

# **The Born-Again Dictator**

*Guatemala, 1982–83, and the American Christians who blessed it*

On the evening of December 4, 1982, Ronald Reagan stood at an air base in Honduras and told reporters that the president of Guatemala, General Efraín Ríos Montt, was “a man of great personal integrity and commitment,” “totally dedicated to democracy,” and that his government had been “getting a bum rap” on human rights.

Two days later, a unit of Guatemalan special forces walked into a village called Dos Erres. Over three days they killed everyone there — more than 160 people, at least sixty of them children. The children were killed by swinging them by the ankles against walls and rocks. The bodies went into the village well. The unit was the Kaibiles, whose officers had trained with the U.S. military.

Reagan never took the words back. To understand how an American president came to vouch for a man later convicted of genocide — and how the most powerful evangelical broadcaster in the United States came to pray for him by name on national television while the killing was at its peak — you have to go back thirty years.

## **The land first**

In 1952, Guatemala’s elected president, Jacobo Árbenz, began redistributing uncultivated land to landless peasants, most of them Maya. The largest landholder in the country was the United Fruit Company of Boston. The law firm that had represented United Fruit was Sullivan & Cromwell, where John Foster Dulles had been a senior partner. In 1954 Dulles was Secretary of State; his brother Allen ran the CIA. That June, the CIA overthrew Árbenz. The land went back to United Fruit.

John Foster Dulles was not just a lawyer. He was one of the most prominent Protestant laymen in America, a Presbyterian who had chaired the Federal Council of Churches’ commission on a “just and durable peace.” The coup that opened Guatemala’s thirty-six years of civil war was engineered by a man the mainline churches held up as a model Christian statesman, on behalf of a fruit company. This is the capital half of the story, and it came first.

## **The earthquake and the missionaries**

In February 1976 an earthquake killed some 23,000 Guatemalans. American evangelical

and charismatic groups poured in with relief. One of them was Gospel Outreach, a Jesus-movement church from Eureka, California — hippie converts turned communal Pentecostals — which planted a congregation in Guatemala City called Iglesia El Verbo, the Church of the Word.

In 1978 a retired general joined it. Efraín Ríos Montt had run for president in 1974 as the Christian Democratic candidate and won, and then had the election stolen from him by the military. He was shipped off to Spain as an attaché, came home, and was born again. At Verbo he became an elder and ran the church school. By the early 1980s, largely through American missions, Guatemala had become the most Protestant country in Latin America.

## **The coup**

On March 23, 1982, junior officers overthrew the sitting general and installed Ríos Montt. He told the nation God had put him there. His slogan was "I do not steal, I do not lie, I do not abuse." Every Sunday he preached to the country on television and radio — the presidency as pulpit, the general as revivalist. He brought two Verbo elders, Francisco Bianchi and Álvaro Contreras, into the palace as his closest advisers.

Then he declared a state of siege, created secret military tribunals, and launched the campaign the army called *Victoria 82* and everyone else called *Frijoles y Fusiles* — Beans and Rifles. He summarized it himself: if you are with us, we will feed you; if you are not, we will kill you.

## **The American amen**

Pat Robertson flew to Guatemala within five days of the coup. Ríos Montt's first interview as head of state was with Robertson, who aired it on *The 700 Club* and prayed on the air: "God, we pray for Ríos Montt, your servant, Lord, that you would cover him." He defended the counterinsurgency with Romans 13 — he who wields the sword does not wield it in vain. He launched a fundraising drive called International Love Lift, talking about raising as much as a billion dollars for the regime's relief program; a small fraction ever materialized, but one broadcast alone produced a flood of letters to the White House demanding military aid for Guatemala. In his 1982 book *The Secret Kingdom* he wrote that under Ríos Montt, "little by little the miracle began to unfold," and praised him for ending the death squads.

Jerry Falwell and Youth With A Mission's Loren Cunningham joined the chorus. Verbo's own relief foundation channeled American church money into the highlands and worked alongside the army.

Robertson's prayer on the air was, in the vocabulary of this project, a recognition of form. Ríos Montt performed every signal American evangelicals had been trained to trust: the conversion testimony, the sermon, the man of God besieged by worldly critics, the "miracle" unfolding against the odds. They recognized the shape of faith and never checked what it was attached to.

## **What the relief money was for**

The army's doctrine was that the Maya highlands were the sea the guerrillas swam in, and the sea had to be drained. Villages were burned, crops destroyed, livestock killed. Survivors were herded into "model villages" — army-controlled resettlement camps — and conscripted into civil patrols, forced to patrol and kill alongside the soldiers. The model villages were the relief program. The camps American Christians were raising money for were the destination of a scorched-earth campaign.

The UN truth commission later documented 626 massacres across the war and estimated 200,000 people dead or disappeared. Eighty-three percent of identified victims were Maya. Ninety-three percent of the violations were committed by the state. The killing peaked in 1982 and 1983 — the seventeen months of Ríos Montt's rule, which were also the months of the loudest American evangelical celebration. The commission's finding was genocide: the army had targeted the Maya Ixil and other groups as a people.

Francisco Bianchi, the Verbo elder speaking for the president, explained the logic to a *New York Times* reporter in the summer of 1982: the guerrillas had won over many Indians, therefore the Indians were subversive, and how do you fight subversion? You have to kill Indians. A church elder said that, on the record, to an American newspaper, and it changed nothing in Virginia Beach.

That is the racial half of the story. The Maya were not killed for what they did. They were killed for what they were. It is the same move that made proslavery theology work: define a people as a category, and the conscience is clear.

## **Christians killing Christians**

The Catholic Church in the highlands had embraced liberation theology, and the army treated lay catechists as guerrilla cadre. Priests were murdered; catechists were killed in the hundreds. Converting to an evangelical church became a survival strategy — carrying the right Bible could keep you alive. The born-again regime was, among other things, a campaign of Protestant Christians against Catholic ones.

Ríos Montt's own brother Mario was a Catholic bishop. Years later, after Bishop Juan

Gerardi was beaten to death in 1998 — two days after publishing the church's report on the war's atrocities — it was Mario Ríos Montt who took over the archdiocesan human rights office that had produced it.

When Pope John Paul II came to Guatemala in March 1983, the Vatican asked for clemency for six men sentenced by the secret tribunals. Ríos Montt had them shot four days before the pope landed.

## **What Washington knew**

The CIA had cabled Washington about the army's plan to destroy Ixil villages before Ríos Montt even took power. In October 1982, the U.S. embassy dismissed massacre reports as a communist disinformation campaign. Documents from the Reagan Library show the administration understood the strategy — destroying the guerrillas' "civilian support mechanisms" — and endorsed it. In January 1983, a month after Dos Erres, Reagan lifted the arms embargo Jimmy Carter had imposed in 1977 and approved millions in helicopter parts.

## **The fall, and the long reckoning**

In August 1983 his own defense minister overthrew him. Among the officers' stated grievances: his religious fanaticism and the influence of the church elders. The army had used the evangelical fervor for legitimacy and then discarded it once it became inconvenient.

Ríos Montt went on to serve as president of Congress and run for president again. In May 2013 a Guatemalan court convicted him of genocide and sentenced him to eighty years. Ixil survivors had testified in their own language, in their own country's courtroom, thirty-one years after the fact. Ten days later the Constitutional Court annulled the verdict on procedural grounds. He died in 2018, at ninety-one, mid-retrial, never having served a day.

Bill Clinton went to Guatemala City in 1999 and said that U.S. support for military forces that had committed such violence was wrong. Reagan never revised a word. Neither did Robertson, who died in 2023 having never repudiated any of it.

## **Why this belongs in the story**

Guatemala is the whole project compressed into seventeen months. Capital came first — a fruit company and a Presbyterian secretary of state. Political loyalty came next — a Cold War that made any anticommunist a friend. Racial ideology supplied the permission — a people redefined as a category. And American Christianity provided the blessing: a

general who spoke the language of testimony, a broadcaster who recognized the language and prayed for him on air, and a president who told the world the killers were getting a bum rap.

None of this was the faith. It was the faith stolen — its forms borrowed, its vocabulary worn like a uniform, its money routed into camps. The Christians in this story who look most like Christ are the catechists who were shot for reading the Bible with the poor, and the Ixil grandmothers who walked into a courtroom in 2013 and said what happened. Nobody prayed for them on television. They kept the faith anyway.

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*Main sources: the UN Commission for Historical Clarification report, Guatemala: Memory of Silence (1999); Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit (2010); declassified U.S. documents published by the National Security Archive; contemporaneous reporting in The New York Times and The Nation.*