justice in the Guatemalan courts?” Where indeed...if any judges have intentions of allowing for the case to be heard they better prepare for a barrage of bullets or find a home outside of the country quickly. Colop also points out that the Spanish courts made a ruling on similar dynamics in Chile & Argentina, even though Guatemala is a more serious case - in regards to the numbers killed. In the end Colop says the Spanish court’s decision was racist, since those killed were “indios” and that the judges stand as “Pilates” - attempting to wash their hands of any responsibility.

December 23, San Cristobal de las Casa, Chiapas, Mexico

It’s about 9pm and I am in bed under the covers, slightly removed from then cold. The sun only managed to pop out for a few brief moments today, so it never really warmed up. I best tell Rachel to pack extra warm.

After several attempts at the Enlace office I was finally directed to their new address. They are across the street from Santo Domingo, the old catholic church where most of the

local artisans sell their wares. It is also right next to the coffee shops where I interviewed Elisa the last time I was in Chiapas. The staff was in a meeting, so I was told to come back any day after X-mas and I could get started I told the woman that a friend was coming on the 27th, so on the 28th we could go to orientation.

I am nearly finished with Dale Hathaway's book on the labor movement in Mexico, known as FAT - *Frente Autentico del Trabajo*. It is an inspiring book about folks who take labor organizing seriously, despite the risks. It will be a useful resource as the Global Trade Coalition works on Mexico this year. I also started the book I bought in Guatemala about Huehuetenago. There is a great deal of background information, but the bulk seems to deal with 1980-96. It should be useful in my understanding of the Guatemalans in Grand Rapids who are from that area.

December 24

The *La Jornada* of today had some interesting things to say. First, after a year and a half of resistance, with a campaign of paper airplanes and all, the Mexican Army is leaving the Armador Hernandez military base. The EZLN communique published in the paper speaks eloquently about the resistance of *El Pueblo*, a resistance of non-violence that finally bore fruit in the military's flight. There was also an article about international observers. The article seems to be saying that the government is continuing to crack-down on the presence of *extranjeros*, but it isn't clear especially since the government has decided to allow Peter Brown back into the country. *A ver*. I am sure these issues will be cleared up at the Enlace orientation.

December 26

I finished 2 books today since not much was happening. First, was a book on evangelicals in Chiapas. There was about a third of the book that I did not read, since it was testimonies from converts - I just couldn't stomach the Jesus shit. Some parts were certainly interesting from a historical perspective, since there is no doubt that many evangelicals have been persecuted. Where I have serious problems with the author is his simplification of the Zapatistas, especially Marcos.

His position seems to be that the Sup is the leader and has imposed his "Marxist-Leninist" views on the *indigena* of Chiapas. His academic support lies with one book that takes a critical look at Marcos and claims that he and bishop Ruiz are of the same ideological arena. The other area of contention is his refuting the numerous claims that the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) were not motivated in any way politically, nor did they collaborate with forces to pacify the Mayas. He even quotes David Stoll at one point from an article, but does not cite Stoll's book on the SIL or the other texts that have documented well the motives of this US-based missionary group.

Interestingly, some of the converts cited in the book do say that they respect other's rights to practice their own beliefs. They even show some sympathy with the EZLN. When

Bonner speaks it takes on an entirely more polarized tone. The other claims of the author is that the converts are eventually creating their own religious identity - an evangelical Chiapaneco identity. This may be the case and it may even bring some personal improvements to individuals and families, but it happened only through proselytizing. One other minor point is that the author mentioned the “resettlement camps” created by Rios Montt in Guatemala. Nothing was said about Montt’s genocidal policies nor the fact that the General was a born-again christian. The fact that Bonner used the terms “resettlement camps” and did not put them in parenthesis should tell us something.

December 31, Oventic, Chiapas

This morning was one of the more moving experiences of my life. At about 5:30am several thousand people gathered on the road in front of Oventic. Their mission was to walk to the nearest army base and tell them to leave...now! Many from DF and international observers were invited to participate.

After the first mile or so we were greeted by another group marching from the south. We then took a side road that wove through the mountains to the army base. People carried signs that read - Military Leave! - Fulfill the Accords of San Andres! - Release Political Prisoners! - Leave Already! - and Demilitarize Chiapas!

The morning was cloud covered, but you could tell when the sun was rising as it gradually became light. One thing that was impressive was the level of order and discipline that the participants showed. After about an hour walk we finally arrived at the military base. The crowd immediately began chanting at the gate. A few soldiers walked down carrying their rifles and the few in the guard post held their position. Then the group decided to move past the first set of barbed wire, by crawling under it. While some entered, others threw paper airplanes at the soldiers who stood their ground. Again the Zapatista air force was called in.

People were now pressed up against the last gate, while others had panned out on both side of the entrance pressing up against the guard post structure. The chanting continued with statements such as Chiapas is not a barracks. Then, catching the military and many of us off guard, the people forced their way onto the base.

Trudging through the mud the hundreds of supporters had backed the soldiers up against the barracks, now chanting Hoy, Hoy, Hoy and Zapata Vive! The look on many of the young soldiers faces was one of disbelief as villagers began telling them the pain that their presence has caused their families.

After 30 minutes had passed some of what appeared to be military officers came out to speak to the crowd. People kept demanding their immediate departure and I overheard one of the officers tell a pleading man that they indeed were leaving today. The exchange between some of the villagers and the officer went on for some time, when all of a sudden one of the communication antennas began to fall. I was able to turn quick enough to capture it on film. The crowd cheered wildly as it hit the muddy terrain below. Later

we found out that someone had cut the lines to prevent the soldiers from communicating for outside assistance.

At one point one of the villagers got the crowd to quiet down as a declaration was read out loud expressing their demands. When the reading was finished, as if on cue, the people began to sing the Zapatista anthem. By this time more than two hours had passed and people eventually began filing out of the base and back to Oventic.

Along the way Rachel and I spoke at length about what we had witnessed, the courage, the patience and the commitment that people had demonstrated. We also could hear other conversations going on where people talked about the reaction of the soldiers and the legitimacy of armies in general.

As we walked back the clouds parted and the sun warmed us as if a divine affirmation of the morning's activities was bestowed upon us.

Trade Policy as warfare

In December of 2004 I went to Guatemala with several other activists from Grand Rapids to listen to the perspectives of Guatemalans on the issue of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

December 14, 2004

Roughly 2000 campesinos from all over the country marched through the streets of Guatemala City ending up in front of the National Palace with a message to the government. Marchers chanted "we want land reform now" and "sin justicia no hay paz" - "without justice, there is no peace."

The march was organized by several campesino and labor groups, particularly CUC (Committee for Campesino Unity) and CONIC (National Indigenous and Campesino Coordination). Several speakers condemned the neoliberal policies of the Berger government (President of Guatemala). Juan Tuyuc of CONIC said "We have enough written agreements from the government, what we want is our land back and to earn just salaries." At one point another speaker used the upcoming holidays to underscore the economic realities of the country. "The rich that run this country are busy buying Christmas gifts for their children, all we have to offer our children is hunger."

At several points in the demonstration, the crowd was urged to yell unpleasantries at government officials who would try to sneak by. According to the United Nations [70% of Guatemalans live in poverty](#). The protestors today emphasized the point that "the Guatemala that they experience is the real Guatemala, not the fantasy land that many members of Congress live in." Today's march was another indication that what Guatemalans want and demand is [serious land reform](#), not the neoliberal economic policies the government forces on them.

December 15, 2004

I met with the Mutal Support Group (GAM), an organization of families and relatives of the disappeared. GAM's director Mario Polanco has been receiving death threats over the past 2 weeks, so he was not available. I spoke with Carlos Sag who told me about the recent work of this human rights organization. GAM says that since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, this year is by far the most violent, with political executions and intimidations on the rise. Some of this is done directly by the military, but most often it is clandestine groups who work in collaboration with the military.

GAM said several of their members and villagers in the town of Sacqualpa have received threats after the process of uncovering a mass grave began in October. GAM is also involved in analysis and organizing against the murder of women throughout the country. Just to give some perspective, more women in Guatemala have been murder in the past year than the past 10 years in Juarez, Mexico where the deaths of many women in poverty has received international attention. Just a few weeks ago the upper hal of a woman's body was found near Zone 1, her legs discovered several miles away. The GAM spokesperson said that most of the female deaths bore signs of execution, not random murder. So far the Guatemalan government has done little to investigate

December 16, 2004

Today, we met with folks from UNSITRAGUA and UASP, both longtime labor organizations. Irene from UNSITRAGUA told me that in many ways things have become worse ecenomically since Berger came to power. He ran on a platform to increase the minimum wage, but 2 days after taking office he suspended the minimum wage, which stands at 38.6 Questzales per day. That equals about \$5 a day. She also said that the years long labor battle with Chiquita banana has resulted in Chiquita moving many of the plantations to the south, away from the Puerto Barrios area where there has been a strong union presence.

The issue in which she spoke most about was CAFTA. There is tremendous organizing here around this issue, even though Congress and the Berger administration hope to keep it out of the public eye. Currently there are about 200 Maquiladoras in Guatemala, but if CAFTA goes through that number is expected to increase. At one point, Irene said that all of Guatemala is a Maquiladora in the eyes of the business community.

At UASP we spoke with Nedy Barrios, who just returned from a trip to the US to meet with the AFL-CIO and members of the US Congress on CAFTA. He said that what CAFTA would do is:

1. provide even larger tax breaks to foreign investors
2. cause many in the agricultural sector to leave the country since US subsidized corn and beans would undercut the Guatemalan market
3. many small and medium sized businesses would close

We were very impressed with his clarity and analysis of this trade policy. We hope to visit a sweatshop soon to interview workers and get their perspective on CAFTA.

December 29, 2004

With GAM

I'm still in the capital accompanying members of GAM. Preparations are underway for tomorrow's 8th anniversary of the Peace Accord signing here in Guatemala. I plan on filming and covering the events organized by the popular movements.

Earlier this year several thousand Central Americans met at the Mesoamerican forum to discuss CAFTA and Plan Puebla Panama. They produced a declaration which states in part "We have observed how more than 20 years of structural adjustment, deregulation, privatization, and extreme indebtedness have led to greater poverty and unemployment, increasingly precarious labor conditions, more migration, increased ecological destruction, greater food insecurity, less access to public services, and a systemic violation of economic, social and cultural rights, especially among youth, women, indigenous peoples, and those of African descent.....For the US, the free trade agenda constitutes a fundamental part of it's national security strategy, which - from a militarist, unilateralist perspective - then justifies repression against those who resist these transnational projects of domination."

One example of how the regional governments have implemented their own national security strategies as it relates to CAFTA is in Guatemala. If Guatemalan truck drivers engage in non-violent actions, such as road blocks, they could face up to 30 years in prison under the crime of "terrorism." In addition, the group [Tropico Verde](#) has documented joint US/Guatemalan troop exercises in the Peten (the rainforest area of Guatemala). Not surprising, it is in the same areas as [the proposed damn sites for hydro-electric generation](#) that will be needed to fuel the new industrial corridor along the Guatemalan/Mexican border.

December 29, 2004

Mesa Global

Today I spoke with a new group called [Mesa Global](#). They are sort of an umbrella group that came together a few years ago for organization resisting Plan Puebla Panama and CAFTA. This coalition consists of labor, indigenous, campesino, human rights and women's organizations. They talked about the importance of people in the US understanding that Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) is the link between NAFTA and CAFTA. PPP has already got many foreign investors behind it, but CAFTA would provide more of a formal implementation of the broad plans of PPP.

The strategy of PPP and CAFTA is an "integrated one," according to Mesa Global. They told me that the new highway plans would link up major industrial and shipping corridors. The influx of US grains, particularly corn at cheaper prices, will force many small rural farmers off the land seeking work in the growing Maquiladora zones. This will hit Guatemala particularly hard since it has the largest rural small farmer population in Central America. The damn projects would provide sufficient energy resources for the new sweatshop factories. This all sounds like a great plan to investors, but what they

don't take into account is that this plan doesn't take into account that it will create more displacement and more environmental destruction. They told me that people in the US need to look at what has happened in the northern Mexican border, [the current major sweatshop corridor](#) along the US border.

“Look at the working conditions it has created, [the environmental problems](#) and the other social factors that these Free Trade Zones have created.” The factors, I was told, are that these sweatshop zones become havens for drugs and prostitution, which eventually leads to [more violence against women](#) as we have seen in places like Juarez and Chihuahua.

December 31, 2004

8th Anniversary of the Peace Accord Signing

Yesterday I had the strange opportunity to enter the National Palace for the formal ceremony to commemorate the 8th anniversary of the Peace Accord signing. You knew something was up in downtown Guatemala City. They closed off the roads and brought in 3 truckloads of extra police to make sure that things went smooth.



It was a surprisingly short ceremony, with lots of official declarations about the “peace” in Guatemala. Only a few hundred were in attendance, with virtually no Mayan representation - this in a country with roughly 60% of the population being Mayan.

There was a break between the formal ceremony and the bread & circus event for the public outside. At this point a small crowd gathered in front of the fountain in the center of the Central Plaza. I went over to see who was speaking and to my surprise there was Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu Tum. Her reason for the impromptu press conference was her denunciation of CAFTA, with particular emphasis on what the US-based pharmaceutical industry will do to Guatemala's. Menchu claims that CAFTA will increase medicine costs for her fellow citizens, many of which can not afford the generic drugs manufactured locally.

A couple of hours later the Peace Accords anniversary celebration resumed with a ridiculous MC who sounded more like a game-show host. A marimba band played and then they brought out a Britney Spears look a like. The ceremony ended with a group of people introduced as members of the National Peace Committee. They said nothing, but released several doves, apparently to demonstrate that peace has indeed come to

Guatemala. Unfortunately, eight years after a cease fire agreement was signed between the government and the insurgent forces (URNG), peace alludes most of the country.



The [Guatemalan Human Right Commission](#) in its November report documents many current violations of the Peace Accords signing. First, the state “the army is patrolling the streets along with the police,” a clear violation of the agreement. More importantly, many of the private and clandestine security forces, believed to be connected to much of the recent crime, human rights abuses and drug trade - are [actually linked to the Army](#).

Impunity is still one of the main issues that underscores the lack of Justice in the country. The United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) documents in it’s last report states that “shielded by impunity, these structures (clandestine security groups) have regrouped and are pursuing illegal business interests and political influence. Whenever human rights groups attempt to prosecute these organizations they are intimidated with death threats.” Even the US State Department admits as much, “with relatively few exceptions, plaintiffs, witnesses, prosecutors, and jurists involved in high profile cases against members of the military reported threats, intimidation and surveillance.” Perhaps more relevant to this trip is the fact that everyone I have spoken to up to this point all agrees on two things; that the root causes for the war still exist - extreme economic injustice and institutional racism, and that CAFTA will only exacerbate these problems.

January 03, 2005

Interviews on CAFTA

I spent some of the weekend continuing to accompany organizers from the Mutual Support (GAM). Since most of the organizations were closed over the weekend I interviewed people on the street to get their take on CAFTA and the economy in general.

One major issue facing Guatemalans is internal and external displacement. The 36 year war left several million displaced, many of them fled to Mexico or the US and many came to Guatemala City. CAFTA would in the minds of many here create more displacement, particularly amongst the rural indigenous population. One of the major

provisions of CAFTA is to allow US taxpayer subsidized grains, like corn, to be imported to Guatemala. We saw what effect this had in Mexico, where thousands of small farmers had to abandon their land since the US imported corn undercut the market. According to the Guatemalan government 3% of the population controls 65% of the land. Roughly 90% of the landed population can not make a living off of what they grow now.

Of all the Central American countries, Guatemala has the highest rural farming population, thus they would be hit hardest by CAFTA. I spoke with a woman from Chimaltenago who was selling roasted corn (photo of corn) in the Central Plaza. She used to live in a small rural community, but was forced to leave with her family, unable to make a living from growing corn. Now she is forced to sell someone else's corn. She told me that most weeks she barely makes enough to feed her family, which lives in one of the barrancas (shanty towns) near a garbage dump in the capital.



This woman's story is multiplied over and over with hundreds of thousands of people forced into the informal economy - selling whatever they can to survive. The indigenous woman with her back to the camera is forced to sell these posters of pictures with puppies or cats that say things like "You are so cute."



She felt embarrassed about what she did, but said she had no choice. Her husband was killed during the war and she has 3 girls to take care of. At night she sleeps on cardboard on the sidewalk, in the same place she sells these posters.

So who will gain from this so-called trade agreement? According to a story today on Bloomberg.com, [the winners will be companies like Proctor & Gamble and Caterpillar Inc.](#), since one of the benefits would be to “end duties on up to 80 percent of the \$15 billion in U.S. exports to the region.” I don’t doubt the people’s ability to resist these policies here in Guatemala. The more important question is what will we do in the US. Congress will be deciding how it will vote on CAFTA soon. We need to mobilize people quickly. For anyone interested in working on an anti-CAFTA campaign later this month please [contact Media Mouse](#).

January 05, 2005

Myrna Mack Foundation

“What is the difference between an American and a Guatemalan anthropologist? In America you publish or you perish; in Guatemala you perish if you publish!”

Statement by Guatemalan anthropologist Myrna Mack - cited in Beatriz Manz book “Paradise in Ashes,” 2004

Yesterday I met with Carmen Ibarra with [the Myrna Mack Foundation](#). This foundation is named after the Guatemalan anthropologist who was assassinated in 1990 by the Guatemalan army. For years this case was bogged down in the corrupt judicial system and a victim of the decades-long impunity that benefited the military.

Carmen is the coordinator of both political projects, the justice and security projects. With the justice project, the foundation is focusing on decreasing the size and role of the military in Guatemalan affairs. Carmen discussed the failure of the government to fulfill one of the major agreements of the 1996 Peace Accords, which was the downsizing of the army. Another major issue has to do with reforming the system of military intelligence, particularly the information sharing that occurs between official military sources and clandestine groups. The Myrna Mack Foundation and other human rights groups have been pushing for an agreement between the Guatemalan government and the United Nations that would establish an international Commission to Investigate Illegal Bodies and Clandestine Security Groups (CAIACS). (See [Human Rights Report April-October 2004](#)) The Guatemalan court is arguing that the agreement would violate their constitution, but the human rights groups point out that this agreement would qualify as a human rights convention, which according to article 46 of the Guatemalan Constitution a human rights convention has preeminence over national law.”

I also asked Carmen about the foundations role in resisting economic policies like CAFTA. She said this was not an issue that they focused on. However, she acknowledged that historically the military behavior has been tied to preserving the economic interests of a privileged few. This could certainly be the case with the new Berger administration, which according to an analysis by the Myrna Mack Foundation is tied to big business interests. (See [the Myrna Mack Foundation Political Analysis, March 2004](#), in the Resources section of the GHRC-USA page) In fact, people who represent some of the largest economic interests in the country received high ranking positions in the new government.

January 07, 2005

Central Americans on CAFTA

“For nearly 20 years, our countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have been implementing a so-called development model that has led not to development, but to greater inequality and the loss of opportunities for the majority of people,” said Peruvian economist Humberto Ortiz, who coordinates the Humanization of the Global Economy project for the Latin American bishops’ council, known by its Spanish acronym CELAM.

The Central American bishops have called for public debate before other legislatures vote on CAFTA. In the joint statement, they called for the region’s governments to “take as much time as necessary to provide adequate information and foster broad debate about the content and impact of the Free Trade Agreement. The moral measure of any trade agreement should be how it affects the lives and dignity of poor families and vulnerable workers,” the bishops said.

The Honduran government has been exercising enormous pressure to get Congress to ratify the trade deal before the end of the year, to take advantage of the fact that the public is preoccupied with the year-end holidays, which makes it more difficult to mobilise social action.

But the Workers Confederation is on a state of alert, in case parliament approves the treaty quietly, or “in the shadows, as so many things are done in this country,” added Israel Salinas, secretary-general of the Honduran Workers Confederation.

Trade unionists, producers and activists opposed to CAFTA say farmers will be the first to feel the impact of the opening up of the markets, because they are not protected by subsidies of any kind - a situation similar to that faced by small and medium businesses.

Labour rights are also under threat, they argue, because the unending search for competitiveness will favour the exploitation of cheap labour in substandard conditions.

“Even without the treaty, small businesses in Honduras are already disappearing, which means that if the accord enters into effect it will spell the end for that sector. Workers and social organisations regard it as just one more blow to our hopes,” said Salinas.

More than half of Central America’s total combined population of 37 million is poor, and the extreme inequality of income and wealth will be aggravated if CAFTA goes into effect, its critics maintain.

Albino Vargas, secretary-general of Costa Rica’s National Association of Public Employees (ANEP), said the number of organisations in that country opposed to the trade accord is steadily growing, and the resistance promises to be fierce.

Part III

The Way You Live, Determines How We Live

Beyond Demythologizing Columbus

July 1992

History is a set of lies agreed upon.

Napolean Bonaparte

History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery.

William Carlos Williams

During the past year or so there has been a public debate going on about the "real" history in regards to the person of Christopher Columbus. People are aligned in two camps; one that portrays Columbus as an adventurer/discoverer and one that shows him as an invader/murderer. Both sides claim to come from scholarly perspectives, citing "official" documentation and historical accuracy as the foundations for their claims. Like other political debates, the most important thing missing are the perspectives of those people whom "official" history has left out.

Last October, people from some 60 different indigenous groups, Blacks, and members of popular organizations met in Xelaju (Quetzaltenango), Guatemala at the Second Continental Encounter. At this gathering they discussed their continuing struggles as well as all the Quincentenary hype and babble. For these folks Columbus did not discover the Americas, nor was it an encounter. For Native people it was, simply put, an invasion followed by genocide and a continual colonization of their people. As Juan Vasquez says, "The Conquest has not yet ended."

For those of us here in the USA to view this history as anything other than what the indigenous call invasion and genocide is to continue to deny the truth of history and to perpetuate this bloody trail of tears. No one can deny that it is important to have greater understanding of this history, but when all is said and done politically correct observations of Columbus Day will change nothing. The future of indigenous people will continue to be racked with suffering and pain unless we begin to dismantle the structures which feed off the genocide and exploitation.

Probably no issue is more central than the issue of the land - who owns it and how it is used. The theft of indigenous land by imperial powers is key to the continued repression of native peoples. Unlike most Western/Christian concepts of land ownership, most indigenous people view land as central to their livelihood, culture, community and spirituality. Concepts of private property are viewed as unhealthy, even savage. To take away land is to decapitate these people on all levels; physically, emotionally and psychologically. As an example of current land disparity amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous people lets look at Guatemala. At present roughly 2% of the *Ladino* population controls some 70% of the land, while 85% of the mostly Mayan population is

landless and living in extreme poverty. Most of the land is used for export crops - crops that could feed people in that country. In addition these mostly Mayan peasants are forced to work for slave-like wages working on the land that was taken from their communities over the centuries.

The USA government's response to this and similar land inequities where Indigenous people live has been to create easier access to transnational investors with "free" trade zones and agreements. Speaking of these agreements Mayan Indian Activist Rigoberta Menchu has this to say, "Simply speaking, it is an extension of technology, but technology imported from other countries to serve the interests of a minority...used by a minority in the service of exploitation, and it has been converted into a tool of the confrontation." This issue, however, is more than just economics. It is also about cultural imperialism.

Indigenous life centers around the relationship of a particular group to the region that they inhabit. Tradition, culture, and spirituality emanates from their relationship to that land area or eco-system. To uproot them from their land is to destroy their culture. As Russell Means has put it, "If our culture is dissolved, Indian people as such will cease to exist. By definition, the causing of any culture to cease to exist is an act of genocide. That's a matter of International Law, look it up in the 1948 Genocide Convention." If President Bush and his client state buddies were to honor this law there would be some serious changes of land occupation.

To deny people their own culture is criminal, but to impose one's culture upon another is brutal. Since the Spanish conquistadors were accompanied by the church, it followed that these poor "pagans" needed to be "converted" into believing the imperial religion. "Whenever Christians have passed, conquering and discovering, it seems as though a fire has gone through, consuming everything," said Pedro de Cieza de Leon in 1550.

Now on the eve of the Quincentenary Pope John Paul II has proposed the theme of "new evangelism" for the Americas. This "new" approach seems like the same old song of "our religion is superior." It is interesting to note that this "inferior spirituality" of Indigenous people has never made it a practice to butcher other people because they did not share the same religion.

Possibly the most difficult element of this 1992 issue is reflected in what one Guatemalan woman from a human rights group told me. "The way you (North Americans) live determines the way we live." For the basic exploitative structures to be dismantled the USA government's policies which protect corporate interests, our tax dollar's use and our lifestyles need to change. These fundamental yet monumental changes are what will threaten the control of existing power structures. Indigenous people throughout the hemisphere are being repressed precisely because their very existence is a threat to this ever-expanding corporate/government control of resources and land. The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano says of this, "From capitalism's point of view, communal cultures....are enemy cultures." It is no wonder that in a country like Guatemala over 100,000 most Mayans have been murdered by USA trained military and death squad units in the past 20 years.

This short reflection on the banality of the Quincentenary should not leave us just to wallow in despair. It can give us incredible hope because Indigenous people have survived and resisted this historical evil for 500 years. This is why the Indigenous people call their movement "500 Years of Resistance." The fact that these people still have a

culture and practice traditional ways of life after 500 years of onslaught from assassins is amazing to me. In addition they are also issuing demands. One example is from the 1980 Guatemalan Declaration of Iximche where they ask, *"For a society based on equality and respect; so that our Indian peoples can develop our culture, fractured by the criminal invaders; for a just economy in which no one exploits others; so that the land may be communally held, as it was in the time of our ancestors; for a people without discrimination; in order to end all repression, torture, kidnapping, assassinations, and massacres;...so that we gain equal rights as workers; so that we don't continue to be used as objects of tourism; for a just distribution and use of our wealth, as in the times when the life and culture of our ancestors flourished."*

If we are to be true to any real solidarity with these people we need to honor these demands. In 1992 and beyond we can celebrate a proud people's way of life not the anniversary of a greedy killer.

In this way, we, the descendants, have known our history....This is our genealogy, which will not be lost, because we know our origins and we will not forget our ancestors.

Annals of the Cakchiquels

Victory for Women of Color and Indigenous People is an Indictment for US Policies

Jan. 1993

There is something important about women in Guatemala, especially indigenous women, and that something is her relationship with the earth.

Rigoberta Menchu Tum

Por Fin! The Nobel Peace Prize Committee has given credibility to their name by choosing Rigoberta Menchu Tum for the world's most visible recognition of a peacemaker.

Their choice is a drastic change from the last Central American Nobel laureate, former Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, whose administration was anti-Sandinista and tolerated illegal drug smuggling throughout the Reagan years. Rigoberta on the other hand is a true model of peace, with her commitment to women's rights, land rights, environmental justice, cultural integrity and human dignity.

First, this is a tremendous victory for women of color. Rigoberta represents millions of women who have struggled their whole lives for justice. She represents Palestinian women of the Intifada, Filipina women fighting the USA military bases in their country and the thousands of the Mothers of the Disappeared throughout Latin America. Her victory is for the Grupo Apoyo de Mutual (GAM - the Relatives and families of the Disappeared), CONAVIGUA (Guatemalan widows), women of the CPR (Communities in Popular Resistance), refugee women in Mexico and the thousands of women resisting the exploitative agricultural and *maquiladora* factory systems. Rigoberta's victory says

that women can refuse to participate in male-dominated systems and ways of thinking. It also says that women of color must be reckoned with as true leaders with vision, unlike many of the so-called revolutionaries who have *ibal* (a Quiche word for near-sightedness or lack of vision).

Secondly, Rigoberta represents the struggle of the majority population of indigenous people in Guatemala, including the Quiche, Kekchi, Mam, Cakchiquel and Kanjobal. She embodies the 500 years of resistance to European and Euro-American imperialism. Rigoberta has given more honor to those who have refused to assimilate "modern civilization" and its nihilistic ways. Her victory has brought attention to the Indigenous struggle for and communion with the land. In *Granddaughters of Ixmucane: Guatemalan Women Speak*, by Emilie Smith-Ayala, Rigoberta writes that her mother said that if Indigenous peoples were to leave their land, they'd be orphans, without a future. Winning the prize helps to legitimize the commitment of many Indigenous groups seeking to maintain their cultural heritage.

One cannot talk about Rigoberta's victory however, without discussing US foreign policy. The award of the Nobel Prize is a clear indictment of the historical and contemporary genocidal/misogynist policies of the US government and its terrorist-directed military system in Guatemala. Her victory indicts the historical land theft by US corporate elite's, the existence of a slave labor system and the ousting of democratic forces by the CIA coup in 1954. It is an indictment of the years of support for a death squad government that has murdered 200,000 of its own citizens since 1960. It is also an indictment of USAID programs which have poisoned the land, created food dependence, and implemented forced sterilization programs directed against Indigenous women. (*Granddaughters of Ixmucane*) In Quiche terms it is an indictment of all that is of *Xibaba* (the underworld), everything that is against beauty, that which is anti-life.

Finally, the victory is a harsh indictment of the continual acts of brutality committed by US client states, like the present one in Guatemala. On October 12, the GAM office in Guatemala City was bombed, and on the day that Rigoberta left the country because of the constant death threats, October 19, two young women from CONAVIGUA were attacked on the street, beaten, robbed and left naked by assailants that accused them of belonging to the guerrillas. (*Peace Brigades International*, Bulletin, Nov. 1992) This ongoing banality is exactly why we not only see Rigoberta's victory as one for women of color and Indigenous people, but also as a call to stand in solidarity with them, and to fight policies and structures which seek to silence them.

Rigoberta Menchu Tum....*Presente!*

Suggested Reading

- *I Rigoberta Menchu*, by Rigoberta Menchu Tum
- *El Clamor de la Tierra: Luchas Campesinas en la Historia Reciente de Guatemala*, by Rigoberta Menchu
- *Crossing Borders*, by Rigoberta Menchu
- *The Granddaughters of Ixmucane*, by Emilie Smith-Ayala
- *Guatemalan Women Speak*, by Hooks, Margaret
- *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*, by Green, Linda
- *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*, by Cynthia Enloe
- *Close to Home: Women Reconnect Ecology, Health and Development Worldwide*, edited by Vandana Shiva

Fashionable Poverty

March 1993

Commercial conquest is far more thorough and final than military defeat.

Wendel Berry

When was the last time you bought a pair of Levi Dockers or Liz Claiborne brand clothes? If it has been in the past five years chances are they were sewn by poor, young, women from all around the world. Since the mid 1980's the US and Korean garment industries have set up shop in Guatemala. By 1992, more than 275 garment *maquila* factories were employing over 50,000 workers who assembled nearly \$350million in garments for export to the US and abroad.

Realizing the tremendous demand for labor, cheap wages and minimal legal restrictions, foreign investors have opened a new chapter in the Guatemalan economy. With financial help from USAID *maquiladoras* have been springing up all over Guatemala City and to some extent the countryside. To the average observer this may seem like a vast improvement over the traditional agricultural work, which has been at the heart of the oppressive economic structure in Guatemala for 500 years, particularly since the beginning of the coffee era in the late nineteenth century. While the average daily wage for *maquila* work is a step up from traditional agricultural work, there is nothing significantly liberating or beneficial about it....for most Guatemalans.

Recently, Kurt Peterson has written an excellent book, *The Maquiladora Revolution in Guatemala* (1992 Yale Unn. Printing Service). It is a thorough and passionate look at the status of the new sweatshops in Guatemala. Peterson's findings are phenomenal when articulating the depth of the oppressive nature of this industry. Even some of the investors admit to the consequences - one is quoted as saying, "When a young woman gets off the bus in Zone 12, she vanishes into the morass of factories and is often never seen again."

Rosa, one of the many that Peterson interviewed for his book, exemplifies the debilitating nature of *maquila* work. Rosa is permanently disabled due to just one and a half years of production work. Like most workers she sat for long periods of time with few or no breaks, nor access to potable water. Eventually her kidneys failed (partly due to not being able to go to the bathroom during work) and she had to quit before she turned 30. "What I fear is that thousands of women will suffer the same fate. And all for the sake of stupid clothing that Guatemalans never wear," she said.

Reported working conditions at factories are atrocious - few breaks, no ventilation, no first aid, inadequate heating or cooling systems, forced overtime and the continual threat of losing your job if production is not stepped up. Women and children are the primary victims of this burgeoning capitalist venture. According to Peterson, 30 to 40% of the *maquila* work force is under the age of 18. Close to one-fifth of the workers are under the age of 16, and in factories outside the capital as many as half the workers are minors, some as young as 6 years old.

Fundamentally women are the ones who suffer the most. Sexual harassment runs rampant, and physical abuse is frequent. In some factories women are beaten on the stomach every month to prevent pregnancy, which in the minds of the management would slow down production. The US Embassy says that these are false allegations since they claim that few women have complained to the General Inspector's Office. Few have complained there, but that is due to the fact that if you complain you are likely to lose your job. Another factor is that the General Inspector's Office excludes reports of all forms of sexual abuse by definition, unless the report of rape or violent molestation. Thus, thousands of Guatemalan women, possibly a whole generation, will be exploited and disabled in order to keep us all in style.

So why don't they organize, you ask? Well, this has been attempted, but not without cost. In most factories those found organizing will be harassed or fired. The biggest problem, however, is the competition with the *Solidarismo* movement. *Solidarismo* is an anti-union labor movement that began in Costa Rica as a way of undermining traditional labor movements. The movement seeks, in the words of one advocate, "to make capitalists out of workers as well as employees." Management will give simple benefits to *Solidarismo* workers if they do not threaten or question the power base of the industry. (for more info see Tom Barry & Deb Preusch's *AIFLD in Central America: Agents as Organizers*)

But if we stop buying these jeans and other articles of clothing, won't we be contributing to the devastating poverty in those countries? This is not the issue. What is more important is seeing the problem as a structural one that needs structural changes. Byron Morales, a union leader in Guatemala says, "Basically there is tremendous need for employment in Guatemala. The *maquila* industry gives a partial answer to his problem, but we need deep answers to our deep-rooted problems. The real answer to unemployment must begin with the redistribution of our most important asset: land." USAID officials dismiss this solution as a failed relic. However, as one journalist noted, "It is not that land reform has not been tried and failed in Guatemala. It is that the proponents of land reform have been tried and killed."

In order to help real land reform and other structural changes in Guatemala we can not continue to support the present *maquila* systems. We must challenge the corporate control of companies like Levi Stauss & Co., Liz Claborne, Phillip Van Heusen, GAP and McKids. One organization that is doing this is the US/Guatemalan Labor Education Project (c/o ACTWU-Chicago Joint Board, 333 S. Ashland Avenue, Chicago, Ill. 60607 phone 312-769-5038). They have been engaged in building solidarity with US citizens and labor groups to Guatemalan labor groups, as well as organizing campaigns to challenge the above mentioned companies. In addition to this we need to pressure Congress to limit AID funding that helps prop up "free trade zones" for these corporations. These are the demands that are coming from the people of Guatemala, demands that we need to honor instead of promoting fashionable poverty.

Suggested Reading

- *The Soft War: The Uses & Abuses of US Economic Aid in Central America*, Tom Barry & Deb Preusch.
- *The Sky Never Changes: Testimonies From the Guatemalan Labor Movement*, Karen Brandow & Thomas F. Reed.

- *The Maquiladora Revolution in Guatemala*, Kurt Peterson
- *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade and the Rights of Garment Workers*, edited by Andrew Ross
- *Workers of the World Undermined: American Labor's Role in US Foreign Policy*, Beth Sims
- *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA*, Rachel Kamel & Anya Hoffman

December 2000 observations and updates on *maquiladoras* in Guatemala

In December 2000 I had an opportunity to speak with UNSITRAGUA, one of the larger unions in Guatemala. They shared with me the two main areas of work for them in recent years have been with the banana workers union and sweatshop workers.

The banana workers struggle has been a long a brutal struggle for decades. In recent years it has become even more volatile because of renewed efforts to organize banana workers, which are some of the lowest paid workers in the country. One union organizer told us that it was common for workers to put in 15-18 hours, sometimes seven days a week.

The sweatshop workers in Guatemala have also been active for some time, beginning in the early 90's with an effort to unionize at a Phillip Van Heusen factory. It was a campaign that had significant support from abroad. A coordinated effort in the US was led by USGLEP. Eventually the workers won, but Phillip Van Heusen responded by shutting down the factory and moving production somewhere else. A hard lesson learned about the globalization of the economy.

UNISTRAGUA told us that there were roughly 800 known *maquiladoras* operating in Guatemala by 2000. Most of the factories were owned by Korean, US, or Guatemala companies. UNISTRAGUA said that the proliferation of sweatshops was in part due to the 1996 cease-fire agreement, which ended Guatemala's 36-year war and has created more space for foreign investors to do business. They also told us that a huge labor pool existed, since poverty and violence had displaced many rural people and drove them to the cities looking for a way to make a living.

The day after our initial meeting with UNSITRAGUA they invited us to accompany them to the courts, along with several workers who had been fired from a *maquiladora* for attempting to organize a union. Like most sweatshops, the workers we met were women who agreed to let us interview them after accomplishing what they had hoped to at the courts.

Each of them told us similar stories of long hours, little pay, poor conditions and some verbal and physical abuse. They told us that working 7 days a week was more common than not and that if you had medical problems the company didn't care. Rarely could you get time off to see a doctor and if you did leave work for an appointment quite often you were sent home for a week. None of these women had any formal education, but they all knew their rights and, more importantly, they were committed to justice.

After the interviews the UNSITRAGUA reps and I went to have lunch in zone 1. Carlos and I spoke at length about the possibility of developing some ongoing communication between workers in Grand Rapids and Guatemala. He seemed less than enthusiastic about the idea, so I asked if why. He told me that in recent years they have been contacted by numerous international groups around the issue of sweatshops, which he said, was a good thing. The problem, however, was that many of the delegations or solidarity groups seemed to lose interest unless there was some really scandalous story they could share

with their constituents. Carlos told me that some people were not interested in labor struggles if it was just poor working conditions, long hours and poverty wages. They wanted dirt on people, a Kathy Lee Gifford scandal. Carlos simply looked at me and said low wages are a scandal, working 70 hours a week and still not being able to have a decent standard of living was scandalous. He told me that the international community can not dictate what are bad labor practices and what are not. He said that working people would not tolerate these conditions in the US. He was right. Somehow we had framed the sweatshop issue in a Jerry Springer-like context. How bizarre does the abuse need to be before we pay any attention to it?

*Is That a Banana in Your Pocket?
The Politics of Cultural Imperialism and Corporate Misogyny*
Sept 1994

Last month I was riding my bike south on Plainfield Ave. and while waiting at an intersection I was assaulted by the message on one of the hundreds of billboards that clutter the Grand Rapids landscape. It was a Meijer ad celebrating the 50th anniversary of what is now marketed as the "perfect food"....Chiquita Bananas. To most people the thought of the "perfect food" elicits visions of banana splits, sliced bananas with cereal and every back packer's favorite, banana chips. What most people are not aware of are the profoundly political and historic implications of banana trafficking. This article will seek to discuss the political impact of banana production in regard the USA foreign policy, using Guatemala as a case study. I also hope to discuss the sexualization of bananas and its impact within the dominative culture.

The Tentacles of Corporate Control

Bananas originally come from Southeast Asia, but with the influence of colonial trade bananas then became a staple for Africans living on the Guinean coast. The European slave trade of Africans then brought this "slave food" to the Americas. Once a wealthy Bostonian and other US elite's found bananas a delicacy that set in motion the wheels of another capitalist venture.

Around the turn of the century the United Fruit Company (UFC), headed by Sam the banana-man Zemurray, brokered a deal with the then dictator of Guatemala, Manuel Cabrera. United Fruit was given hundreds of thousands of acres of land in exchange for the promise of constructing a transcontinental railroad in the "land of eternal springs". For nearly 40 years this agreement also meant that UFC enjoyed tax exception, cheap labor due to forced labor laws and the cooperation of the Guatemalan military in the event that banana workers might decide to be unappreciative and organize. The political clout of the UFC (also known as *El Pulpo* - the octopus) was not threatened until the 1944 Guatemalan revolution and the subsequent land reform laws.

The revolutionary, yet pro-capitalist, governments of Arevalo and Arbenz eliminated the forced labor laws and allowed labor organizing throughout the country. Although this upset the UFC it was land reform that initiated the first CIA led coup in the Western

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the ruling power of our country....it is the intelligent minorities which need to make use of propaganda continuously and systematically. Edward Bernays

Hemisphere. According to Jim Handy's recent book *Revolution in the Countryside*, "under the Agrarian Reform Law, land expropriations began in early 1953, and by August of that year close to 250,000 of its (UFC) 350,000 *manzanas* had been taken." (pg. 171) It should be noted however, that this was idle land, land not in use for production by the UFC. In addition the Arbenz government willingly compensated the UFC monetarily as it had done with all other land expropriations. This was a moot point for the UFC and its political elite's in Washington. Noam Chomsky states that there were other issues at hand, namely US hegemony. "A State Department official warned that Guatemala

'had become an increasing threat to the stability of Honduras and El Salvador. Its agrarian reform is a powerful weapon; its broad social program of aiding the workers and peasants in a victorious struggle against the upper classes and large foreign enterprises has a strong appeal to the populations of Central American neighbors where similar conditions prevail.'" (Year 501, pg.37)

Allies, Propaganda and "Operation Success"

Even before the UFC had land expropriated, plans were underway to dismantle Guatemala's experiment with democracy. Numerous books have been written about the litany of UFC's bedfellows within the US government (see box), so let's just say that it gets very gray when attempting to determine the difference between corporate and government interests.

In order to assert US hegemony in Guatemala a variety of allies were recruited, most notably the father of modern PR, Edward Bernays. Bernays was hired to boost UFC's public image and pave the way for a USA invasion. Bernays was responsible for establishing a "Middle America Information Bureau" to supply company "facts and figures to American and Latin journalists." In the early 1950's Bernays was able to convince the corporate media that the "Reds" were taking over in Guatemala. "He persuaded the New York Herald Tribune to send a reporter, Fitzhugh Turner, to Guatemala in February 1950. Turner's series, called 'Communism in the Caribbean', was based primarily on conversations with United Fruit Company officials in Guatemala; was splashed across the paper's front page for five consecutive days." (Bitter Fruit, pg. 85) Soon the rest of the big

United Fruit/US Government Connections

John Foster Dulles - US Sec. of State - former lawyer for UFC
Allen Dulles - Director of the CIA - Like brother had done legal work for UFC. Together they organized "Operation Success"
John Moors Cabot - Sec. of State for Inter-American Affairs, brother of Thomas Cabot, the pres. of UFC.
Walter Bedell Smith - Under Sec. of State - served as liaison in Operation Success, then became board member of UFC.
Senator Henry Cabot Lodge - US representative to the UN - UFC share holder. Had on various occasions received money from UFC for speeches in the Senate.
Ann Whitman - personal sec. to Pres. Eisenhower - Married to UFC public relations chief.
Robert Hill - US Ambassador to Costa Rica - Collaborates on Operation Success, then became board member of UFC.
John Peurifoy - US Ambassador to Guatemala, known as the butcher of Greece for his past diplomatic service in Athens. Spoke no Spanish.

* excerpted from Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire, Volume III - Century of the Wind*

newspapers got in on the act and sent journalists to Guatemala "to document what was said to be the advance of Marxism there". Bernays then set up the group tours in Guatemala to further his propaganda campaign. "Between early 1952 and the Spring of 1954, Bernays put together at least 5 two-week 'fact-finding' trips to Central America, with as many as ten newsmen on each one." (Bitter Fruit, pg. 87)

Once the work had been done at home, attention could be given elsewhere. A CIA transmitter was mounted on top of the US Embassy in Guatemala so as to project the "proper messages" to the people. The CIA also recruited Guatemalan Catholic Bishop Mariano Arellano to pen a pastoral letter that exhorted the populace to rise "against communism, enemy of God and the Fatherland". The CIA facilitated this ecclesiastical scandal by dropping the bishop's message out of 30 of its planes. Other Latin American client states lent their support, like Somoza's Nicaragua, which allowed invasion training to take place on its soil. Therefore, in the June of 1954 the CIA led invasion, known as Operation Success, ended Guatemala's 10 years of democracy. Colonel Castillo Armas, who was flown in on the US embassy plane was promptly declared dictator. He quickly rolled back any and all gains of the popular movements; eliminating unions, land reform and repressing popular struggles. More importantly this event signaled to the hemisphere and the rest of the world that where US corporate interests and political hegemony are at stake, no one could seriously threaten those interests.

Sexual politics of Bananas

The billboard I mentioned at the beginning included the figure of the Chiquita mascot, a characterization of former Hollywood actress Carmen Miranda. Miranda, a Portuguese born singer, was recruited by 20th Century Fox's Darryl Zanuck to contribute to Hollywood's own "Good Neighbor Policy". Miranda, as some may remember, was a tall slender *Latina* who often wore outrageous clothes with fruit and flower filled hats. She became the feminine symbol of Latin America "and next to coffee was Brazil's chief export", says Uruguayan historian Eduardo Galeano. Miranda's character as the Chiquita banana woman was to the banana industry what Juan Valdez is to the coffee industry, a bastardization of cultural norms. Not many Latin American women look like Miranda, their skin is generally darker and their economic reality does not afford them the opportunities that Carmen had. What is most interesting about the Chiquita banana woman character, was that she was half woman half banana, and like bananas Latin American women would be devoured.

When huge banana plantations were first set up in Latin America men were the primary source of labor used in production. However, a plantation made workforce always has its effects on women. Eventually company towns would spring up, since most of the laborers were seasonal. This always meant the "need" to forcibly recruit women as sex workers. In Cynthia Enloe's book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, she starkly documents this impact that these export driven economies have on the local populace, especially women. She also says that "the feminization of agriculture - this, leaving small scale farming to women, usually without giving them training, equipment or finance - has always been part and parcel of the masculinization of mining and banana plantations." (pgs 136-37) Behind every all-male banana plantation stands scores of women performing unpaid domestic and production labor. Since automation has entered the banana plantation dynamic, women too have been embraced as paid workers.

While visiting a banana plantation on the Atlantic coast of Honduras in 1992, I was amazed by the almost endless sea of banana trees that surrounded you on both sides of the road while the bus rolled past the small housing hamlets that were constructed by the company. Women now made up 100% of the banana-packing workforce, minus the supervisors. Women spend 10-15 hours a day, sometimes 7 days a week, sorting through bananas and then soaking them in a highly toxic substance. In my one-hour visit to the packing station I had 6 different women ask me, in desperation, to marry them so they could go to the US and leave their misery behind. I never felt angrier in my life at that point, not with the women, but because this transnational corporation was literally devouring these women's lives.

At home bananas are marketed to appeal to housewives who shop and mothers who care about their children's nutrition. In our imperialist culture the women whose lives are devoured by our manufactured consumer need is little known. What is known are phrases like "is that a banana in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me", a sexualized, fetishized phrase that has become a part of our misogynist culture. It disgusts me that the fruit that is casually referred to as a man's penis is the same fruit, that by the nature of its production, enslaves and slowly eats away at the lives of countless women.

When sharing this information with people I often here the response "at least it provides these people with jobs". This type of response shows little understanding of the structural or root issues at hand. Historically people have been forced off their land by big business. If they were not forced off their land the companies made it difficult for

people to sell their products in the market because the big companies could sell it cheaper or the governments of these countries started to import food from the US that undermined the local economy and diet. US taxpayers' money has been used all throughout this process of destroying the local economies and creating dependence amongst the local populace. People work on banana plantations because most of the time there isn't anything else. When people have tried to regain land that had been taken or tried to revive the local economy they have been raped, tortured or murdered by US trained and funded death squads. So let's think twice before we give the usual privileged, elitist response and let's work for economic justice and solidarity with banana workers worldwide.

Bananas and the Environment

"From 1989 to mid-1992, there were over 75 documented incidents of pesticide pollution killing massive wildlife populations. In 1990, for instance, contamination by American Cyanamid's insecticide terbufos killed one million fish and ruined the drinking water in the Barra de Matina on the Atlantic Coast of Honduras. The coral reef off Honduras's Caribbean shore is now about 90% dead as a result of pesticide run-off and sedimentation, principally from the banana plantations. In addition to massive fish, lobster, and shrimp kills, thousands of acres of former banana lands have been rendered irreversibly damaged by excessive chemical contamination."

* excerpted from Daniel Faber's *Environment Under Fire*

- *Roots of Rebellion: Land & Hunger in Central America*, Tom Barry
- *Doing Business with the Dictators: A Political History of United Fruit in Guatemala 1899-1944*, Paul Dosal
- *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala 1944-1954*, Jim Handy
- *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, Stephen Schlesinger & Stephen Kinzer
- *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*, by Cynthia Enloe

Luis Palau: Bringing the Nations to Christ.....and Under Control

Nov. 1994

To many, Grand Rapids, Michigan is known as the City of Churches. With a population of just over 190,000, Grand Rapids boasts an astonishing 650 churches. That's roughly 1 church for every 300 people. These ecclesiastical statistics, however, are not the only thing that this Michigan City can boast. Grand Rapids is home to the Christian Reformed Church's North American headquarters and its largest college in the country, Calvin College. More importantly the city is also a veritable breeding ground for religious right zealots. We have numerous churches, especially Assemblies of God, who host Operation Rescue rallies that have given birth to significant violence directed against local women's clinics and Planned Parenthood. Zondervan Publishing Co., which has produced books by Ollie North and Dan Quayle, resides here. Another publisher, Baker Book House, recently released a book by Nicaraguan Minister of Education Humberto Belli, an anti-Sandinista intellectual who had his first book financed by the CIA and the Puebla Institute. For the more high-browed Christian we also have the Acton Institute, a sister organization to the Washington based Institute for Religion & Democracy (IRD), that promotes the marriage of capitalism and Christianity. Last, but not least, Grand Rapids is also the home stomping grounds for the "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" Amway co-founders Rich DeVos and Jay Van Andel, whom Forbes magazine listed as tied for 5th place as the wealthiest MEN in the US. With this line-up of conservative Christians it is no wonder and no surprise that in September some 500 churches and several local businesses invited Argentine-born evangelist Luis Palau to town for a crusade.

Next to Billy Graham, Luis Palau is possibly the most globally known evangelist today. Latin America is his area of high notoriety, but in the past 2 decades he has made significant inroads in the US, Europe and even the former Soviet Union. So why would Christians in West Michigan, an area that is staunchly Christian/conservative, bring this Oregon based evangelist to town?

I went to hear him one of the nights he was in Grand Rapids and I must say that I was not impressed. Palau is not a flashy preacher nor particularly good with words. He does not strongly play on your emotions, therefore not attracting a large Pentecostal crowd. In fact, I found Palau to be down right boring, but that did not deter an average 8,000 people (mostly White) per night who came out to hear him. In many ways the event was purely entertainment, with a 100 head choir, a tonight show type band and an MC who got people excited by asking who was gonna win the football game that weekend. They had a "Blind" section for the visually impaired, as well as book displays and other tables by groups such as Compassion International. What was important about Palau, I believe,

was that he represented the world vision of the power structure of West Michigan.

Palau is "clean" by certain evangelistic standards. He has no publicly known past sexual blemishes, nor has he been investigated for fraud or tax evasion. Palau even states that he is disgusted with the type of TV evangelists that have given his work a black-eye. Palau is an evangelist in the traditional Christian bible believing sense. He believes that accepting Jesus as your personal savior is paramount, but he also believes in capitalism and nurturing political connections when serves his purposes. Thus, more than anything, Palau affirmed the status quo attitudes of many West Michigan residents, especially in business and political circles.

The other reason that Palau may have been invited to the area was to theologically help assimilate the growing Latino/a population. West Michigan has one of the largest migrant populations in the country. Every year thousands of migrant workers come the area to work in the fields before heading back to Mexico or some other southern USA state. While Palau was in town he had 2 exclusively Spanish crusade nights out of 10 days here. As someone who has worked with Central American refugees in the area since 1987, it is quite probable that the conservative majority Christians here do not want their city infected with liberation theologies from base Christian communities that are in exile or traditional non-Christian religions that many from Latin America still practice. Surely we welcome their cheap labor, but we do not want any bothersome and disruptive ideologies.

The local coverage in the *Grand Rapids Press* certainly seemed to reflect the status quo message of the crusade. Their headlines gave an uncritical, almost applauding posture; "Ambassador with a commission arrives in GR", "America desperately needs God", Palau tells crowd", "Palau crusade achieved most of its goals". Again Palau was portrayed as nothing more than this unblemished evangelist bringing the message of the gospel. Nowhere in the *GR Press* articles is Palau's deeper political connections touched on, and on only one occasion does the local monopoly paper refer to Palau's overseas adventures.. Palau and his activities have been reported in over a dozen article in *Christianity Today* during the past 20 years. During that time Palau was in Somoza's Nicaragua, where, unlike the community of Solentiname, a Nicaraguan Christian based community under persecution, he was welcome with open arms. In 1977, Palau was greeted and accompanied on his crusade by Colombian president Alfonso Michelsen, not particularly known for being a human rights advocate. Also in the 70's Palau visited Bolivia with the help of an organization known as Food For the Hungry (FFH). According to Sara Diamond's book *Spiritual Warfare*, FFH "argues that poverty is rooted in individuals' belief systems and by extension, in cultures supposedly conducive to underdevelopment and poverty." (Diamond pg 226) The founder of FFH, Larry Ward, was also with Palau on that trip. Ward, a former overseas director of World Vision "was known to have a close relationship with South Vietnamese and US military leaders." In 1982, Palau brought his crusade to Paraguay, under the brutal dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. According to recently released documents there was massive execution of civilians during Stroessner's reign. (see *Covert Action Quarterly*, Fall 1994). Stroessner's government gave Palau his approval to distribute 100,000 bibles and study courses to children nationwide.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Palau was crusading in the Soviet Union. In 1989, Palau was said to have brought the first open-air evangelism of its kind. The *Christianity*

Today article quoted Kent Hill as a Soviet specialist who was pleased with the outcome of Palau's crusade. Kent Hill is with IRD, who I mentioned earlier. In 1992, Palau was in Mexico and was given the title "Distinguished Visitor" by Mexican neoliberal president Carlos Salinas. In Mexico that title has previously been given only to the Catholic Pope and the Dali Lama.

Probably the most revealing article was a May, 1983 interview that *Christianity Today* did with Palau. In my mind it clarifies the theology and politics of this crusader. Palau had just returned from Guatemala when this interview was conducted. *Christianity Today* asked Palau "How much control does President Rios Montt have of the army? (Palau) To turn a nation around as he has, knowing Latin Americans and how independent we are, that has got to be the helping hand of God. Generally, it appears he's given the right instructions urging the people to do the right thing, and putting it on the basis of righteousness. In the first weeks in office he said, 'I will not lie, I do not cheat, and I do not abuse my powers.'" For anybody who knows anything about the history of Guatemala this statement is utterly scandalous.

Efrain Rios Montt became president in 1982 via a military coup. During his 18 months in power Montt presided over a genocidal campaign waged against the Indigenous and poor of that country. Americas Watch documented the atrocities in which women were frequently raped and children were bayoneted to death or smashed against rocks. Even one of Montt's supporters in the church El Verbo said, "The Army doesn't massacre the Indians. It massacres demons, and the Indians are demon possessed; they are communists." (Diamond pg. 166)

Some of Palau's connections have also helped to further these repressive policies in Guatemala and elsewhere. Frequently when Palau travels he is accompanied by a representative from Bible Literature International (BLI). In the early 1980's BLI helped to distribute hundreds of thousands of bibles to army personnel and civil patrol units in Guatemala, for what was known as "Operation Whole Armor", another counterinsurgency tactic developed by Rios Montt. BLI, which began in 1923, has been distributing bibles and bible literature throughout the globe as an attack communism, most notably in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In El Salvador they are said to have sent bibles to everyone in the Salvadoran telephone directory. As former president of Overseas Crusades, one of the largest US-based missionary organizations, Palau was able to utilize their connections as well. According to Sara Diamond, Overseas Crusades "said that at one time virtually all of its personnel were being debriefed by the CIA. Debriefings included questions by the CIA on the internal politics of remote Third World regions and detailed questions on Indigenous religious and political leaders." (*Spiritual Warfare* pg. 207) So much for being a clean evangelist.

On the 100th anniversary of Protestantism in Guatemala (1982), Montt invited as the main speaker Luis Palau, who predicted that Guatemala would be the first majority Protestant country in Latin America. In many ways that was not just a prediction, but a promise. More than any other Latin American country Palau and his ministry team works diligently to spread their message in Guatemala. Guatemala is the distribution center for Palau's radio and TV shows in Latin America. At least 17 radio stations and one TV station runs Palau's message within the country. Palau also has a newspaper column in one of Guatemala's largest dailies *La Prensa Libre*, where it is published twice a week. Palau also publishes 2 magazines *Cruzada* and *Continente Nuevo*. This all has a

tremendous impact on the rise of evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Guatemala. Some estimates say that 35-40% of the population is now Protestant. Many analysts attribute this rise to what is referred to as salvation theology, a theology that focuses on personal salvation and hopes for a better life in the next world. In many ways much of Guatemala is ripe for this type of theology. In a country that has one of the worst human rights records in the Western Hemisphere this type of theology has a certain emotional and psychological appeal. As a way of dealing with the incredible pain and suffering that so many Guatemalans have endured, it is quite understandable that huge numbers of people would embrace this pie in the sky world-view. But lets not kid ourselves about the role that the US funded Guatemalan military has in helping this process along.

During the scorched-earth campaign under the regime of Rios Montt many "model villages" were set up as an attempt to pacify the areas that had been traditionally more sympathetic to the guerrilla movement. Many of the Palau-type evangelicals were invited in to help pacify the people, often using USAID food to win them over, in what Montt called his "Beans and Guns" program.

In the recent elections in Guatemala, Rios Montt was elected to Congress (only 20% of the population voted). He attempted to change the law that would have allowed him to run for president in the Nov. 1995 elections. At present the Guatemalan constitution bars anyone from running for president who has participated in previous military coups. Montt was unsuccessful in his attempts to change the law, but ran a candidate that finished second in the voting with the slogan "Portillo for President, Montt to Power". (see page)

For me all this background on Palau harkens back to my reasoning for bringing Palau to Grand Rapids. He could preach a gospel of passivity and tolerance to structural injustice to the Latino/a community. In the end Palau fulfills his role as a modern day crusader. Unlike the crusaders of old who butchered you on the spot if there was rejection of their plan, Palau has sophisticated his approach of theological imposition and imperialistic control. Palau's invitation and huge support is in sharp contrast to the visit by Adolfo Perez Esquivel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and author of *Christ in a Pancho*, who came to town in 1983 and received a marginal welcome. I guess you need to be an endorser of mass murder to gain the approval of the larger religious community here in Grand Rapids.

Suggested Reading

- *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America*, Phillip Berryman
- *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*, Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford & Susan D. Rose
- *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right*, Sara Diamond
- *Protestantism in Guatemala*, Virginia Garrard-Burnett
- *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*, David Stoll

Speak Spanish, Sell American!

Local Ad Agency puts on a Business Seminar for Investing/Exploiting in Mexico

June 1995

Since the beginning of 1995 it has been no secret to most that the Mexican economy has taken a turn for the worst. That is to say that most Mexicans, who are not included in economic planning, are the ones suffering from the current economic crisis. The several dozen billionaires and other corporate hacks are not worried about where their next meal will come from. The situation is like this - the peso has been devaluated (again), strict conditioned international loans have been given, and there are pressures to privatize more and more of the Mexican economy. Sound familiar? It should. In many ways this is a textbook example of the USA government led structural adjustment programs that the IMF and the World Bank have been forcing on the majority of the developing countries around the world. Then again maybe this doesn't sound familiar, because the corporate media has chosen to blame Mexico's woes on their government's incompetence or societal backwardness and not the earlier IMF imposed economic plan.

A similar failure of the corporate media was its failure to report on the recent Chase Bank memo directed at the Mexican government on the Chiapas problem and a favorable investment climate. In a February 1 issue of the *CounterPunch* newsletter we are given excerpts of an internal memo from Chase Bank. The memo says "There are three areas in which the current monetary crisis can undermine political stability in Mexico. The first is in Chiapas, the second in the upcoming elections and the third is the role of the labor unions, their relationship to the government and the governing PRI." The memo goes on to say "While Chiapas, in our opinion, does not pose a fundamental threat to Mexican political stability, it is perceived to be so by many in the investment community. The government will need to eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate their effective control of the national territory and of security policy." It seems clear to me that from the reporting by the justice-based press that the Zedillo government is taking to heart Chase's suggestion about eliminating the Zapatistas.

An April 21 article from the *National Catholic Reporter* states that "on April 7, Roger Maldonado, from the Chiapas human rights organization CONPAZ, documented abuses in at least 20 towns and villages under army control. The violations include torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention and rape." As to the issue of "labor unions and their relationship to the government," again we have to consult the justice-based press since the corporate press continues to wax eloquently about the wonders of NAFTA.

To most workers in Mexico the devaluation of the peso was no surprise. According to numerous studies done by the Inter-hemispheric Resource Center based in New Mexico "the average wage in Mexico has stagnated or declined over the past 15 years, unemployment has risen and the cost of living has increased." In addition to this, the climate for labor organizing has become very repressive, especially in USA run companies like GM, Motorola and Nike. Fortunately the bleak economic picture is not going unnoticed in some sectors of the US left. As we go to print there is a labor conference in Detroit sponsored by Labor Notes that is focusing on the consequences of NAFTA and the prospects for US/Mexican labor solidarity.

On our side of the Rio Grande things are also not as lovely as was predicted by pundits with the passage of NAFTA. Some government and corporate claims have stated that NAFTA has created 100,000 jobs in the USA in 1994. That claim however, is being challenged by the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). An IPS study could only pinpoint 535 jobs attributable to NAFTA. On the other side of the ledger, the

number of jobs lost to the trade treaty appears to be in the tens of thousands. "The US Labor Department says that nearly 13,000 workers have applied for NAFTA-related Transitional Adjustment Assistance (TAA), but the AFL-CIO labor organization reports 47,000 applicants in the first nine months of NAFTA operations." (*Latinamerica press*) According to the IPS study, the apparel industry, with one-third of the applicants in the TAA program, was hardest hit by NAFTA displacement. Fifty-one percent of all job loss was attributable to plant relocation to Mexico and another 21 percent to increased NAFTA competition.

Eat Mexican Food

Listen to Mexican Music

Don't Give a Shit about Most Mexicans

In March I attended a seminar organized by a local ad agency (Burglar Advertising) on some of the benefits and how to of investment in Mexico. The seminar took place at San Chez restaurant, complete with "ethnic" food, music, and little name tags that said *me llamo* (my name is). The entire morning was filled with speakers that ranged from economists and investors, to ad people. Needless to say the majority of those in attendance were Anglo businessmen.

The tone of the seminar was set by Comerica Bank economist David Litman. His talk was entitled "After NAFTA, GATT and the Psycho peso: What Next?" Mr. Litman's job was to basically calm the storm that might have been in the minds of current and potential investors since the recent crash of the peso. Like most economists he gave us a whole litany of facts and figures that seemed meaningless. In the end he said "the bailout will only prolong the inevitable growth. In the real world Mexico has done well. The Salinas program set the stage for future expansion." If by future expansion he means greater control by transnational corporations in the region, then he is right. This of course leaves out the majority of the population that will drown in poverty or join the ranks of the Zapatistas and their allies.

Next we were entertained by Andrzej Rattinger, publisher of ADCEBRA, an advertising and marketing journal in Mexico "for establishing the Mexican view of American Marketing." This former employee of Bayer and Kodak talked about the potential for marketing in Mexico and how "most of the Mexicans are waiting for your product." He shared an interesting image with us on the possibilities of product growth, even in a country that he said had 53 million people earning between \$120-500 per year. "On highway 95 in Mexico you have two men, one is driving a new 1995 car, the other a donkey. Both are in two completely different economic brackets, but both may be drinking Coke, wearing Levi's jeans and listening to the same radio station." That, he said, is the importance of "Speaking Spanish, but Selling American."

The founder of Burglar Advertising, Marcel Burglar, spoke about an ad campaign he did for the Asgrow Seed Company. This seed company wanted to introduce new tomato seeds into the Mexcian farm industry. This new type of seed would be for northern Mexican climate and would give the tomato a long shipping and shelf life. Obviously these seeds are designed for the export market. As an ad man he talked about the cultural education that he learned in attempting to develop a campaign that would speak to Mexican cultural heritage. This is all quite fine except he did not address how the increased agro-export model is unsustainable for most economies, nor did he address the

fact that it will hurt most of the small *ejido* farmers who can not compete with these large scale farming operations (like the ones targeted by this ad campaign).

The only two Latino presenters spoke last and also echoed the words of the previous speakers. They showed us some car commercials made in Mexico for the Chrysler LaBaron. Mind you they were trying to sensitize us to the culture. The commercial was filled with elite images, and a woman waiting to be picked up and taken away by her man. This almost Victorian display did not seem to reflect the cultural sensitivity about most Mexicans that I have met either here or in Mexico. It was obvious that the target market was the upwardly mobile members of Mexican society, not the masses of indigenous or *mestizos* that make up the bulk of the Mexican population.

For me the seminar was a clear demonstration of cultural and economic imperialism that some in the business continue to display. Not once did anyone ask the question about what our responsibility is to promote free trade systems that honor people's needs, respects the environment and fosters solidarity among the people of North America. One way to make this happen would be to investigate local business/government efforts that take advantage of the NAFTA model. It is with these examples that I believe we can reach a broader audience, since it makes the local connection about the real effects of these policies. People understand the local connection and will organize around it. Focusing only on the multinational corporations can sometimes leave people feeling overwhelmed. However we do it, it is high time we hold businesses and governments accountable for their policies at home and abroad.

Suggested Reading

- *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform*, Dan LaBotz
- *The Annexation of Mexico: From the Aztecs to the IMF*, John Ross
- *Runaway America: US Jobs and Factories on the Move*, by Harry Browne and Beth Sims
- *Trading Freedom: How Free Trade Affects Our Lives, Work and Environment*, edited by John Cavanagh

Image Brokering: PR Firm Hired to Put Spin on Human Rights in Guatemala

July 1995

A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilizations.

Jorge Videla, President of Argentina 1976

Earlier this year we were given some information in the corporate media about the CIA involvement in human rights abuses in Guatemala. Several weeks later Guatemala has again fallen into the abyss of International coverage of the BIG Press. This is in spite of the fact that human rights abuses continue, impressive land occupations are occurring and that the country is gearing up for presidential elections in the fall. Because of the corporate media's blatant omissions one gets the impression that things are just peachy in Guatemala. Unfortunately for citizens of Guatemala and the US the Guatemalan military is not taking any chances on the world's perception that things are getting any better.

In May, Washington PR firm R. Thompson & Co. was hired for "\$420,000 to conduct a six-month public relations effort," according to a May 15 issue of *CounterPunch*. "The funds will allegedly improve lines of communication in the US so the government's story and the truth are fully explained, said a letter from the firm to Defense Minister Gen. Mario Enriquez." Enriquez initially said the money that was being provided to the PR firm was from "private companies". He later admitted that the companies are all owned by the Guatemalan military. The firm of R. Thompson & Co. plans to arrange visits to Guatemala by US government officials. Outrageous you say? Well this is not the first time that Guatemala has had help in its attempt to cover up what Americas Watch called "Guatemala's systematic campaign of terror and human rights abuses."

In 1979, when the Lucas Garcia regime was implementing its counterinsurgency war against the civilian population, they hired the Hannaford Company to influence some within the US government and the corporate media's view of what was going on at the time. (see *Sultans of Sleaze: Public Relations and the Media*, by Joyce Nelson, pg. 40) All throughout the 1980's and even the early part of the 1990's Guatemala continued to hire PR firms to bolster their image, especially in the US.

According to a study done by the Center for Public Integrity *named The Torturers' Lobby*, during 1991 alone several elements within Guatemala had hired 5 different PR groups to lobby for them in Washington. (Patton, Boggs, and Blow; Schuette & Associates Intl.; Schuette & Associates; Reichler & Soble; and MWW Strategic Communications) These 5 PR firms received a combined amount of \$475,000 from military and non-military sources in Guatemala. This PR lobbying was an attempt to reactivate the \$2 million of military aid that was suspended by the US government, even though both Americas Watch and Physicians for Human Rights sharply criticized the Guatemala government that year in a report entitled Guatemala Getting Away With Murder. The report said: "Government forces continue to commit torture, murder, and disappearances with impunity." Now with the help of R. Thompson & Co., an old hand at congressional lobbying, the Guatemalan military hopes to regain its good favor with Washington.

In 1991-92 R. Thompson & Co. was also hired by the Republic of Turkey for \$400,000 to put a spin on their international image. Here the stakes were higher, since the potential US foreign aid was listed at \$804 million for fiscal 1991. Robert Thompson, who knows his way around Washington, (he was Deputy Director of Legislative Affairs in the Reagan administration) called upon some of his old pals who were questioning the integrity of Turkey. The PR firm lobbied several influential members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, including Michigan Democrat Carl Levin. The aid eventually went through even though a 1992 Amnesty International report entitled Turkey: Torture, Extrajudicial Executions, Disappearances, said that "no practical or legislative steps had been taken and the already large volume of credible torture allegations had, if anything, increased." The report added: "Systematic practice of torture continues throughout Turkey."

If the PR firms have their way we will all believe, as the tourist industry has many believing, that Guatemala is a paradise. Don't believe the hype. More importantly don't let Congress believe it when they receive slick material from R. Thompson & Co. showering praises on the government of Guatemala for "embracing democracy". Unlike

what the Sprite commercial says, in this case, image is everything, death is nothing, the policy makers obey the image brokers.

Suggested Reading

- *Sultans of Sleaze: Public Relations and the Media*, Joyce Nelson
- *The Torturers' Lobby: How Human Rights-Abusing Nations Are Represented in Washington*, Pamela Brogan
- *Toxic Sludge is Good For You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, John Stauber & Sheldon Rampton
- *PR! A Social History of Spin*, Stuart Ewen

Resurgent Mayan Identity: Human Rights, Elections, and Popular Organizing in Guatemala

Jan. 1996

It was Saturday afternoon in Chichi when we arrived. This was market day where the human activity resembled that of an ant colony. Everyone was busy buying and selling, trading and bargaining. The economic activity of this market economy is radically different from the one that we are used to in the US. It is more of a social event than anything else. Most people who are displaying their wares either made them or grew them. Food clearly dominates the items for sale, thus creating a large potluck atmosphere with people eating and sharing all day long. The smells of the *comedores* and the sight of *tipicas* bring great pleasure to the senses, senses that are deadened in the standard supermarket of the North, filled with plastic, preservative, and a multitude of products disconnected from their makers. It is in this vibrant, dynamic setting that the new party members brought their message.

We arrived accompanying members of the newly formed political party Frente Democratico Nueva Guatemala. We were invited to accompany them since the majority of candidates are popular movement organizers who have been on the death squad lists for years and because the government has labeled them an extension of the armed resistance movement. This is a standard tactic used by repressive governments against new parties that advocate anything other than business as usual. This discrediting label did not seem to take effect here in Chichi. The people swamped the pickup truck we were riding in, all extending a hand out to get the literature that was being passed out. Within 30 minutes the flyers and calendars that were being distributed were gone. At first we thought that this was an aberration. Maybe people were taking flyers because it was free or because literature was hard to come by in these rural communities. Our speculations were quickly dismissed when two other party groups arrived passing out their respective flyers. People did not swarm their trucks nor struggle to grab the paper with outstretched hands. While we watched these parties flounder on the street, Maria, a Mayan woman with the Frente, began to speak over a loudspeaker.

People gathered around to hear her powerful words. She spoke with conviction and clarity about the dreams and desires of her people, but she also talked about how her party members have been fighting for justice alongside these people for years. That is

why the crowds listened intently and that is why they rushed to take the flyers. All of this was not clear to me at first, because Maria spoke to the crowd initially in Quiche. This was another clear distinction between the Frente and the other parties, they always had local representatives who spoke the local language. Maria did not use much political rhetoric nor did she make idle promises. She spoke as she has spoken for years, about the demand for an end to murder, an end to the disappearance, an end to poverty, and an end to impunity. Only then will the people be able to determine what kind of future they will have.

This scene, like many others i witnessed, reflected the political space that was opening up in Guatemala. A space that was not given to them, but one that they made for themselves. I arrived in Guatemala 3 weeks before the elections on November 12. My intention was to meet with as many people as possible, to gather information, to work on a video about human rights, and to observe the elections. The following is some of the information and experiences of my trip.

Popular Movements and Political Repression

As was mentioned before the public activity of the popular movements is at an all time high. Every time I go back to Guatemala new groups have formed. Some of them form to fill a void in the popular base or to challenge some of the faults of the existing groups. Notable, are the increase of women's groups and indigenous groups. The women's groups are more and more challenging the machismo of the *ladino* and indigenous societies. They have learned from their own experience and that of other Central American women that their issues cannot be subordinate to the revolution. The indigenous groups are also refusing to allow *ladinos* to set the political tone in a country that has its own form of apartheid, with 60% of the indigenous population still having no effective political representation at the government level. Plus the indigenous groups also do not want to lose their own cultural identity within the national identity, whether that is a totalitarian identity or a nationalist identity.

One of the newest indigenous groups is CONIC, a *campesino*-based organization that is fighting for land rights by challenging the traditional property system in the courts, but mostly through land occupations. CONIC was born out of the 500 years campaign that has existed in Guatemala formally since the late 1980g's. Their main objective, aside from autonomy, is to reclaim land that was once theirs. This they believe is fundamental to rebuilding a new society. An enlarged statement on one of their organizational brochures says "The struggle for land, is a struggle for life and peace."

Another area of increased organizing is with the repopulated communities. These groups consist of communities that were either refugees in southern Mexico since the early 1980g's or internal refugees who were displaced from their villages and survived in the highland regions. i had an opportunity to spend time with both, once internal (*Los Cimientos*) and external refugees (*Nuevo Mexico* in the south coast). Each community was dealing with the lack of sufficient community resources, children adjusting to unfamiliar places and tensions with surrounding communities. At the same time they are essential to the foundation for a new society based upon their experience and ability to survive under extreme circumstances.

Overcoming Impunity

Even with the tremendous political space that has been created by the popular sectors, human rights violations still mar the political landscape in Guatemala. It is in the area of human rights that I spent most of my time, specifically with the group CERJ. This organization, which was born out of the need to resist the forced civil patrol duty of indigenous men that was instituted during Rios Montt's reign of terror, has now become one of the most outspoken defenders of human rights.

Most of my time was spent between documenting the testimonies of people who had been victims of human rights abuses or witnesses to them, as well as accompanying members of the organization when traveling about since they are constant targets of military repression. In both instances the video camera I brought with was a tremendous asset. One incident that we documented is particularly noteworthy, since it demonstrates the type of repression that most of the groups like CERJ must deal with on a daily basis. Just days after accompanying CERJ members who were campaigning for the Frente in Chiche, a woman and her three children were strangled to death in that same village. This alone was abominable, but to make matters worse the murderers then put up posters throughout the town accusing CERJ of committing the murders. Upon discovering this we went to Chiche to make a public declaration against this defamation of CERJ. The intention of course was to create confusion amongst the villagers, but the murderers made a fundamental mistake, the defamation was written in Spanish in a community where most of the inhabitants could not read and only spoke Quiche. The attempt at character assassination was also a failure since CERJ has won the trust of most villagers by their years of solidarity with Mayan brothers and sisters.

The rest of the country was experiencing similar forms of terrorism. In early October the military entered the community *Aurora 8 de Octubre*, in Xaman, Alta Verapaz. This was a clear violation of the terms of agreement between repopulated communities and the government that were signed in 1993. When the community members confronted the soldiers, the soldiers opened fire killing 11 people and wounding another 25. This event, which received some international attention, affirmed the analysis of the human rights groups in the country....that some things are not getting better. In fact, most of the groups who have been documenting the abuses said that there have been more human rights violations during the year and a half of President Carpio (the former human rights ombudsman) than during the years of Jorge Serrano. Serrano, the previous president of Guatemala, was forced to flee the country after suspending the constitution and plundering the national treasury. According to the families and Relatives of the Disappeared group, GAM, some 1,433 human rights abuses were documented in 1994. This includes murders, disappearances, death threats, and detentions. In the first 6 months of 1995, GAM had documented over 700 abuses, thus keeping pace with the previous year's numbers. Still, the major contention that surrounds the issue of human rights is impunity. Everyone knows who is committing the crimes and virtually nothing is being done to stop them. Even the UN, which came out with their 3rd report (early Nov. 1995) in as many years on human rights in Guatemala said "...no one is prosecuted, especially as it applies to the government."

Vote....if you can

Historically voting has been somewhat of a formality in Guatemala, since most everyone knows that the military runs the show. People either vote out of fear or not at all

for lack of faith in the system. Abstention generally claims the majority of votes. This election proved slightly different from the very beginning, not due to the electoral process but to several factors that made the privileged few very uncomfortable.

On October 20, the anniversary of the 1944 revolution, people participated in the usual demonstrations and public rallies, calling on people to reclaim the spirit of that revolution. With the election being just weeks away it added anew sense of revolutionary purpose in the popular movement, especially with the newly formed FDNG. However, a new popular party was not the only thing that motivated people in these tense days.

To add to the excitement and expectations of many people, president Carpio allowed something that most people did not expect. The remains of one of the revolutionary presidents, Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, were returned to Guatemala with much fanfare. The FDNG took advantage of Guzman's return by calling it a "symbol of the return to revolutionary democracy in Guatemala." This helped set the tone for the Frente as they scrambled to make up for the limited time for campaign organizing.

It was also not only an issue of time for the Frente but also the lack of resources that the "traditional" parties enjoyed. The *Prensa Libre* said that both PAN and the FRG overwhelmingly outspent the FDNG on election expenses. The money spent on election day alone for party observers, transportation and other expenses were as follows: PAN Q476,100, FRG Q250,000, and the FDNG Q15,000. The FDNG could also not run the types of campaign commercials on the TV and radio that most of the other parties could, nor did they have the resources to give away hats, T-shirts and other paraphernalia with the hopes of buying voters. At one FDNG rally a labor organizer made the statement that "PAN is for the rich, but tortillas, the food of the poor, is what the Frente represents."

Political violence was evident, especially in the rural areas just prior to Election Day. We saw several military battalions on maneuvers in the Ixil Triangle at 2:00am while traveling on bus from north Quiche. Few of the Frente candidates were harassed, but that was in part due to the fact that most of the candidates were people who have been escorted by members of the international community for the past 10 years. Rosalina Tuyuc, the director of CONAVIGUA, a widow's organization, was threatened one evening and her vehicle was also stolen just days before the vote. The most ominous form of political repression however, was and remains in the form of poverty. This is something that the Frente kept highlighting in their platform. Democracy cannot exist, nor can you have democratic elections when people are starving. This is something that will certainly plague the country for years to come unless major structural changes are made with the entire system.

All this aside, the most important aspect of this election was the increased participation of the indigenous population. Not in the usual sense of just casting a ballot for some wealthy *ladino* but in a new way that could be the key to real change in years to come.

"Our cries, pain, and woe from the last several hundred years have begun to end, and now we can begin to listen to our own voices." This declaration from *Nukuj Akpop*, a Mayan phrase for "Experiment in Governance," reflects the present awareness and self-determination of many of the indigenous people. Never since the Spanish invasion of Guatemala have indigenous people organized their own election candidates, nor have they had their own platform. Of all the candidates that ran for the Frente, 130 were indigenous, including mayoral candidates, Congressional candidates, and even the vice-presidential candidate was a Quiche Mayan, Juan Leon. This new dynamic gave many

great expectations for change and real participatory democracy.

As an election observer it was my job to report on any part of the process that was in violation of election standards, as well as to act as a deterrent to any potential fraud or violence that may occur. I was one of 100 or so independent observers from all around the world. In addition to us there were groups from the OAS, UN and even the Union of European States. These groups had more resources, labeled vehicles, and walkie-talkies to assist in their work. However, they were fewer in number and tended to be in the more urban areas, away from the potentially more volatile rural areas. I worked in the department of Quiché and observed in 5 towns throughout the day.

We did observe some elements of coercion. In Patzún members of the PAN party were giving money to people before they got into line, hoping to buy votes. In San Pedro Jocopilas some parties were displaying party emblems, a violation of Election Day rules. No one could wear a hat, T-shirt, or anything else that had party colors or symbols. Many people also discovered that their names did not appear on the register, even though they had a voting card with a designated number. At the same time there were reports that names of people who had been dead for years appeared on the voting lists. And there were reports of military personnel or civil patrol members around voting stations, also a clear violation. The biggest problem, however, lay with the very structure of the electoral system itself.

Most of the people who came to vote in the areas that I observed in were indigenous. Many of them had never voted before or were not that familiar with the voting process. Matters were complicated by the fact that the voting procedure was in Spanish, thus making it difficult for people who were either unable to read or only spoke an indigenous language. The election representatives at each table were almost exclusively *ladino* and male. When people had problems, many of them could not communicate with those in charge. The most common thing we witnessed was people were going to the wrong place. Many of the voters had to travel from another town to vote, since not every village had its own station. Upon arriving most people would simply go to the nearest voting site and wait in line, sometimes 2 or 3 hours. When reaching the front they were often told that they were at the wrong voting station. If people were not familiar with the town they were not able to find the other voting stations, and election personnel were not really assisting them. Frustrated, many people simply gave up and went home, never able to fulfill their hopes of voting for change. Clearly the system was fraudulent, at least for the majority poor indigenous population. At one point we decided to tell people which lines to get in when they arrived, since we had copies of the voting station numbers. In spite of these efforts and that of many of the popular movement, nearly 60% of the population either refused to vote or could not because of the difficulties posed by the system.

At the presidential level PAN candidate Arzu was the top vote getter with 36%. Portillo, the Ríos Montt-led FRG party candidate, was second with 24%. Of the 19 presidential candidates the FDNG was in fourth with 8%, not bad for the lone oppositional party that had only 3 months to organize. Even the press in Guatemala referred to their position in the results as "A Big Surprise". At the local and congressional level the Frente did much better. I watched the vote counting in Santa Cruz de Quiché, and at all three tables I witnessed a Frente victory. It was a delight to watch and listen to the vote counters as they kept echoing the words *Nueva Guatemala* (short for the FDNG). Representatives from the other parties did not seem to be surprised though. These were areas of the

country with a Mayan majority and where Frente candidate Amilcar Mendez has worked to defend people's human rights through CERJ over the past 8 years. Other impressive victories were the election to Congress of Nineth Montenegro, the director of GAM, whom I had escorted for months in 1988, due to constant death threats against her, and Rosalina Tuyuc, who became the first Mayan woman ever elected to Congress.

In spite of these victories, the FDNG went public the day after calling the elections a sham that was fraudulent. On Monday, Nov. 13, the day after the election, the electricity went out in the entire country. We were told that this was the first time that that had ever happened in their history. This means that the election computers went down for awhile, much in the same way as in Mexico in 1988, when it was revealed that the ruling party PRI fixed the election results. We are still waiting on the truth of that mysterious blackout, but many villages did not wait to express their disgust with the election outcome.

A community of recent returnees in the Huehuetenago area were denied the opportunity to vote even though the accord signed with the government granted them that right. In Escuintla hundreds of people were accusing the mayor of fraud. In Santa Lucia Milpas Atlas, a crowd of people set fire to tires calling for a re-election for mayor. People in San Miguel Acatan were so disgusted with the results that they burned the ballots. In Guanazapa, Escuintla, PAN supporters beat several people and took election council representatives hostage. These types of public protest were repeated in Tecun Uman, Olintupeque, and San Aguastin Acasaguallas. As of this writing many towns are still protesting the election results and some are threatening to boycott the January run-off between Arzu and Portillo for the presidency.

It still remains to be seen what will eventually happen with the final results of the election. Many people are wondering how the Frente candidates will fare in Congress or if they will live that long. People are also speculation on whether or not the Frente can deal with internal party problems that have plagued other regional democratic movements. Many things remain uncertain, but one thing is for sure, the majority of the population wants a change. I have no doubts that they will continue to struggle for an authentic democratic society in Guatemala, but as long as US policy remains the same there it is questionable as to whether the Guatemalans will ever be able to achieve authentic democracy.

Why Give a Damn about Guatemala?

.....one day I was accompanying a labor organizer from Chichicastenago who asked me about unions in my town. I told him that labor organizing was weak for lots of reasons, one being the presence of Amway, which has always been anti-union. He said that he had heard of them before. I told him that a major business magazine reported that both the Amway founders were worth several Billion each. After a pause, he looked at me and said "with that kind of money we could rebuild the entire country."

If people have even bothered to read this piece on Guatemala, they might be wondering of what importance it has to people living in Grand Rapids. My response is this - US corporate exploitation of most Guatemalans has been going on for at least a century, causing loss of land, poverty, and death. Our consumption of their labor contributes to this vicious cycle of misery. The US government has directly been involved with repressive political policies at least since 1954. This has meant that

Washington has directed and supported the bloody political structure in Guatemala that has caused over 200,000 deaths since 1960. Our tax dollars have helped to pay for this brutal repression with the funding, training and arming of one of the worst militaries in the hemisphere

These policies have caused thousands of refugees to flee Guatemala, many of whom have made their way to Grand

Rapids. This exacerbates the already difficult economic conditions in Grand Rapids as people fight for jobs with companies looking for the lowest bidder. Since "our" system is inherently antagonistic to "foreigners", their misery is often extended here. Now, I realize that most of this takes place without our knowledge. This is no surprise since the *GR Press* more or less chooses to ignore the political realities there. They printed only one piece (with no sources) on Guatemala that was 3 column inches high on the last page of section A on Nov. 12. They received a fax that I sent them a few days after the election, but failed to print it or contact me upon return. So it goes.

I also realize that most of these decisions, ones with brutal outcomes, have been made without our input and no doubt will continue unless we do something. The point is that it is in Washington's and corporate America's best interest to maintain these unjust dynamics. They will not change unless WE change. I emphasize we because it must be a collective response. A response that is predicated on our developing a relationship with Guatemalan people and personalizing their suffering. It is my experience that we can count on their continued involvement in the struggle, what is not clear is what our involvement will be.

Suggested Reading

- *The Mayan Movement Today: Issues of Indigenous Culture and Development in Guatemala*, Alberto Esquit Choy & Victor Galvez Borrell
- *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process*, Suzanne Jonas
- *Guatemala After the Peace Accords*, Rachel Sieder
- *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala*, Richard Wilson
- *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Mayanism and Ethnic Resurgence in Guatemala*, Warren, Kay
- *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, Edward F. Fischer & R. McKenna Brown
- *Políticas Para La Reinvidicacion De Los Mayas De Hoy*, Demetrio Cojti Cuxil
- *Configuracion del Pensamiento Politico del Pueblo Maya*, Demetrio Cojti Cuxil
- *Quebrando El Silencio: Organizaciones del Pueblo Maya y sus Demandas (1986-1992)*, Santiago Bastos & Manuela Camus

Not at Play in the Fields of the Lord: The Bible League and Genocide

April 1996

In October, Ralph Reed, director of the Christian Coalition, spoke in Grand Rapids by invitation from the Acton Institute. (Founded by a Catholic priest, the Acton Institute believes that Christianity and Capitalism make great bedfellows) In attempting to localize the influence of the Religious Right I gave a presentation at the Institute for Global Education the month prior to Reed's visit. While researching the local connections I was

amazed at how many groups there were and what role they play on the international scene. This essay will focus on the Wycliff Bible Translators/Summer Institute of Linguistics work and their relationship to the Illinois based group, The Bible League, which has its Latin American branch based in Jenison, Michigan.

Around the turn of the century a growing number of Christians, called Millennialists, thought that the Great Tribulation would occur by the year 2000. This cosmological view of the world prompted many missionary groups to work towards evangelizing the planet before the rapture, with the hope of bringing more souls to Christ. One such young evangelist, Cameron Townsend, felt that more than any other population in the world, indigenous people would benefit the most.

After being challenged to translate the Christian New Testament into a Mayan language known as Cakchiquel, Townsend decided that he would develop an organization to translate the Christian bible into all the indigenous languages in the world. Thus the Wycliff Bible Translators came to be. This was in the 1930's when there was some anti-church sentiments running through Latin America. To avoid the appearance of being missionaries, Townsend decided to call his overseas operation the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), to lend more credibility to his efforts. In the end the SIL, who's claim that they were not an evangelistic organization, came under significant fire for their deception as a linguistic group and the role they would play in the colonization, exploitation and genocidal policies directed at many indigenous communities around the world.

While researching the historical role of SIL I discovered that a local group, The Bible League, was translating Christian bibles for SIL in Mexico and Peru. I wrote to The Bible League to ask if they were aware of the accusations made against SIL by well known scholars, anthropologists and Indigenous groups? A Rev. Chester Schemper wrote me back stating that "SIL publicly and categorically denies these charges as completely false. We have every reason to accept SIL's categorical denials." Rev. Schemper and the folks at SIL may categorically deny these accusations, but there is too much credible scholarship that says otherwise.

Mexico

SIL formally has its beginnings in Mexico. Cameron Townsend was invited to Mexico by a government official who was impressed with Townsend's work in Guatemala. Townsend was quickly able to win over the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas in supporting his project to learn the native languages of southern Mexico. Cárdenas was very impressed with Townsend's projects that he even bought him a brand new car to show his gratitude. So why would a government that tended to be anti-clerical give such support to a Christian group like SIL? Consistent with most "liberal" and "revolutionary" governments in the Americas, Cárdenas was hoping to bring the indigenous population more fully into the national identity. This strategy has been employed mostly to provide cheap labor for expanding markets, but also to snuff out potential indigenous led insurgent movements or the support of those movements. The work of SIL fit nicely into this nationalist program.

Beginning in the 1970's, however, SIL came under attack from Mexican activists, indigenous groups and anthropologists. One example of this criticism came from anthropologists who were shocked when they found out that a SIL translated dictionary

of the Tzotzil speaking Maya of southern Mexico had eliminated both Spanish and native words for ideological concepts that threatened the status quo. Interestingly this came at a time when there were significant conflicts in the region. Another anthropologist cited in *Is God An American: An Anthropological Perspective on the Missionary Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics* (Hvalkof & Aaby, 1981), observes that SIL encouraged indigenous people to submit to the repression since it was being perpetrated by the local authorities. "If any of you are killed by the bosses....do not retaliate. God is the one who has set the bosses in authority over us; therefore we must pray for them. They are part of God's plan...God is in control and He always works for our good. It is impossible for anyone to kill us before God says we can come home. If we are killed by them, let us consider that since God is over all, this is part of his will."

In 1979, a commission from Mexico's College of Ethnology and Social Anthropology had presented the government with a report that concluded "SIL supports the expansion of capitalism in areas rich in natural resources, opening these areas to the capital markets and turning the population into a docile and cheap labor force." (*Spiritual Warfare*, Diamond 1989) This comes as no surprise when one realizes who has been funding SIL over the years. In *Thy Will Be Done*, the authors give us this list: the Pew Family Sun Oil Company, Nelson Baker Hunt Placid Oil, Standard Oil of New Jersey, Weyerhaeuser, Samuel Milbank Corn Products Corporation, USA military surplus, USAID, US Department of Defense, CIA and the US State Department just to name a few.

When I wrote *The Bible League* and inquired as to their relationship with SIL, I also asked "do you think that Indigenous communities that have practiced their own forms of religion for centuries need Christianity? Is Christianity a superior form of religion, and how do you respect people's basic right to engage in their own form of worship and beliefs?" Their response was "The Bible League is convinced that what the world needs more than anything else is the Bible, which introduces men to Christ in who people can find hope for now and eternity....If the people were to respond to it, this would certainly be a lot better world to live in." At this point it would do us well to ask for whom is it a better world to live in? From all of the sources I have read and cited here, just in regard to SIL, suggests that indigenous people are worse off than they were before the missionaries invaded their territory. In fact, SIL has been very intolerant and antagonistic towards the religious traditions of the indigenous groups they have come in contact with.

SIL has viewed indigenous religious beliefs and practices as the "principle abode of Satan." (*Fishers of Men or Founders of Kingdom*, Stoll 1982) In standard imperial fashion this missionary group even equated the indigenous peoples troubles with their practice of "witchcraft and shamanism." With this kind of thinking it is understandable that these kinds of religious groups would feel that their work is not only good, but necessary. Indeed, like much of the Cold War rhetoric, SIL saw the influence of communism in many countries, where nationalist or revolutionary movements grew, as the influence of Satan. To collaborate with US government agencies or US client state authorities was standard fare in the battle for people's souls. This imperialist practice even reached into the realm of culture. Stoll cites one example where SIL was "supplanting Amuesha sacred music with its own. Set to Amuesha words, all too familiar tunes like 'O My Darling Clementine' and 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' were leaping out of cheap play-back only cassette players which translators distributed from Peru to Guatemala." This may not seem like such a big deal to The Bible League or many

others, since it is the very nature of missionary groups to engage in this type of religious and cultural imperialism, but in the realm of international law it is simply called genocide.

According to the 1947-48 Genocide Convention "genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation. It is rather intended to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the essential foundation of life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the group themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions of culture, language, and national groups..." This type of genocide, sometimes called cultural genocide, is stated quite clearly by the North American Congress on Latin America in regards to SIL, "The integration policies, however designed to abolish the reservation, wipe out the material basis for any possible continuance of indigenous culture. These policies force upon the Indians a whole spectrum of relationships based on private ownership of property and remove the underpinnings of their cultural survival." (Report on the Americas - NACLA 1973)

For the past 20 years or so SIL has been the target of much criticism by numerous groups, especially indigenous. In 1980, at the Inter-American conference, delegates denounced SIL and asked that conference participants withdraw an honor that had been given to SIL founder Cameron Townsend in 1972, Benefactor of the Linguistically Isolated Population of America." The decision was unanimous. According to Guatemalan author Victor Perera "SIL officials pressured Guatemalan politicians not to ratify funding for the Academy of Mayan Languages in 1990" for fear of losing control over linguistic work in the country. (*Unfinished Conquest*, 1993) Perera goes on to cite Mayan cultural activist Demitrio Cojti on the SIL, "The time has come for Mayas to reclaim their own languages as well as the distinct cultural vision they sustain. We have no more need of foreign excavators and interpreters of our Maya heritage."

It is my view that as Mayans and other Indigenous people struggle to reclaim cultural autonomy, and in some cases political sovereignty, we need to respect and support these efforts. The Bible League, even though it may deny the charges of SIL participation in government and corporate crimes, it is still an accomplice in genocide. In many ways they serve the same function as Catholic priests did who blessed the European conquest of the Americas, chaplains who blessed soldiers and bombs as they murder civilians, or Christian leaders who encouraged the anti-semitic and fascist policies of Nazi Germany. One might ask how providing bibles overseas could be equated with the heinous atrocities committed in the previous examples? One may remember that US Chief Justice Robert Jackson, who presided at the Nuremberg trials against war criminals, sentenced Julius Stricker to death for his part in the Nazi extermination campaign. Stricker's crime was acting as the editor of a German newspaper that dehumanized the Jews and contributed to the German public's acceptance and participation in genocide, particularly with the racist caricatures of Jews on the pages of *Der Sturmer*. The Bible League does no less, since its literature promotes a cultural assimilation that can lead to cultural genocide.

I would encourage people to challenge the Bible League on this matter by contacting them at 16801 Van Dam Road, South Holland, Illinois, 60473 or call the Jenison, Michigan office at 616-457-3900. Also, I would suggest that we investigate and challenge the activities of any and all foreign missionary groups to see if they are

engaged in similar activities. Ultimately we may need to call into question and challenge the very nature of mission work, since it is based upon the assumption that the truth they proclaim is superior to that of the Indigenous.

Suggested Reading

- *Thy Will Be Done - The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil*, Gerard Colby & Charlotte Dennett
- *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire? The Wycliff Bible Translators in Latin America*, David Stoll
- *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right*, Diamond, Sara
- *Is God An American: An Anthropological Perspective on the Missionary Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics*, Hvalkof & Aaby
- *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, edited by Edward Fischer & R. McKenna Brown
- *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala*, by Kay Warren

The Press Commits Another Sin of Omission: When Rape is Passe May 1996

On April 13, in the Religion section, the *Grand Rapids Press* ran an article from Newhouse News Service writer Julia Lieblich about a US nun who is engaged in a protest/ fast across the street from the White House. Actually, the article spends more time talking about the "concern" that National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and his associates are having in this case.

The headline reads "Administration officials make late-night visits to see protesting nun." The title alone is enough to lead you to believe that they are on some humanitarian mission. According to the article, Lake has paid three visits to Sister Diana Ortiz who has been camped out since April 2. In fact, the article gives more print space to the supposed empathy of government officials than that of the reasons for Ortiz's actions.

The Press article simply states that Sister Ortiz "was raped and tortured in Guatemala." No other specifics are mentioned. We are given no date or any testimony from Sister Diana herself about what happened. It is almost as if rape and torture were incidental in this case. The article mentions former US Ambassador to Guatemala Thomas Strook's challenge of Ortiz's story, but no one who supports her case is cited. For as much as the article reflects the agony of the government officials on this case you might expect the writer to give equal time to the agony of Sister Ortiz. Not so. The specifics of her abduction, rape, and torture are quite available, however. You can find full testimony in publications such as *Report on Guatemala*, the Bulletin of the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission/USA, as well as a taped interview on Alternative Radio. Any competent journalist could easily find these sources.

Some of the specifics of her case are as follows. She was abducted on November 2, 1989. Her abductors took her to a warehouse-like building, where Sister Diana recounts that she heard "the despairing screams of people being tortured and I watched helplessly as an innocent person was tortured." She was then questioned and every time she responded men burned her with cigarettes. In all she has 111 burns on her back from the interrogation. She then says, "I was raped numerous times. After pouring wine over my body they used and abused my body in horrible ways that are too humiliating to describe

in detail. Then they lowered me into an open pit packed with human bodies - bodies of children, women, and some men, some decapitated, some lying face up and caked with blood, some dead, some alive - and all swarming with rats." Had any aspect of this testimony from Sister Ortiz been included in the *Grand Rapids Press* article would it have changed your impression of this case? I think it probably would have.

None of these serious omissions by the corporate media should surprise us though. If we look at the date of the crimes committed against Sister Diana, Nov. 2, 1989, we can make other conclusions about the self-censorship that the corporate media engages in regularly.

According to Noam Chomsky in *Terrorizing the Neighborhood*, when this story appeared on the AP wire service on Nov. 6, 1989, none of the major media picked the story up, nor were there Congressional calls for an investigation. Just over a month later and right before the illegal US invasion of Panama, George Bush waxed indignantly about what happened to a US woman in Panama. "If they threaten and brutalize the wife of an American citizen, sexually threatening the lieutenant's wife while kicking him in the groin over and over again - then....please understand, this president is going to do something about it." (see Stephen Shalom's *Imperial Alibis*, pg. 178-79) So, if a US woman is terrorized in a country that the US military is about to invade it is an outrage, but if a woman is terrorized in a country that systematically murder's its own people (with US government support) it is not worthy of mention? You decide.

Finally the *Press* article does make mention that Sister Diana is pushing the Clinton Administration to release all classified documents related to her case. They also cite a catholic priest who believes that Anthony Lake's interest is more posturing than genuine concern. However, the article does not seriously look at the present efforts by the Guatemalan solidarity community in this country to push the Clinton Administration to release all declassified documents related to Guatemala since the CIA-led coup of 1954. In the most recent issue of *Report on Guatemala*, Jennifer Harbury states that after receiving some declassified documents it is clear that Anthony Lake and other US government officials were either withholding information from her or deliberately deceiving her in regards to the status of her husband Efrain Bamanca Velasquez, who is now believed to have been killed at the hands of CIA paid military officers in Guatemala. No wonder the corporate media is "missing" the real story, it would not only indict the role of numerous US administrations in grave human rights abuses in Guatemala, it would also be self-indicting since the bulk of the information on cases like Sister Ortiz has been available for decades and has not been reported on.

(Postscript: Again I find it interesting that the *Grand Rapids Press* chooses to run an article on someone who is not from the area who is protesting policy in Guatemala, yet refused to report on my last trip or respond to the press release that I sent from Guatemala the day after the presidential election.)

The Other End of the Drug War

January 1999

It was late morning as we prepared the piñata's for tomorrow's New Year's children's activities. The sky had cleared up from yesterday's rain here in the small mountain village of Oventic. As children admired the hair on my arms a Huey helicopter flies over low causing everyone to stop what they are doing. We waited for a moment as it circled around again before it flew off towards the military base near San Andres.

This is a daily activity here in the southern most state of Mexico, Chiapas. Since 1994, when peasants and Mayans rose up to defend themselves against political repression and economic exploitation, the Mexican military has made their presence known. According to the Catholic Church's human rights office in Chiapas, over 70,000 Mexican soldiers are stationed in the Northern and Eastern parts of Chiapas alone. This means that 60% of Mexico's entire military force is in this tiny corner of the country, and for what?

The village where I was certainly was not a military threat. The residents were completely unarmed and the majority of them were children. Oventic is the center of education for the Zapatistas, a place where the teachers are teenagers or in their early twenties. Their only defense was placing wooden poles in the ground, spaced out so that the helicopters could not land directly in the village. Aside from that the only other means of protection was the presence of international observers, like the six people from Grand Rapids, and myself who were there over the Christmas and New Years holidays.

From December 18th through January 4th, Grand Rapids residents were placed in two communities in the region known as Los Altos. Our task was to simply have a presence and note the activity of military and paramilitary groups in the area. Everyday in Oventic I was able to video tape the activities of military airplanes, police and military helicopters that circled the village at all hours of the day. In all over the 18 days I was in the village I documented 32 airplanes and 15 helicopters.

The worst day of military activity was on New Years Eve. Due to the heightened helicopter presence the village was on alert. We were told to be ready to flee to the mountains in the event of an invasion. Fortunately we never had to leave, but other communities at other times are not that lucky. The nearby village of Union Progresso spent several days in the mountains, without food or warm clothes just days before we arrived, and last year 45 Tzotzil Mayans were massacred by paramilitary forces in the community of Acteal.

Military presence is so menacing that it effects the psyche of the children. We participated in art projects with the children of Oventic. Many of them drew pictures with paints or crayons about their community. Most of them drew their families, the cornfields, the breath taking mountains, or Zapatista leaders. Noticeable in many of the drawings were images of helicopters flying above the homes. The children do not see their reality without these very real symbols of repression. It very much reminded me of the art work of Guatemalan and Salvadoran children that I had seen there during the war years.

When the military would fly over the village I could feel the rage building up inside me. They are just children, poor Mayans who want nothing more than to be left alone, left to work their land, and to celebrate the New Year in peace. What angered me most was the fact that these planes and helicopters that the Mexican military used to terrorize these people were from the US, they were paid for by my tax dollars.

According to the US General Accounting (GAO) office for 1998 over \$20 million were sent to Mexico for Narcotics Control. Since 1996, the US government has provided 4 C-

26 planes and 73 UH-1H helicopters for the Narcotics Control program. These military aircraft are to be used for interdiction, drug eradication, and surveillance. So, what are they doing in Chiapas? The Mexican and US governments both acknowledge that there is no drug cultivation in Chiapas, nor is this southern state used as a drug transshipment point.

In March 1998 testimony, the GAO indicated that "oversight and accountability of counternarcotics assistance continues to be a problem. We found that embassy records on UH-1H helicopter usage for the civilian law enforcement agencies were incomplete. Additionally, we found that the US military's ability to provide adequate oversight is limited by the end-use monitoring agreement signed by the governments of the United States and Mexico."

It would seem from my own 2 experiences in Chiapas over the past 12 months and the record of our own government, that the helicopters sent to fight the drug war are being used to terrorize the poor. This may not seem surprising to many readers, especially those that live in urban neighborhoods where excessive force has been a staple in the domestic war on drugs.

Two years ago I joined the Grand Rapids Mayor's Drug Task Force for these very same reasons. I wanted to be part of a body of people who said that we need to see the drug problem more as a public health issue and less of a crime issue. This was the basis of the final report released last year. Something that was missing from the report, I believe, was the need to question the efficacy of the federal government's foreign policy as it relates to the drug war. Could these billions of dollars be better spent on prevention than on weapons that are used to commit human rights abuses?

I think that most Americans understand these inconsistencies in the government's policy. The poor, Black and Hispanic populations of the US are tired of being blamed for the drug problem. We do not bring the drugs into the country. We do not produce the drugs and we do not own the banks that transfer drug money to offshore accounts. We are the ones they put in jail in this war on drugs, which is nothing more than a war on the poor.

In mid-February, Clinton traveled to Mexico to meet with President Zedillo and offered to increase money for the counter-narcotics program. This is scandalous. I saw first hand the misuses and abuses of this so-called war on drugs. We need to communicate to lawmakers that if they want to promote democracy abroad there needs to be more accountability in the drug program and that we should stop sending weapons to Mexico until human rights are respected. This much we owe to the children and families of Oventic.

Suggested Reading

- *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press*, Alexander Cockburn & Jeffrey St. Clair
- *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies and the CIA in Central America*, Peter Dale Scott & Jonathan Marshall
- *Powderburns: Cocaine, Contras & the Drug War*, Celerino Castillo III & Dave Harmon
- *The Zapatista Social Network in Mexico*, David Ronfeldt

"Doesn't a free market provide the better path to higher living standards?"

May 1, 2005

On how the Grand Rapids Press doesn't print anti-corporate perspectives

In late March I submitted an essay for *the GR Press'* Sunday essay column for the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. Romero was murdered by US-back death squads just weeks after he sent then US President Jimmy Carter a letter asking him not to send any more weapons to his country, as they were being used to murder civilians.

I also mentioned that the assassination of Romero and later the 4 female US church workers is what got me involved in the Central American solidarity movement of the 1980s. I, along with dozens of other folks from Grand Rapids, ended up traveling to Central America on human rights delegations to learn about the impact of US policy on the people of countries in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

Then I mentioned that even though Central American had been out of the public eye for some time it was now part of solidarity efforts with the upcoming vote on CAFTA, the Central America Free Trade Agreement. In fact, the trip I took to Guatemala this past December for 4 weeks was to interview people on their perspective of this so-called free trade agreement. Considering the impact that NAFTA had on West Michigan, I thought that there would be sufficient cause to accept an article about CAFTA. Girl, was I wrong.

One week after I submitted the piece I received a response from the *GR Press* Sunday essay editor Mark Allen. His response is quite instructive, so I'll reprint some of it here. First he says "It doesn't quite work as op ed, because it provides a surface look at the issue. Surely there is another side. For instance, if it is unquestionably bad for Guatemala, why also would it be bad for West Michigan?" First of all I didn't think I submitted a surface look at this issue. What I sent him was a summary of what Guatemalans told me during my recent trip. When I say Guatemalans, I mean I talked with teachers, farmers, labor organizers, students, small business owners, human rights groups, indigenous people, foundations and environmentalists. Not one of them thought CAFTA would be good for most people in Guatemala and each of them provided well thought out reasons, plus documentation to support their positions. As to his second point that if it was bad for Guatemalans would it necessarily be bad for West Michigan, this is a reasonable question. However, I didn't say it would be bad for West Michigan, I said it would be bad for working people, working families and small businesses in West Michigan. These policies always benefit someone. For example, with Electrolux moving its factory from Greenville to Mexico, the Electrolux executives and shareholders will win, but not the workers in Greenville.

Next *the Press* guy said "From what I know of CAFTA, it appears to be a negative for Guatemala, especially since their goods largely enjoy unlimited access to the U.S. already. But without CAFTA, is that situation sustainable? In the long run, doesn't a free market provide the better path to higher living standards? Might this result in the importation of improved farming methods so Guatemalans might increase corn production?" Talk about internalizing the values of the dominant system. It is interesting to note that a person in journalism thinks that the "free market" benefits all. Apparently

he doesn't know anyone from around here who has lost a job from NAFTA in recent years. When NAFTA was sold to the American public we were told that it would create higher standards of living in Mexico. Mexicans would then buy more US products, thus create more jobs for US workers. Hello, but unless you have been watching re-runs of *Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous* 24 hours a day, how could you not know that NAFTA has been bad for many workers and their families in West Michigan? Even his comment about the free market providing Guatemalans improved farming methods to increase corn production is ridiculously naive. Again, if we look at NAFTA as a model we can see that the US flooded the Mexican market with cheap, subsidized corn, which forced thousands of small farmers off their land because they couldn't compete with the US corn.

Lastly, *the Press* editor says "I don't pretend to know the answers to these questions, but I think they are questions a reader would ask after giving a thoughtful read to your essay. Surely there is a reason the government there voted overwhelmingly to approve it." If readers of my piece had questions I'd be delighted. If they further investigated what CAFTA is and what it might mean for Central Americans and those of us in West Michigan, then I would have accomplished my goal. It is an opinion piece! Isn't that the whole point of an opinion piece? His last sentence, however, is my favorite. "Surely there is a reason the government there voted overwhelmingly to approve it." There is a reason, but not the one he assumes. The fact is that the government of Guatemala was delaying a vote on CAFTA, so the US sent a trade negotiator there to strong arm their government into accepting the plan. What did the Guatemalan government get out of it? Two weeks later the US re-instated military aid to Guatemala, something the US hadn't done in nearly a decade. This is why small governments around the world support policies that their populations overwhelmingly denounce, because the US will reward them.

So, why is this so instructive about how a so-called free press works in the US? Well, it demonstrates two things. First, it shows that a media system that is commercially driven naturally embraces a for-profit ideology that benefits only a small sector of the global and US populations. Information or perspectives that don't benefit that commercially driven system are not presented, which is what they used to call in more honest days CENSORSHIP. Second, it reflects a certain contempt that media people have for the average citizen, especially since most of us in West Michigan have never even heard about CAFTA. Why, because there has been an almost complete media blackout in the US. The only places you can find out about this trade policy is through independent media sources or the business press. My co-worker and I have been tracking the local news for the past few months and have yet to find a story about a trade policy that involves our country, 5 Central American nations and the Dominican Republic. This is what Lawrence Soley, author of *Censorship Inc.: The Corporate Threat to Free Speech in the United States* calls censorship by omission. I would submit that a journalism that doesn't inform the public on the important issues of the day, doesn't deserve to be taken seriously and shouldn't have our support.

Jeff Smith is involved local with a STOP CAFTA campaign made up of a diverse group of grassroots organization, read - people who really don't matter. You can find out information on CAFTA and the local campaign at <http://www.mediamouse.org/cafta/>.

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