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# This American Life on Guatemalan Genocide

## Washington's role is a story not worth telling

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**By Keane Bhatt**

*On the evening of December 4, 1982, President Ronald Reagan informed reporters assembled at an Air Force base in Honduras that he had just engaged in a "useful exchange of ideas" with Efraín Rios Montt. The Guatemalan military general was the most recent in a succession of U.S.-backed dictators who had been governing the country since the CIA first toppled its democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, in 1954.*

"I know that President Rios Montt is a man of great personal integrity and commitment," Reagan continued. "I know he wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice. My administration will do all it can to support his progressive efforts." In a question-and-answer period, Reagan also shrugged off accusations of human rights violations committed by Rios Montt and his military: "Frankly I'm inclined to believe they've been getting a bum rap," he declared.

Just two days later, on the evening of December 6, a 20-member team of *Kaibil* forces—elite Guatemalan commandos—initiated a military operation that decimated the inhabitants of the remote village of Dos Erres in the Petén region. The murder count of over 250 only hints at the savagery: In a matter of hours, the *Kaibiles* raped children (**ProPublica**, 3/25/12), forced miscarriages by jumping on pregnant women's abdomens (Inter-American Court of Human Rights Judgment, 11/24/09) and flung at least 67 children down a well to their deaths (**Seattle Times**, 8/10/11), among other atrocities.

Dos Erres was just one of over 600 towns to be ravaged by the military in a scorched-earth campaign by Rios Montt during his brief 17-month tenure. Like his predecessor Gen. Lucas García, he presided over a strategy to defeat the country's leftist insurgency while also destroying its "civilian support mechanisms," according to national-security documents unearthed by investigative journalist Robert Parry at the Reagan Library (**Consortium News**, 5/11/13).

**Given Reagan's collaboration** with and defense of Rios Montt, along with a Guatemalan judge's finding of "sufficient evidence tying Rios Montt to the Las Dos Erres massacre"

(**Reuters**, 5/21/12), one would expect an acclaimed public radio show to make this obvious connection in the course of an hour-long episode titled "What Happened at Dos Erres?" (**This American Life**, 5/25/12).

**This American Life**'s host Ira Glass, who along with his producers received a Peabody Award for the episode, seemed to indicate that he would indeed contextualize the atrocity for his 1.8 million listeners early in the program, as he boasted of his expertise on the issues:

> OK, before we dive into this story, just a quick history review. Now, I myself was the kind of insufferable, politically correct person who was obsessed with Latin America back in the 1980s. I called Nicaragua "Neek-ar-ah-wah," and actually went to Nicaragua for a month during the fifth anniversary of the Sandinista revolution. I traveled in Guatemala during the civil war. You, however, might be what we call a normal person and didn't do any of that.

But Glass's history review for "normal people" was scrubbed of any mention whatsoever of the overwhelming U.S. involvement in crimes against humanity in Guatemala.

**Publicly available evidence** of that involvement, however, is abundant: As was reported at the time, Reagan persisted in providing material support to Rios Montt despite a congressionally enforced ban (**New York Times**, 12/19/82). Over two years, the United States supplied roughly $15 million in equipment and vehicles to the military while coordinating additional assistance and training through proxies like Israel and Taiwan; the CIA also retained top Guatemalan military commanders as paid assets (**New York Times**, 5/16/13).

U.S. Green Beret Jesse Garcia, who had arrived in the country months before the Dos Erres massacre, was authorized to teach Guatemalan military cadets "anything our Army has," including, according to investigative reporter Allan Nairn (**Washington Post**, 10/21/82), "ambushes, surveillance, combat arms, artillery, armor, patrolling, demolition and helicopter assault tactics." In short, Garcia provided expertise in "how to destroy towns."

*Kaibil* sergeant Pedro Pimentel, sentenced in 2012 to 6,060 years in prison for his role at Dos Erres (**Guardian**, 3/13/12), was invited to serve as an instructor at the School of the Americas, the U.S. military's infamous training center for Latin American security forces, immediately after the 1982 massacre. The School had trained Rios Montt in 1950, and would in 1985 train Guatemala's current president Otto Pérez Molina, who, as a *Kaibil*, likely committed atrocities himself (**ProPublica**, 5/25/12; SOA Watch; **Democracy Now**, 4/19/13).

**But not once** were the words "Reagan," "Arbenz," "School of the Americas" or "CIA" ever

uttered in **This American Life**'s portrayal of Dos Erres. Rather than convey the reality—that the United States actively engaged in decades of state terror in Guatemala (**Extra!**, 5/1/99), or that the *Kaibiles* were armed and trained by the U.S. and its allies—Glass instead framed the U.S. government as a negligent bystander whose sin was solely a reluctance to speak out.

"Embassy officials heard lots of reports about the army massacring whole villages throughout Guatemala, which they dismissed," said Glass—until, "at the urging of the State Department back in Washington," they went to "see for themselves if the stories were true." **This American Life**'s harshest indictment against the U.S. is that, despite years of repeated massacres after Dos Erres, "the U.S. knew about it but stood by."

Some might argue that the show, which puts great emphasis on personal narratives, is justified in excluding political context from its 60-minute episode on the massacre. But **This American Life**, in promoting its false contention that the U.S. simply "stood by," disregarded its own media partner **ProPublica**'s reporting of U.S. collaboration with *Kaibiles* at the School of the Americas (5/25/12).

Reached by phone, one of Glass's in-studio interviewees—Kate Doyle of the National Security Archives—said she and Glass had had a wide-ranging discussion in which she highlighted the active U.S. role in Guatemala's conflict. The show ultimately aired a greatly shortened segment with Doyle, which excluded that content.

**With remarkable continuity**, some months later **This American Life** (1/4/13) moved from Guatemala to Honduras, airing a half-hour segment titled "Some Like It Dot." The episode explored the concept of charter cities—swaths of land to be ceded to international investors and developed into autonomous cities, with their own police forces, taxes, labor codes, trade rules and legal systems. The show's hosts enthusiastically conveyed the idea as a solution to Honduran "corruption and chaos and violence."

Not once did **This American Life** mention the 2009 overthrow of the country's left-leaning, democratically elected leader, President Manuel Zelaya, which opened the floodgates to an enormous upsurge in that corruption, chaos and violence (**Nation**, 5/22/12). Nor did the program note that its interviewee, Octavio Sánchez, the leading Honduran advocate for charter cities, had actually championed the coup d'etat against Zelaya in a **Christian Science Monitor** op-ed (7/2/09). Instead, **This American Life** portrayed Sánchez, current president Porfirio Lobo's chief of staff, as the country's idealistic "national dreamer."

**This American Life** also excluded any reference to the fact that after appointing Sánchez, Honduras's post-coup leader Lobo designated Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla, accused of past ties to death squads (**AP**, 7/1/12), as the national chief of police. And, naturally, the show's breathlessly favorable treatment of charter cities avoided the 2012 death-squad-style murder of human rights lawyer Antonio Trejo, Honduras' most prominent charter-cities opponent (**NACLA**, 2/19/13).

**Echoing presidential discourse** of three decades prior, Barack Obama lavished Lobo with praise after meeting with him in October 2011. Thanks to the "strong commitment to democracy and leadership by President Lobo," said Obama—referring to a head of state who had assumed power through repressive, sham elections held under a coup regime—"what we've been seeing is a restoration of democratic practices and a commitment to reconciliation that gives us great hope."

Like Reagan, Obama avoided the fact that his ally had presided over the routine killings of civilians by state security forces trained and financed with millions of U.S.-taxpayer dollars (**NACLA**, 5/8/13).

By ignoring decades of high-level U.S. involvement—from Reagan to Obama—in the activities of Central America's most brutal regimes, **This American Life** leaves its millions of listeners unaware of both the past and present effects of U.S. power. If Glass still conceives of his show as a way to "provide a perspective on this country that you couldn't get elsewhere," he could begin by informing U.S. listeners of their relationship to seemingly far-flung and senseless violence abroad (DePauw University News and Media Page, 4/15/02).

In leaving its listenership untroubled by the grim realities of U.S. foreign policy, **This American Life** may well be engaged in captivating storytelling—but it shouldn't be mistaken for good journalism.

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