

HUMAN RIGHTS IN AN AGE OF COLD WAR VIOLENCE: THE CENTRAL AMERICAN

EXAMPLE

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

May, 2011

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

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Throughout much of the Cold War, anti-Sovietism represented the yolk of American foreign policy. Anti-Sovietism colored the vast majority of foreign policy decisions and generally overrode all other concerns in cases where American goals conflicted. In 1977, the election of Jimmy Carter represented a transitional moment in American Cold War history in which Anti-Sovietism ceased to be alone at the center of foreign policy decisions. The Carter administration, reacting against the calculating *realpolitik* of Henry Kissinger, hoped to place human rights at the center of its foreign policy. While Carter certainly did not hold any illusions about the threat of the Soviet Union, Carter insisted on placing human rights on a higher plane in some cases. His administration resolved that America's friends and enemies alike would be subjected to the same high standard of human rights and if they did not meet that standard, the Carter administration would adjust American foreign policy accordingly.

Ronald Reagan's defeat of Jimmy Carter in the presidential election of 1980, affected a significant shift in the U.S. government's new emphasis on human rights. Reagan submerged human rights concerns to the broader struggle against the Soviet Union far more than his predecessor. Reagan, like Carter, utilized human rights policy as a foreign policy tool, but did so in a more uneven manner, applying the policy against America's perceived enemies while largely ignoring the human rights abuses of American allies. The American experience in Central America from 1977 to 1989 demonstrates this shift in policy between Carter and Reagan. While Carter utilized his human rights policy to aggressively confront dictators in Nicaragua and Guatemala, facing considerable resistance in the process, Reagan used the policy only as a foreign policy tool with which he could confront American enemies in the struggle against Soviet Communism.

Ultimately, this research paper will add to the historiography of Carter and Reagan's respective foreign policies in three key ways. First, while a number of historians have analyzed the foreign policies of Carter and Reagan, few have done so in such a way as to examine foreign policy successes and failures through the lens of human rights. Due to Carter's close identification with his human rights policy, many Carter historians touch on this subject in their works. However, few if any works delve into Carter's human rights policy in Central America, specifically, despite the fact that this region represented the ultimate testing ground for Carter's policy. Most works on Carter's human rights policy are global in focus, which disable the reader from appreciating some of the domestic complexities of target states that effect the Carter administration's implementation of its human rights policy in these states. While most Carter historians writing evaluative histories of Carter's foreign policy touch upon human rights, Reagan historians tend to focus on the Reagan Doctrine when discussing Reagan's Central American policy, largely ignoring Reagan's efforts to mold Carter's human rights policy to his own aims, a key topic in this paper.

Second, the historiography of the Carter and Reagan administrations is not sufficiently mature because it lacks the historical distance that might better ensure a dispassionate evaluation of Carter and Reagan's work. Much of the historical work on Carter and Reagan reflect continuing political divisions. Many individuals currently writing on the Carter and Reagan administrations were part of those administrations, like Robert Kagan, who worked at the State Department Bureau of Inter-American Affairs under Reagan and Robert Pastor, who was the National Security Adviser on Latin America and the Caribbean under Carter. By approaching the Carter administration's human rights policy in a detached, unbiased manner this paper

confronts a historiography that is too often politicized and unbalanced.

Third, the historiographies of Carter and Reagan's respective human rights policies are deficient in that they overwhelmingly focuses on the perspective of the United States. It is critical that as a historian of U.S. diplomacy one does not overvalue the impact of American power and influence. The human rights policies of Carter and Reagan did not operate in a vacuum, but were effected by individual leaders in target states and the political and economic circumstances of those states. This research paper maintains a constant eye on the perspective of the target states, Nicaragua and Guatemala. This research paper captures the perspective of government leaders by delving into their thoughts and feelings regarding the human rights policies of the United States. Furthermore, this research paper aspires to a better understanding of those most effected by the violence and instability of Nicaragua and Guatemala, the citizens, by relying upon the human rights reports of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The IACHR is an organization of the OAS that, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, regularly went on fact-seeking missions to document and report what was happening on the ground in countries like Nicaragua and Guatemala. In these three critical ways, this research paper will add to the respective historiographies of the Carter and Reagan administrations.

THE CARTER SHIFT

Upon his election in 1976, Jimmy Carter sought to re-conceptualize U.S. foreign policy. Carter hoped to accomplish this by challenging the traditional Cold War foreign policy outlook of his predecessors. In his memoirs, Carter expresses disapproval of the recent American tendency to thoughtlessly support right-wing dictators who maintain an anti-communist line.

"Instead of promoting freedom and democratic principles," Carter explains, "our government seemed to believe that in any struggle with evil, we could not compete effectively unless we played by the same rules or lack of rules as the evildoers."¹ To Carter, the Cold War had eroded the moral foundation of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S., a nation that once considered itself a "city upon a hill," had turned its back on its moral mission to inspire freedom and democracy internationally.

The myopic foreign policy outlook of the Cold War era had led Carter's predecessors in the White House and Congress to support unsavory authoritarian leaders abroad, so long as those leaders adhered to American anti-communism and promised to maintain the stability of non-leftist governments in their respective countries. In Carter's view, these were indeed dark days for the United States. Traditional American values had been subverted, not only by a Manichean Cold War anti-Sovietism run amok, but also by recent foreign policy crises like the Vietnam War and domestic crises like Watergate that cast a long shadow across the nation. Carter told the American people in 1976, "We've lost the spirit of our nation...We're ashamed of what our government is as we deal with other nations around the world, and that's got to be changed, and I'm going to change it."² Carter promised to usher in a new era of U.S. foreign policy, an era in which the United States no longer viewed its relationships with other nations through the narrow lens of the Cold War. At the University of Notre Dame on May 22, 1977, he stated, "Being confident of our own future, we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in our fear."³

¹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 142-143.

² Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 139.

³ Wilson D. Miscamble, ed. *Go Forth and Do Good: Memorable Notre Dame Commencement Speeches*, (Notre

The Carter administration's desire to abandon that "inordinate fear of communism" posed one key problem for the Carter administration. Anti-Sovietism served as a unifying principle for Carter's predecessors, tying their respective interactions with foreign governments together into relatively coherent policies. If the Carter administration was to move beyond anti-Sovietism, it too would need a unifying principle similarly universal in its application, not simply to ensure public and Congressional support for administration policy, but also to facilitate foreign policy decisions within the administration.⁴ Human rights became that overarching foreign policy theme. Soon after his inauguration, Carter expressed that human rights represented the "soul" of his administration's foreign policy.⁵

Carter and his foreign policy advisers strongly believed in the utility of a comprehensive human rights program in the Cold War world. Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski explains in his autobiography, Power and Principle:

We hoped that in attacking the problems at their most basic level the United States would thus become engaged in shaping a world more congenial to our values and more compatible with our interest...America would no longer be seen as defending the status quo, nor could the Soviet Union continue to pose as the champion of greater equity.⁶

The Carter administration recognized that while the United States was winning the arms race, in the battle for soft power, the United States was losing ground across the globe. Carter and his advisers intended to promote human rights abroad and, in the process, create a positive image of the United States in the developing world. In pursuing a universal human rights agenda as a

Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 197.

⁴ David Skidmore, *Reversing Course: Carter's Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and the Failure of Reform*, (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 90.

⁵ Alan L. McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books Inc, 2006), 79.

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981*, (New York: Farrar Straus Girous, 1983), 123.

prominent foreign policy goal and distancing American foreign policy from the more cold and calculating realpolitik of its predecessors, the Carter administration was not simply making a moral decision, it was making a strategic decision.

DEVELOPING CARTER'S HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

Though the human rights policy of the United States is accurately linked to Carter, who aggressively utilized existing human rights laws and expanded upon those laws, that policy had roots in Congressional measures that were undertaken before Carter arrived in Washington. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate, Congress undertook a concerted effort to wrest power away from the executive branch, exert more control over foreign policy and oversee executive behavior. For some Congressmen like Ed Koch of New York and Tom Harkin of Iowa, this extension of Congressional power needed to confront the tendency, which Carter hoped to further address upon his election, of the executive to support authoritarian leaders with records of human rights violations. In 1974, Congress enacted the Foreign Assistance Act, which required "a cut-off of assistance" for "governments which are consistent violators of internationally recognized human rights."⁷ Section 502B of this Act restricted security assistance to human rights violators. It made the "observance of human rights...a principal goal of U.S. foreign policy."⁸ In 1976, Congress created the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs as an executive agency concerned with the promotion of human rights through foreign policy measures.⁹

⁷ John Dumbrell, *American Foreign Policy: Carter to Clinton*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), 18.

⁸ AID/Washington. Human Rights/Project and Program Approval. 13 December 1977.

⁹ Victor S. Kaufman, "The Bureau of Human Rights During the Carter Administration," *The Historian* 61 (1998).

On April 30, 1977, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance discussed the Carter administration's definition of human rights in a speech at the University of Georgia. Vance explained the three dimensions of "human rights": the integrity of the individual, the fulfillment of basic human needs and the possession of basic civil and political liberties.¹⁰ This ambiguous definition of human rights left many Americans uncertain about what Carter's human rights policy would entail in its practical application. Frequently, the administration adopted a "carrot and stick" approach, publicly chastising and withdrawing economic and military aid from human rights violators while publicly lauding and increasing financial aid to those governments that made improvements.¹¹ With the bare basics of the policy laid out early in 1977 and the apparatus with which to exercise the policy in place before 1977, the Carter administration was prepared to test its newly formulated policy.

IMPLEMENTING CARTER'S POLICY: CENTRAL AMERICA

Latin America quickly became the testing ground for Carter's human rights policy. Carter saw himself as acting against a long tradition of violent American intervention in Latin American affairs when he assumed office in 1977.¹² The United States had militarily intervened in Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1961), the Dominican Republic (1965) and Chile (1973) over the preceding twenty-five years. The administrations of Eisenhower, Johnson and Nixon all identified stability and anti-Sovietism as the critical foreign policy goals of the United States in Latin America. Cultivating free and just societies in Latin American nations was at best a

¹⁰ Cyrus Vance, "Human Rights," Speech, Athens, Georgia, April 30, 1977.

¹¹ Smith, Gaddis, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine*, 141.

¹² Smith, Gaddis, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years*, 110.

secondary goal. Carter rejected this tendency.

Two countries in Central America, Guatemala and Nicaragua, presented Carter with an early opportunity to exercise his human rights policy. Governments in both countries faced frequent accusations of violations of human rights and each was embroiled in a violent civil war. In Guatemala, the U.S.-sponsored toppling of Jacobo Árbenz in 1954 had thrust the nation into a civil war that lasted for over thirty years. Árbenz was succeeded by a string of military dictators who struggled to gain popular support in a nation torn by economic inequality and protest. These dictators derived their power from the Guatemalan military and only held power so long as they could maintain the loyalty of the armed forces. Repressive measures against union leaders, students, peasant leaders and indigenous peoples increased substantially after 1966. The civil conflict again reached a new level in the 1970s, when the government conducted violent campaigns against the nation's Indian population when that population began to agitate for economic and political rights.¹³ As the nation descended into economic depression in the late 1970s, revolutionary groups were able to further expand their membership and mobilize against the nation's military leaders.¹⁴ General Kjell Lauguerud García (President, 1974-1978) and General Romeo Lucas García (President, 1978-1982) came under international criticism for their heavy-handed approach to dealing with insurrectionist guerrillas (disproportionately of Mayan descent) but negative international opinion did not deter their actions.

In contrast to Guatemala, Nicaragua was ruled by one family, the Somozas, for over forty years (1937-1979). Nonetheless, Nicaragua shared a great deal in common with Guatemala.

¹³ John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion and Change*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2006), 121.

¹⁴ Walter Lafeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1993), 255-258.

There, too, the government faced a significant domestic insurgency. Much like in Guatemala, dictatorial rule drew the ire of the nation because it was perceived to be indifferent to the needs of the people. Two events in the 1970s typify Somoza's corruption and account for the proliferation of opposition movements against him. First, in 1972, a devastating earthquake leveled the capital city of Managua and claimed the lives of thousands of Nicaraguans. Money poured into Nicaragua from all over the world in order to rebuild Managua; President Richard Nixon sent \$32 million for reconstruction.¹⁵ A great deal of this money was never spent on rebuilding efforts, going instead into the pockets of Somoza and his supporters.¹⁶ Second, in January 1978, Nicaraguans blamed Somoza for the assassination of the Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardenal, editor of the newspaper *La Prensa* and critic of the Government of Nicaragua. These events turned the tide of public opinion against Somoza and mobilized a broadly based opposition movement against his government.

Carter and his administration believed that a grounded human rights policy would benefit not just Guatemala and Nicaragua's people, but the governments themselves by improving their international image and draining their insurgencies of support. Both nations had been damaged by their international reputation for human rights abuse. If the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan governments improved their records, they could burnish foreign opinion. Furthermore, insurgent leaders would face more difficulty in gaining recruits and public support. In a conversation with Minister of Finance Colonel Hugo Tulio Bucaro, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance argued that the Guatemalan situation was comparable to the Spanish situation: in Spain, terrorist groups attempted to stoke army crackdowns in order to turn public opinion in favor of the insurgents,

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 227-228.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 227-228.

thus perceived as victims of government repression.¹⁷

As in the case of Guatemala, the Carter administration believed that improving its human rights situation would aid the Nicaraguan government in its fight against leftist insurgents. Human rights violations combined with a generally undemocratic political process had much more to do with promoting insurgency than any external actor like Cuba or the Soviet Union. A memorandum composed by a member of the U.S. embassy in Guatemala argues that "the conditions which have fomented the guerrillas' existence for so many years in Nicaragua...have been more a result of frustration with the prospect of achieving changes through peaceful democratic processes than a result of Cuban backing of the FSLN."¹⁸ The same memorandum concludes that "If [the government of Nicaragua] were to constructively discuss possible changes and undertake some reform measures...this would change the domestic climate so as to undercut support for extremism." The line of argumentation was very much the same for both Guatemala and Nicaragua. Carter's human rights policy did not necessarily contradict the American Cold War imperative to support anti-communist governments. The goal was not to undermine authoritarian governments, but to inspire gradual reform in those governments.

The Carter administration first elected to pursue quiet diplomacy with Guatemala and Nicaragua, tying U.S. military aid to the requirement that both governments grant an independent human rights organization the access that it needed to compile a comprehensive human rights report. When the Guatemalan government refused, the U.S. suspended its security assistance to

¹⁷ Cyrus Vance. Human Rights in Guatemala: Views of Finance Minister Bucaro. Memorandum. 8 November 1979.

¹⁸ AmEmbassy Managua. Your Meeting With Somoza. 10 January 1978.

Guatemala. It did the same to the Somoza government in 1977.¹⁹ This refusal set the tone for years of tense back-and-forth between the Carter administration and the respective government leaders of Guatemala and Nicaragua, who resented every attempt to connect aid to human rights progress.

FACING RESISTANCE FROM FOREIGN SOURCES

Guatemalan leaders were furious at the aggressiveness with which Carter and his administration utilized this new policy. Guatemalan leaders renounced U.S. military assistance on the grounds that human rights predicates were interventionist and violated Guatemalan domestic affairs. They were also confused by what they regarded as a significant shift in American emphasis. In response to visiting U.S. Congressman Robert Drinan's criticism that the Guatemalan government had an exaggerated fear of communists, who, after all, he explained, were people too, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Castillo Valdez pointed out to his guest, "All the bad things we learned about Communists, we learned from you Americans. Now that you have changed your minds you will have to give us time to readjust."²⁰

Guatemalan leaders increasingly believed that the Carter administration's new policy had been designed to embarrass and undermine Guatemalan leadership.²¹ On October 2, 1979, President Lucas expressed his distaste for Carter's policy. The American Embassy in Guatemala discussed his complaints, "the President considers Guatemala is the target of an unjust orchestrated campaign of defamation. The object of this campaign, he says, is to destabilize

¹⁹ Memorandum from Executive Secretary Peter Tarnoff to Zbigniew Brzezinski dated September 6, 1977.

²⁰ AmEmbassy Guatemala. Private Visit of Congressman Drinan. Memorandum. 23 January 1980.

²¹ AmEmbassy Guatemala. Monthly Report on Political Violence and Human Rights: September 1977. Memorandum. 19 October 1977.

Guatemala and halt its progress.”²² On August 18, 1980, President Lucas lamented that the U.S. government was trying to “strangle” Guatemala.²³ Lucas and others began to question American support.

Guatemalan leadership did not only reject the Carter administration’s human rights policy on the grounds that it was interventionist or undermining. Many in the Guatemalan government believed that the strict adherence to human rights norms limited the government’s ability to quell the insurgents. In a 1978 conversation with Assistant Secretary of State Terence Todman, then Guatemalan President Laugerud lamented the limitations on his government that this progress requires. The “onerous evidence requirements of the penal code [allowed] many offenders to go scot free,” Laugerud complained.²⁴ He went on to say that human rights was a “two-way street” and Guatemalan officials were victims of insurgent violations as well.

In 1980, with the struggle with insurgents worsening and the recent Sandinista victory in Nicaragua looming, President Lucas lamented that “he was engaged in a ‘war’ with subversive leftist forces which would not follow the rules and there was no possibility of defeating them in a “clean and legal manner.”²⁵ He went on to say that while “he needed and wanted official U.S. economic and security assistance (particularly the latter) Guatemala could and would have to live without it if in order to obtain such assistance he had to follow a course that would deprive him of the ability to utilize measures that he believed were the only means to keep the extreme left from defeating him.”²⁶

²² AmEmbassy Guatemala. U.S. Position on Inter-American Bank Loan. Memorandum. 3 October 1979.

²³ Dreyfuss and Walter H. Nutting. Emissaries to President Lucas. 18 August 1980.

²⁴ AmEmbassy Guatemala. Todman Conversation with President Laugerud, January 23. Memorandum. 24 January 1978.

²⁵ Dreyfuss and Walter H. Nutting. Emissaries to President Lucas. 18 August 1980.

²⁶ Dreyfuss and Walter H. Nutting. Emissaries to President Lucas. 18 August 1980.

In Nicaragua, Somoza echoed many of these complaints regarding Carter's human rights policy, particularly the idea that the human rights policy was undermining counter-insurgency efforts. Somoza continually blamed the American withdrawal of support and Carter's "excessive idealism" for the spreading insurgency in Nicaragua.²⁷ On February 22, Somoza communicated to an American ambassador that he wanted that ambassador to relay to Washington that the United States was going too far with its human rights campaign.²⁸ "[The insurgents] would always be complaining until the U.S. stopped applying pressure."²⁹ On May 8, 1978, Somoza again complained that he was not receiving sufficient American support in his struggle for power with the Sandinistas. He explained, "The U.S.G...cannot continue to play 'this cowardly game.' The U.S.G has made its point on human rights...and now it was time to 'mend our fence...'"³⁰ At this point in time, under fire from a number of angles in his own country, Somoza was eager for public support from the U.S. government, support that, traditionally, he likely would have gotten. In September of 1978, Somoza expressed hope that the U.S. "was aware that its human rights policy had encouraged misperceptions by the opposition regarding his weakness."

Unlike the Guatemalan leadership, Somoza went beyond simply complaining about American posture toward his government. Somoza threatened the Carter administration with Congressional pressure. On May 19, 1978, Somoza "continued to insist that the U.S.G more actively support the GON and pointedly referred to his influential 'friends' in Congress who would embarrass the administration if such support

²⁷ Solaún, Mauricio. Demarche to President Somoza. 8 February 1978.

²⁸ AmEmbassy Managua. Amb Conversation With Somoza: May 8. 10 May 1978.

²⁹ AmEmbassy Managua. Meeting With Somoza. 23 February 1978.

³⁰ AmEmbassy Managua. Amb Conversation With Somoza: May 8. 10 May 1978.

was not given.”³¹ American ambassador Mauricio Solaun recalled a meeting with a desperate Somoza in May of 1978 in which Somoza excused himself to take a phone call. Upon returning, Somoza indicated to American diplomats that the phone call was from an American who asked Somoza to contact "A U.S. politician who has the influence to get Nicaragua off the hotspot in the U.S. Senate."³² Somoza went on to say that he knew many Congressmen and would embarrass the Carter administration unless it decided to stop "picking" on him. Somoza believed that, without executive leadership, the U.S. human rights policy was utterly impotent.

FACING RESISTANCE FROM DOMESTIC SOURCES

The Carter administration had to deal with domestic resistance to the human rights policy as well. In the case of Nicaragua in particular, the Carter administration faced considerable Congressional resistance. An examination of Congressional letters to the Carter suggests that Carter was repeatedly attacked from both sides of the aisle, though the attacks from the right were more frequent.

From the right, a number of Congressional leaders criticized the Carter administration's lack of support for the Somoza government. On June 29, 1978, Representative John Murphy (a close personal friend to Somoza) wrote to Carter expressing “Your human rights program has caused many to view our foreign policy as 'slapping our friends and kissing our enemies.' Particularly in Nicaragua, 'Human Rights' does not include the “right” to riot, kill and destroy

³¹ Solaún, Mauricio. Conversation with Somoza: May 19. 22 May 1978.

³² Solaún, Mauricio. Conversation with Somoza: May 19. 22 May 1978.

with the aim of establishing a totalitarian Marxist state.”³³ Murphy further argued that the human rights record of the Sandinistas was worse than Somoza's. Three months later, Representatives John Murphy and Charles Wilson sent Carter another letter in which they urged him to support Somoza before the Sandinistas toppled his government. In the letter, Murphy complained of Carter's "misguided application" of policies, "particularly regarding unsubstantiated and erroneous allegations against the government of Nicaragua.”³⁴ This letter was signed by over 75 U.S. Congressional Representatives. Ultimately, the criticisms of Murphy and other conservative Congressmen foreshadowed the criticisms of the Reagan administration. Carter's human rights policy did not have the unifying effect that he had hoped.

Bureaucratic resistance within the executive branch further constrained Carter's human rights policy. Many in the Department of Defense and the Critical Intelligence Agency attributed the problems the United States faced in Central America (the Nicaraguan revolution, insurgency in Guatemala and El Salvador) to an overambitious human rights policy.³⁵ CIA documents from the era suggest that while the Carter administration was prepared to distance itself from the traditional Cold War outlook of its predecessors, the CIA was not. In fact, in 1977, the CIA believed that the “current impasse between Washington and much of Latin America over the human rights issue can only encourage Moscow...as long as the U.S. fails to stabilize its own relationship with the Latins, Moscow will be able to make inroads on the still-preponderant U.S. influence in the area.”³⁶

The recent loss of Cuba to the Soviets and the success of Cuba in disassociating itself

³³ Letter from Representative John Murphy et al to Jimmy Carter dated June 29, 1979.

³⁴ Letter from Representative John Murphy et al to Jimmy Carter dated September 22, 1978.

³⁵ Robert Pastor. DR On Mini-SCC. Memorandum. 13 February 1980.

³⁶ Central Intelligence Agency. Soviet Interest in Latin America. April 1977.

from the United States without losing its independence gave inspiration to leftists in Latin America, the CIA theorized; the Soviet Union represented an alternative to the domineering hegemon to the North with the long legacy of unwanted intervention. The CIA even suggested that Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, having rejected U.S. military assistance "in protest of Washington's 'interference in internal affairs'" might turn to the Soviet Union for arms.³⁷ The CIA's peddling of this unlikely scenario demonstrates how adamant certain elements of the bureaucracy were in their rejection of Carter's policy; perhaps if these individuals could scare Carter administration officials with ideas of increased Soviet influence in Latin America, Carter would abandon the policy. These critics were not eager to help the Carter administration further its human rights policy in Central America.

The Carter administration was not only being criticized by certain elements of the CIA and Department of Defense, it was also being undermined by various elements in the State Department. In a letter dated July 1, 1977, Representative Ed Koch, a supporter of Jimmy Carter's human rights policy warned him that his "determination to emphasize human rights as a major component in U.S. foreign policy is being badly undercut by certain segments of the State Department."³⁸ Koch then relays to Carter that certain elements of the State Department had covertly supported the re-implementation of military aid to Somoza.

REVOLUTION: A COMMITMENT TO CHANGE PUT TO THE TEST

Though Republicans and conservative Democrats in Congress and bureaucrats throughout the executive branch pushed Carter to support Somoza against the socialist

³⁷ Central Intelligence Agency. Soviet Interest in Latin America. April 1977.

³⁸ Letter from Representative Ed Koch to Jimmy Carter dated July 1, 1977.

Sandinistas, Carter held firm. Carter remained committed to his human rights policy, but he also recognized that the Somoza regime was nearing its end. Carter's reputation for upholding human rights as the main tenet of his foreign policy would be irreparably damaged if he subverted the will of the Nicaraguan people and propped up the internationally despised Somoza government when it was destined to fall.

Nevertheless, with all of its talk of turning its attention away from the traditional Manichean Cold War outlook, the Carter administration demonstrated concern with the rise of the FSLN in Nicaragua. The Carter administration scoured Nicaragua throughout 1978 and 1979 for a moderate leadership that might overtake Somoza and not yield to leftist radicals. American mediation was seen as one way the U.S. could prevent radical takeover.³⁹ In those mediation efforts, the Carter administration supported moderate elements of Nicaraguan society, elements that feared that if quick action was not taken to mediate the Nicaraguan crisis, Nicaragua would fall into anarchy, civil war and may ultimately lead to communist takeover, or perhaps worse, harsher Somoza rule.⁴⁰ In 1979, the Carter administration explained, "Our preferred outcome is to see a moderate transitional government succeed General Somoza...Our goal should be to try to isolate [the Sandinistas] and to minimize and gradually reduce their influence."⁴¹ Thus, the Carter administration sought to distance itself from the Somoza dynasty while at the same time preventing the Sandinistas from seizing governmental control.

When the Sandinistas did come to power in 1979, however, the Carter administration decided to work with them in an attempt to prevent their being pulled any further into the Soviet-

³⁹ Memorandum from Latin America Division of the Office of Regional and Political Analysis to Robert Pastor dated December 24, 1978.

⁴⁰ From American Embassy in Managua to Cyrus Vance date unknown (between September 1-12, 1978).

⁴¹ Agenda for SCC Meeting dated September 18, 1978.

Cuban orbit. Initially, the administration demonstrated a belief that the Sandinista movement was broad based and open to democracy and capitalism. As the Carter administration told Congress in 1972,

The broad outlines of "Sandinismo"...includes a commitment to a democratic form, a compassionate attitude toward its enemies, defense of human rights, respect for private property, a commitment to allow the private sector to be part of a mixed economy, a commitment to freedom of expression and of the press and, in foreign [policy], a desire to have good relations with all countries while pursuing a non-aligned posture.⁴²

Perhaps this was the view of an administration that had come under considerable fire for losing Nicaragua to the communists. Indeed, the Carter administration scrambled to mediate the Nicaraguan crisis in order to empower a more moderate element. Nevertheless, the Carter administration had a much more benign view of the Sandinistas than the Reagan administration would ultimately have.

In the immediate aftermath of the Sandinista takeover, the Carter administration remained optimistic that the Sandinistas had not undertaken a campaign of bloodletting that might exacerbate an already terrible human rights situation in Nicaragua. Indeed, the Carter administration's evaluation of post-revolution Nicaragua was relatively positive. The administration painted a portrait of a government eager to right the wrongs of the previous government. The Carter administration was impressed by the commitment to human rights that the Sandinistas demonstrated in the first months after their takeover. Not only did the Sandinistas invite the IACHR into Nicaragua, as Somoza refused to do in his final years in office, but they worked with the U.S. on human rights issues in the OAS.⁴³ The Nicaraguans

⁴² Pezzullo, Lawrence A. Congressional Presentation on Nicaragua. August 1979.

⁴³ Graham, Richard. Your Meeting With Members of Nicaragua FSLN Directorate, December 6 at 9:15. 5

appreciated the U.S. human rights policy. As reported in 1980, “Junta member Arturo Cruz called me this morning to indicate ‘how impressed all members of his gov’t are that the U.S.G took such firm action in El Salvador.’ He said it is convincing evidence that the U.S.G, unlike the ‘other block,’ acts on the basis of principle and takes human rights seriously.”⁴⁴ Perhaps these were the words of a government that did not wish to arouse American anger while they were still trying to set the foundations for a new Nicaraguan regime, but exchanges between the two governments seemed genuinely cordial at the outset.

As Sandinista ties to the Soviet and Cuban efforts to spread communist revolution in El Salvador became clear to the Carter administration, mild admiration turned to distrust. The Carter administration realized that steps had to be taken to prevent the spread of revolution in Central America and stem any Soviet attempt to take a foothold in Nicaragua, but officials were uncertain what to do given the positive international image of the new Sandinista regime that so bravely toppled the dictatorial Somoza. An American embassy memorandum discussed the difficulty of American intervention: "I do not think our aim should be punish the Nicaraguans, though that may be necessary, because they still have much sympathy around the hemisphere and in Europe."⁴⁵ Having run out of time in office, the Carter administration left office under harsh criticisms that it had lost Nicaragua to the communists.

CONCLUSIONS ON CARTER’S HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

Upon Carter's inauguration in 1977, the Carter administration undertook the revamping of

December 1979.

⁴⁴ AmEmbassy Managua. GRN Impressed by U.S.G Decision in Suspending Aid to El Salvador. 6 December 1980.

⁴⁵ AmEmbassy San Jose. Interventionist Activities in Salvador. 14 January 1981.

American foreign policy, first by turning away from the traditional Cold War outlook that had marked the foreign policies of Carter's predecessors and second by instituting a comprehensive human rights policy unlike any previously known in Washington. The administration conducted this policy enthusiastically, eager to prove that anti-Sovietism need not be the defining characteristic of American foreign policy. Instead, human rights could represent the yolk of U.S. foreign policy.

The Carter administration likely did not expect the degree of resistance that this policy ultimately met in Washington and abroad. Foreign leaders resisted this policy, some of whom renounced American aid tied to human rights progress. This refusal to comply limited the ability of the policy to affect positive change in target nations. The policy also led to chilled American relations with a number of Latin American nations including Guatemala and Somoza-led Nicaragua. Resistance in Washington further demonstrated the untenable nature of the policy; while the Carter administration was ready to move beyond the anti-Sovietism of the Cold War, bureaucrats and Congressman that had been entrenched in Washington were not.

Ultimately, Carter stuck to the policy, though it is questionable if he would have done so in Nicaragua if the relaxation of the policy could have perpetuated Somoza's rule in Nicaragua and prevented the rise of the Sandinista government. By 1978, it was clear to the Carter administration that nothing short of American military intervention would prevent the fall of Somoza and the Carter administration would never make such a commitment in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, in the latter years of the administration, the Carter administration's distrust of the Sandinista rebels and their fear of possible Soviet intervention in Latin America indicate that the administration was not as divorced from the anti-Sovietism of

their predecessors as they thought they were.

THE REAGAN CRITIQUE OF CARTER'S HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

Jeane Kirkpatrick's criticisms of Carter's human rights policy in her article, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," proved especially influential in the Reagan administration and Reagan ultimately fashioned his criticisms of Carter's human rights policy in Kirkpatrick's terms.⁴⁶ In the article, Kirkpatrick drew the distinction between traditional "authoritarian" governments and "totalitarian" governments.⁴⁷ Kirkpatrick criticized Carter for using his human rights policy to harass innocuous "authoritarian" regimes, like that of Somoza, which safeguarded traditional culture. Carter should have used his human rights policy against "totalitarian" regimes like Sandinista- led Nicaragua because totalitarian regimes, "claim jurisdiction over the whole life of the society and make demands for change that so violate internalized values and habits..."⁴⁸ During his campaign for election in 1980, Reagan echoed Kirkpatrick's criticisms that Carter's divisive human rights policy rewarded America's totalitarian enemies and punished its authoritarian allies.⁴⁹

While Reagan's first moves in office suggested a hostility to human rights, Reagan did not completely abandon the human rights imperative of his predecessor.⁵⁰ Indeed, he seized on the Carter administration's effort to imbue American foreign policy with American values.

⁴⁶ Richard Melanson, *Reconstructing Consensus: American Foreign Policy Since the Vietnam War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 144.

William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 55.

⁴⁷ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary Magazine* (November 1979).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Melanson, 138-139.

⁵⁰ Glenn A. Mower, *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy: The Carter and Reagan Experiences*, (New York: Greenwood Press, c1987), 153-154.

Reagan altered Carter's human right policy in two significant ways. First, the Reagan administration did not have as broad a view of human rights and tended to focus its attention more on democratization, with a special emphasis on free elections, and focused less on political violence. Second, while the Carter administration made human rights the focal point of its foreign policy, the Reagan administration submerged human rights concerns to the administration's greater anti-Sovietism.

Whereas Carter attempted to distance himself from the traditional Cold War outlook that pitted communists against anti-communists in a moral struggle, Reagan embraced that worldview. In 1981, the Reagan administration brought to the White House a highly charged ideological conception of the world, one that viewed every conflict in the world in the context of the U.S.-Soviet struggle. For instance, Carter initially identified the Nicaraguan revolution as a distinctly Nicaraguan phenomenon, the result of internal processes within that nation and not of foreign intervention. Reagan attributed unrest in the developing world to Soviet intervention. Reagan explained, "The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on...if they weren't engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world."⁵¹ If the Soviet Union was primarily responsible, its surrogates were also culpable for spreading leftist extremism.

REAGAN'S NICARAGUA: UNEVEN APPLICATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

In Latin America, Reagan identified Cuba and Nicaragua as Soviet surrogates. In his memoirs, Reagan suggests that Nicaragua was not only supporting the overthrow of the

⁵¹ Leogrande, 53.

Salvadoran government, but also the overthrow of the governments of Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica.⁵² Consequently, Nicaragua became one of the first victims of the "Reagan Doctrine," Reagan's policy to rollback communism by supporting anti-communist resistance movements. Between 1981 and 1989, the Reagan administration funneled tens of millions of dollars to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, often circumventing Congressional control to do so.⁵³

While Reagan funded the Contra rebels, he also undertook a public campaign to undermine the Sandinista regime which relied to a large extent upon rhetoric steeped in human rights ideals. Shortly after Reagan's election, he began to step up verbal attacks on the Sandinistas, citing their poor human rights record as evidence that their totalitarian dictatorship needed to be confronted. The Sandinistas were "brutal" and "cruel" and theirs was a "communist totalitarian state" without "a decent leg to stand on."⁵⁴ Furthermore, the Sandinistas were masterful manipulators of public opinion who had deceived many of those in Congress who opposed the Contra war.⁵⁵

While Reagan critiqued the Sandinistas on their human rights abuses, he remained silent on the human rights violations of the Contra rebels that his administration funded and the CIA trained. To some degree, the CIA was complicit in Contra violations of human rights. One disclosed manual that the CIA had provided to the Contra for training purposes, was titled, "Psychological Operations In Guerrilla Warfare." It stated: "it is possible to neutralize carefully selected and planed targets, such as judges, police and state officials. It is absolutely necessary to

⁵² Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 474.

⁵³ James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 156.

⁵⁴ Bradford E. Burns, *At War in Nicaragua: The Reagan Doctrine and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 36.

⁵⁵ Reagan, 479.

gather together the population affected so that they will take part in the act.”⁵⁶

While the Contras perpetrated human rights violations, the Reagan administration conveyed a very different portrait of the Contra rebels. Reagan's "Office of Public Diplomacy" attempted to disseminate to the public the idea that Nicaragua's Contra rebels with analogous to America's revolutionary freedom fighters. Reagan himself made reference to this intimate connection in a speech he made on March 1, 1985, in which he asserted that the Contras, the anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua, were the “moral equivalent of America’s Founding Fathers and the brave men and women of the French resistance.”⁵⁷ In Reagan's view, the Contras were not counterrevolutionaries nor were they associated with the Somoza regime. Instead, they were champions of the revolution who had grown tired of the "broken promises" of the Sandinistas.⁵⁸

The fact that the Reagan administration was criticizing Sandinista human rights violations while supporting the violent Contras was not lost on Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. Ortega, speaking about a bomb explosion that occurred at the Managua Airport, accused the U.S. of standing behind such violence. The American embassy in Managua paraphrased some of Ortega’s criticisms of U.S. policy, “terrorist attacks were being carried out by the same elements who had brutally violated Nicaraguan human rights under Somoza. The [United States government] was complaining of [Nicaraguan government] human rights violations while supporting terrorism itself.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Burns, 58.

⁵⁷ Mark P. Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War's Last Chapter*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 99.

⁵⁸ United States Department of State. Misconceptions About U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua. September 1984.

⁵⁹ AmEmbassy Managua. Daniel Ortega Speech. 20 February 1982.

The Sandinista record on human rights, though not unblemished, was better than the Reagan administration admitted. Indeed, the Sandinistas made significant strides in human rights from their predecessors in the Somoza government. An IACHR report in 1981, standing in contrast to the Commission's 1978 report, concluded that the Sandinistas had "assumed a commitment to respect human rights" and with regard to economic and social rights, the Nicaraguan government "[had] made major efforts toward the reconstruction of the country and the restructuring of social and economic conditions in Nicaragua, in order to implement those rights."⁶⁰ Certainly, these laudatory notes were tempered by criticisms that Sandinista rhetoric did not always match the reality of Sandinista actions, but the improvement from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report of 1978 was significant. By 1982, Nicaragua's human rights situation began to steadily deteriorate when the Sandinistas decreed a state of emergency. American support of the Contra rebels negatively effected Nicaragua's human rights situation by prompting the government to crack down on perceived opponents. By 1982, Nicaragua's human rights situation began to deteriorate significantly when the government declared a State of Emergency which would last until 1988.⁶¹ During those years, the Sandinistas repressed political opponents and instituted severe press censorship.⁶²

REAGAN IN GUATEMALA: ANTI-COMMUNISM PREVAILS

While the Reagan administration demonstrated interest in the progress of human rights in Sandinista-led Nicaragua, it was relatively quiet when it came to the abuses of the Government

⁶⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Nicaragua. 30 June 1981.

⁶¹ Booth, Wade and Walker, 84.

⁶² Booth, Wade and Walker, 81.

of Guatemala which represented a significant divergence from the Carter administration. An examination of U.S.-Guatemala documents from the National Security Archives, reveals a shift in emphasis away from the Carter human rights outlook under Reagan. Human rights do not cease to be a talking point, but it clearly begins to take a more secondary role, with Guatemala's leftist insurgency becoming much more central.

Less than two months after Reagan's inauguration, Ambassador Melvin E. Sinn, appointed by Carter in August of 1980, sent a memorandum to Secretary of State Alexander Haig which demonstrates this shift in foreign policy outlook. It is unclear whether Sinn was a critic of Carter's human rights policy who simply seized the opportunity to affect a revamped U.S.-Guatemalan policy or whether Sinn hoped to keep his job as the Ambassador of Guatemala under Reagan. In either case, the message is clear:

On balance, the H.R. reports have worked against our national interests in Guatemala. They have won us few friends, but have contributed to the development of a mentality which has limited our access and, perforce, our influence with governing sectors...The reports must be counted, at minimum, as an irrelevance if not a failure.⁶³

Underlying early Reagan memorandums on Carter's human rights policy was the idea that the United States had a very limited ability to affect positive change in foreign countries; human rights improvement had to come from within those nations.

The day after this memorandum was sent to Secretary of State Haig, on March 3, 1981, the Department of State compiled another report titled, "U.S. Strategy Toward Guatemala." Here, too, human rights as the central emphasis of U.S. policy toward Guatemala was pushed aside. The Reagan administration was focused upon a different problem, "How can we influence

⁶³ Melvin E. Sinn. Annual Human Rights Reports. 2 March 1981.

the current GOG to conduct itself in a way that will permit it to defeat the Cuban supported Marxist insurgency and to become a keystone for regional stability?"⁶⁴ The aim of the Reagan administration was to facilitate the Guatemalan government's counter-insurgency campaigns, not to improve that government's record of human rights. In a critique of Carter's human rights policy, the report casts doubt on Carter's evaluation of Guatemalan human rights violations by arguing that during the Carter administration "we chose to treat the GOG *as if* it were a gross and consistent human rights violator."⁶⁵ The report goes on to argue that Carter's human rights policy was utterly impotent in affecting positive change in Guatemala.

Beyond being merely impotent, Carter's policy exacerbated the Guatemalan repression and the Guatemalan insurgency, "a plausible case can be made that an important contributing factor to the increase in government repression was the paranoia of GOG leaders with regards to the intentions of a U.S. administration perceived to have grown hostile, or, at best, indifferent."⁶⁶ Guatemalan leaders welcomed an administration that did not emphasize human rights and that U.S.-Guatemalan relations would "improve immeasurably."⁶⁷ The CIA concurred, adding that the Reagan policy would assist the United States at keeping Soviet influence in Latin America at bay.⁶⁸ In May of 1981, Secretary of State Haig sent General Vernon Walters to meet with Guatemalan leaders and explain the new emphasis of the United States. During that meeting, Walters relayed that "The Secretary recognizes that your government is engaged in a struggle for survival with externally supported Marxist guerrillas. We want to help you win that struggle.

⁶⁴ Department of State. U.S. Strategy Toward Guatemala. 3 March 1981.

⁶⁵ Emphasis added.

⁶⁶ Department of State. U.S. Strategy Toward Guatemala. 3 March 1981.

⁶⁷ Department of State. U.S. Strategy Toward Guatemala. 3 March 1981.

⁶⁸ Central Intelligence Agency. The Guatemalan Insurgency: Near-Term Prospects. 1 September 1983.

The Secretary has sent me to see if we can work out a way to do that.”⁶⁹

GUATEMALA: DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

The Reagan administration recognized that Carter's human rights policy resonated with portions of the American public and U.S. Congress. Secretary Haig noted in April of 1981, “the high level of political violence in which the GOG is involved causes us internal political and legal problems which impede our ability to maintain the level of military cooperation we would wish.”⁷⁰ Haig then concluded, “Department believes our first gesture could not include the sale of helicopter spares or any other [Foreign Military Sales] or Munitions List items without provoking serious U.S. public and Congressional criticism of the Administration.”

Aware of possible Congressional oversight, the Reagan administration resolved to approve some foreign military sales if the Guatemalan government gave the U.S. assurances that it would make an effort to quell political violence, assurances that might appease Congressional opponents.⁷¹ The administration did not require concrete progress as Carter often did, but only assurances. The Reagan administration also tried to find loopholes in the definition of military materials, “we are requesting that the commerce department take trucks and jeeps especially designed for military purposes off its list of crime control equipment, thereby permitting a [3 million dollar] export of these vehicles to the Guatemalan army.”

The Reagan administration recast itself as an ally to the government of Guatemala, with the U.S. Congress representing an impediment to warmer relations between the two governments

⁶⁹ Alexander Haig. Initiative on Guatemala: Talking Points For General Walters. April 1981.

⁷⁰ Alexander Haig. Initiative on Guatemala. 8 April 1981.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

that both the Reagan administration and the government of Guatemala needed to confront.

While it is unclear the degree to which the Reagan administration had genuine concern for the human rights situation in Guatemala, the administration was certainly aware that human rights improvement would ease administration efforts to aid the Guatemalan government more aggressively. In General Walters meeting with President Lucas, Walters paraphrases his explanation of this issue to Lucas,

We cannot explain to the Congress the drastic increase in deaths in recent months of noncombatants not directly involved in the guerrilla [insurrection]. We have been unable to demonstrate to Congress that there has been an improvement by a reduction in the number of quote bystanders unquote killed by violent action and we do not have indications of this...We have to convince Congress that you are making an effort to control this generalized violence.⁷²

Walters later assured President Lucas that he would appreciate whatever information the President and Foreign Minister could provide to help him to convince Congress that the Guatemalan government was making efforts to curtail violence.

Thus, similar to the Carter administration, the Reagan administration developed a largely adversarial relationship with the U.S. Congress when it came to U.S.-Central American foreign relations. Congressional disapproval constrained the Reagan administration. The Reagan administration abstained from granting the Guatemalan government a \$70 million hydro-electric loan. The administration noted to the Guatemalan government that it had abstained because an abstention would leave open the possibility that the loan would be approved and a vote in support of the loan would have led to Congressional hearings on Guatemala that may have lead to nation-specific legislation that would further handicap the Reagan administration's ability to

⁷²AmEmbassy Guatemala. Ambassador Walter's Call on President Lucas: Bilateral Issues. 22 September 1981.

aid the Guatemalan government.⁷³ The Reagan administration did not simply worry that support for such a loan would lead to harsher restrictions on Guatemala; the administration also feared that Congress would clamp down on military aid to El Salvador, a country that faced similar insurgency.⁷⁴

While at home, the Reagan administration attempted to counter Congressional restraints on its power, abroad, the Reagan administration faced resistance from human rights organizations that criticized Reagan for supporting the Guatemalan government. Reagan discounted such criticisms, holding that such human rights organizations were, like portions of Congress, conspiring against the Guatemalan government. Ambassador Chapin wrote on October 22, 1982, that "a concerted disinformation campaign is being waged in the U.S. against the Guatemalan government by groups supporting the communist insurgency in Guatemala."⁷⁵ The memo went on to say that these groups are "betting on an application, or rather misapplication of human rights policy so as to damage the [Government of Guatemala] and assist themselves." Thus, in the administration's efforts to compel the U.S. Congress to re-instate military aid to the Guatemalan government, the administration worked to debunk human rights reports that were critical of the Guatemalan government before Congressional committees and the public.⁷⁶

⁷³ Alexander Haig. U.S. Vote on IDB Loan to Guatemala. 10 November 1981.

⁷⁴ Stephen W. Bosworth. U.S. Guatemala Relations: Arms Sales. 26 November 1982.

⁷⁵ Frederic L. Chapin. Analysis of Human Rights Reports on Guatemala by Amnesty International. 22 October 1982.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

DEFENDING THE GUATEMALAN GOVERNMENT IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

While the Reagan administration attempted to work around Congressional restraints on its power to restore America's traditional military and economic ties to Guatemala, it also conducted a rhetorical campaign to defend the government of Guatemala. In a meeting with Guatemalan President Lucas, General Vernon Walters assured the president that the Reagan administration “sought to insure that the situation in Guatemala is treated in an unbiased and objective manner in meetings of international organizations. For example, in cooperation with your delegation, we were successful in obtaining a more acceptable resolution at the recent United Nations Human Rights Commission Session in Geneva.”⁷⁷ In 1981, the Reagan administration went on to say that it would silence critics of the Guatemalan government, or “minimize public statements by U.S. officials on the human rights situation in Guatemala or on any other subject concerning Guatemala about which there is little positive to be said.”⁷⁸

The Reagan administration also lavished praise on Guatemalan leaders and attempted to counter international organizations that painted those leaders in a negative light. During the early 1980s, Reagan lavished praise on then Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt. Montt was “a man of great personal integrity” that was “totally dedicated to democracy.”⁷⁹ As for those contending that Montt was a vicious dictator, they were incorrect; Montt and his government had gotten a “bum rap.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Alexander Haig. Initiative on Guatemala: Talking Points For General Walters. April 1981.

⁷⁸ Alexander Haig. Initiative on Guatemala. 8 April 1981.

⁷⁹ Daniel Wilkinson, “Party to Mass Murder?” *The Washington Post*, 8 November 2003.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

REAGAN'S GUATEMALA POLICY: INCONSISTENT WITH THE TRUTH

Reagan's characterization of Montt stood in stark contrast to the characterization of Montt by three Congressional staffers who visited the president following his successful coup in 1982. Those staffers, who met with the new Guatemalan president on March 23, 1982, left their dinner with Montt concerned that the Guatemalans had lost one ruthless dictator and gained another. A memorandum composed by Ambassador Chapin concluded,

[The staffers] were very put off by [Montt's] failure to even [acknowledge] that President Lucas and some of the military had been responsible for human rights violations during the Lucas Presidency...Ríos Montt's failure to commit himself to the prosecution of both civilian and military law breakers of the previous regime did not sit well. The Staffdel felt he would be protective of his military colleagues even if they might have blood on their hands.⁸¹

Besides these concerns, staffers referred to Montt as "crazy" and a "lunatic" whose "feet were not on the ground."⁸² Ambassador Chapin emphasized in his memorandum that Montt's ramblings could not be blamed on intoxication as only papaya juice was served.⁸³

Early indications verified that the Congressional staffers' views of Montt as one who would not uphold a high standard of human rights were correct. On July 1st, Montt declared a state of siege that significantly upped government repression tactics. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration remained firmly committed to the belief that the Guatemalan government was improving with regard to human rights violations.

While the Reagan administration asserted that most of the human rights violations were being committed by the leftist guerrillas, some in the American Embassy in Guatemala were

⁸¹ Frederic L. Chapin. Congressional Staff Del Ofnwoodward (sic), Ross and Cameron Have Dinner Meeting with Montt. 20 May 1982.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

questioning such claims about what was occurring on the ground in Guatemala. Their knowledge was largely skewed by the American Embassy's method of gathering information. In a memorandum regarding the "Credibility of Embassy Guatemala Human Rights Reporting," Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Charles Fairbanks concluded that much of the Reagan administration's knowledge about human rights in Guatemala came from the Guatemalan army, which clearly stood to gain from covering up human rights violations and had a history of deception.⁸⁴ Second, the Embassy relied upon the Guatemalan Press. While this might seem like a good source of relatively unbiased information, the state of siege declared in Guatemala in July of 1982 required that all press reports come from army press releases and even before the state of siege, Fairbanks admitted that the media is an unreliable source of information.⁸⁵ Fairbanks discussed another source of Embassy information, video tapes and transcripts, which he also distrusted because the "early optimistic cables about Choatulum were partly based on TV interviews of refugees who said they were fleeing from the guerrillas...A later cable, as we know, established that they were fleeing from the Army."⁸⁶ Of course, there is one reliable means by which to extract information on human rights violations: by asking eyewitnesses. Fairbanks pontificates on this method:

[On-site inspections and interviews with eye witnesses] are the only really good methods of being sure of who is responsible for human rights violations in the Guatemalan countryside, although they are far from infallible. We have not done very many such inspections. I was directly asked by Chuck Berk exactly how many on-site inspections Embassy Guatemala has carried out. I don't know the answer, but suspect it might be embarrassing.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Charles Fairbanks. Credibility of Embassy Guatemala Human Rights Reporting. 23 November 1982.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

From this, Fairbanks concludes that the American embassy in Guatemala City could not accurately state who is responsible for the killings in rural Guatemala; Fairbanks characterized the Embassy's feeling that guerrillas were committing most of the human rights violations as "wishful thinking."⁸⁸

Consequently, the Reagan administration's defense of the Guatemalan government as a government eager to right the wrongs of the past and improve its human rights record did not match with independent organizations like the IACHR that visited Guatemala throughout the course of the 1980s. The IACHR traveled to Guatemala to compile special reports of the Guatemalan human rights situation in 1981, 1983 and 1985. The striking trait of all of these reports is the consistency across different Guatemalan Presidential administrations of a lack of commitment to basic human rights. In 1981, the IACHR criticized the Lucas government and noted that an "alarming climate of violence [had] prevailed in recent years in Guatemala, which violence has either been instigated or tolerated by the Government, unwilling or unable to contain it. The violence has resulted in an excessive loss of life and in a widespread deterioration of the human rights set forth in the American Convention on Human Rights."⁸⁹ In 1983, the IACHR criticized Montt, noting that, "the Guatemalan army has been principally responsible for the most grievous violations of human rights, including destruction, burning and sacking of entire towns and the death of both combatant and noncombatant populations in those towns."⁹⁰ In 1985, too, the Óscar Humberto Mejía Victores government came under fire for its

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Guatemala. 13 October 1981.

⁹⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Guatemala. 5 October 1983.

incessant violations of international human rights norms.

CONCLUSIONS ON REAGAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

Upon taking office in 1981, officials in the Reagan administration renounced Carter's human rights policy on a number of levels. Reagan officials correctly criticized that Carter's policy alienated American allies. Officials also criticized that Carter's policy aided leftist insurgency in Nicaragua and Guatemala and enabled the Sandinistas to win control of the Nicaraguan government in 1979. Ultimately, as John Murphy would criticize in 1978, Carter's human rights policy led to a foreign policy in which the United States "slapped" its friends and "kissed" its enemies.

The Reagan administration sought to rectify this tendency by using the human rights policy as a weapon against totalitarian Nicaragua and taking a much more passive approach to the human rights violations of perceived allies in the anti-Soviet struggle, like Guatemala. Consequently, human rights rhetoric became a critical weapon against the Sandinista government while human rights ceased to be a major foreign policy emphasis in America's dealings with the "authoritarian" government of Guatemala.

On the positive end, the Reagan administration, which considered Guatemala a critical American partner in Central America, successfully normalized relations with the Guatemalan government by ceasing to pressure the government on its human rights abuses. More negatively, Reagan's human rights policy in Central America was unevenly practiced. The Reagan administration sometimes undertook deceitful means to whitewash the human rights abuses of the Guatemalan government and the Contra rebels, while critiquing the human rights violations

of the Sandinistas. Ultimately, the normalization of relations with Guatemala and the ultimate defeat of Sandinistas with the help of the Contra rebels came at a high cost, complicity with human rights abuses of the most severe kind.

In 1981, the transition of presidential power from Carter to Reagan prompted a significant shift in human rights policy. Upon his election, Carter attempted to re-conceptualize American foreign policy. While he never fully strayed from the Anti-Soviet outlook of his predecessors, he nevertheless submerged this traditional Cold War impulse to his human rights policy in some cases. In Guatemala and Nicaragua, Carter aggressively confronted anti-communist governments that had long been friends of America. Though he achieved limited success as a result of significant resistance from a number of sources, Carter still managed to bring human rights to the forefront of international relations.

Conversely, Reagan held deep reservations about Carter's human rights policy because that policy sometimes entailed the American government to confront its allies in the fight against Soviet Communism. Reagan rejected the notion of "slapping" America's friends with pressure to maintain a high standard of human rights. Consequently, Reagan utilized Carter's human rights policy selectively. Like Carter, Reagan aggressively utilized the policy against Nicaragua, who he perceived as a Soviet surrogate. In sharp contrast to Carter, Reagan supported the government of Guatemala despite powerful rumblings in the United States and abroad that the Guatemalan government was a gross violator of human rights. While the Reagan administration successfully normalized relations with Guatemala and healed the damage that Carter's human rights policy did on U.S.-Guatemalan relations, it did so at the high cost of Guatemalan lives.

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