

Rights Action
May 9, 2013

UPDATE: Genocide Trial In Guatemala

Closing arguments were made today (May 9, 2013) in the genocide trial against retired Generals Rios Montt and Rodriguez Sanchez in Guatemala City. The prosecution has asked for a 75 year prison sentence for the two generals. A decision is pending. Assuredly there are more legal manipulations and trickery to come; assuredly there will be more appeals and motions to strike. Tensions and threats of repression remain very high in Guatemala.

PLEASE CONTACT YOUR OWN MEMBER OF CONGRESS and insist that they and the U.S. government make on-going public statements in support of the rule of law in Guatemala, in support of the genocide trial and in support of all trials against the material and intellectual authors of war crimes, crimes against humanity and human rights violations.

MORE INFORMATION ON TRIAL: <http://www.riosmontt-trial.org/>

ARTICLE:

How Reagan Promoted Genocide

By Robert Parry, February 21, 2013, <http://consortiumnews.com/2013/02/21/how-reagan-promoted-genocide/>

[Special Report: A newly discovered document reveals that President Reagan and his national security team in 1981 approved Guatemala's extermination of both leftist guerrillas and their "civilian support mechanisms," a green light that opened a path to genocide against hundreds of Mayan villages, reports Robert Parry.]

Soon after taking office in 1981, President Ronald Reagan's national security team agreed to supply military aid to the brutal right-wing regime in Guatemala to pursue the goal of exterminating not only "Marxist guerrillas" but their "civilian support mechanisms," according to a newly disclosed document from the National Archives.

Over the next several years, the military assistance from the Reagan administration helped the Guatemalan army do just that, engaging in the slaughter of some 100,000 people, including what a truth commission deemed genocide against the Mayan Indians in the northern highlands.

(Photo: Vernon Walters, a former deputy director of the CIA who served as President Ronald Reagan's ambassador-at-large in the early 1980s.)

Recently discovered documents at the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, also reveal that Reagan's White House was reaching out to Israel in a scheme to circumvent congressional restrictions on military equipment for the Guatemalan military.

In 1983, national security aide Oliver North (who later became a central figure in the Iran-Contra scandal) reported in a memo that Reagan's Deputy National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane (another key Iran-Contra figure) was approaching Israel over how to deliver 10 UH-1H helicopters to Guatemala to give the army greater mobility in its counterinsurgency war.

According to these documents that I found at the Reagan library – and other records declassified in the late 1990s – it's also clear that Reagan and his administration were well aware of the butchery underway in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America.

The relaxed attitude toward the Guatemalan regime's brutality took shape in spring 1981 as Reagan's State Department "advised our Central American embassies that it has been studying ways to restore a closer, cooperative relationship with Guatemala," according to a White House "Situation Room Checklist" dated April 8, 1981.

The document added: "State believes a number of changes have occurred which could make Guatemalan leaders more receptive to a new U.S. initiative: the Guatemalans view the new administration as more sympathetic to their problems [and] they are less suspect of the U.S. role in El Salvador," where the Reagan administration was expanding support for another right-wing regime infamous for slaughtering its political opponents, including Catholic clergy.

"State has concluded that any attempt to reestablish a dialogue would require some initial, condition-free demonstration of our goodwill. However, this could not include military sales which would provoke serious U.S. public and congressional criticism. State will undertake a series of confidence building measures, free of preconditions, which minimize potential conflict with existing legislation," which then barred military assistance to Guatemala because of its long record of human rights crimes.

The "checklist" added that the State Department "has also decided that the administration should engage the Guatemalan government at the highest level in a dialogue on our bilateral relations and the initiatives we can take together to improve them. Secretary [of State Alexander] Haig has designated [retired] General Vernon Walters as his personal emissary to initiate this process with President [Fernando Romeo] Lucas [Garcia].

"If Lucas is prepared to give assurances that he will take steps to halt government involvement in the indiscriminate killing of political opponents and to foster a climate conducive to a viable electoral process, the U.S. will be prepared to approve some military sales immediately." But the operative word in that paragraph was "indiscriminate." The Reagan administration expressed no problem with killing civilians if they were considered supporters of the guerrillas who had been fighting against the country's ruling oligarchs and generals since the 1950s when the CIA organized the overthrow of Guatemala's reformist President Jacobo Arbenz.

SPARING THE 'NON POLITICIZED'

The distinction was spelled out in "Talking Points" for Walters to deliver in a face-to-face meeting with General Lucas and his senior advisers. As edited inside the White House in April 1981, the "Talking Points" read: "The President and Secretary Haig have designated me as [their] personal emissary to discuss bilateral relations on an urgent basis.

"Both the President and the Secretary recognize that your country is engaged in a war with Marxist guerrillas. We are deeply concerned about externally supported Marxist subversion in Guatemala and other countries in the region. As you are aware, we have already taken steps to assist Honduras and El Salvador resist this aggression.

"The Secretary has sent me here to see if we can work out a way to provide material assistance to your government. ... We have minimized negative public statements by US officials on the situation in Guatemala. ... We have arranged for the Commerce Department to take steps that will permit the sale of \$3 million worth of military trucks and Jeeps to the Guatemalan army. ...

“With your concurrence, we propose to provide you and any officers you might designate an intelligence briefing on regional developments from our perspective. Our desire, however, is to go substantially beyond the steps I have just outlined. We wish to reestablish our traditional military supply and training relationship as soon as possible.

“As we are both aware, this has not yet been feasible because of our internal political and legal constraints relating to the use by some elements of your security forces of deliberate and indiscriminate killing of persons not involved with the guerrilla forces or their civilian support mechanisms. I am not referring here to the regrettable but inevitable death of innocents though error in combat situations, but to what appears to us a calculated use of terror to immobilize non politicized people or potential opponents. ...

“If you could give me your assurance that you will take steps to halt official involvement in the killing of persons not involved with the guerrilla forces or their civilian support mechanism ... we would be in a much stronger position to defend successfully with the Congress a decision to begin to resume our military supply relationship with your government.”

In other words, though the “talking points” were framed as an appeal to reduce the “indiscriminate” slaughter of “non politicized people,” they amounted to an acceptance of scorched-earth tactics against people involved with the guerrillas and “their civilian support mechanism.” The way that played out in Guatemala – as in nearby El Salvador – was the massacring of peasants in regions considered sympathetic to leftist insurgents.

CABLES ON KILLINGS

As reflected in the “Talking Points” and as confirmed by other U.S. government documents from that time period, the Reagan administration was well aware that the Guatemalan military was engaged in mass killings of Guatemalan civilians.

According to one “secret” cable also from April 1981 — and declassified in the 1990s — the CIA was confirming Guatemalan government massacres even as Reagan was moving to loosen the military aid ban. On April 17, 1981, a CIA cable described an army massacre at Cocob, near Nebaj in the Ixil Indian territory, because the population was believed to support leftist guerrillas.

A CIA source reported that “the social population appeared to fully support the guerrillas” and “the soldiers were forced to fire at anything that moved.” The CIA cable added that “the Guatemalan authorities admitted that ‘many civilians’ were killed in Cocob, many of whom undoubtedly were non-combatants.” [Many of the Guatemalan documents declassified in the 1990s can be found at the National Security Archive’s Web site.]

In May 1981, despite these ongoing atrocities, Reagan dispatched Walters to tell the Guatemalan leaders that the new U.S. administration wanted to lift the human rights embargoes on military equipment that former President Jimmy Carter and Congress had imposed.

In essence, Walters was giving a green light to Guatemala to continue the practice of slaughtering guerrillas and their civilian supporters, a counterinsurgency strategy that was practiced during some of the darkest days of the Vietnam War in such infamous incidents as the My Lai massacre.

The “Talking Points” also put the Reagan administration in line with the fiercely anti-communist regimes elsewhere in Latin America, where right-wing “death squads” operated with impunity liquidating not only armed guerrillas but civilians who were judged sympathetic to left-wing causes like demanding greater economic equality and social justice.

[“OPERATION CONDOR”]

In the 1970s, Argentina, Chile, Brazil and other South American countries even banded together in a cross-border assassination program that hunted down leftist and other political opponents around the world, including inside the United States. Called "Operation Condor," the wave of assassinations reached Washington D.C. on Sept. 21, 1976, when Chilean intelligence assets exploded a car bomb killing former Chilean Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier and American co-worker Ronni Moffitt as they drove down Massachusetts Avenue through an area known as Embassy Row.

The original cover story for the assassination plot had been a meeting at the CIA with Vernon Walters, who was then deputy CIA director under CIA Director George H.W. Bush. Walters also had served as U.S. military attaché to Brazil at the time of a right-wing military coup in 1964.

Reagan again turned to Walters in 1981 to serve as the President's ambassador-at-large. One of his key roles was coordinating with right-wing governments across Latin America in their escalating wars against leftist insurgencies.

RIGHT-WING BUTCHERY

Despite his aw shucks style, Reagan found virtually every anticommunist action justified, no matter how brutal. From his eight years in the White House, there is no historical indication that he was morally troubled by the bloodbath and even genocide that occurred in Central America while he was shipping hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to the implicated forces.

The death toll was staggering — an estimated 70,000 or more political killings in El Salvador, possibly 20,000 slain from the Contra war in Nicaragua, about 200 political "disappearances" in Honduras and some 100,000 people eliminated during a resurgence of political violence in Guatemala. The one consistent element in these slaughters was the overarching Cold War rationalization, emanating in large part from Ronald Reagan's White House.

Despite their frequent claims to the contrary, the evidence is now overwhelming that Reagan and his advisers had a clear understanding of the extraordinary brutality going on in Guatemala and elsewhere, based on their own internal documents. As they prepared to ship military equipment to Guatemala, White House officials knew that the Guatemalan military was engaged in massacres of the Mayans and other perceived enemies.

According to a State Department cable on Oct. 5, 1981, when Guatemalan leaders met again with Walters, they left no doubt about their plans. The cable said Gen. Lucas "made clear that his government will continue as before — that the repression will continue. He reiterated his belief that the repression is working and that the guerrilla threat will be successfully routed."

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

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

What the documents from the Reagan library now make clear is that the administration was not simply struggling ineffectively to rein in these massacres — as the U.S. press corps typically reported — but was fully onboard with the slaughter of people who were part of the guerrillas' "civilian support mechanisms."

MORE MASSACRES

U.S. intelligence agencies continued to pick up evidence of these government-sponsored massacres. One CIA report in February 1982 described an army sweep through the so-called Ixil Triangle in central El Quiche province.

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

The CIA report explained the army's modus operandi: "When an army patrol meets resistance and takes fire from a town or village, it is assumed that the entire town is hostile and it is subsequently destroyed." When the army encountered an empty village, it was "assumed to have been supporting the EGP, and it is destroyed. There are hundreds, possibly thousands of refugees in the hills with no homes to return to. ...

"The army high command is highly pleased with the initial results of the sweep operation, and believes that it will be successful in destroying the major EGP support area and will be able to drive the EGP out of the Ixil Triangle. ... The well documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike."

On Feb. 2, 1982, Richard Childress, another of Reagan's national security aides, wrote a "secret" memo to his colleagues summing up this reality on the ground:

"As we move ahead on our approach to Latin America, we need to consciously address the unique problems posed by Guatemala. Possessed of some of the worst human rights records in the region, ... it presents a policy dilemma for us. The abysmal human rights record makes it, in its present form, unworthy of USG [U.S. government] support. ...

"Beset by a continuous insurgency for at least 15 years, the current leadership is completely committed to a ruthless and unyielding program of suppression. Hardly a soldier could be found that has not killed a 'guerrilla.'"

THE RISE OF RIOS MONTT

However, Reagan remained committed to supplying military hardware to Guatemala's brutal regime. So, the administration welcomed Gen. Efraim Rios Montt's March 1982 overthrow of the thoroughly bloodstained Gen. Lucas.

An avowed fundamentalist Christian, Rios Montt impressed Official Washington where the Reagan administration immediately revved up its propaganda machinery to hype the new dictator's "born-again" status as proof of his deep respect for human life.

Reagan hailed Rios Montt as "a man of great personal integrity."

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

In October, Rios Montt secretly gave carte blanche to the feared "Archivos" intelligence unit to expand "death squad" operations. Based at the Presidential Palace, the "Archivos" masterminded many of Guatemala's most notorious assassinations.

The U.S. embassy was soon hearing more accounts of the army conducting Indian massacres. On Oct. 21, 1982, one cable described how three embassy officers tried to check out some of these reports but ran into bad weather and canceled the inspection. Still, the cable put the best possible spin on the situation. Though unable to check out the massacre reports, the embassy officials did "reach the conclusion that the army is completely up front about allowing us to check alleged massacre sites and to speak with whomever we wish."

The next day, the embassy fired off its analysis that the Guatemalan government was the victim of a communist-inspired "disinformation campaign." Dated Oct. 22, 1982, the analysis concluded "that a concerted disinformation campaign is being waged in the U.S. against the Guatemalan government by groups supporting the communist insurgency in Guatemala."

The Reagan administration's report claimed that "conscientious human rights and church organizations," including Amnesty International, had been duped by the communists and "may not fully appreciate that they are being utilized. ... The campaign's object is simple: to deny the Guatemalan army the weapons and equipment needed from the U.S. to defeat the guerrillas. ...

"If those promoting such disinformation can convince the Congress, through the usual opinion-makers — the media, church and human rights groups — that the present GOG [government of Guatemala] is guilty of gross human rights violations they know that the Congress will refuse Guatemala the military assistance it needs. Those backing the communist insurgency are betting on an application, or rather misapplication, of human rights policy so as to damage the GOG and assist themselves."

HAILING THE DICTATOR

Reagan personally joined this P.R. campaign seeking to discredit human rights investigators and others who were reporting accurately on human rights crimes that the administration knew, all too well, were true. On Dec. 4, 1982, after meeting with Rios Montt, Reagan hailed the general as "totally dedicated to democracy" and added that Rios Montt's government had been "getting a bum rap" on human rights. Reagan discounted the mounting reports of hundreds of Maya villages being eradicated.

On Jan. 6, 1983, Rios Montt was informed that the United States would resume military sales to Guatemala. The dictator expressed his thanks, according to a cable from the U.S. Embassy, "saying that he had been convinced that the USG had never abandoned Guatemala. He commented that the guerrillas in country and its propaganda machine abroad would now launch concerted attacks on both governments."

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

Meanwhile, the U.S. government's cover-up of the Guatemalan bloodshed continued. State Department spokesman John Hughes said political violence in Guatemalan cities had "declined dramatically" and that rural conditions had improved too.

In February 1983, however, a secret CIA cable noted a rise in "suspect right-wing violence" with kidnappings of students and teachers. Bodies of victims were appearing in ditches and gullies. CIA sources traced these political murders to Rios Montt's order to the "Archivos" in October to "apprehend, hold, interrogate and dispose of suspected guerrillas as they saw fit."

Despite these grisly facts on the ground, the annual State Department human rights survey praised the supposedly improved human rights situation in Guatemala. "The overall conduct of the armed forces had improved by late in the year" 1982, the report stated.

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

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

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

INVOLVING ISRAEL

Publicly, senior Reagan officials continued to put on a happy face. In June 1983, special envoy Richard B. Stone praised "positive changes" in Rios Montt's government, and Rios Montt pressed the United States for 10 UH-1H helicopters and six naval patrol boats, all the better to hunt guerrillas and their sympathizers.

Since Guatemala lacked the U.S. Foreign Military Sales credits or the cash to buy the helicopters, Reagan's national security team looked for unconventional ways to arrange the delivery of the equipment that would give the Guatemalan army greater access to mountainous areas where guerrillas and their civilian supporters were hiding.

On Aug. 1, 1983, National Security Council aides Oliver North and Alfonso Sapia-Bosch reported to National Security Advisor William P. Clark that his deputy Robert "Bud" McFarlane was planning to exploit his Israeli channels to secure the helicopters for Guatemala. [For more on McFarlane's Israeli channels, see Consortiumnews.com's "How Neocons Messed Up the Mideast."]

"With regard to the loan of ten helicopters, it is [our] understanding that Bud will take this up with the Israelis," wrote North and Sapia-Bosch. "There are expectations that they would be forthcoming. Another possibility is to have an exercise with the Guatemalans. We would then use US mechanics and Guatemalan parts to bring their helicopters up to snuff."

However, more political changes were afoot in Guatemala. Rios Montt's vengeful Christian fundamentalism had hurtled so out of control, even by Guatemalan standards, that Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores seized power in another coup on Aug. 8, 1983.

Despite the power shift, Guatemalan security forces continued to murder with impunity, finally going so far that even the U.S. Embassy objected. When three Guatemalans working for the U.S. Agency for International Development were slain in November 1983, U.S. Ambassador Frederic Chapin suspected that "Archivos" hit squads were sending a message to the United States to back off even mild pressure for human rights.

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

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

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

According to now declassified U.S. records, the Guatemalan reality included torture out of the Middle Ages. A Defense Intelligence Agency cable reported that the Guatemalan military used an air base in Retalhuleu during the mid-1980s as a center for coordinating the counterinsurgency campaign in southwest Guatemala.

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

The Guatemalan military used the Pacific Ocean as another dumping spot for political victims, according to the DIA report. Bodies of insurgents tortured to death and of live prisoners marked for "disappearance" were loaded on planes that flew out over the ocean where the soldiers would shove the victims into the water.

REGIONAL SLAUGHTER

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

Reagan's attempted falsification of the historical record was a hallmark of the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua as well. In one case, Reagan personally lashed out at an individual human rights investigator named Reed Brody, a New York lawyer who had collected affidavits from more than 100 witnesses to atrocities carried out by the U.S.-supported Contra rebels in Nicaragua fighting to overthrow the country's leftist Sandinista government.

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

Privately, Reagan had a far more accurate understanding of the true nature of the Contras. At one point in the Contra war, Reagan turned to CIA official Duane Clarridge and demanded that the Contras be used to destroy some Soviet-supplied helicopters that had arrived in Nicaragua. In his memoir, Clarridge recalled that "President Reagan pulled me aside and asked, 'Dewey, can't you get those vandals of yours to do this job.'" [See Clarridge's *A Spy for All Seasons*.]

It was not until 1999, a decade after Ronald Reagan left office, that the shocking scope of the grisly reality about the atrocities in Guatemala was revealed by a truth commission that drew heavily on documents that President Bill Clinton had ordered declassified.

[TRUTH COMMISSION]

On Feb. 25, 1999, the Historical Clarification Commission estimated that the 34-year civil war had claimed the lives of some 200,000 people with the most savage bloodletting occurring in the 1980s.

The panel estimated that the army was responsible for 93 percent of the killings and leftist guerrillas for three percent. Four percent were listed as unresolved.

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

The army "completely exterminated Mayan communities, destroyed their livestock and crops," the report said. In the northern highlands, the report termed the slaughter "genocide." [Washington Post, Feb. 26, 1999]

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

AMERICAN BLAME

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

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

"Within the framework of the counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, in certain regions of the country agents of the Guatemalan state committed acts of genocide against groups of the Mayan people," Tomuschat added. [NYT, Feb. 26, 1999]

The report did not single out culpable individuals either in Guatemala or the United States. But the American official most directly responsible for renewing U.S. military aid to Guatemala and encouraging its government during the 1980s was Ronald Reagan.

The major U.S. newspapers covered the truth commission's report though only fleetingly. The New York Times made it the lead story the next day. The Washington Post played it inside on page A19. Both cited the troubling role of the CIA and other U.S. government agencies in the Guatemalan tragedy. But, again, no U.S. official was held accountable by name.

On March 1, 1999, the Washington Post's neoconservative editorial board addressed the findings but did not confront them, except to blame President Carter for having cut off military aid to Guatemala in the 1970s, thus supposedly preventing the United States from curbing Guatemala's horrific human rights conduct.

The editorial argued that the arms embargo removed "what minimal restraint even a feeble American presence supplied." The editorial made no reference to the substantial evidence that Reagan's resumption of military aid in the 1980s made the Guatemalan army more efficient in its slaughter of its enemies, armed and unarmed. With no apparent sense of irony, the Post editorial ended by stating: "We need our own truth commission" – though there was no follow-up of that idea.

During a visit to Central America, on March 10, 1999, President Clinton apologized for the past U.S. support of right-wing regimes in Guatemala dating back to 1954. "For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake," Clinton said. [Washington Post, March 11, 1999]

However, back in Washington, there was no interest, let alone determination, to hold anyone accountable for aiding and abetting the butchery. The story of the Guatemalan genocide and the Reagan administration's complicity quickly disappeared into the great American memory hole.

For human rights crimes in the Balkans and in Africa, the United States has demanded international tribunals to arrest and to try violators and their political patrons for war crimes. In Iraq, President George W. Bush celebrated the trial and execution of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein for politically motivated killings.

Even Rios Montt, now 86, after years of evading justice under various amnesties, was finally indicted in Guatemala in 2012 for genocide and crimes against humanity. He is awaiting trial.

Yet, even as Latin America's struggling democracies have made tentative moves toward holding some of their worst human rights abusers accountable, no substantive discussion has occurred in the United States about facing up to the horrendous record of the 1980s and Reagan's guilt.

Rather than a debate about Reagan as a war criminal who assisted genocide, the former president is honored as a conservative icon with his name attached to Washington National Airport and scores of other public sites. MSNBC's Chris Matthews gushes over Reagan as "one of the all-time greats," and Democrats regularly praise Reagan in comparison to modern right-wing Republicans.

When the U.S. news media does briefly acknowledge the barbarities of the 1980s in Central America, it is in the context of how the little countries are bravely facing up to their violent pasts. There is never any suggestion that the United States should follow suit.

To this day, Ronald Reagan – the U.S. president who signaled to the Guatemalan generals that it would be alright to exterminate "Marxist guerrillas" and their "civilian support mechanisms" – remains a beloved figure in Official Washington and in many parts of the United States.

(Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).)

MORE INFORMATION ON TRIAL: <http://www.riosmontt-trial.org/>

UPCOMING FACT-FINDING DELEGATIONS

- Delegation to Guatemala, July 6-14, 2013: Mining injustice & impunity -Versus- Community well-being, human rights & the environment
- Delegation to Honduras, July 13-21, 2013: Struggle for democracy, human rights & the environment -Versus- Military-backed regime, & global companies & investors
- CONTACT: info@rightsaction.org

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