

Richard Cohen

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Guatemala Shame

This is the season of shame. The anniversary of the end of World War II approaches, and both the Japanese and the Germans are being asked to remember and—deservedly—feel some shame. Some would even ask Americans to share some of that shame. Two atomic bombings or the firebombing of Dresden—all justified in my view—are considered by some to be nothing less than war crimes. They are not—although the second atomic bomb is troubling. Our shame came later.

I am speaking of the postwar period when, in the name of anti-communism, the United States harbored ex-Nazis and war criminals, sometimes allowing them to escape Europe, sometimes putting them to work in such enterprises as our rocket and space programs. In both scale and morality, none of this compares to what the Nazis or the Japanese did, but it is nevertheless not a pretty picture. We too have reasons for shame.

What's stunning is that our shameful period continued until relatively recently. Little by little, we are now learning that the CIA not only retained and paid human rights abusers in Guatemala but concealed their activities from the rest of the U.S. government. In 1990 and 1991, Guatemalan army units under the command of a then-CIA operative, Col. Julio Alpirez, apparently murdered an American citizen and a leftist guerrilla leader who was married to one. Much of that time, the agency has apparently done everything in its power to hide Alpirez's activities from other government agencies, including the State Department and the White House.

The American, Michael DeVine, was apparently murdered when he stumbled upon a smuggling operation run by the Guatemalan military. The guerrilla, Efraim Bamaca Velasquez, was captured and reportedly held at a special installation designed to keep prisoners alive while being tortured. Bamaca's brutal interrogation was seen by at least one eyewitness who said Col. Alpirez presided. Alpirez's unit is also implicated in the death of DeVine.

Ever since 1954, when the United States toppled Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz Guzman and installed a military regime, Guate-

malma has been a CIA fiefdom. It also has one of the world's worst human rights records, an endless insurgency and deaths numbering more than 100,000 in the past 30 years. Say what you will about this record, it has not been compiled in vain: Guatemala, for what it's worth, has never gone communist—nor, for

that matter, democratic. It remains a brutish place, run by thugs for their own benefit. Our complicity—indeed, our sponsorship—is inexcusable.

But what was once inexcusable has not reached the point of insanity. By 1989, the Berlin Wall was down. Communism was finished, the Iron Curtain a rusted rag and the Soviet Union about to lose its empire in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the United States continued to financially aid Guatemala, and the CIA continued to pay operatives such as Col. Alpirez. It was not, in fact, until July 1992 that the CIA pink-slipped its little goon, giving him \$44,000 in severance pay.

President Clinton has reacted with outrage to these disclosures and has ordered an investigation. It appears the CIA withheld even from the White House and its National Security Council that it knew what had happened to both DeVine and the leftist guerrilla, Bamaca. In fact, for some of that time, Bamaca's wife, an American lawyer named Jennifer Harbury, was across the street from the White House, conducting a hunger strike in Lafayette Square to learn her husband's fate. On another occasion, she fasted outside the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City while inside the CIA station chief knew not only that her husband was dead but who had killed him.

I spoke with Harbury a day after she learned her husband's fate—not from the CIA, mind you, but from Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.), a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I also spoke to White House officials who, in a guarded way, suggested they had been snookered. On one occasion, when the White House had told Harbury that it could not say for sure if her husband was dead or alive (although they presumed he was dead), it turned out the CIA had the facts all along. Harbury, who shares her late husband's politics, said she was treated no worse, really, than countless Guatemalans who also don't know the fate of a loved one. My reaction was different: Guatemala is not the United States. We treat our citizens differently.

Somewhere in the CIA are officials who continue to fight an enemy that has left the field. Somewhere, there are officials who can justify anything in the name of anticommunism, including the pleas of an American wife who they knew to be a widow. The Cold War is over, but the shame of how we sometimes conducted it persists. It is time we dealt with it.

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