

*Truth and Consequences*

# A Woman's Obsession Pays Off

By CATHERINE S. MANEGOLD

WASHINGTON  
**O**BSESSION is a wild, defining force. Like fire, it can forge or destroy. The line between the two, as any smithy knows, is thin. Jennifer Kristina Harbury walked that line for several years.

When friends said stop, she did not stop. When enemies said stop, she did not stop. She left legions of quizzical admirers in her wake. She made enemies, too, and appeared on a death list. But she had convinced herself that she could change the course of history and she never did back down.

Still, it is no simple thing to balance obsession and one's sanity. Time after time, Ms. Harbury encountered disappointment and defeat in her quest to learn the fate of her husband, a Guatemalan guerrilla who disappeared in 1992.

But she tried everything. One moment, she was the latest nonstop maysayer to lay her mark on Lafayette Park, pointing fingers at the White House and sharing bench space with the obsessed, the possessed, the skinheads and the saved. The next, she was walking up the stairs of Congress, a quirky modern heroine on a hunger strike for justice, wearing a borrowed dress and a pair of high heels as she waltzed in to see Madame Mitterrand at a private reception in a polished hall.

In the park, the homeless man who wears his whiskers long and whippers confidences about covert operations had precisely the same message. He spat out accusations all day

long: Murder! Conspiracy! Injustice and betrayal!

But he is a former mental patient. Ms. Harbury is a 43-year-old Harvard-trained lawyer. And when she talked about murder, conspiracy, injustice and betrayal, she was right.

Last week, she caught her Government in the thick of it. Now, she must reconstruct a life — her own — both shattered and shaped by a single explosive thought: "They are lying!" For three years and three hun-

## Her husband vanished in Guatemala and her crusade began.

ger strikes that conviction carried her, like Alice, down a rabbit hole into Washington's own wonderland.

The Government, as it often seems to in any crusade against entrenched bureaucracy, most obligingly played the heavy. Even her most frightful scenarios had not captured the grim truth.

Last Wednesday, a member of the House Intelligence Committee accused the Central Intelligence Agency of concealing information that linked a Guatemalan Army colonel who was a paid CIA informant to the killings of an American hotel-keeper in Guatemala in 1980 and, later, of Ms. Harbury's husband.

The American hotel-keeper appar-



Jennifer Harbury won, but at what price? Two years earlier, at a grave in Guatemala, she viewed a skull falsely said to be her husband's.

Associated Press

## — at a Cost

ently had stumbled onto a smuggling scandal involving the Guatemalan military. Ms. Harbury's husband was a Mayan rebel who, the Guatemalan military said, had been killed in battle. Instead, it appears that he was captured, tortured and executed without trial. The Guatemalan colonel was dropped from the C.I.A. payroll about the time he supervised the interrogation and killing of Ms. Harbury's husband, Government officials now say.

### A Part for Madonna

Representative Robert G. Torricelli, the New Jersey Democrat who blew the whistle, admonished his Government for a cover-up that the C.I.A. is denying: "It's not bad policy," he said firmly. "It's a crime."

Ms. Harbury, dazed and shaken, sipped carrot juice, ending a little-noticed 12-day fast and quieting speculation that she was, as many Government officials insisted, "well-meaning," but "a little wacky."

She was somber in victory, and still angry. "I do feel really, really pleased to finally, finally catch the C.I.A. red-handed," she said Thursday. "They are exposed. And so is the State Department exposed. And so is the White House."

Yes, there will be a movie. Ted Turner had already put up \$200,000 for the rights before this week's disclosures. Perhaps Madonna should consider the part. It would take a certain controlled irreverence and mad gusto to get Jennifer Harbury on the screen.

Her lonely, quixotic crusade jarred the jaded and the cynical with a lesson often overlooked by a soci-

ety that disdains nonconformity: sometimes, only a radical heart can force change. But how would the movie end? What seems an unambiguous victory of good over evil has come at tremendous personal cost.

In Guatemala City last winter, she explained herself with some excitement. After numbing hours talking of death squads, forensics, scare tactics and torture, she pulled the whole haunting history of Guatemala's 34-year civil war within the framework of her search for her husband.

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Cast as a heavy,  
the intelligence  
agency excelled  
in its role.

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Efrain Bamaca Velasquez, a 35-year-old rebel commander known mostly by his nom de guerre, Comandante Everardo, vanished on March 12, 1992 after a firefight in the Guatemalan jungles. Ms. Harbury always viewed her search in a broader context.

"I have a really good chance now of just ending this, once and for all," she said over breakfast last winter, referring not just to her husband but to three decades of atrocities. "It's why people hug me in the streets and won't let me pay taxi fares." But many did not cheer her on. Instead,

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# An Obsession Has Its Payoff — and Cost

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they said she sounded programmed, too pat and too political by half.

"Really," said a Texas friend who used to call her "tank" in deference to her relentless drive, "if you had lined up 20 of my friends 10 years ago and asked who would go on a hunger strike for her husband who is a missing Guatemalan guerilla leader, appear on '60 Minutes' and get a hearing at the White House, well, I would have definitely picked Jennifer."

## Born to Obsess

Others in the circle of liberal advocates she worked with on Latin American immigration issues called her the "God hog," always so mired in messy causes that she seemed to monopolize all God's energies.

She was born hard-wired for a righteous fight. And she found one when her husband disappeared.

But by the time Ms. Harbury started her fast outside the White House this month, she was no longer a romantic figure wasting away on a hunger strike on foreign soil but a tiresome evangelist endlessly pounding the same theme.

Single-mindedness does that. It wears at the nonbelievers until they either react or withdraw. In this country with its short attention span, Guatemala's grisly history hardly registered and she quickly became easy to overlook.

Yet for months, she had travelled between Washington and Guatemala, asking for answers. Now she wants more. She plans to file criminal charges in Guatemala, and perhaps here as well. She has already called for Congressional hearings.

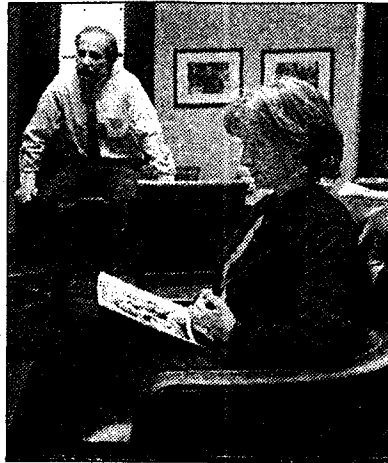
She plans to return to Guatemala too, to face the men she has long accused of complicity in her husband's death. "They don't want to see me," she said. "So I guess that means they need to see me."

Affairs of state are usually handled in the murk of secrecy and strict decorum. Ms. Harbury can handle the formalities as well as anyone. After her hunger strike last fall, she made a strong case with the national security adviser, Anthony Lake, in the White House and then pummelled Congressional staffers with theories.

## A Puzzling Failure

Her Harvard chic made her comfortable in those circles. But it was her wild obsession that made her win. In a city driven by compromise, she would not bend.

Though the White House received news of the death of Ms. Harbury's husband months ago, the information stayed secret until Mr. Torricelli spoke out. In retro-



David Scull/The New York Times

Just the facts: Jennifer Harbury and Representative Robert G. Torricelli.

spect, the secrecy seems a puzzling failure. (On Friday, the White House said anyone at the C.I.A. who had withheld information would be dismissed.) Since the C.I.A.'s link to the Guatemalan colonel dated back well before Bill Clinton's term began, this White House had little reason to be defensive. But Washington lives inside the rabbit hole, where normal logic does not hold.

## 'Is It a Monster?'

State Department officials spun in frustration, speaking a language all their own. While Ms. Harbury spoke of justice, love and murder, they talked of policy. Taking the risky gamble that the Guatemalan military was already on the road to reform, they had suggested, always off the record, that she was caught in a personal time warp of 1960's revisionism or was being twisted by leftist strategists.

"They treated me like this nuclear bomb rolling in through the door," Ms. Harbury said of her meeting at the White House. "They wanted to know, 'Is it Patty Hearst? Is it a monster? What is it?'"

The story detailed by Mr. Torricelli last week pointed to other questions: "What did they know and when did they know it?" By the time those questions are answered, Ms. Harbury will be working on a book and managing the nonprofit foundation she plans to start with money from her movie deal.

"I'm real tired and kind of beat up and dilapidated," she said as she ended her fast the other day. "But I'm still here."

So is the rabbit hole.