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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

17 November 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Guatemala: Godfather Politics*

Recent reports that Communist terrorists are planning to attack US officials as retaliation for the assassination of party leaders by the Guatemalan government are a reminder of the special dangers involved in the US effort to assist the local security forces as well as to provide this [redacted] country with economic and social assistance. Partly because of US urgings, the present government acknowledges the need for social change and the dangers of recurring campaigns of terror and counterterror. Yet because of unyielding historical and cultural factors, we see little chance that the cycle of political violence will terminate any time soon.

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* This paper has been discussed with other components within CIA, but has not been formally coordinated.

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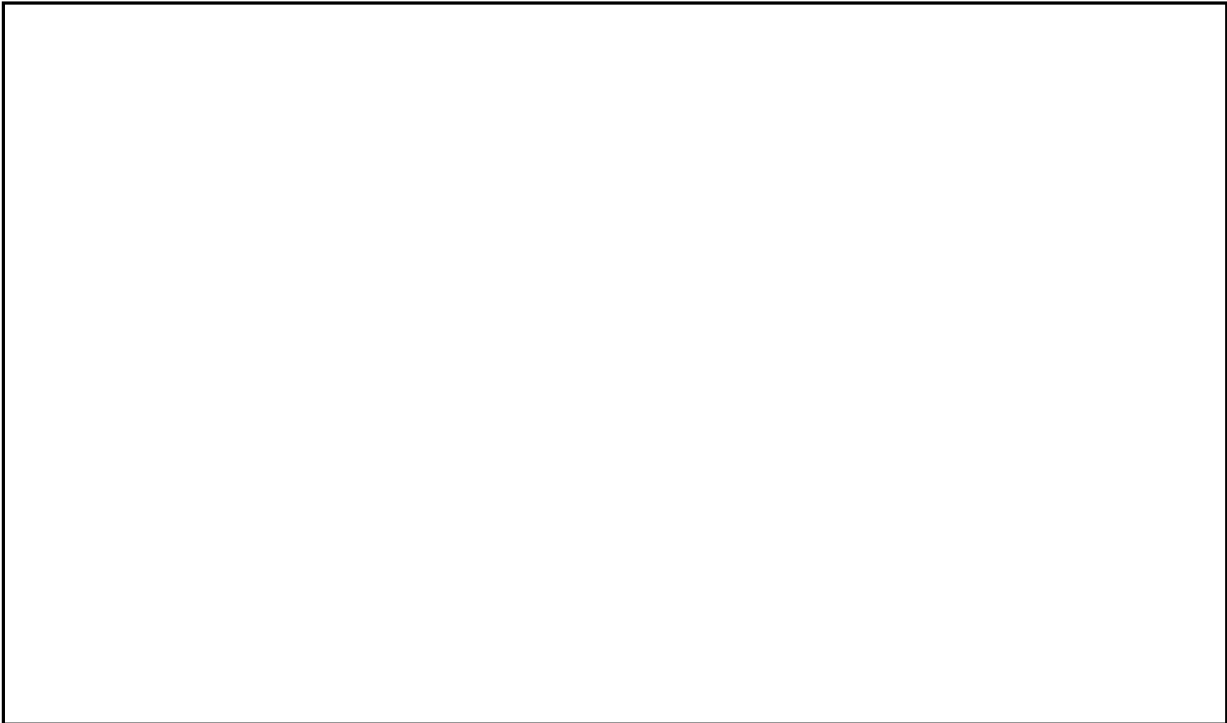
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Political Violence and Gangsterism

1. Guatemala's political history can be written more convincingly in terms of violence between contending forces than of elections held and laws observed. The chronicle of coercion and bloodshed picked up an overlay of ideological warfare in the 1950s with the advent of the Marxist-oriented revolutionary government of Jacobo Arbenz, and then with that government's overthrow by the US-supported counterrevolutionary legions of Carlos Castillo Armas. Assassinations -- including that of Castillo Armas in 1957 -- have been a recurrent feature of Guatemalan politics and the

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Guatemalan countryside has traditionally been the backdrop for the law of the machete.

2. Political murder assumed a new dimension in the 1960s, when guerrillas used terrorism against symbols of authority such as military, police, and government officials. These anti-government terrorists were originally organized by a band of rebellious military officers of no fixed political persuasion. The Guatemalan Communist Party was soon drawn into the terrorists' campaign, in part to protect its revolutionary credentials. The Communists have always received financial and propaganda support from the USSR, for both their political and guerrilla activities. The Cubans also have supported the guerrillas. The Guatemalan guerrillas, though continually racked by internal divisions over ideology and leadership, constituted the most murderous subversive group in Latin America during the sixties.

3. A counter-campaign of violence against the guerrillas and other "subversives" began in earnest under the Méndez Montenegro government (1966-1970). After three years of direct rule, a nervous military had grudgingly relinquished power to Méndez, but demanded *carte blanche* in security matters. Méndez, a moderate leftist in the Guatemalan context, thought it necessary and potentially

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beneficial to the constitutional cause to accede. Méndez' mere survival did represent a rare achievement. In Guatemala, few elected presidents have completed their terms.

4. Under Méndez, the security forces began to use vigilante groups to eradicate the guerrillas. Sophisticated political discernment has never been a strong point in Guatemala, and the "anti-Communist" campaign resulted in more dead bodies than the Communist party had members. Some victims were innocent bystanders; some others were the personal and political enemies of the *jefes* of law-and-order forces.

5. During the electoral campaign of 1969-1970, terror and counterterror produced a particularly large number of political murders. After Colonel (now General) Arana -- an anti-Communist hero -- took office as elected president in July 1970, the battle intensified until the forces of the right clearly gained the upper hand. The extreme leftists now seem weak, divided, disoriented and not at all sure they can afford to continue the deadly competition.

6. Vestiges of ideological warfare also persist in the conflict between the government and the legal opposition. Even the moderates among leftist political leaders still identify with the

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revolution of the 1950s, and nurture a sense of denied legitimacy. The rightist forces identify with counterrevolutionary hero Castillo Armas and indeed many of today's government leaders served in his administration. They tend to lump all opposition in the Communist bag. Outspoken opponents of the government -- labor leaders, journalists, professors, and politicians -- at times became targets of the counterterror effort on the grounds that they were intellectual authors of the leftist campaign of terror.

7. The protracted struggle between left and right, having taken place over the years against a backdrop of banditry and simple crime, has contributed to a general lack of respect for the law. This in its turn has led to use of extra-legal violence against delinquents and social undesirables. Now, even with a reduction in leftist attacks, bloodletting seems an "established" part of the Guatemalan milieu. Indeed, an important part of the violence of recent months evidently is intramural. Gangs with connections to the government have, mafia-like, engaged in assassination bouts.

Priorities

8. President Arana and members of his official family relate violence and subversion to societal ills and agree that the "marginal" Guatemalans must be given a better share of the national assets. But they see a need first to deal with the immediate threat, to eliminate the enemy or to be always threatened by him. Having greatly reduced the guerrilla problem, Arana has been able to give some attention to the problems of economic and social development. Performance has been mixed. Economic activity, bolstered by good world commodity prices, has been at a respectable pace -- the 1972 growth rate is expected to be over 6 percent. Rural electrification and health programs are progressing, but most other efforts at social reform have run into snags. Programs for agricultural credits and technical assistance have not been going well and tax reform has not been very successful.

9. The recognition of the importance of social development at least is a step in the right direction. Although the prosperity and up-to-date aspect of downtown Guatemala City give little hint of it, Guatemala remains one of the most backward countries in Latin America. [REDACTED] Haiti, rescues Guatemala from the bottom position on most socio-economic indices

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for the region. The overwhelming majority of Guatemala's 5 or 6 million are rural mestizos and unassimilated Indians scratching out a living through primitive farming and having only a vague concept of nation, government, or a citizen's role or rights.

Prospects

10. A presidential election is scheduled for 1974,

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As the elections grow near, the fragmented opposition parties are likely to coalesce. The rightist incumbents intensely fear a united opposition because they believe that the "left" (i.e., the center and left) is able to attract majority support from the electorate. The government might not permit the opposition, some of whose partisans they have had killed and some of whose organizations they have suborned, a chance in power. The opposition nevertheless seems committed to a major electoral effort, probably via some form of united front. The rightist politicians, to strengthen their position, are seeking their candidate from a traditional source of leadership in Guatemala, the military.

11. The approach of the election period is likely to usher in another round of high-level political killings and another surge of leftist terrorism. Jockeying for favored spots even within each

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camp can provide disruptive developments, as recent gangster-style killings have shown. Some of the contenders for high position are among the strongest proponents of Guatemala's gangland politics. The extreme left, although battered and weak, retains a capability for violent action which it will be tempted to use during the elections, when such actions would receive world-wide publicity. A debate among the revolutionary groups is already underway to decide whether to concentrate on a nonviolent political posture or to resurrect their image by initiating a new terrorist campaign.

12. In short, most signs point to more spins of the cycle of violence. The only glint of something new is the growing evidence of displeasure on the part of a few military officers with the situation as it stands. Some of the tasks given the army in recent years -- civic action, assisting impoverished areas in the city, combing the boondocks for guerrillas -- have personally exposed some military officers to the country's many ills for the first time. President Arana himself has expressed irritation over the lack of movement in the social sphere and has chided -- some think threatened -- the wealthy stratum for excessive self-interest. Arana has warned them that their resistance to change is an "invitation to tyrannical government".

13. This social concern of Arana and his military confreres seems sincere but it is neither profound nor sophisticated. The Guatemalan officer corps remains one of the least educated in Latin America. Nevertheless the new concern has raised questions among certain of the military about what their role should be in developing the country, in light of the ineptitude of civilian politicians.

14. The temptation to military elements to try to seize power would be minimized, however, by the candidacy of a general as the nominee of the right in the 1974 elections. It is too early to say what the character of the next such "civilian" government would be. Arana's successor may be even more inclined than he to push programs designed to aid the impoverished elements of society. His style of rule would nonetheless be authoritarian, and interest in social improvement would again have to compete with pressures to eliminate subversives. Elements of the small civilian elite can be counted on to stimulate godfather politics whenever its vested interests are seriously threatened.

Implications

15. Because the unyielding historical and cultural factors suggest little possibility that the cycle of political violence

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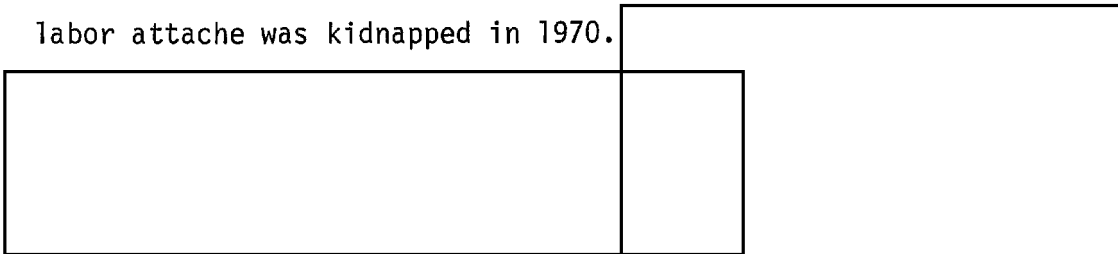
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will terminate any time soon, relations with Guatemala will continue to pose periodic embarrassment and danger for US officials. Longstanding US efforts at economic and social assistance have been adversely affected by the limited ability of the Guatemalans to absorb such help and by the resistance of the elite to meaningful reform at its expense. The fruits of military and public safety training and advice have similarly been limited. Familiarity with modern police techniques, laboratory equipment and methodology probably are, of course, an asset to Guatemala, but the tendency for the immediate future will still be to meet real and perceived threats with brute force.

16. Part of the problem is merely the embarrassment that follows recurrent press stories identifying the US with Guatemala's violence and brutality. More serious can be the consequences of the leftist terrorists' linkage of the US with their enemy, the Guatemalan government. The US ambassador and two members of the military mission were murdered in 1968, and our labor attache was kidnapped in 1970.

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Because of this persistent threat of retaliation, US mission chiefs in Guatemala will continue to require personal security arrangements as elaborate as those for the native *jefes* in Guatemala's deadly game of politics.

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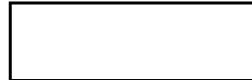
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MEMORANDUM FOR: Ray S. Cline
Director, INR

A copy of the attached Memorandum has
been sent to Deputy Assistant Secretary Hurwitch.



JOHN HUIZENGA
Director
National Estimates

Attachment

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16 November 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. William Jorden
NSC Staff

Attached is a memorandum giving some of the background on the intractable problem of terror and counter-terror in Guatemala. We do not see much hope that anyone, including the US, can do much to stop the violence. We indicate some of the possible painful consequences for the US in the last paragraph.



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16 November 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Robert A. Hurwitch
6260-State

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