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Rebellion and the Quest for Social Revolution in Latin America:

The Case of Guatemala in the 1960's

by

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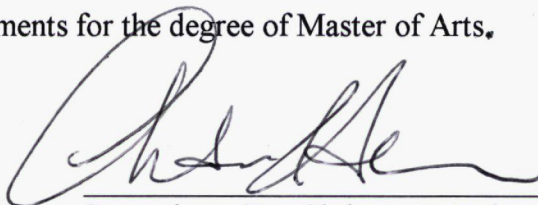
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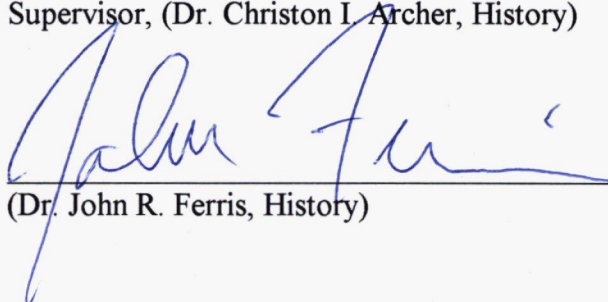
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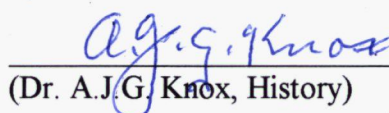
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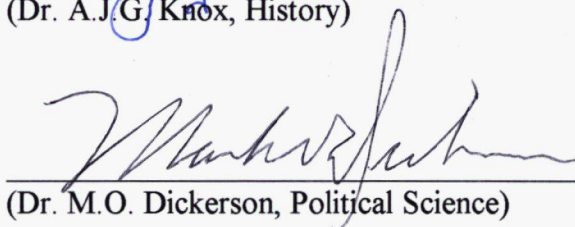
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## **ABSTRACT**

While rebellion was an almost common occurrence in Latin America during the cold war era, the evolution of these rebellions into social revolutions was far less common. After Cuba's successful revolution in 1959, several other Latin American countries, including Guatemala, attempted to duplicate these results in the 1960's. None were successful, however, because although the guerrilla movements of the decade were similar in strength to that of Cuba, the regimes in those countries were not weak enough to permit a revolution. In Guatemala, the rebellion came fairly close to achieving revolution in 1966, but was halted in its efforts because the Guatemalan army, bolstered by aid from the United States, was sufficiently determined to prevent one. In the end, it was the fear of communism which violently polarized Guatemalan society and set the stage for a protracted struggle between left and right which continues to this day.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

Although the theories of guerrilla warfare have been popularized in the twentieth century by the writings of important historical figures such as Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, and Ernesto “Ché” Guevara, the actual practice dates back to a much earlier time. Defined by *The Oxford Dictionary* as “...irregular fighting by small groups acting independently,”<sup>1</sup> the word “guerrilla” derives from the diminutive form of the Spanish word for war. The term guerrilla itself was coined during Napoleon’s campaign in the Iberian peninsula, when his forces encountered local resistance to the French invasion, but the phenomenon of irregular warfare chronicles back to long before the French Revolution. In actuality, guerrilla warfare predates regular warfare. Small scale struggles were a common occurrence in world history, often used by weaker groups to fight invading or occupying forces, or by oppressed peasants rising against unjust overlords. The object of the guerrilla fighter is to avoid large-scale and direct engagements with the enemy, encounters which the guerrillas would surely lose. Instead, the goal of the small war is to utilize hit and run tactics: minor skirmishes, ambushes, cutting supply lines, raiding to gather supplies, etc. The use of these tactics is part of the larger guerrilla strategy: one that is designed to weaken the enemy’s forces gradually and to diminish their will to counter the insurgency.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, this form of protracted struggle makes patience an element that the guerrilla fighter can ill-afford to ignore.

Rebellion (also referred to as insurgency or insurrection) can be defined as open resistance to authority: a power struggle which threatens the regime by means that include

violence.<sup>3</sup> In the Central American country of Guatemala, such a power struggle took place in the 1960's, of which guerrilla warfare was an important factor. The rebellion began as a violent uprising which was part of a larger struggle for political control. In the case of Guatemala, guerrilla warfare followed the traditional line, to inflict damage on the enemy in small degrees over an extended period of time. This military objective was part of the broader strategy of rebellion in Guatemala, which was a quest by the insurgents to improve the economic, social, and political welfare of the lower classes in their country, changing the status quo through social revolution.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, the objectives of rebellion are not always realized, and such was the case in Guatemala in the 1960's. Like many other guerrilla movements throughout history, the Guatemalan guerrillas achieved some success in military terms, yet the overall power struggle of the rebellion failed to materialize, and the armed forces of the state crushed the movement quickly.

Before examining the case of the Guatemalan insurgency it is necessary to probe the nature of rebellion and revolution. Often, the factors leading to the growth of a strong insurgency and the circumstances which lead to either success or failure share common characteristics. Having established these elements, the growth of the guerrilla movement in Guatemala will be examined, as well as the personalities, institutions and foreign powers that became major players in the rise and suppression of the guerrilla movement. Finally, we will analyze why this movement failed to achieve its objective of social revolution and how a strong and rapidly growing rebellion could be defeated so quickly by the Guatemalan state.

The Guatemalan guerrilla uprising traces its roots to an abortive military coup in 1960, and the movement persists to this day. However, the present study will not be a comprehensive examination of the thirty-six years of struggle. Instead, the focus will be upon the more important elements of the rebellion that occurred during the 1960's. To begin, one must understand the history of Guatemala leading up to the insurrection. Prior to the sixteenth century Spanish conquest, the area now known as Guatemala was a major centre of Mayan civilization. To this day the country's population is more than fifty percent native (some sources put the figure at close to seventy percent). Since the conquest, Guatemala shared a common history with other areas of Latin America regarding the deplorable treatment of the Indian populations by their Spanish overlords. This prejudicial relationship formed the basis for the rebellions of the twentieth century. In 1821, three centuries after the conquest, Guatemala achieved independence from Spain as a part of Mexico, and four years later became part of a Central American federation. The fledgling country began self rule with descendants from Spain (*criollos*) comprising the elites and the Indians and *mestizos* (those of mixed-blood) the lower classes.<sup>5</sup>

The Central American federation endured only thirteen years, and during the next century, 1838 to 1944, the nation fell under control of a series of strong-armed dictators, or *caudillos*.<sup>6</sup> In 1944, an interesting turning point in the history of Guatemala, the ruling *caudillo* Jorge Ubico suffered a series of political reversals which led to his overthrow by a liberal middle-class and intellectual-inspired coalition that launched a new political era in Guatemala which participants exaggerated somewhat to call the "revolution." This so-called revolution was a ten-year process of *very moderate* political and social reform

begun during the administration of President Juan José Arévalo. The leftist-leaning Arévalo introduced educational reforms and programs for the expansion of labour rights for peasants. However, the more extensive reforms occurred under the second (and final) president of the revolution, Jacobo Arbenz. Arbenz, who governed from 1950 to 1954, expanded the reform efforts to include programs for the expropriation of property to institute a process of land reform. After ten years of revolution, the Guatemalan government became increasingly infiltrated (although still to only a small degree) by communists. The hard-line foreign policy of the United States during the Cold War convinced American leaders to promote the overthrow of the revolutionary government of Guatemala through a coup sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>7</sup>

Backed by the CIA, the coup of 1954 became known to successive Guatemalan governments (and American leaders) as the “liberation,” referring to what they perceived as an escape from the vilely communist-infiltrated revolution. The political environment of Guatemala after 1954, often referred to as the “counter-revolution,” has been a period dominated by the military. The upper classes tolerated the situation because of the army’s willingness to maintain the status quo, and to oppose communism — a political system which endangered the oligarch’s lifestyle.<sup>8</sup>

In February of 1962, six years after the ‘liberation’ of 1954, Guatemalan guerrillas launched their military operations.<sup>9</sup> To a large degree, the insurgents received inspiration from the successful social revolution which took place in Cuba in 1959. However, the guerrilla outbreaks of 1962 traced their origin to a coup attempt launched fifteen months previously. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1960, a day of immense importance to Guatemalan

guerrillas, junior military officers in the Guatemalan army attempted a military coup.<sup>10</sup> Disconcerted with the corruption of the current regime and President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes' authorization for the United States to use Guatemalan territory to launch a counter-revolutionary invasion force against Cuba, the rebel officers plotted to overthrow the Ydígoras regime. However, the coup failed after only a few days because key elements of the military remained loyal to the regime and these routed the insurgent officers and their followers. Some of the rebel officers chose self-imposed exile at this point, waiting for their chance to return and continue their fight against the government. This was the initial stage of the Guatemalan rebellion.

Two of these exiled officers, Captain Marco Yon Sosa and Lieutenant Luis Turcios Lima, rose to prominence in the guerrilla movement. Ironically, both had received counterinsurgency training under the sponsorship of the United States earlier in their military careers.<sup>8</sup> Although the 1960 coup attempt was not Marxist-inspired, while hiding in the countryside during the following year, Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa perceived the true plight of the lower classes of Guatemala and developed leftist leanings. During 1961, the peasants of eastern Guatemala befriended the rebel officers, and many offered support for a projected insurrection. Rather than simply another attempt to overthrow Ydígoras Fuentes, the movement was to take the form of armed struggle for agrarian reform.<sup>13</sup> On February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1962, fifteen months after the original coup attempt, a small and poorly equipped guerrilla movement commenced operations in the mountains of eastern Guatemala.<sup>14</sup>

Within a month, popular discontent with the Ydígoras regime reached a boiling point in the capital and mass demonstrations by students, peasants, and workers triggered violent clashes with police. These circumstances provoked a strong response by the military, bolstered by aid from the United States when Washington feared another Cuban-style revolution in Guatemala. Fed up with the weakness and corruption of Ydígoras, the army took control of the government, leaving the president in office solely as a figurehead. The student revolt revealed the degree of discontent within the population, but its only accomplishment was to provoke the military into a seizure of power, which had a profound impact on the development of the guerrilla movement. Overwhelming force subdued the students and their supporters, and the guerrillas suffered defeat due to their participation in the failed uprisings. Once again, the insurgents took refuge in the countryside and regrouped their movement.<sup>15</sup> For the remaining months of 1962, the rebels concentrated upon the development of ties with the outlawed Guatemalan Communist party, the *Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo* or PGT (Guatemalan Party of Labour). The guerrillas became the “mailed fist” of the growing antigovernment movement under the political direction of the party. However, the nature of this arrangement led to years of unity problems among the separate guerrilla leaders and also between the guerrillas and the PGT.<sup>15</sup>

In the spring of 1963, a year after the Guatemalan army seized control of the country, the military made its power official by forcing the resignation of President Ydígoras Fuentes. Defence Minister Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia took control of the government, commencing three years of direct military rule. Described as the *Gobierno*

*Militar* (Military Government), the new regime was not at all monolithic. Factionalism among the armed forces provoked a fierce struggle for authority.<sup>16</sup> Although the guerrilla movements also suffered some disunity of their own, they were able to make some headway in their armed struggle. Internal divisions preoccupied the military regime, distracting the *Gobierno Militar* from launching an earnest counterinsurgency campaign against the numerically inferior guerrillas. Also, the guerrillas received support from the populace simply because of the presence of a military regime. As a result, the movement grew in strength as 1966 approached.<sup>17</sup>

In 1966, the insurgents were as close as they would ever come to implementing social revolution. However, circumstances in Guatemala changed dramatically in 1966, dashing the rebel hopes for victory. Although the guerrilla movement gained strength, the rebels made strategic errors in their quest for power. Also, the government was not so weak that it could not regroup to exploit the guerrillas' mistakes, changing the fortunes of the insurgents. In the fall of 1965, the *Gobierno Militar*, under increased pressure from the United States, declared that democratic elections for the office of president would take place the following spring. Planned to give the Guatemalan government the appearance of legitimacy, this act turned out to be a clever strategic move for the future of countering the guerrilla insurgency. The military vetoed parties and leaders which it disapproved of, preventing left-wing opponents from running. Nevertheless, the election was relatively free of fraud. In March of 1966, a civilian leader of a moderately leftist party, Julio Méndez Montenegro, won the election, but the military refused to allow him to assume office until he made sweeping concessions to the army — all done in secret. One of these

included the appointment of Peralta's right-hand man, Colonel Rafael Arriaga Bosque, as defence minister. Further, the new president permitted the military to take a free hand in a counterinsurgency campaign to exterminate the guerrillas. While Montenegro gave the Guatemalan government the face of legitimacy, in fact he was a puppet of the military. Although the new president desired reforms for the betterment of the less fortunate members of society, his military overlords severely limited what he was allowed to accomplish.<sup>18</sup>

During Montenegro's reign, the presence of the United States in Guatemala increased dramatically. For reasons which will be explored further, during the era of the *Gobierno Militar* Peralta refused to allow American support to quell the growing insurgency. This changed dramatically with the election of Montenegro, who allowed the United States to become a prominent contributor to the Guatemalan counterinsurgency efforts. This support caused a quick and utter defeat for the guerrilla movement. The circumstances allowing the election of Montenegro, and the subsequent increase in United States involvement were crucial events that changed the direction of the Guatemalan rebellion. Although American aid was of limited consequence in turning the tide against other Latin American insurgencies during this decade, in Guatemala during 1966 this assistance was a definitive factor in preventing social revolution by eliminating the guerrilla threat.<sup>19</sup>

Under the firm guidance of the United States, the 1966 counterinsurgency campaign was highly successful in eradicating the rebel threat within eighteen months. However, this did not mean a transition towards a peaceful society in Guatemala, because



the social, economic, and political inequities that had led to the eruption of the first rebellion still prevailed. Consequently, a new guerrilla movement emerged in the 1970's which was far stronger, better organized, and more united than the movement of the 1960's. However, in comparison to the first guerrilla movement, this latter rebellion does not have nearly the same historical significance. Although a more powerful insurrection, the movement of the 1970's faced a much stronger state structure and organized military. The army determined to use whatever means were necessary to crush the rebellion. Instead of coming close to achieving a social revolution, this second movement provoked a vehemently oppressive response from the government. The result produced a lengthy stalemate between guerrillas and soldiers in which the state forces eventually gained the upper hand through a program of genocide designed to eliminate the guerrillas' base of support. Nevertheless, a beleaguered guerrilla movement still persists in Guatemala, though it has grown considerably weaker in the last decade.<sup>20</sup>

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**CHAPTER ONE**  
**THE GUERRILLA MOVEMENT**  
**BEGINS IN GUATEMALA**

The 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1962 marks the conscious beginning of guerrilla warfare in our country, in the sense of an armed struggle taking place in the countryside, with the political and social support of the peasantry, initially carried out by a small, unsophisticated, irregular military force.  
-César Montes<sup>1</sup>

**THE NATURE OF REBELLION AND GUERRILLA WARFARE**

In areas where peasant rebellion breaks out, obviously there must be a considerable degree of social discontent. However, it would be incorrect to assume that all peasants experiencing substantial social discontent might rebel. Theories about rebellion are numerous as well as extremely complex. Although there are a many explanations for the causes of rebellion, the military strategies of guerrilla movements exhibit many common characteristics. In a Darwinian example of historical writing, successful guerrilla leaders either survive to explain their methods, or attract enough attention through their successes to have it written for them. By the same logic, those who practice unsound guerrilla methods fade rapidly into historical insignificance. Of course this is a generalization, because the success of guerrilla groups depends in large measure upon the strength of the opposition. Typical strategies of the successful guerrilla include harassment of the enemy rather than engagement in decisive battles, and a focus upon cutting lines of supply and communications vital to the enemy. Guerrilla military engagements concentrate on ambush

techniques to inflict casualties upon the army a little at a time, rather than taking part in any large-scale actions. However, the guerrillas' objective must be to grow in strength while at the same time weakening the state's armed forces. To achieve a social revolution the guerrillas must eventually confront the military head-on. These general strategies, however, are very basic in nature. As Walter Laquer noted, more specific policies: "vary from country to country and are affected by geographical conditions, and social and political processes."<sup>2</sup> In the case of Guatemala, it is essential to examine the country's background prior to the guerrilla movement in order to understand why the rebellion erupted. The political, economic, and social characteristics must be analyzed and related to the development of the guerrilla movement.

#### ARÉVALO AND ARBENZ: REFORM AND COUNTERREVOLUTION

With a population that is more than fifty percent Indian, Guatemala contains twenty-two different native language groups. However, approximately forty percent of the Indian population speak only native languages, without full understanding of the Spanish language. Since the time of the Spanish conquest, Indians have been relegated to the lowest class in Guatemalan society. The language barriers served to preclude significant involvement by the Indians in political and economic decision-making. The other major sector of the population, the Ladinos, are either *mestizos*, or Indians who assimilated into the Spanish culture. They speak Spanish but are poor, and occupy an inferior status in Guatemalan society, although they rank slightly higher than the Indians.<sup>3</sup> Guatemala is the largest country in Central America with an approximate area of 109,000 square

kilometers, and a 1995 population of 10.6 million. During the period of the first insurgency, 1960-1970, the population grew from 4 million to 5 million (approximate). The economy was and still is primarily agricultural, with coffee being the leading export, followed by bananas, sugar, and cotton. The economic, political, and social systems in Guatemala remain severely polarized between a small number of very rich, and a large number of very poor.<sup>4</sup>

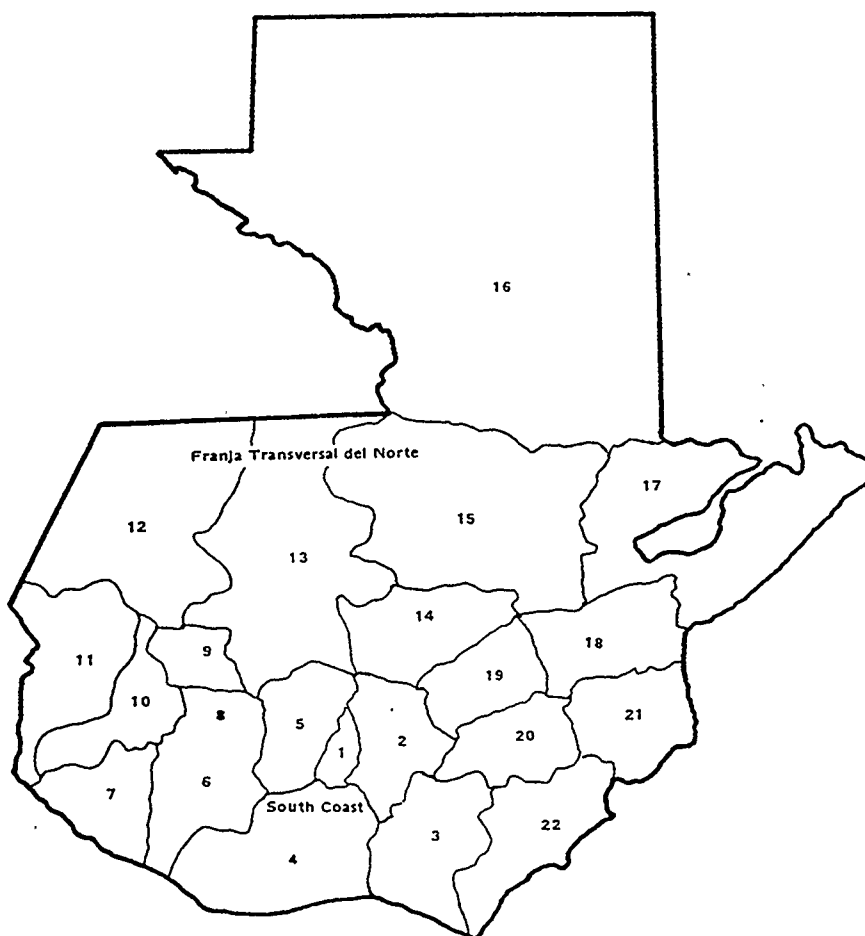
As noted in the introduction, for a century following independence, a series of iron-fisted dictators called *caudillos* ruled Guatemala, the last whom was Jorge Ubico. Ubico ruled for more than a decade, but by 1944, his rule was threatened by his continually shrinking base of power. Opposition to Ubico mounted, and the leader had to rely for support upon the army, some wealthy landowners, and foreign corporations. Ubico realized that he would be powerless against a popular uprising, so his strategy for preventing one was to instill terror among the populace.<sup>5</sup> One sector singled out for discrimination and terror was the indigenous population. During Ubico's government many Indians were pressed into military service. As opposition to the *caudillo* grew in 1944, those of Indian origins deserted the military and at the same time depleted Ubico's power-base.<sup>6</sup> Ubico's history of poor economic policies and use of repressive tactics against the general populace gradually sapped his foundation of support. Confronted by violent student demonstrations and widespread opposition from the middle and professional classes, Ubico stepped down as leader, turned over authority over to a military triumvirate, and fled the country.<sup>7</sup>

Map 1-1\*

## GUATEMALA

## DEPARTMENTS

1. Sacatepequez
2. Guatemala (capital)
3. Santa Rosa
4. Escuintla
5. Chimaltenango
6. Suchitepéquez
7. Retalhulea
8. Sóloá
9. Totonicapán
10. Quezaltenango
11. San Marcos
12. Huehuetenango
13. El Quiché
14. Baja Verapaz
15. Alta Verapaz
16. El Petén
17. Izabal
18. Zacapa
19. El Progreso
20. Jalapa
21. Chiquimula
22. Jutiapa



\*Concerned Guatemala Scholars, *Guatemala: Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win* (San Francisco: Solidarity, 1982), p. 5.



At first the new regime masqueraded as a legitimate government, but in reality it was little different than the one it replaced. However, the opposition did not sit still for the supplanting triumvirate. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1944, students and professionals, along with some younger military officers, assaulted the Guatemalan National Palace and seized power. This movement, known as the October Revolution, produced a popular victory which saw thousands of Guatemalan citizens spontaneously take to the streets cheering what they felt would be the beginning of a new era of prosperity.<sup>8</sup> However, applying the term revolution to this period is something of a misnomer, because the change in government was accomplished by the middle class. The masses had little to do with the seizure of power, and more importantly, although this so-called revolution implemented some reforms, the period did not see a dramatic departure from the status quo. Nevertheless, the majority of the Guatemalan people felt that this was *their* revolution, destined to improve the lives of the lower classes. Shortly after the seizure of power, Juan José Arévalo won the election as the Revolution's first president.<sup>9</sup>

Arévalo was an intellectual and an educator inspired by humanitarian ideals. If there were any Guatemalans who doubted the leftist orientation of the new president, Arévalo dispelled these doubts in his first speech to the people. He announced:

In the past there has been a fundamental lack of sympathy for the working man.... Now we are going to begin a period of sympathy for the man who works in the fields, in the shops..., in small businesses. We are going to make men equal to men.... We are going to add justice and happiness to order, because order based on injustice and humiliation is good for nothing.<sup>10</sup>

Such principles may seem amorphous, but to the ruling class of Guatemala, Arévalo's ideas set off alarms. The new president faced immediate opposition from conservative

elements of society: wealthy landowners, parts of the military, and the Church. Nevertheless, Arévalo clung to power and tried to implement sweeping reforms. From 1944 to 1950, he did achieve some successes in reaching his objectives as president. Arévalo democratized the political process in Guatemala, adopted a new Constitution which provided rights to peasants and the working class, and implemented educational reforms aimed at improving the lives of the lower classes.<sup>11</sup> In 1950, Arévalo was succeeded by the election of the second revolutionary president, Jacobo Arbenz, who proposed even more radical changes to Guatemala's sociopolitical system than his predecessor. However, these reforms were not nearly radical enough to qualify this period as anything resembling a social revolution, but Arbenz did achieve some success in improving the lot of a small percentage of Guatemala's peasant population. The president initiated a program of agrarian reforms, expropriating idle agricultural lands owned by the United Fruit Company (UFCo),<sup>12</sup> the powerful United States-owned company that monopolized Guatemala's railroad lines, international communications, and port facilities. Although the company paid almost no taxes, UFCo was a very powerful player in the Guatemalan economy. Its overwhelming power and even its presence was seen by many as an affront to the national dignity of the nation.<sup>13</sup> The Arbenz government redistributed expropriated lands to approximately 87,000 peasants.<sup>14</sup> Because UFCo was American-owned, Arbenz's actions attracted immediate attention from the United States. Not only were the Americans concerned about Arbenz's seizure of UFCo lands, but they expressed deep concerns about his political leanings. Although the real extent of leftist infiltration of Arbenz's administration is debatable, it is indisputable that there was a certain degree of

communist participation in his government. Staunchly anti-communist during this period, the Americans rationalized that the Arbenz regime represented a leftist threat to the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, the decision was made in Washington to direct the CIA to arrange for the overthrow of Arbenz's democratically elected government.<sup>15</sup>

Just before launching an intervention in Guatemala, American policy makers imposed the "Caracas Declaration of Solidarity" on the majority of the members of the Organization of American States (OAS). The conference which gave rise to this declaration took place in March of 1954, just two months before the CIA planned to launch its coup against Arbenz. The timing was not an accident: the declaration was clearly aimed at Guatemala.<sup>16</sup> The main thrust of the Caracas Declaration stated:

That the dominion or control of the political institutions of any American state by the international communist movement extending to this hemisphere... would constitute a threat to the sovereignty and political independence of the American States, endangering the peace of America.<sup>17</sup>

Bolstered by the Caracas Declaration, in 1954 the CIA used deception with great success to frighten President Arbenz into thinking that he faced a massive invasion force determined to kill him and to overthrow his government. In actuality, the "invasion force" was a small guerrilla band led by Guatemalan Army Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. The deception indicated that Castillo Armas was the leader of a much larger armed force. Frightened by the "imminent danger," Arbenz resigned without a fight on June 27, 1954.<sup>18</sup> He turned power over to the chief of the armed forces, Colonel Carlos Enrique Díaz, who permitted Castillo Armas to march triumphantly into the capital without any opposition from the army. The United States and successive Guatemalan governments referred to these events as the "liberation" because the invasion was seen to free Guatemala from

communist influence. A series of juntas followed, with Castillo Armas eventually appointed to the leadership of a three-man junta on July 8, largely through American influence. Over the next month most foreign states recognized the new government. Following a series of political-military reversals for the junta, Castillo Armas became president in October 1954.<sup>19</sup> The counterrevolution had begun.

Clearly, President Castillo Armas was little more than Washington's puppet. The "hero" of the "liberation" wasted no time in accomplishing what he was placed in power to do, which was to reverse all of the reforms implemented in the previous ten years, and to purge the country of communist influence. The new president created the *Comité Defensa Nacional Contra Comunismo* or CDNCC (National Defence Committee Against Communism), which received powers of investigation and arrest beyond constitutional restrictions. In the first year of operations, agents of the NDCAC arrested close to 10,000 suspected communists. They assassinated peasant, union, and political leaders, and erased all forms of democratic processes in Guatemala.<sup>20</sup> However, not every facet of the Revolution was reversed by subsequent counterrevolutionary governments. During the period of the caudillos, the traditional mode of social control for the *campesinos* (rural peasants), Indians and urban workers was through a local elite of leaders called *caciques*, *patrónes* or *políticos*. Arbenz diminished the power of these local leaders to create a system where economic and social services were provided to the masses through party, league, committee, union, and public outreach organizations. During the Revolution, the government created development banks, and rewrote legislation concerning the labour code, public health, and social security. Although after 1954 the spokesmen and would-be

organizers of the lower classes suffered repression, Castillo Armas and his successor, Ydígoras Fuentes, maintained many of the Revolution's structural changes which had made the country more politicized and centralized.<sup>21</sup> In the process, however, the large governmental bureaucracy grew corrupt as years passed.

During these events, the future leftist revolutionary leader Ché Guevara, participated on the losing side during the "battle" between Arbenz and Castillo Armas. Guevara's experiences in Guatemala had a profound effect upon his later actions and writings.<sup>22</sup> In the meantime, Castillo Armas enjoyed the support of the United States during his dictatorship, and Washington aided the oppressive actions of the Guatemalan leader. A 1957 Department of State publication stated: "Many peasants were occupying land which did not belong to them and which they had been encouraged to take by their Communist masters."<sup>23</sup> This attitude reflected a total lack of sympathy in Washington for the Guatemalan lower classes, and revealed that the United States was focused solely upon prevention of the spread of communism.

Castillo Armas' repression against the peasant class, including the reversal of Arbenz's limited land reforms, created an atmosphere conducive to the development of a guerrilla movement in later years. Castillo Armas would not last long as president. On July 22, 1957, one of his own palace guards assassinated him. This act in itself did not mark a turning point in Guatemala's political history. After a six month period of political turmoil, in January of 1958, electoral fraud permitted General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes to assume the Guatemalan presidency.<sup>24</sup> Under the new president, the counterrevolution continued unabated.

## AN ABORTIVE COUP

In the minds of many of the Guatemalan people, President Ydígoras Fuentes was not an improvement over Castillo Armas. A sizable number of army officers joined those opposed to Ydígoras. Their discontent had originated with Castillo Armas' "triumphant parade" into Guatemala City during the 1954 overthrow of Arbenz. The military viewed Castillo Armas' haughty victorious attitude as an insult because it was the Guatemalan army which had chosen not to oppose him. Moreover, many army officers saw United States involvement in the 1954 coup as unwarranted meddling in Guatemalan affairs.<sup>25</sup> The first two years of Ydígoras' regime did little to improve the attitude of many Guatemalans toward their government. The administration was rife with corruption and the president's monetary policies pushed the country deeper into economic recession. In July 1960, many leftist groups took part in mass demonstrations and other forms of agitation against the government to protest Ydígoras' corruption and ineptitude. The president responded by instituting repeated states of siege (martial law) and employed the military and police forces to crush agitation. He justified his actions by stating that the leftist groups received direct support from the communist government in Cuba.<sup>26</sup>

As public opposition to Ydígoras grew during the autumn of 1960, army officers opposed to his regime expressed concerns when they discovered that the President had allowed the United States to train Cuban exiles on Guatemalan territory, and that Guatemala would be a launching base for the Bay of Pigs operation against Cuba. Later information revealed that Ydígoras allowed this use of Guatemalan territory in exchange for the United States working as mediator with Britain over the Belize border dispute.

According to Lieutenant Luis Turcios Lima: "It was a shameless violation of our national sovereignty. And why was it permitted? Because our government is a puppet."<sup>27</sup> Not only did the officers resent the presence of the Cuban exiles, but many held no ill will against Fidel Castro and therefore saw no reason why Guatemala should be used as an anti-revolutionary launching pad. Most of the army officers opposed to the government were graduates of the National Military Academy. They were younger, better educated, and generally more idealistic than other army officers who received their commissions from the ranks.<sup>28</sup> The rebellious officers viewed Ydígoras as a tool of the United States, and they opposed his acceptance of American aid. Furthermore, they wished to eliminate corruption in the army and in Guatemalan politics, as well as to try to cure some of the terrible social inequities in their country. According to Yon Sosa:

The aim was to 'clean up' the government, not to destroy capitalism. The Ydígoras administration... not only devoted itself to the defense of imperialism and the *latifundistas* [owners of large landholdings] but also lined its pockets with national treasury funds.<sup>29</sup>

These officers were idealistic, nationalistic, and reformist, but they were not Marxists.<sup>32</sup> However, communism would influence some of them in future years. Pushed to the limit of tolerance by Ydígoras' corruption, they planned a coup against his government.

The actual uprising was led by Colonel Rafael Sessan Pereira on the night of November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1960, but of the 150 military officers who swore to participate, only forty-five showed up. Part of this group took control of the army staff headquarters near Guatemala City and they managed to capture arms and supplies. Following these events, they rushed to the military barracks in the eastern department of Zacapa. There the rebel officers were met by 800 peasants who asked for weapons to assist in the uprising. The

coup leaders expressed confusion about what to do with this unexpected turn of events, and they could not imagine a way to link the military coup with a people's revolt. Nevertheless, the peasant's action did serve to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of part of the Guatemalan populace.<sup>31</sup> Another group of rebel officers secured control of the military base at Puerto Barrios, a seaport town on the Caribbean. Although the coup attempt won initial successes, it was poorly organized and doomed to fail. The rebel officers lacked clear objectives, and did not know what to do or where to advance when the revolt did not spread to a much larger portion of the military to produce the demise of Ydígoras' regime. Aided by the United States, the government reacted quickly and fiercely. The coup collapsed on November 17<sup>th</sup>, and the rebels scattered to the hills.<sup>32</sup>

#### THE MOVEMENT BEGINS

After the coup failed, President Ydígoras Fuentes offered full amnesty to those who participated. While in most other parts of the world, such treacherous actions merited death sentences, Ydígoras was in a tenuous position as leader and could ill-afford to alienate the military. He had to forgive those who accepted the amnesty. Many of the rebel officers requested pardons and returned to their duties in the army, everything forgiven. George Black noted: "With that code of gentlemanliness peculiar to thugs, the Guatemalan Army was reluctant to punish members of its own officer corps."<sup>33</sup> Some officers, however, did not accept the amnesty, choosing instead to become self-imposed exiles. Turcios Lima fled to El Salvador and Yon Sosa took refuge in Honduras. Four months later these two ended their exile and secretly returned to Guatemala along with



another rebel officer, Alejandro de León. Yon Sosa had been a captain in the army and had studied counterinsurgency techniques under the instruction of the United States in Panama. Lieutenant Turcios Lima also studied warfare under American direction, but he took his instruction in the United States, at the commando school in Fort Benning, Georgia.<sup>34</sup> These officers still had hopes of overthrowing the government, but the army was no longer a willing supporter of this idea. In an effort to gain assistance, they decided to initiate relations with the Guatemalan Communist party, which had formed in 1944 and was outlawed in 1954. This leftist party, called the *Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* or PGT (Guatemalan Workers' Party), had between 750 and 1000 members. The PGT was sympathetic to the rebel officers' cause, but under the guidance of Moscow they chose to opt for using peaceful methods as a road to political power rather than violence. This was the beginning of a tenuous and intermittent relationship between future guerrillas and the PGT.<sup>35</sup>

In the early months of 1961, shortly after the period of failed negotiations with the PGT, Alejandro de León was killed by police in the capital, and Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa returned to the hills in northeast Guatemala to help create a guerrilla movement. Their fledgling group was named to honour the name of their dead friend: *Movimiento Revolucionario Alejandro de León de 13 Noviembre*. Better known as MR-13, the name also reflected the date of the abortive coup which led to the guerrilla insurgency.<sup>36</sup>

According to Yon Sosa, the peasants influenced the guerrillas through thousands of isolated incidents. They helped the rebels hide, gave them information about the surrounding territory and on the army's movements, and also gave them food when the

local population scarcely had enough to feed themselves. Although this aid helped the fledgling guerrillas and demonstrated that most peasants had no love for the government, it did not mean that an armed movement would receive wide-spread support for an insurgency. Nevertheless, in December 1961, a group of peasants sought out the leaders of MR-13 and related their problems. The peasants pledged their support for the guerrilla movement, with the provision that the insurrection be an armed struggle *for the land*.<sup>37</sup> Still, it must be understood that this limited peasant support did not necessarily reflect a homogenous desire among Guatemalan peasants to support rebellion.

MR-13 divided into three small fronts, each containing between one and two dozens *guerrilleros*. However, before guerrilla operations could commence, the army wiped out two of these fronts. The surviving front led by Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa divided yet again between the two leaders with Turcios Lima setting up operations in Zacapa and Yon Sosa going to the Izabal department in the rough terrain of the Sierra de los Minas in northeastern Guatemala. On February 6, 1962, after very little preparation, the small and poorly armed guerrilla group called MR-13 launched attacks against some military outposts and United Fruit Company properties.<sup>38</sup> The guerrillas released an opening statement upon the commencement of their operations:

Democracy vanished from our country long ago. No people can live in a country where there is no democracy... We can no longer carry on this way. We must overthrow the Ydígoras government and set up a government which respects human rights, seeks ways and means to save our country from its hardships, and pursues a serious self-respecting foreign policy.<sup>39</sup>

The day February 6, 1962, is widely considered to be the official beginning of the Guatemalan insurgency.

## NOTES

- 1) Cited in Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 52 - César Montes was an important leader in the FAR and a close friend of Turcios Lima. Montes took command of the guerrilla group when Turcios died in 1966.
- 2) Walter Laquer, *The Guerrilla Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), P. 1
- 3) César Montes y Orlando Fernández, *Turcios Lima* (Havana: Tricontinental, 1969), p. 140; Douglas Blaufarb and George Tanham, *Who Will Win?* (New York: Crane Russak, 1989), p. 91; Concerned Guatemala Scholars, *Guatemala: Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win* (San Francisco: Solidarity, 1982), p. 9.
- 4) Otto Johnson, (Ed.), *1996 Information Please Almanac* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996), p. 198; Richard Newbold Adams et al. *Crucifixion by Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), p. 137; Blaufarb and Tanham, *Who Will Win?*, p. 92.
- 5) Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 33.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 7) Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p. 101; Adams et al., *Crucifixion*, pp. 182-183.

- 8) Handy, p. 103; Immerman, pp. 40, 42; NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America), *Guatemala* (Berkeley: NACLA, 1974), pp. 44-45.
- 9) Immerman, p. 43.
- 10) Marie Dion, *Las Ideas Sociales y Políticas de Arévalo* (Santiago, Chile: Prensa Latinoamericana, 1958), p. 116.
- 11) *Carta Pastoral del Episcopado Guatemalteco sobre los Problemas Sociales y el Peligro Comunista en Guatemala* (Guatemala: Union Tipografica, 1962), p. 9; Guevara, pp. 217, 219.
- 12) Guevara, p. 219; Piero Gleijeses, "The Agrarian Reform of Jacobo Arbenz," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 21, 1989, pp. 456-457.
- 13) *El Imparcial*, Guatemala, 23 June, 1958, p. 2.
- 14) Nathan Whetten, *Guatemala: The Land and the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 71.
- 15) United States Department of State, *A Case History of Communist Penetration: Guatemala* (Washington: Department of State Publications, 1957), pp. 1-3, 58-59; Jose Alfredo Palmieri, *Terror Rojo en Guatemala* (Guatemala, 1963), p. 2; Juan José Arévalo, *Guatemala, la Democracia y el Imperio* (Havana: Editora Popular de Cuba y del Caribe, 1960), p. 36.
- 16) United States Dept. of State, *A Case History*, pp. 7-10; NACLA, pp. 71-72; Arévalo, *Guatemala, la Democracia*, pp. 47-49.
- 17) Tenth Inter-American Conference: Caracas, Venezuela, March 1-28, 1954. *Declaration of Solidarity for the Preservation of the Political Integrity of the*

- American States Against the Intervention of International Communism*, Appendix A in Richard Chardkoff, *Communist Toehold in the Americas* (Ph.D. Diss., Florida State University, 1967), p. 490.
- 18) Juan José Arévalo, *AntiKomunismo en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Palestra, 1959), pp. 122-123; Immerman, pp. 161-173.
- 19) Jose Palmieri, *Terror Rojo en Guatemala*, pp. 3-4; Immerman, pp. 174-177; Dept. of State, *A Case History*, p. 59.
- 20) Arévalo, *AntiKomunismo*, pp. 124-125; Guevara, p. 221; *The Washington Post*, 13 March, 1966; Milton H. Jamail, *Guatemala 1944-1972: The Politics of Aborted Revolution* (Ph.D. Diss. University Arizona, 1972), p. 30; *El Imparcial*, 2, 13 July, pp. 1-3, 1954.
- 21) Jerry Weaver, *Bureaucracy During a Period of Social Change: The Guatemalan Case* (Austin: Latin American Development Administration Committee, 1971), pp. 17-18.
- 22) Guevara, pp. 220-221.
- 23) Dept. of State, *A Case History*, p. 60.
- 24) Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 43; *El Imparcial*, 6 February, 1958, p. 1.
- 25) Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 94; Richard Chardkoff, *Communist Toehold*, p. 469.
- 26) *The New York Times*, 23 July, 1960, p. 23.

- 27) *The Miami Herald*, 24 December, 1966, p. 7; *The New York Times*, 26 October, 1960, p. 22; Allan Howard, "With the Guerrillas in Guatemala," *New York Times Magazine*, 26 June, 1966, p. 18.
- 28) Jerry Weaver, "Political Style of the Guatemalan Military Elite," *Militarism in Developing Countries*, Kenneth Fidel (Ed.), (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1975), p. 63.
- 29) Gilly, "The Guerrilla Movement," (1), p. 13
- 30) Gott, p. 35; Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 94.
- 31) *The New York Times*, 14 November, 1960, p. 1; Gilly, "The Guerrilla Movement," (1), pp. 13-14.
- 32) Gilly, "The Guerrilla Movement," (1), p. 14; Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 94.
- 33) George Black et al., *Garrison Guatemala* (London: Zed Books, 1984), p. 71.
- 34) Gott, p. 48; Howard, "With the Guerrillas," pp. 16, 18.
- 35) Black et al., p. 71; M. Drachkovitch (Ed.), *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 224; Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 95.
- 36) Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 95; Gilly, (1), p. 16.
- 37) Gilly, (1), pp. 14-16.
- 38) Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 95; Gott, p. 52; *New York Times*, 7 February, 1962, p. 11.
- 39) Gott, p. 52.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A SLOW START

A week ago today a handful of young patriots embarked on the glorious path of guerrilla warfare. The 'Alejandro de León' movement will end the rotted regime of the traitors, accomplices of the corrupt and tyrannical Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes.

-Former Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz, February 13, 1962, in a transmission from Radio Havana.<sup>1</sup>

#### POPULAR UNREST IN GUATEMALA CITY

In the spring of 1962, shortly after the guerrillas launched the initial stages of their operations, mass demonstrations and general strikes by students and workers erupted in the capital. Although the guerrillas during this stage were slow to direct their struggle against the government, the student-led protests literally exploded into a large-scale uprising. However, also unlike the guerrilla fighters, the commitment of students and workers to armed combat lacked staying power. Protesting against the regime of Ydígoras Fuentes, the uprisings began as a result of allegations of fraud in the 1961 congressional elections. The revolt lasted two months and was the first mass uprising since the fall of Arbenz. After the Guatemalan army repressed the student revolt, the university students no longer played an important role in the quest for a social revolution.<sup>2</sup> Prior to examining the spring uprisings, it is essential to understand the individual worker and student groups, and the contributions each made to the quest for social revolution.

The Guatemalan working class did not lead the anti-government uprisings in this period, and workers seldom played more than a supportive role in any of the major

protests. Furthermore, they did not participate directly in insurgent activities beyond an attitude of “jumping on the band-wagon,” or simply expressing fraternal sympathy for the insurgent cause. The reasons for these attitudes can be traced back to the fall of Arbenz in 1954. His failure was a searing defeat for the working class. The “liberation” and subsequent “counterrevolution” dealt crushing blows to the self-confidence and organizational capabilities of the urban proletariat because the regime of Castillo Armas assassinated nearly all of their leaders. Threats of violence from the government made any type of serious union activity a very dangerous undertaking. Not only that, but the urban proletariat was very small indeed, comprising only three percent of the economically active population. As a result, the actions of this sector during the tumultuous period of the 1960’s were largely economic and defensive in character.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, students were politically active. To understand why, one must examine the nature of the Guatemalan student body that contributed to its participation in left-wing agitation. As was the case in most universities throughout Latin America, the students at the Universidad de San Carlos (the main university in Guatemala city, which was also the most politically active) were predominately male. Throughout the period of the first Guatemalan insurgency, the percentage of women enrolled in university was less than fifteen percent. Guatemalan women were not even allowed to vote before 1945, and as a result they were far less politically active than men. This skewed university population partially explains why students were a very politically active group.<sup>4</sup>

Another reason for the high level of political activity among students was the “professional student syndrome.” Guatemalan students spent a much longer time attending



university than their North American counterparts.<sup>5</sup> As a result, like other Latin American students they were generally older, often in their late twenties and early thirties. There were students at San Carlos who spent as many as fifteen years or more at university, and during the course of their long academic careers they became politicized and anxious to play a role in national politics. Also unlike many North American students, a majority of the San Carlos students supported themselves through outside employment, largely due to the fact that Guatemala did not have significant scholarship programs, and the students' families could not afford to support them during their extended university careers. Furthermore, the types of jobs held by Latin American students differed from those in North America. While those in the north usually sought menial jobs unrelated to their field of study while attending classes, students at San Carlos occupied jobs of importance. Law students held prominent positions in the nation's judicial system, including posts as judges. Medical students were active among hospital staffs. Economics students served in important posts in the nation's banks, and many students in other faculties taught in schools and colleges or worked for government ministries.<sup>6</sup> One of the reasons why students were able to hold such important jobs was the lack of trained professionals in such an underdeveloped country. In addition to having respectable employment, Guatemalan students often came from well-educated families of substantial wealth. University students often belonged to the middle or upper-middle classes, and they rarely if ever experienced the economic repression suffered by the lower classes, nor the starvation and disease which were rampant among the less privileged members of society.<sup>7</sup>

Given this background, one may wonder why these students rebelled against a government that helped them to succeed.

During the course of their extended university careers, many students became sensitized about the oppressive nature of their society. It has been argued that the longer students remained in university, the more radical they became. In addition, university students in Latin America historically have seen themselves as the saviors of society.<sup>8</sup> They became idealistically left-wing and resolved to end their society's social and economic inequities. Although a generalization, this conclusion can be supported partially for Guatemala by an analysis of newspaper readership. During the 1960's, newspaper readership was fairly low, largely due to the high level of illiteracy. However, among university students it was high (a 1968 survey revealed that sixty percent read a paper daily and thirty percent read one or more on a semi-regular basis).<sup>9</sup> The most popular daily, *El Imparcial*, had a history of being a highly responsible newspaper dedicated to unbiased reporting of the facts. Another popular newspaper during this period was *La Prensa Libre*, which was oriented to the right-wing, yet still fairly objective. The aforementioned statistics suggest high levels of awareness among the student body and concern about current events. As a result of their political awareness, more radical students became enamored with the concept of a Cuban-style revolution, and they were not adverse to employing violence as a method for change in their country.

Given their prominence in society and their political feelings, the students had a role to play in the guerrillas' quest for a social revolution. Many students supported the rebellion, and many more opposed the government, but their role as players in the

rebellion grew and faded very rapidly. As early as January of 1960, university students exhibited their raw potential political power when they became involved in a labour strike. After witnessing the police brutality against striking employees of the *Instituto Guatemalteco Social Seguridad* or IGSS (Guatemalan Social Security Institute), *La Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios* or AEU (Association of University Students) joined the protest and demanded a general strike. Student support proved effective and, in a rare instance of compromise, President Ydígoras settled with the protesters to end the mass strike action. The AEU claimed a moral victory in helping to achieve a better working environment for employees of the IGSS.<sup>10</sup> However, this was only a minor instance, and two years later in the spring uprisings of 1962, the students showed a more significant revolutionary potential.

Although some workers and members of political opposition parties became involved in the struggle once it had taken hold, the students were the main instigators of the 1962 uprising. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 1962, after Ydígoras implemented repeated states of siege, the AEU issued a declaration which outlined their concerns about the government:

The situation of uncertainty and restlessness which resides in the city...; the chaotic economic situation that lives in the country; the poor administrative organization due to corruption; the increase of unemployment and the lamentable state of education and the lack of public health; electoral fraud; faulty judgments of the government concerning international politics.... In all of these matters we must hold the Ydígoras Fuentes regime responsible.<sup>11</sup>

On February 28, 1962, this statement of concerns was followed with a call to action in the form of a general strike against the government by students, workers and peasants. The

students began their strike on March 9<sup>th</sup>, and because of the fact that they held so many important positions in society, Guatemala City was soon partially paralyzed. Furthermore, many students took to the streets to cripple the city by blocking traffic and clashing with police. The violence in the capital grew as more students joined the uprising, and expanded even further when many members of the general population participated in the March uprising. All this came about because the corrupt administration of Ydígoras Fuentes was almost universally hated.<sup>12</sup>

Frequent riots in the following week led to several clashes between the protesters and police. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, after at least two dozen students had been killed and hundreds injured in the violence, the army seized control of the city, ostensibly at the request of President Ydígoras, who claimed that the students were communist-inspired. However, it was the army that initiated the move, coercing the president into allowing the action. Ydígoras reported that he deemed the move necessary to prevent a Cuban-style revolution. As was common, Ydígoras, as well as officers in the military, judged anyone who opposed the government to be communist-inspired. At this point the AEU issued a declaration demanding the resignation of Ydígoras and the annulment of the fraudulent 1961 congressional elections. The statement also declared that the AEU, contrary to the president's statements, was not infiltrated by communists and that the uprising was a logical reaction to the corruption of the regime. In fact, only about thirty percent of students were openly supportive of socialist ideals. Nevertheless, Ydígoras would not resign, and the oppressive presence of 40,000 soldiers flooding the streets of Guatemala

City gradually restored peace to the capital, if only for a short period of time.<sup>13</sup> The situation would repeat itself on a larger scale less than a month later.

The remainder of March and the early days of April returned a semblance of normality to the capital. Participants in the strike returned to work and the University of San Carlos reopened its classrooms.<sup>14</sup> However, on the afternoon of April 12<sup>th</sup>, this brief period of peace was shattered when soldiers opened fire on students at the university, killing four. Students and other observers blamed the president for this “inhumane” and unprovoked attack.<sup>15</sup> Although it is true that Ydígoras was no humanitarian, he was not directly responsible for this action. Soldiers passing the university in a military bus had been stopped and were harassed by large numbers of students. Most likely the poorly trained army privates fired their weapons out of fear rather than upon official directives.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the killings resulted in a renewal of violence in the streets of Guatemala City. Another general strike received even wider support than the one of the previous month. There were renewed calls for the resignation of Ydígoras published in the country’s newspapers, and several petitions were signed by many professionals in Guatemalan society. These included not only students and the leadership of the University of San Carlos, but many doctors, lawyers and prominent businessmen.<sup>17</sup> It was at this point that opposition to Ydígoras was at its apogee, but the president did not fall, and no social revolution occurred.

During these events, the guerrilla movement was still in its infancy and unable to confront the Guatemalan army even in small-scale military actions. While there was a degree of cross-class opposition to the Ydígoras regime, it was not nearly strong enough

to make the opposition a true contender for power. Also, although the regime of Ydígoras was weak, the military was not. Social revolution could only occur when both the state *and* the military were vulnerable. Such was not the case in Guatemala in 1962. John Holger Petersen concluded:

Ydígoras was tottering but did not fall. The army leadership was determined to keep him in office because the alleged connections between the students and Castroite communism made the Guatemalan military leaders fear the possibility of a real revolution. Maintaining Ydígoras in power was seen as the only option for the army because he was against communism and he could be controlled. The military succeeded in keeping Ydígoras in office through severe suppression of the opposition.<sup>18</sup>

The degree of anti-communist feelings among the officer class cannot be overstated. When the armed forces seized military control of Guatemala City, they took political control as well, and in the process Ydígoras was reduced to the role of figurehead president, forced by the army to appoint a military officer to head every ministry except foreign relations. The most important military appointment was that of Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia to the defence ministry. Effectively placed under the boot of Peralta Azurdia, Ydígoras spent his final year in office as a president without power.<sup>19</sup> It should be pointed out that during this period, the United States more than tripled its military assistance to Guatemala. The figure (in 1960 U.S. dollars) rose from 0.4 million in 1961 to 1.3 million in 1962.<sup>20</sup> The United States maintained the attitude laid out in the Caracas Declaration. As a result of Washington's fear of a possible communist revolution in the Central American country, the Guatemalan military was able to become more effective militarily.

After less than a month of military repression, the students gave up the struggle. Truthfully, they varied as a political group: some were outspoken communists who

wanted to bring about a Cuban-style revolution in Guatemala, while many others simply wished to pressure the government into reforming some of the inequities in their society. It would be safe to say that *all* wished for the resignation of Ydígoras. Although no longer willing to participate in uprisings against the government, the students did remain politically active. Violent repression taught many that revolt against the government would only exact the army's wrath. During the second uprising in April, approximately fifty more students and other protesters were killed and several hundred wounded. There was no longer a middle ground left for the students. They were essentially an unarmed group which relied on influencing public opinion for its political power, and therefore they could not continue to operate effectively in this increasingly violent environment. There were a few students who abandoned their studies to continue the struggle against the government as guerrillas, but the rest of the student body did not regain prominence in the fight for a social revolution.<sup>21</sup> The fight continued, however, but it became solely the domain of the guerrillas and those peasants who could be convinced to support the insurgency.

#### AN AMATUERISH EFFORT

During the spring uprisings, the guerrillas tried a few initial engagements with the army, and spent most of their time on the run. While this became a disastrous year for the guerrillas, unlike the university students, they had the tenacity to stay in the fight. During 1962 they continued the struggle after taking a period of time to regroup. Although a complete failure militarily, the guerrillas gradually set the foundations for a stronger movement. Their first efforts were very amateurish. Mass peasant support did not

materialize as the guerrillas had expected because the rural population was largely illiterate, ill-informed, and generally apathetic to the rebel cause. However, the early guerrillas made matters worse by their failures to secure peasant support. The army acted quickly and crushed the various guerrilla movements only a few months after the incidents commenced.<sup>22</sup>

The very first of the guerrilla groups in Guatemala, MR-13 (*Movimiento Revolucionario Alejandro de León 13 Noviembre*), commenced operations on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1962, attacking small military outposts in the towns of Bananera and Morales in eastern Guatemala. They seized arms and money from the outposts and a United Fruit Company office, but the military response was quick. In little more than a week, many of the *guerrilleros* of MR-13 were captured or killed.<sup>23</sup> The remnants fled to hide in Guatemala City and abroad. The need to disband for periods of time when pressured by massive armed force is not uncommon in the history of guerrilla movements. For the successful insurgent, the will to outlast their opponents made them willing to accept such setbacks and bide their time until the situation allowed for a reemergence. Such was the case in Guatemala in 1962. In September of the same year, Yon Sosa, Turcios Lima and some of the other rebel officers who survived the February actions made a secret trip to Cuba. While there, they met the exiled former Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz as well as the legendary guerrilla fighter Ché Guevara. The meetings with Guevara and Arbenz served to renew the enthusiasm of the beleaguered guerrillas, and they returned to Guatemala late in the year with restored determination to continue in their struggle against the government.<sup>24</sup>



MR-13 was not the only Guatemalan guerrilla movement in 1962 to rise and fall. In March the *Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo*, or PGT (Guatemalan Party of Labour), the outlawed communist party, established a small guerrilla front of fewer than thirty men. Conceived by politically ambitious members of the party, this group undertook an effort to overthrow the Ydígoras regime rather than to engage in a protracted guerrilla struggle. The movement was called “The October 20<sup>th</sup> Front” to commemorate the revolution on that date in 1944 which overthrew Ubico. However, they were quickly annihilated by the army.<sup>25</sup> Most members were untrained students who hoped to work with other student protesters to put pressure on the Ydígoras government. Ironically, the nearly immediate obliteration of this group served to demoralize the entire student protest and to bring about an earlier end to the uprising.<sup>26</sup> According to communist agitator Carlos Manuel Pellecer, the guerrillas of the October 20<sup>th</sup> Front were captured, and “although they [had] surrendered, they [were] massacred, cut up into pieces...” and the body parts were driven to a nearby city and thrown into the public square.<sup>27</sup>

Yet another small guerrilla group formed shortly after the failed student uprisings in the spring of 1962. Adhering to the tradition of naming movements after historical dates, the group called itself the “12<sup>th</sup> of April Movement” to honour four student martyrs killed on that day by soldiers at the University of San Carlos. Like the failed October 20<sup>th</sup> Front, most of these guerrillas were university students, disaffected with the AEU and unwilling to give up the fight against the Ydígoras regime.<sup>28</sup> On their own, however, this guerrilla group was very small and there are no documented cases of it taking any military actions during 1962.

In December, 1962, Guatemalan guerrillas formed the *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes*, or FAR (Rebel Armed Forces). The FAR was a unification of survivors of MR-13, the few remnants of the PGT's October 20<sup>th</sup> Front, and the 12<sup>th</sup> of April Movement.<sup>29</sup> The surviving rebels regrouped and redistributed their members into three new guerrilla fronts. Comparatively speaking, the newly formed FAR had a clearer political ideology than its predecessors, but this is not saying much. There was no single centralized leadership or strategy, and the sole goal of the FAR at this point was to plan and coordinate the military activities of the three fronts. Up to this time, the original guerrillas had shown a large degree of self-reliance, and if they were sure of only one thing, it was that violent insurgency was the only path to true change in Guatemala. When Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa made their first attempts to gain support from the PGT in 1961, they were shrugged off with the argument that insurrection was not a viable option to achieve political goals.<sup>30</sup> However, in 1962 the PGT leadership realized that a guerrilla movement could be a valuable asset to the party's quest for change. Interested in utilizing the political process to realize their goals, the PGT used the FAR strictly as an organ for exerting pressure. The fact that the guerrillas allowed themselves to be used in such a way is curious. According to Adolfo Gilly, "the FAR's role was merely executive, it was a 'mailed fist' while political direction remained in the hands of the Frente de Unido Resistencia or FUR (United Resistance Front), organized by the PGT... in which... - the guerrillas - were not represented."<sup>31</sup> Gilly also explained that the goal of the PGT was not as extreme as the goal of the guerrillas, which was to achieve a social revolution. The PGT desired a less

radical national democratic revolution in which negotiation was seen as the main tool for change, with guerrilla operations taking only a complementary role.<sup>32</sup>

The nature of this arrangement sowed the seeds of future dissent between the FAR and the PGT, because it did not take the guerrillas long to figure out that they were being used by the communist party. While the two groups were almost necessary allies in the 1960's because of their common animosity against the government, relations between them became strained and intermittent throughout the decade. There was much debate about what type of political line should be chosen for the guerrilla group. Men like Turcios Lima were not prepared to deal with the ideological wrangling between Trotskyists, Castroists, and supporters of the Moscow style of communism. Instead, Turcios was a practical soldier who saw himself as a warrior for justice.<sup>33</sup> This particular characteristic concerning politics was common among the guerrillas, and it may explain why they were willing to become subordinate to the PGT. The FAR adopted the theory of *foquismo*, modeled after the Cuban example (later formalized in the writings of Ché Guevara and Régis Debray)<sup>34</sup> which "calls for the establishment in specific zones, of small, armed groups that awaken the population and set an example of how to struggle. ...this example should spread almost spontaneously throughout the country."<sup>35</sup> Although insurgent leaders later realized that this was not the soundest of theories concerning guerrilla warfare, almost anything was an improvement over the aimless actions of 1962. Although the PGT helped the guerrillas to establish themselves as a military power, the party did not attempt to indoctrinate the insurgents with communist ideals; the guerrillas learned this on their own. Walter Laquer noted: "the impact of Marxism-Leninism among contemporary

guerrilla movements has been the strongest with regard to the role of the political party in mobilizing the masses, the function of propaganda in the struggle, and the emphasis placed on organization.”<sup>36</sup> There is no question that the PGT used the guerrillas for purposes which served the party, but at the same time as the insurgents’ methods improved, they gained strength, and became more effective militarily. It was the organizational presence of the PGT which affected these changes.

### THE ARMY IN POWER

While the guerrillas regrouped under the “guidance” of the PGT, the military governed Guatemala with Ydígoras as figurehead. However, the president’s role as puppet would only last one year, because the army grew tired of the façade and seized direct control in March of 1963, establishing the period of the *Gobierno Militar* (Military Government). In his book *My War With Communism*, President Ydígoras Fuentes shows little humility in painting himself as a hero against socialist expansion. The president had delusions of grandeur and never considered himself as an oppressive dictator. It is almost humorous to follow his final year as chief executive because it appears that he did not realize the true nature of his predicament. After the military seized control in April 1962, Ydígoras was no longer in a position to dictate policy.<sup>37</sup> He displayed overconfidence in the fall of 1962, when he asserted that he was willing to allow the return of exiled former President Arévalo to run in the presidential elections planned for October 1963. There was no question that Arévalo, the first president of the Revolution, held leftist leanings, and the possibility of his imminent return made right-wingers in Guatemala very nervous.

Ydígoras' willingness to tolerate Arévalo's candidacy became evident when he told a foreign correspondent that "[Arévalo] would not stand a chance in the presidential race."<sup>38</sup> However, the army did not share the president's confidence that Arévalo would lose in a presidential election, and rightly so. If fair elections had taken place, it is likely that Arévalo would have won. Ydígoras also failed to realize just how anti-communist his defence minister, Peralta Azurdia, and the rest of his clique had become. The officers in control of the government had been frightened by the student revolt and the formation of guerrilla groups in Guatemala, and as 1963 opened, the anti-communist feelings in the military became exacerbated even further.

Four months before the army seized power, there was a small military rebellion on November 25, 1962, launched primarily by members of the Guatemalan Air Force. In previous years, Ydígoras lavished the air force with funds for equipment in an effort to gain an ally to counterbalance the threat posed to him by the army. Even though the president worked hard to cultivate allies in the air force, like the army, feelings of anti-communism were prevalent, and the decision of Ydígoras to allow Arévalo to become a candidate in the upcoming presidential elections prompted a coup attempt. For three hours rebel pilots bombed the presidential palace and a few army installations. No military personnel were hurt, but four civilians died and fifty suffered wounds from the attacks. The leaders of the rebellion fled to El Salvador while the regime imprisoned all 500 members of the air force who remained in Guatemala.<sup>39</sup> This rebellion was of no real consequence in the history of Guatemala, but it does serve to show that the Guatemalan military was not a thoroughly unified entity.

It is certain that the impending return of Arévalo to contend for presidential power at least partially inspired this aborted air force rebellion. However, only the army had the real power to seize the presidency. Chapter four will demonstrate that with the right puppet, the military in Guatemala could happily control the government from behind the scenes. However, the military as an institution suffered terribly under Ydígoras. During his five-year reign, the president often tried to bolster personal loyalties among army officers by handing out promotions. Ydígoras did this so frequently that an inverted pyramid of rank was created with over 500 colonels in an officer corps of only 900. Not only that, but the president was parsimonious with the amount of equipment he provided the army, while the air force was well equipped.<sup>40</sup> These factors would play a role when the time came for the army to get rid of Ydígoras.

Another circumstance which helped the army reach the limits of patience was the impact of the regrouping of the guerrillas and the formation of the FAR. In March of 1963, the FAR launched a series of successful hit and run attacks in the north of Guatemala. Also, a renewal of uprisings in the capital took place (although on a much smaller scale than the previous year), and on March 25<sup>th</sup>, Ydígoras imposed a state of siege. A few days later (March 26-28, the date is uncertain) Arévalo returned to his homeland incognito. His presence in Guatemala further awakened the anti-communist sentiments in the military and it did not take long after the former president's return for the army to act. Defence Minister Peralta Azurdia had grown tired of maintaining Ydígoras as a puppet president, and felt that he could do a better job of securing the country against a revolution. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1963, the army launched a successful coup

and a delegation of military officers arrested Ydígoras in his office and forced him into exile. Immediately afterwards, Peralta Azurdia appointed himself as the new leader of Guatemala.<sup>41</sup> The possibility of any rapid return to democracy in Guatemala seemed remote. The era of the *Gobierno Militar* had commenced.

## NOTES

- 1) Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, *My War With Communism* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 183. Considering the source, it is possible that this quote is not completely accurate. However, the quote does fit the model of Arbenz's ideology.
- 2) *New York Times*, 17 March, 1962, pp. 1, 13; Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 66; *Hispanic American Report* (Stanford University) March 1962, pp. 210-211.
- 3) George Black et al., *Garrison Guatemala* (London: Zed Books, 1984), p. 72.
- 4) John Holger Petersen, *The Political Role of University Students in Guatemala: 1944-1968* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1969), p. 21.
- 5) Francis Donahue, "Students in Latin American Politics," *Antioch Review*, vol. 26, 1966, p. 94.
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- 7) *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 35-36.
- 8) Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 36.
- 9) Petersen, pp. 35-36.
- 10) *El Imparcial*, Guatemala, January 24-26, 1960, pp. 1-2.
- 11) V.M. Gutierrez G., *Guatemala Contra Ydígoras* (Guatemala, 1962), p. 12; Anonymous, *La Lucha Estudiantil en Guatemala, Marzo-Abril 1962*, this is a small leaflet without page numbers.



- 12) *El Imparcial*, Guatemala, 1 March, 1962, p. 1; Carlos M. Pellecer, *Carta de un Guatemalteco en Exilio*, June 1962, pp. 17-18; Petersen, pp. 157, 159-160;
- 13) *New York Times*, 17 March, 1962; Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 55; Research and Information Commission, *Conferencia Estudiantil Guatemala, 1963/64*, p. 19.
- 14) Petersen, p. 163.
- 15) *El Imparcial*, 13 April, 1962, pp. 1-2; *La Lucha Estudiantil, Marzo-Abril 1962*.
- 16) *Hispanic American Report*, June 1962, pp. 306-307.
- 17) *El Imparcial*, 14 April, 1962, pp. 1-2; *Prensa Libre*, Guatemala, April 16, 18, 1962, pp. 1-2.
- 18) Petersen, pp. 166, 173; Pellecer, *Guatemalteco en Exilio*, p. 27.
- 19) Caesar D. Sereseres, *Military Development and the United States - Military Assistance Program for Latin America: The Case of Guatemala, 1961-1969* (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, 1971), p. 47.
- 20) United States Department of Defense, *Foreign Military Sales and Military Assistance Facts*. Washington: Security Assistance Agency, December 1977, pp. 23-24.
- 21) Petersen, pp. 168-169, 191; *Conferencia Estudiantil Guatemala*, p. 20.
- 22) Douglas Blaufarb and George Tanham, *Who Will Win?* (New York: Crane Russak, 1989), p. 95.
- 23) *New York Times*, February 7, 1962, p. 11, February 16, 1962, p. 7.

- 24) Malcolm Deas, "Guerrillas in Latin America: A Perspective," *The World Today - The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, vol. 24, January-December 1968, p. 72; Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 95.
- 25) Black et al., *Garrison Guatemala*, p. 72; Jonas, *Battle for Guatemala*, p. 67; Gott, *Guerrilla Movements*, p. 54.
- 26) NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America), *Guatemala* (Berkeley: NACLA, 1974), p. 180.
- 27) Pellecer, *Guatemalteco en Exilio*, p. 22.
- 28) Kenneth Johnson, *Guatemala: from Terrorism to Terror* (Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1972), p. 4; Petersen, p. 170.
- 29) Black et al., p. 73.
- 30) Blaufarb and Tanham, p. 95.
- 31) Adolfo Gilly, "The Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala," *Monthly Review*, (1), May 1965, p. 18.
- 32) *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- 33) Saul Landau, *The Guerrilla Wars of Central America* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p. 163.
- 34) This theory is developed in Ché Guevara *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) and Régis Debray *Revolution in the Revolution?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967)
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- 36) Walter Laquer, *The Guerrilla Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), p. 5
- 37) Steven J. Koebrich, *The Guatemalan Military and the Growth of the National Political System* (M.A. Thesis, University of Texas, 1989), p. 93.
- 38) Paul Kennedy, *The Middle Beat: A Correspondent's View of Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador* (Colombia University: Teacher's University Press, 1971), p. 164.
- 39) *Conferencia Estudiantil Guatemala*, p. 21.
- 40) Edwin Lieuwen, *Generals vs. Presidents: Neo-Militarism in Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 37-38.
- 41) Gott, p. 58; *Conferencia Estudiantil Guatemala*, pp. 22-23; Koebrich, p. 93.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE GOBIERNO MILITAR

#### AND AN INCREASE IN GUERRILLA ACTIVITY

“One of the best organized guerrilla groups in Latin America today appears to be the Rebel Armed Forces... in Guatemala.”

-Morris Rosenberg, 1966.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE NATURE OF THE NEW REGIME

After it had so quickly seized power on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 1963, the *Gobierno Militar* did not take long to express its anti-communist intentions to the country. However, Juan Arévalo did not wait around for any confirmation of this, because he fled Guatemala for Mexico immediately after the coup.<sup>2</sup> It was characteristic of most army coups which take place in Latin America to release a statement which sought to justify the seizure of power. Peralta Azurdia's statement asserted that the army took control because Guatemala was “on the brink of an internal conflict as a result of subversion promoted by pro-Communist sectors, and because of the infiltration of Communists that had become more alarming each day.”<sup>3</sup> Following this statement, the army presented a decree which gave Peralta Azurdia control of executive and legislative functions (giving him absolute power), suspended the Guatemalan Constitution, dissolved the National Congress, terminated the activities of political parties, and called for all Guatemalans to support the regime in the eradication of communism.<sup>4</sup>

Just a short time later, the official government position was put into law by the *Gobierno Militar* with the release of the *Carta Fundamental de Gobierno* (Fundamental Charter of the Government) and the *Ley de Defensa de las Instituciones Democráticas* (Law for the Defence of Democratic Institutions). The *Carta Fundamental* reaffirmed by decree that the Chief of Government (Peralta) was vested with total powers of state and made final decisions in all matters. It also decreed: “the exercise of the rights and the enjoyment of individual guarantees will be limited by the security measures dictated by the Chief of Government. Any communist action... is punishable.”<sup>5</sup> This meant that a permanent state of emergency had been established in Guatemala, one that would last the entire reign of the *Gobierno Militar*, from April 1963 to April 1966, when the Guatemalan army allowed a “democratically” elected president to assume office.

Released in conjunction with the *Carta*, the new government used the *Ley de Defensa* as an effective instrument of repression of Guatemalan citizens. Article 19 of the law called for a register to be drawn up of all suspected communists, and stated that the Ministry of Defence would determine whether or not an individual or group was to be considered as communist. During the 1963 to 1966 period, it was very easy for people to become part of this list because it was constantly updated with the names of additional suspected communists. Having one’s name on the register was hazardous because the law stipulated that “the authorities shall be able to order the detention of any person included in the register... for a period of up to six months.” The law also stated that those who influenced public opinion with anti-government ideas could be jailed for up to one month.<sup>6</sup> In practice, however, the law was merely an excuse to get suspected communists behind

prison bars. Many spent much longer in jail than the sentences specified under the new law, and all too frequently those arrested were never seen again. Although effective in preventing public communist agitation in urban areas, laws such as this had a counter-productive effect on the presence of insurgency in Guatemala. The repressive nature of the *Gobierno Militar* convinced many in the lower classes to support the guerrilla movement secretly. With the enactment of these laws, the instruments for growing oppression of the Guatemalan populace were in place, and the guerrillas answered with an intensified campaign.

Laws and decrees enabling increased repression were not the only items enacted by the *Gobierno Militar*. The new government launched a political program called "*Operación Honestidad*" (Operation Honesty) which was designed to purify the administration.<sup>7</sup> In the first few months after taking power, Peralta fired many of the executive and middle-level bureaucrats and threw several into prison. The new regime then launched an administrative reorganization with the goal of increasing governmental control and eliminating duplication. In the process, this reorganization served to create new administrative positions and to vacate established offices soon occupied by new bureaucrats.<sup>8</sup> Not only that, but the reorganizations were not comprehensive: one office or department of a certain ministry would be changed while the regime ignored other parts of the same ministry. The reforms also lacked integration, a consideration for the effects of the reorganization of one ministry on that of another. As a result, the administrative reforms of the *Gobierno Militar* had very little overall effect because of redundancy in the bureaucracy, overlapping jurisdictions, and unclear lines of authority.<sup>9</sup> Regarding this

period, the newspaper *El Imparcial* noted: “rapid reform creates more political and social problems than it solves.”<sup>10</sup>

### WHO’S WHO OF THE *GOBIERNO MILITAR*

Before addressing the issue of the guerrilla presence in Guatemala and the government’s actions to counter the insurgency, one must analyze the make-up of Peralta’s regime. Authority in the *Gobierno Militar* was without question in the hands of the army, but that did not mean that the officers ran the entire government. On the contrary, there were still many civilians employed in the government. In fact, the *Gobierno Militar* was comprised of three groups: 1) military officers; 2) economic notables; and 3) technocrats. The first group, military officers, held positions as ministers of all the important departments, including defence, education, finance, and interior. As well, Peralta Azurdia, himself a military officer, was Chief of Government. In addition to holding these important posts, officers held positions of authority throughout the bureaucracy. However, they did not form a monolith of unity.<sup>11</sup>

The second important group involved in running the Guatemalan government during this period were the economic notables. These included industrialists, bankers, and plantation owners: the elite group of Guatemalan society. This group served many purposes for the *Gobierno Militar*, including providing the regime with a semblance of legitimacy through their presence, which helped to reduce the threat of an upper-class based, anti-government movement. The presence of the economic notables in the government also served to make the United States more tolerant of the military controlled

regime. In addition, the economic notables provided the government with much needed managerial skills and professional experience necessary to the everyday running of the country.<sup>12</sup> The *Gobierno Militar* reciprocated these benefits by allowing the economic notables to express their self-interest concerning public policy. One example was the reformed tax laws which gave generous exemptions to the industrialists and other economic elites while imposing heavier taxes on merchants, self-employed professionals, and other members of the middle-class.<sup>13</sup> It could be said that while the military controlled the government, it was the economic notables who were actually running the show.

The technocrats were the engineers, economists, and others with technical proficiency. There was an emphasis on economic development during the Peralta regime which created an increased demand for those with technical skills. This group, like the economic notables, participated to a certain degree in the decision-making process by the military officers, but they made only implementive or tactical decisions. Therefore, although the technocrats became a member of the political elite (an entirely new circumstance in Guatemala), the army relegated them to a junior position.<sup>14</sup>

Each of these three groups all had roles to play in the divisive nature of the *Gobierno Militar*, but these followed the problems related to the running of government by the officer/executive. Immediately after the *Gobierno Militar* seized power, soldiers replaced many of the civilian executives. Also, officers replaced twenty of the twenty-two departmental governors. These officers were generally in league with the governing faction of the military's officer corps. This was a practice called *amiguismo*, or government by cronies.<sup>15</sup> *Amiguismo* made a great deal of sense because these



officer/executives were comrades of the military leaders, and had years of service together. This created an *esprit de corps* which facilitated greater understanding between those in charge; who shared beliefs in military virtues such as discipline and duty; and they could work as liaisons between the government and the bureaucracy. However, these were all hypothetical advantages, and in practice the use of the officer/executive created many problems largely because they expected the bureaucrats under their control to conduct themselves like soldiers. Since the bureaucrats did not understand military discipline and the practice of following orders without question, tensions formed between the two groups. Many of the officer/executives ran their domains like a military institution, but the civilian subordinates did not understand how to fit into this mold. As a result, the political efforts of the *Gobierno Militar* suffered.<sup>16</sup>

Although there is no mistaking that the regime of Ydígoras Fuentes was corrupt, in the era prior to the *Gobierno Militar*, the Guatemalan administrative system had been characterized by commitment to service, austerity, and obedience to constitutional authority. However, the presence of military officer/executives in charge of the bureaucracy eroded the professional attitudes of the administrators. The officer/executive identified more with the military than with the notion of being a public employee. Furthermore, the personality conflicts between the officer/executives and the civilian bureaucrats served to undermine dedication to the aforementioned ideals. Often, the bureaucrats were frightened of their overlords, and as a result relied on formalism, legalism, and indecision to defend themselves from the harsh military attitudes of the officer/executives.<sup>17</sup> Obviously, this situation created an atmosphere of chaos in the

political system of the *Gobierno Militar*, which the presence of factionalism among the military officers exacerbated.

## FACTIONALISM IN THE MILITARY REGIME

According to Jerry Weaver, the only scholar to analyze the administrative system of the *Gobierno Militar*: "Factionalism within the armed forces produced a pattern of conflict for supremacy that mirrored the social, political and economic antagonisms of the greater Guatemalan society."<sup>18</sup> Weaver explained that this factionalism emanated from differences in personalities and ideologies, as well as opportunism, but that the most important factors were the different alignments between "officers of the school" vs. "officers of the line." School officers (graduates of the National Military Academy) viewed officers of the line (who received their commissions directly from the ranks) as uncultured and unprofessional, while line officers saw their counterparts as snobbish and overly liberal, accusing them of being unaware of the perils of communism. The line officers were older and more conservative as a group while the academy graduates tended to be younger and more idealistic. It is important to point out that both Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima were graduates of the academy, as Jacobo Arbenz had been. The factionalism which existed not only among the officers, but throughout the entire government, served to create three competing groups in the Guatemalan officer corps: the Economic Reformers, the *Duristas*, and the Moderators.<sup>19</sup>

The group known as the Economic Reformers was closely associated with Major Jorge Lucas Caballeros, Minister of Finance during most of the period of the *Gobierno*

*Militar*. He and his associates advocated development programs and reforms to alleviate the social ills of their country. These included an expanded role for the government in economic planning, which led to tax reform, program and public planning, and administrative reform. Their position was a direct challenge to the prevailing social and political status quo, and as a result, it is not surprising to find that there were few senior officers counted among them. The Economic Reformers drew their support from the more idealistic and enthusiastic young officers of the academy. The reaction of the economic notables to the ideals of this faction ranged from mild approval to outright denunciation, but the technocrats were very supportive. In fact, the technocrats felt that the reformers in the military should advocate *more extensive* changes which could possibly end the guerrilla insurgency through jobs and land, rather than bullets and prisons.<sup>20</sup>

The second group was that of the *Duristas*, or hard-liners. Rather than advocating reform as a measure to combat communism and insurgency, this group supported violent suppression of all those opposed to the government. The *Duristas* were staunchly anti-communist, comprised of senior "officers of the line" who saw prevalent leftist infiltration among labour leaders, intellectuals, and reformers. Their main goals were to maintain the status quo and eradicate any communist influence, whether real or imagined, from the country. The *Durista* officers drew their support from civilians with anti-communist feelings, as well as any group that profited from the continuance of the status quo, which included a portion of the economic notables.<sup>21</sup>

The Moderators, as their name suggests, fell somewhere between the Economic Reformers and the *Duristas*. This group was the "government faction" which supported

Chief of Government Peralta, but he attempted to stay above factionalism. He often stated that the *Gobierno Militar* was working toward a return to democracy and that his successor was to be democratically selected. This dedication to the semblance of political legitimacy precluded Peralta from making strong connections with any of the three factions. However, the line Peralta chose to follow was clearly that of a moderate. On one side, the Chief of Government advocated expanding the role of government in directing economic development called for by the Reformers, but conversely, he also supported the *Durista's* position of intense repression of communism (although this took the form of mass arrests of suspected communists in urban areas rather than a counterinsurgency campaign against the guerrillas in the countryside). Thus, it became Peralta's role to enact compromises between the positions of the Reformers and the *Duristas*. Peralta and the Moderators eventually drew widespread, if not enthusiastic support from the economic notables because the latter felt that when it came time for an election, the Reformers would not tolerate a government party victory with a *Durista* candidate, and vice-versa. This might plunge the country into civil war, which, among other things, would destroy the Guatemalan economy. In the end therefore, the economic notables took the position that it was best to align themselves with the Moderators because the prevention of a civil war in the future was paramount to their financial interests.<sup>22</sup>

Because of factionalism and maladministration, the reform efforts of the *Gobierno Militar* achieved very little. Peralta and the Moderators were preoccupied with maintaining the semblance of unity in the government through extensive compromise between the Economic Reformers and the *Duristas*. Also, the tense relationship between

the officer/executives and the civilian bureaucracy often caused the latter to hide behind rules and regulations, and to defer decisions to a higher authority rather than adhering to a modicum of professionalism when doing their jobs. Nevertheless, even with this antagonistic system between bureaucrats and officers, it was the bureaucracy which prevented Guatemala from falling apart entirely during the period of the *Gobierno Militar*. Sufficient numbers of the civilians in the government stuck to their routines and were able to satisfy demands for basic public services during the three years of Peralta's regime.<sup>23</sup>

#### A GROWING YET DISUNIFIED GUERRILLA MOVEMENT

The factionalism of the *Gobierno Militar* became further exacerbated as a result of the presence of the growing guerrilla movement in the rural countryside. As the guerrillas gained strength, the government lost it. The former grew in popularity among the lower classes and the latter was not only ineffective in enacting political policy, but also failed to launch an organized counterinsurgency program. After three years of the *Gobierno Militar*, the guerrillas made some headway in their quest for a social revolution.

The presence of a true military dictatorship, the suspension of the Constitution, and the dissolution of Congress allowed the guerrillas to justify their claim that armed struggle was the only path to real change in Guatemala. As previously mentioned, the FAR was a reorganization of the shattered guerrilla groups of 1962, with the remnants reallocated into three new guerrilla fronts with the purpose of continuing the fight against the Peralta regime. First was the communist party's front which used the same acronym, PGT, which was seen to be the "brains" of the FAR. It was composed up of intellectuals,

students and workers, who limited their guerrilla activities to urban areas. As a military group, the PGT front was by far the least important of the three. As for the second group, Yon Sosa became the leader of the MR-13 Front, maintaining the group name which honoured the day of the abortive coup as well as a dead comrade. MR-13 was composed of some of the army officers who had taken part in the 1960 coup attempt, a few fighters from the PGT cadre, and some Ladino peasants. Skilled in the methods of guerrilla warfare, Yon Sosa commanded his front adroitly in the eastern department of Izabal. His group caused considerable havoc with the Guatemalan military, yet his efforts would pale in comparison to the guerrilla exploits of Turcios Lima.<sup>24</sup> Turcios was given command of the *Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra* or FGEI (Edgar Ibarra Guerrilla Front [Edgar Ibarra was the name of one of the four students killed by soldiers outside the University of San Carlos on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1962]), which, like MR-13, included some members of the PGT cadre and Ladino peasants. However, FGEI also contained the student guerrillas from the March and April demonstrations, as well as a few Indians. Turcios' group began operation in the department of Zacapa, which is also in the east, but further inland than Izabal.<sup>25</sup> Although these two men were highly skilled guerrilla leaders, neither was what one could call politically adept. The attitudes of these guerrillas were based on armed conflict, which led to the growth of disparate goals between these two groups and the PGT. This created tension in the alliance which was the FAR, resulting in almost continual unity problems among the guerrillas.

The PGT towed the party line by considering that the main task of the FAR should be to make an alliance with the national bourgeoisie and create a reformist government

similar to that of the 1944-1954 revolution. During the period of the *Gobierno Militar*, the PGT claimed to accept the inevitability of armed struggle as a means for change in Guatemala, yet the party did not alter its structure to incorporate violent struggle into its own practices. This caused many of the overly idealistic younger members of the PGT to abandon the party and join the guerrillas in the rural struggle. The PGT used the guerrilla groups as their own personal armed force for change while contributing nothing to the cause other than an occasional recruit and a nominal sense of direction, which the guerrillas did not always support. The goals of the PGT at this stage were to eradicate the “feudal” landowning systems, industrialize the country, and continue the path towards a peaceful passage to a social revolution. The role assigned to the guerrillas in the larger scheme of PGT strategy was as nothing more than a bargaining tool. The PGT leaders felt that their more limited aims could be served by the FAR through using the guerrillas to exert pressure on the *Gobierno Militar* to restore constitutionality, thereby giving the party a chance to follow the Moscow line of communism which preferred a path to socialism through peaceful means. Because of the way in which the PGT directors saw the guerrillas, they had a tendency to leave the insurgents to their own devices. As a result, the guerrillas slowly grew more independent politically and came to identify less and less with the PGT.<sup>26</sup>

Because of the lack of a strong centralized leadership, Yon Sosa and MR-13 developed with relative autonomy, and in the process they fell under the influence of Mexican Trotskyists (Posadistas) who criticized the PGT’s policies and influenced Yon Sosa concerning the ideological differences between his group and the PGT. Sosa had his

own explanations for his ideological leanings. When asked in 1965 how he and his comrades became socialists, he replied: "While we were dodging bullets. It's impossible to fight for very long, side by side with peasants, and not become a socialist.... A backward country cannot advance along the capitalist path, and there is no third alternative."<sup>27</sup> Sosa criticized the PGT for subservience to the Moscow line of the peaceful path to socialism. In the December 1964 *Declaration of the Sierras de las Minas*, the MR-13 leaders stated:

The PGT leadership has supported the pacifist, revisionist, conciliatory line of Khrushchev and the privileged line of the USSR. It has attacked... the comrades of the Communist party of China, who, with their policy impel the world revolution.... No advance is possible without arming the masses and without destroying the machinery of the capitalist state.<sup>28</sup>

Sosa called for an immediate socialist revolution, and in the process he committed the deadliest sin possible for a guerrilla: he lost patience. Sosa pressed for an early confrontation with the government, and his political tactics concerning the gain of peasant support reflected this desire for a quick path to revolution. It appears that the guerrilla leader forgot that it took Mao Tse-tung twenty-two years to emerge victorious over Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>29</sup> Sosa and MR-13 used a strategy in which they "freed" a certain village from governmental control and then defended it with military patrols, a method known as armed self-defence. The guerrillas created "peasant committees" whose purpose was to organize themselves for revolution and await the call to rise up against the government. They were "trained" to assassinate and harass government agents and patrols as well as to fight against the regime's spy networks. These committees were appointed in a meeting involving all the inhabitants of the village, and thus had a public existence.<sup>30</sup> The actual consequences of what was a strategic error will be analyzed in chapter four, but for now it



will suffice to say that once the Guatemalan government became serious in its counterinsurgency campaign, the peasants who were in support of MR-13 were easy to locate.

Because of his brashness and impatience, both the PGT and Turcios Lima, leader of the FGEI, denounced Sosa. The MR-13 leader was called a “Trotskyist adventurer” by the PGT and denied further assistance, at which point he split from the party. After the rupture, Sosa wished to take command of the entire FAR guerrilla force, but Turcios chose to side with the PGT. The FGEI leader expressed his feelings about Sosa’s actions as a guerrilla leader in an October 1964 letter to the PGT in which he stated: “[Sosa’s] actions can acquire the character of real provocations, causing defeats that oblige the people to retreat politically as the only way of protecting themselves against repression.”<sup>31</sup> Turcios felt that until the guerrilla forces gained enough strength to enable them to keep waves of oppression in check, the populace would be a target of the military. Nevertheless, still in command of the MR-13 front, Yon Sosa stuck to his overconfident ideals of a quick path to a total social revolution. In the spring of 1965, Sosa’s criticism of the PGT ideology as well as his brash goals were outlined by Adolfo Gilly:

For the PGT the goal of armed guerrilla struggle is the establishment of a national democratic government.... Such a government would supposedly democratize and industrialize the country, carry out agrarian democratic reforms, and struggle against imperialist penetration. In other words: a repetition of the Arbenz fiasco.

The PGT’s goals separate it from MR-13, which maintains that the objective of armed struggle carried out under its leadership is to establish a peasant’s and worker’s government, to overturn capitalism, expel imperialism, arm the working population..., institute agrarian revolution, establish worker’s control in industry...<sup>32</sup>

This ideology drew heavily on the Trotskyist influences present in MR-13. However, Sosa's reliance on the organization of armed community self-defence was too open and too immobile, and these actions would make the jobs of the counterinsurgents easier (once the government got around to launching a real antiguerrilla program). Not only that, but Sosa's base of support was limited mostly to poor Ladino *campesinos*. Using peasant support in such an indiscreet and immobile fashion made it very difficult for the strength of MR-13 to expand. Once the government began counterinsurgency operations, the static peasant committees formed by MR-13 became easy targets for the army.<sup>33</sup>

Yon Sosa understood that to survive, his guerrilla group had to make up for its inferior numbers and weaponry by gaining the support of the local population. The rural villagers provided him with the many things important for success: food, shelter (which included places to hide from government troops), local knowledge of the area, intelligence on the army's activities, and recruits for the movement.<sup>34</sup> Yet the path he chose to gain that support, and the way in which he used it, contained flaws. Karl von Clausewitz' classic study *On War* illustrates how guerrilla activities and popular support should be linked militarily:

...armed civilians cannot and should not be employed against the main force of the enemy.... They should not try to crack the core, but only nibble along the surface and on the edges.... The enemy has no other means with which to oppose the actions of armed civilians than the dispatching of numerous detachments to escort his convoys, to occupy posts, defiles, bridges, etc.... These detachments will be weak, because [the enemy] is afraid of dividing his forces too much.<sup>35</sup>

In a failed attempt to get the peasants to rise up in a direct and immediate confrontation with the government, Sosa chose to ignore this type of sound advice. As a result, Yon Sosa and MR-13 played a relatively minor role in the Guatemalan guerrilla movement.

Turcios Lima developed his guerrilla strategy along lines that reflected the exact opposite of Yon Sosa's strategy. Turcios saw that patience, secrecy, and mobility were the paths to building a strong guerrilla movement, and as a result he proved himself to be the most significant guerrilla leader of the period. However, it is important to analyze the relationship between Turcios Lima and the PGT after Yon Sosa separated his movement. Since the PGT considered Turcios to be one of the more reliable guerrillas, in 1965 he received command of the FAR (from this point on, the FGEI and the FAR came to mean the same group). With this support, the FAR was able to expand and Turcios emerged as the principle guerrilla leader in Guatemala. However, although Turcios was not as radical as Yon Sosa, the FAR leader was definitely more militant than most members of the PGT. As pointed out earlier, Turcios had visited Cuba shortly before the formation of the FAR, and he maintained close relations with Havana in subsequent years. This became a cause for concern in the PGT, which followed of the Moscow line of communism, and relations between Turcios and the party became increasingly strained.<sup>36</sup> However, the final factor in creating another split in the movement, this time between the PGT and the FAR, came just after the *Gobierno Militar* allowed the newly elected president, Julio Méndez Montenegro, to take office (this election will be examined in the following chapter). Although the new president posed as a reformer, he was firmly under the control of military overlords who dictated his policy. It did not take long for these facts to become

evident to the guerrillas, and Turcios began to lose what little faith he had in any form of political ascension to power in Guatemala. However, Turcios died a short time after the election in an automobile accident, which had a devastating effect on the morale of the guerrilla movement. As a result of the death of Turcios, the PGT was able to convince, and even cajole the FAR into maintaining the alliance. Even more tenuous than before, the alliance nevertheless managed to survive for another year.<sup>37</sup>

Even in the face of damaging unity problems for the guerrillas during the three years of the *Gobierno Militar*, the various insurgent groups wounded the Guatemalan Armed Forces through the use of hit and run tactics. However, none were so successful in their military accomplishments, and none received such widespread popular support, as the FAR group led by Turcios Lima during the latter half of Peralta's reign as Chief of Government. Unfortunately, due to the censorship often imposed during Peralta's reign, a comprehensive listing of guerrilla attacks during this time is impossible to formulate. Information regarding these attacks is sketchy at best, but a detailed account of the guerrilla operations for this period is not necessarily paramount to the overall analysis of how the guerrillas developed as a military and political group.

As discussed earlier, Yon Sosa's strategy of armed self-defence in peasant villages was not very successful, and MR-13 was unable to expand its territorial base to any major degree. The armed actions of MR-13 primarily involved assassinations of military commissioners, as well as some ambushes of army and police patrols in the department of Izabal.<sup>38</sup> Due to MR-13's inability to expand its base of support, the removal of assistance from the PGT, and Yon Sosa's forsaking of the true guerrilla's cardinal virtues, the armed

actions of MR-13 were of little military consequence. It should be pointed out as an afternote, however, that the Posadista influence which infiltrated MR-13 and led to the splintering of the guerrilla movement was purged in 1966 after it was discovered that MR-13 funds were being embezzled by the Posadistas to support the international Trotskyist movement.<sup>39</sup>

Turcios Lima merged his charisma, personality, leadership, and outstanding military talent to become the most important guerrilla leader in Guatemalan history. After the defection of MR-13 from the FAR-PGT coalition, the PGT agreed to participate more actively in the guerrilla campaign in order to help soothe insecurities in the FAR regarding continued connection with the communist party. Although this move did not permanently heal the rifts between the PGT and the FAR, the alliance remained strong enough to see the FAR grow as a military power during the latter half of the *Gobierno Militar*. The PGT formed the *Comité Dirección Revolucionaria* or CDR (Revolutionary Leadership Committee) to help coordinate guerrilla activities and provide central direction for the FAR's strategy. The PGT's new attitude moved away from a bourgeoisie revolution (at least partially), and encouraged Turcios to launch a popular people's war, with the peasants and workers becoming the decisive force for change in the country.<sup>40</sup> It is important to realize, however, that this FAR-PGT alliance was not made because Turcios was a firm believer in any form of communist doctrine. In reality, the FAR leader felt that it was necessary to develop a new kind of social revolution which considered the special circumstances present in Guatemala, rather than following any established form of communism — Chinese, Cuban, or Soviet. Turcios kept the alliance with the PGT because

the party acquiesced somewhat to the guerrilla leader's demands for a more militant stance, and the presence of the party served to make the guerrilla movement stronger through organizational techniques as well as methods for recruiting more people to the cause. With the tenuous alliance in place, the rebels began to recognize the inherent weaknesses of *foquismo* strategy (even though it worked for Fidel Castro in Cuba), and instead made the decision to adopt a strategy of a prolonged, popular war.<sup>41</sup> This strategy was carried out by the FAR through the use of "armed propaganda" in the villages of Zacapa and Izabal. Turcios' use of armed propaganda was best described by *New York Times Magazine* correspondent Allan Howard, who went on patrol with the FAR in 1966:

The village would be secured militarily. All inhabitants would be required to attend a meeting at which several rebels would talk on different themes: reform, exploitation, the people's army, and security measures. During this initial contact with the community the rebels would seek out the village leaders, hoping to make them the nucleus of a Local Clandestine Committee - a tightly organized unit that, in its most advanced stage, acts as the final political authority of the village.

Often, the rebels win over the local government official to their cause. If they fail, the rebels try to persuade him to remain neutral. And if he actively opposed rebel authority, he will probably be executed.<sup>42</sup>

These clandestine peasant committees coordinated support for the FAR among the rural population. The technique was highly successful, bringing thousands of peasants into a support base for the guerrillas.

The methods used by Turcios relied on political persuasion to make armed propaganda work. The form this persuasion took was outlined by Ché Guevara:

The guerrillas can never forget their function as a vanguard of the people... and as such they must create the necessary political conditions for the establishment of a revolutionary power based on the masses' support. The peasants' aspirations or demands must be satisfied to the degree and form

which circumstances permit so as to bring about the decisive support and solidarity of the whole population.<sup>43</sup>

Although the FAR did receive widespread peasant support by using armed propaganda throughout the department of Zacapa during the 1965-1966 period, it largely came as a result of the explosive social conditions in Guatemala rather than the FAR's efforts to organize a movement. Peasants were drawn to the guerrilla movement as a possible force for change. In the words of César Montes, an FAR leader and close friend of Turcios: "They (the peasants) come with a desperate anger wanting to kill and be killed killing."<sup>44</sup> However, even with much enthusiastic support from the peasantry, the guerrillas still realized that this was going to be a prolonged struggle which must eventually evolve into a popular revolutionary war which would combine military, political, and economic methods of the struggle into a solitary, multifaceted war.<sup>45</sup> An FAR leader described the patient attitude towards the rebellion in 1967: "We must view our struggle as a long-term one which will last perhaps ten, perhaps twenty years. Our first objective is to last out, to survive."<sup>46</sup> The more long-range objectives of the FAR were published in the newspaper *Prensa Libre*: "The fact is that we fight to effect an agrarian and anti-imperialist revolution.... The replacement of the large landowner by the peasant is not done by slaps on the back and loving embraces. It is done by force."<sup>47</sup>

As a group, the FAR grew significantly during the period of the *Gobierno Militar*. The guerrillas' political efforts resulted in them gaining thousands of peasant allies for the rebellion. According to guerrilla warfare author Régis Debray, the FAR was one of the most successful guerrilla movements in Latin America when it came to the gaining of popular support (with the possible exception of the Colombian guerrillas). A large part of

the reason why the peasants were so drawn to the guerrillas was because of the military victories which the movement achieved. Kidnappings of the wealthy elite to raise money to continue the struggle were common. Referring to the approximately \$300,000 in ransom payments the guerrillas received for the safe release of several wealthy kidnapping victims, an American military advisor commented: "That can buy a hell of a lot of fireworks in this country."<sup>48</sup> This effective strategy made the FAR one of the best equipped guerrilla movements in Latin America. Well-armed and highly motivated, Turcios commanded a group of about 300 to 500 guerrillas divided into various fronts. The key to the military actions of the guerrillas was mobility, and the rugged, forest-clad mountains of Guatemala were ideal for the use of guerrilla tactics. Often using peasant organizations for sources of information about the army's movements, and the villagers' knowledge of the local terrain, the guerrillas launched frequent ambushes against army patrols spread out across the countryside in a misguided and vain effort to hold territory. As a further tactic to inflict losses on the army and gain more weapons and supplies for the rebellion, they attacked army convoys and military outposts. During Peralta's regime, the guerrillas also used some urban terrorist techniques as part of their strategy (this helped lay the groundwork for the switch to urban operations after the counterinsurgency push launched in 1966). The rebels were very active during the period of the *Gobierno Militar*, but censorship was often enforced by Peralta's regime and as a result, the actual numbers of casualties inflicted on the Guatemalan Armed Forces by the guerrillas is impossible to determine. However, the total must rank in the hundreds.<sup>49</sup>



Militarily, the guerrillas did not pose a direct threat to the government. However, the armed actions did serve a very clear purpose. First of all, the attacks had a devastating effect on the morale of the army. Often, soldiers vented their frustrations on the peasant population. One such case occurred in the village of Quirigua when in February of 1966 soldiers forcibly entered the peasants' homes and captured nine men, who were never seen and again and presumed executed.<sup>50</sup> Yet another even more heinous act occurred three months later in the department of Zacapa, when a group of 125 peasants were captured and executed by the army.<sup>51</sup> When the guerrillas reached the zenith of their power in the spring of 1966, the army offered relatively little resistance even when attacked by the guerrillas.<sup>52</sup> In the greater scheme of working towards a social revolution, this was part of a very important objective. Ideally, unrelenting guerrilla attacks cause armies to become disillusioned with the regime they support. Either they stand aside in the face of growing opposition to the government, or become part of a cross-class opposition to the government. In Guatemala, the guerrilla attacks also served another purpose: to rally support for an anti-government movement. Although censorship was prevalent, many of the radical groups in Guatemala issued underground newspapers which reported guerrilla victories, portraying the insurgents as heroes of the struggle for freedom. Also, word of mouth relayed the exploits of the rebels to the masses. Of course, the stories grew with the telling and Turcios became a legendary figure in Guatemala; with many believing him to be invincible. It was these stories of the guerrillas' actions that often spurred the peasants, as well as many members of the lower classes who lived in urban areas, to sympathize with the rebel movement. This situation made many of the rural peasants highly receptive when

the guerrillas used their strategy of armed propaganda in the villages of Zacapa. It is important to point out that the rural and urban lower classes already had a high revolutionary potential due to the oppression they experienced under the *Gobierno Militar*, and it was the presence of a tyrannical regime that convinced many to join the guerrillas in the fight against the government.<sup>53</sup>

The success of the guerrillas not only served to demoralize the army, but it rallied many of the peasants and lower classes around the movement. Clearly, the guerrillas were on the right track, and as a result, a substantial political challenge to the government developed during the 1965-1966 period. The presence of a strong guerrilla movement eroded Peralta Azurdia's control over his regime, which in turn led to an increase in general opposition to the government across all classes. In fact, as a military group, the Guatemalan guerrilla movement of this time was almost as strong as Fidel Castro's guerrilla movement had been in 1959 when the Cuban government was overthrown. During the final months of the *Gobierno Militar*, the Guatemalan guerrillas were the closest they would ever come to achieving a social revolution. However, the movement failed. The government forces quickly turned the tables on the guerrillas in 1966 and 1967 after an initial slow start, nearly destroying the movement entirely.

#### A SLOW START TO COUNTERINSURGENCY

Chief of Government Enrique Peralta preferred not to acknowledge the existence of a guerrilla movement in Guatemala, instead referring to the rebels as bandits. As a result, much to the chagrin of the United States, Peralta refused to launch a serious

counterinsurgency campaign. During the period of the *Gobierno Militar*, the United States desperately wanted to become involved in the fight against the guerrillas in Guatemala. The Americans, who had been relatively uninvolved in Guatemala since the overthrow of Arbenz in 1954, renewed their interest in the Central American nation when, in the spring of 1963, a secret meeting chaired by President John F. Kennedy approved the plot by the Guatemalan Army to overthrow President Ydígoras Fuentes.<sup>54</sup> Washington became disillusioned with Ydígoras when he approved ex-president Arévalo's candidacy for the 1963 presidential elections, and as a result, the United States government supported Peralta's coup based on the military's staunch opposition to communism. After the coup, American leaders felt that they should become a strong ally to the new *Gobierno Militar* in its fight against communist insurgency.<sup>55</sup> However, Peralta was a highly nationalistic military officer who did not wish to follow Ydígoras' enthusiastic acceptance of the American embrace.

During his administration, Peralta increased oppression against the general population, making any involvement in communist activities a punishable offense. Nevertheless, the Chief of Government did not perceive the guerrilla groups as a serious threat, and he failed to initiate vigorous counter-attacks against the insurrection. At the same time, American observers expressed alarm at what they perceived as a growing rebellion in the Guatemalan countryside. American counterinsurgency experts, eager to apply their newly acquired skills learned in Vietnam, grew frustrated at the defensive posture taken by Peralta.<sup>56</sup> As a result, relations between the two countries deteriorated. Peralta rarely allowed the army to make any forays into the hills to engage the guerrilla

groups that roamed freely in “their territory.” The Chief of Government allowed no changes to the current military aid programs from the United States, even though the Americans were anxious to increase the amount and type of military assistance they sent to Guatemala. Washington wished to export its advisory personnel, funds, and weapons to Guatemala, seeking to become a guiding force in a counterinsurgency campaign. However, Peralta maintained his nationalistic stance and rejected overt intervention. He refused to let the United States initiate counterinsurgency programs allowing the guerrilla movement to grow almost unchecked during the entire period of the *Gobierno Militar*.<sup>57</sup>

Peralta has been criticized severely for his unwillingness to launch a counterinsurgency campaign during his tenure as leader. Although his disinclination to allow an increased United States presence in his country is understandable, permitting a growing guerrilla movement to expand through the countryside of eastern Guatemala appears to be an act of stupidity. In fact, Peralta had discovered that the existence of a guerrilla threat could be an asset that legitimized the presence of a military government. Caesar Sereseres, one of the few scholars who understood Peralta’s larger strategy, commented:

...the guerrillas were seen as a minor problem; but one that could not be eliminated easily or without serious political costs. To establish an extensive counterinsurgency campaign against the guerrillas would perhaps have altered the political balance in favor of right-wing military and civil elements. From Peralta’s perspective the stability of the military institution as well as his own position as Chief of Government rested on the continued maintenance of the delicate balance between military factions. Thus, so long as the guerrilla threat remained limited, the military could point to the necessity of its continuing in power.<sup>58</sup>

While this was a rational policy for the leader of the *Gobierno Militar*, Peralta actually underestimated the real threat posed by the guerrilla movement. The Chief of Government felt that he could not act against the guerrillas without weakening his regime, yet paradoxically his lack of action served to weaken his government, placing it in peril of succumbing to social revolution. The metaphor "between a rock and a hard place" certainly applies to the position Peralta occupied at this time. While Peralta allowed the guerrilla movement to grow, the Guatemalan Armed Forces which supported his government became increasingly demoralized due to the military defeats suffered at the hands of the rebels. Also, the army blamed Peralta for their inability to fight back, which increased the levels of factionalism in the *Gobierno Militar* and further weakened the regime. Finally, the inadequate response of the Peralta government to the guerrilla movement, and continued refusal to accept United States aid and advice, created deep tensions between the two nations. The United States government became increasingly disaffected with the military regime it had supported originally to overthrow Ydígoras. When Peralta made the decision in late 1965 to hold presidential elections, the Americans approved.<sup>59</sup>

Guatemala was about to reach a turning point in its fight against the guerrillas. Many circumstances would evolve during 1966 which would cause damaging reversals for the guerrillas. With the election of a civilian president came a dramatic increase in United States involvement in Guatemala, to the point at which the Americans literally ran the entire counterinsurgency campaign. Unlike any other insurgency in Latin America, United States involvement would be of paramount importance in suppressing the Guatemalan

guerrillas. As we shall see, it was the significance of the United States role in eradicating the guerrilla threat which made the case of the Guatemalan insurgency noteworthy in comparison to other Latin American insurgencies during the 1960's.

## NOTES

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**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**THE ELECTION OF MÉNDEZ MONTENEGRO**  
**AND UNITED STATES - SPONSORED COUNTERINSURGENCY**

...military aid from the United States may have had a decisive impact on the outcome of one revolutionary movement of the 1960s—the Guatemalan—in the lending of critical assistance to a... weak-willed, and weakly supported military establishment.  
-Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley<sup>1</sup>

**PRELUDE TO CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT IN GUATEMALA**

The *Gobierno Militar* began making plans for a presidential election in late 1965, and although the election itself proved to be relatively honest, there were clear cases of fraud because the government allowed only certain parties to compete. The ability of Peralta's regime to preclude the participation of any party it deemed too radical was one of the reasons why the *Gobierno Militar* was willing to allow the election in the first place. It appears that Peralta had no wish to remain as the permanent dictator of Guatemala. Earlier he had been favoured over Arévalo to be the first president of the Revolution, but he turned down the opportunity. Also, Peralta consistently refused to call himself president during the period of the *Gobierno Militar*, instead affirming that he was only an interim leader who had taken control during a time of dangerous political strife. His goal was to return the country to democracy when the situation permitted. A third reason why the election was allowed was simply that the United States no longer wished to support a military government *per se* in Guatemala. Finally, the *Gobierno Militar* was relatively at

ease about the elections because the party it endorsed stood a good chance of winning. Failing that, the army was convinced that it could strong-arm any new administration into following a line conciliatory to the Guatemalan Armed Forces.<sup>2</sup>

The *Gobierno Militar* did not allow any radical parties to run in the upcoming presidential election. Therefore, the number of participating parties was limited to three. A key part of this was Decree Law No. 175, which required each party to have at least 50,000 members before it could qualify. For many reasons, this requirement became an open scandal. First of all, because of the tradition of electoral fraud in Guatemala, many citizens were antagonistic towards political parties in general, not to mention the fact that becoming an open member of a left-wing party opened one to governmental victimization. Second, because of the difficulty in getting Guatemalans to become party members, virtually every party bought the name of party affiliates, which meant that people were paid to sign up for several parties. Finally, the Peralta Government rejected the lists of three “undesirable” parties (meaning they were left-wing) due to the “numerous abnormalities” discovered.<sup>3</sup> These were the *Unidad Revolucionaria Democrática* or URD (Revolutionary Democratic Unity), the *Movimiento Democrático Nacional* or MDN (National Democratic Movement), and the *Movimiento Nacional Reformista* or MNR (National Reformist Movement). The Peralta government rejected all, viewing them as incompatible with the future goals of the military.<sup>4</sup> Peralta even excluded a section of the center, the *Democrático Cristiano Guatemalteco* or DCG (Guatemalan Christian Democrat Party), led by Jorge Lucas Caballero, Minister of Finance under Peralta and also the leader of the Economic Reformer faction in the *Gobierno Militar*. Even the centrist

reformers in this party appeared to Peralta as too radical, and the DCG was not allowed to register to run in the election due to alleged lateness in submitting its list.<sup>5</sup>

The three qualifying parties were: the *Partido Revolucionario* or PR (Revolutionary Party) — a moderate leftist party led by Julio Méndez Montenegro (former dean of the University of San Carlos Law School); the *Movimiento Liberación Nacional* or MLN (National Liberation Movement) — the most right-wing of the three, which traced its inception to Castillo Armas' "liberation" of Guatemala in 1954, and whose candidate was Colonel Miguel Angel Ponciano; and the *Partido Institucional Democrático* or PID (Institutional Democratic Party) under Colonel Juan de dios Aguilar — considered the official government party because it had been created by the Peralta regime, and from which received significant support. The PID was slightly less right-wing than the MLN,<sup>6</sup> and stood a good chance of winning the election because of the support it received from the government. Therefore, the Peralta government was confident that its party would form the new administration. The nation's most responsible newspaper, *El Imparcial*, reported on the reasons for this confidence: "Every time we have an election in Guatemala inevitably there arises the official candidate who attempts to attain victory through abundant economic resources and the active collaboration of public officials."<sup>7</sup> The MLN was not favoured to show as well in the election, but given the right-wing nature of the party, the Peralta regime was not worried about the MLN's possible ascension to power should it win. The PR, which campaigned on a reformist platform, was allowed to participate because the regime felt that it needed a third and more moderate party in the running to make the elections seem more legitimate. The military viewed the

chances of the PR winning the election as small, and in any event it was believed that Montenegro could be controlled if he won election.<sup>8</sup>

Although there was obvious fraud in the selection of which parties could participate in the election, the election on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1966, took place under conditions of honesty and fairness, almost an anomaly in the history of Guatemala. Nevertheless, the campaign was a bitter one full of exaggerated charges between parties. Montenegro accused the PID of trying to assassinate him,<sup>9</sup> which the government denounced as a theatrical statement used as a ploy to win votes.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the PID charged that the PR was run by communists, which prompted a vehement denial by Montenegro.<sup>11</sup> Since the PID was a new party in Guatemala, there was no past record for the PR to attack, but the MLN was established, and the PR launched attacks upon the Liberationists (MLN) for historical subservience to United States intervention under Castillo Armas and Ydígoras Fuentes. An editorial by the PR in *El Imparcial* thundered "As for the Liberationists: is it heroism to be at the service of the Yankee police, the dictators of the Americas, in order to invade Guatemala with Honduran troops [this was a referral to the CIA sponsorship of Castillo Armas' invasion to overthrow President Arbenz in 1954]... Why does the MLN complain about Castro intervening? They invited the *gringos* to intervene."<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, both the PR and the MLN agreed that international intervention could be positive as far as the election was concerned. In January of 1966, the *Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios* or AEU (Association of University Students) launched a petition which demanded that the Guatemalan elections be overseen by United Nations observers. The two opposition parties were in complete agreement with the AEU petition,

feeling that the presence of international observers would decrease the chance of electoral fraud.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the United States asked Peralta to allow an Organization of American States (OAS) mission to oversee the elections as well.<sup>14</sup> However, Peralta denied both requests, asserting that such an invitation would be a violation of Guatemalan sovereignty and an insult to the political maturity of the Guatemalan people.<sup>15</sup>

The reasons why the AEU, MLN and PR wished to prevent electoral fraud are obvious: the AEU was a reform oriented student group that did not wish to see a perpetuation of a military regime in Guatemala. The MLN and PR realized that any type of electoral fraud would most certainly decrease their chances of victory. Rather than being interested in preventing a fraudulent election for any moral reason, the United States favoured Montenegro in the election because he was seen by Washington's policy makers as the more moderate choice. The *New York Times* on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1966, reported:

Some officials here concede that Guatemala represents one of the most conspicuous failures of United States policy [referring to the CIA sponsored overthrow of President Arbenz in 1954]. This has profoundly embarrassed Washington, which would like to get across the point that progressive democracy, not right-wing military governments, are the alternative to the extreme left.<sup>16</sup>

Popular support for the PR continued to grow, and as the election drew near, it became clear that the more honest the election, the more likely it was that the PR would win. However, the popularity of Montenegro's party increased the possibility that the elections would be marred by violence. Two days before election day, the PR was so confident of its ability to win that its leaders asserted that a loss would be as a result of fraud, and violence would result.<sup>17</sup> However, the elections were not plagued by violence



because Peralta allowed fair conduct. Even so, it should be pointed out that the Guatemalan populace was largely apathetic about the outcome, as would be reflected by voter turnout. To begin with, the percentage of eligible voters who registered to vote was very low, only about twenty-five percent. Furthermore, the pervading assumptions among the people about the high possibility for fraud in the election decreased the turnout of voters on election day. Many Guatemalans felt that if the PID were willing to use fraud to win, then the election would be an exercise in futility. Thus, only slightly more than half of those who had gone to the trouble to register as voters actually bothered to cast their ballots. This total represented less than fifteen percent of those who were eligible to vote. Perhaps in spite of this low voter turnout, support for the PR was strong enough that on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1966, Montenegro and the PR won the election with 191,000 votes. The PID came in second with 136,000 votes, and the MLN brought up the rear with 103,000 votes. Moreover, the PR captured 30 out of a possible 55 seats in the Congress.<sup>19</sup> One of the main factors which led to the PR victory was that the conservative vote was split between the MLN and the PID, while moderates and leftists had only the PR. Most of those who voted for the PR lived in urban areas where the leftist image of the party drew support from students, intellectuals and especially the professionals centered in the capital. Somewhat surprisingly, the more conservative PID and MLN drew most of their support from the rural areas of Guatemala, partially because the people living in these areas were inspired by fear of the military. Also, the Indians who lived in these rural areas were resistant to change, and the good showing of the PID and MLN in the countryside simply reflected a desire by the Indians to be left alone.<sup>20</sup>

After the election, Peralta allowed only the preliminary figures to be announced; the results were not yet “official.” What followed was a week of much speculation as to who had won, although most agreed that the PR seemed to have the majority. Furthermore, by March 10<sup>th</sup>, the MLN called for a new election, alleging fraud, and the PID reported that it had knowledge of serious electoral anomalies.<sup>21</sup> Even though the results were not yet published, these statements by the MLN and the PID seemed to be admissions of defeat. Two days later, Peralta released the official results of the election which confirmed the PR victory. However, since Montenegro’s party lacked a majority of votes, Peralta insisted the matter be handed over to the Guatemalan Congress. What followed was two months of political wrangling. MLN and PID Congressmen accused many of the PR Members of Congress of being communist, which made their election illegal under the *Ley de Defensa de las Instituciones Democráticas* (Law for the Defence of Democratic Institutions).<sup>22</sup> Until this debate was settled, the Congress could not vote on whether Montenegro would be the next president. Finally, on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1966, Julio Méndez Montenegro was elected by the Guatemalan Congress as the new president. He was inaugurated on July 1<sup>st</sup>, making him the first opposition candidate in Guatemalan history to gain victory over the official candidate.<sup>23</sup>

#### THE REGIME OF MÉNDEZ MONTENEGRO

As pointed out earlier, this election was fraudulent in that certain parties considered undesirable by Peralta were excluded. However, the election itself was relatively free of imposture, proved by the fact that the official government party lost. The real fraud came

afterwards. The army constituted the only real power in Guatemala, and it was necessary for Montenegro to develop a favourable working relationship with it in order to survive his term in office. During the week after the election and before the results were released, Peralta and Montenegro engaged in secret negotiations concerning how the country would be run in the future.<sup>24</sup> PGT secretary-general Alvarado Monson later alleged that some secret negotiations were held even before the election, a necessary prelude to Montenegro and his party being allowed to participate in the election in the first place.<sup>25</sup> These negotiations led to strict concessions being exacted from the future president by Peralta. Montenegro was forced to name Peralta's right-hand man, Colonel Rafael Arriaga Bosque, as the Minister of Defense, and many other officers who were part of the *Gobierno Militar* kept their positions in the new government (of the sixteen colonels who backed Peralta's regime, twelve retained their posts). The new president was not allowed to name any leftists to government positions. Most important, however, was the deal made in regard to the counterinsurgency campaign. As noted in the previous chapter, during the *Gobierno Militar*, Peralta was unwilling to launch an attack against the guerrillas because he worried that such an action would upset the delicate balance between factions in his military government. However, with the end of the *Gobierno Militar* and a return to civilian government, Peralta no longer had to be concerned about such things. Therefore, the former Chief of Government decided it was time to address the growing guerrilla threat.<sup>26</sup>

In the months preceding the election, the PGT suffered from an intense intra-party ideological struggle. "Ultra-left" members of the party preferred a stronger focus on the

armed struggle, while more conservative elements loyal to the Moscow line were dedicated to the use of nonviolent political strategies to affect change. Since the beginning of the guerrilla movement, the PGT had spent years waffling between support for the armed struggle and advocacy for a peaceful road to socialism. In the months prior to the election, the PGT was on the side of armed struggle, encouraging moderate leftist parties to join with them in their fight against the government, yet this position changed again when the election date drew near.<sup>27</sup> The decision of the PGT to support Montenegro's presidential bid was made conveniently while representatives of the FAR, including Turcios Lima, attended the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba. Unaware of the PGT's decision to support the PR in the election, Turcios issued a strong statement from Cuba which denounced participation in the elections, and reaffirmed that armed struggle was the only path to real change.<sup>28</sup> Guerrilla representatives in the PGT who remained in Guatemala during the elections voiced their opposition to the party's support of Montenegro, yet their grievances went unheeded. Turcios returned to Guatemala two weeks after the election, still unaware of the position the PGT took in his absence. After apprising the situation, which included Montenegro being the apparent winner, Turcios declined to break party discipline and accepted the situation rather than issuing a polemic against the PGT's move.<sup>29</sup>

Alvarado Monson argued that the PGT's sponsorship of Montenegro won the election for the PR: "the revolutionaries called on the masses to vote for Montenegro.... As a result, [he] won the election."<sup>30</sup> Monson's assertion does have some weight to it. Considering that those who voted for the PR were largely left-leaning in nature, many

were also supportive of, and influenced by, the PGT and the guerrilla movement. If the PGT and the guerrillas had launched a vehement joint condemnation not just of Montenegro and the PR, but the entire election process, then it was possible that the government-sponsored PID would have won. After all, the margin by which the PR won was quite thin. If the PID had won the election, the fate of the guerrilla movement would probably have been different. A PID victory would have been a slightly democratized perpetuation of the *Gobierno Militar*, and in all likelihood the stress of running the government would have been accompanied by a continuance of the factionalism in the military, creating yet another weak regime in Guatemala. Moreover, the United States openly supported the candidacy of Montenegro, and the continuation of a right-wing military regime would have precluded the massive counterinsurgency support sent by Washington during the administration of Montenegro. A United States Department of State pamphlet outlined considerations taken by the American government in regard to military aid to foreign countries. One of these considerations was: "The current internal stability of the recipient country, its capacity to maintain that stability, and its attitude toward human rights."<sup>31</sup> Although influenced strongly by the military, the new regime of Montenegro at least had a greater appearance of stability and dedication to human rights because of the PR's moderate position. While a PID victory probably would have witnessed a perpetuation of Peralta's nationalistic position, Montenegro's election made relations between the United States and Guatemala much closer. When it came to launching a counterinsurgency campaign, the United States was willing to work with Montenegro, who complied completely.

The counterinsurgency push did not begin immediately after Montenegro assumed office. Before the nature of the new president's relationship with the military became evident, Montenegro called for a "cease fire" between the army and the guerrillas. The president's apparent good faith concerning a truce commenced with an army withdrawal of its troops from the guerrilla zones. At this point, the PGT still felt that it chose the right path in endorsing Montenegro's candidacy, and the party convinced the guerrillas to accept the cease fire and suspend operations.<sup>32</sup> Montenegro planned to offer an amnesty for the guerrillas to end the rebellion, but he came under heavy pressure from sectors of the military to offer far less liberal conditions. The guerrillas had to surrender their weapons within eight days, to which PGT leader Jose Manuel Fortuny reported: "In this way the reactionaries turned the amnesty proposal into an ultimatum of a kind that might be presented to an enemy who had been defeated or who was on the verge of defeat, which was certainly not the case."<sup>33</sup> Montenegro allowed changes to the amnesty proposal because his political survival depended on him proving to the army that he would not tolerate the actions of the extreme left. As expected, the guerrillas rejected the amnesty. However the cease fire remained in place, largely because the army did not move back into the guerrilla areas. This was because the Guatemalan Armed Forces, unknown to the insurgents, had begun to prepare for a major offensive against the guerrillas.

With the military pullout from the departments of Zacapa and Izabal, the pressure was off of the guerrillas for the first time since the movement started. As a result, the FAR began to demobilize and they became careless in their security measures. Although the guerrillas had not given up the armed struggle, the removal of military pressure was too

much of an unexpected blessing. During the era of the *Gobierno Militar*, the rebels strictly avoided fixed camps, but with a truce in place many could not resist the temptation to return to their civilian lives, walking openly in their villages and making visits to the capital. Also, many of the guerrillas began giving interviews to national and international media: relating their personal stories, relaying their political positions, and even allowing their photographs to be published. The demobilization of the FAR was a serious and deadly mistake for the guerrillas. Informants and spies were able to infiltrate the peasant support base because of the lack of security. Meanwhile, the army prepared to move against the guerrillas.<sup>34</sup>

The truce was actually a maneuver by government forces to gain time for an offensive against the rebels, as well as to convince the rebels to demobilize their forces. In September, Turcios began realize that the military was in control of the new government, and that an offensive against his movement was most certainly being planned. Therefore, the FAR leader began making preparations, urging all guerrillas in Guatemala to unite and make ready for the government's offensive. He advised: "if we know how to prepare ourselves in time, we can wreck their offensive, the popular forces will come out strengthened from the trial, and the development of the popular revolution will experience a qualitative leap."<sup>35</sup> However, Turcios did not live to witness the battle because he died in an automobile accident outside Guatemala City on the early morning of October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1966.<sup>36</sup> Despite terrible weather, close to 2,000 people attended the funeral to mourn his passing. He was buried in a cemetery in the capital.<sup>37</sup> The large number of mourners who

attended the funeral attested to the sympathy for the movement prevalent in the country. However, under fierce repression by government forces, this support soon disintegrated.

The loss of Turcios was a serious blow to the guerrilla movement. He was a charismatic leader who inspired loyalty from his troops and helped keep the members of the FAR unified. With his death, Turcios' right-hand man, César Montes, took command of the guerrilla forces,<sup>38</sup> but he was not the leader Turcios had been. At this time the guerrilla fighters numbered from 300 to 500 fighters. Although they had an extensive support base of peasants who were ready to join the fight, there were no weapons to distribute among them. The armed forces, on the other hand, were at their strongest in the country's history. The combined military numbered over 10,000 men, and the Guatemalan police force was of a comparable size. More important, the United States was now fully involved. The Americans gave weapons to the Guatemalan defence forces, and counterinsurgency training. The American military advisors literally took control of the situation and planned the entire anti-guerrilla strategy. Given these circumstances, the best move for the guerrillas would have been to retreat and disband for a time rather than face the counterinsurgency onslaught. Instead, they resolved to fight.<sup>39</sup>

## INVOLVEMENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Before detailing the counterinsurgency campaign and the last months of the 1960's guerrilla movement, it is important to examine the nature of the United States involvement and how the Americans' presence dramatically altered the Guatemalan military situation. An important paradox was the fact that while Peralta's political survival depended upon



not upsetting the balance of his regime by attacking the guerrillas; Montenegro's success as president required him to do just the opposite. Although Montenegro was a moderate, many right-wingers suspected him of being a communist. The fact that the PGT supported his candidacy exacerbated this suspicion. The guerrilla threat provided the new president with a chance to prove himself to the rightist elements of the military as an anticommunist. In addition, allowing the army to launch a counterinsurgency campaign preoccupied the officers with fighting guerrillas. Therefore, the threat of a coup against the PR government by the armed forces was not as great.<sup>40</sup> Also, the presence of the United States in the counterinsurgency campaign provided Montenegro with two benefits necessary to his survival as president. First, Montenegro's alliance with the United States facilitated an increase in military aid, and the much better-equipped army was thankful to the president for their new weapons and vehicles. Second, with the United States running the counterinsurgency campaign, the success of the endeavor was much more likely, ensuring that the army would not become disenchanted with the program and take out its frustrations by launching a coup.<sup>41</sup> The United States interest in Guatemala was prompted by a desire to intervene against communist insurgency, while Montenegro's interest in the United States was prompted by a quest for survival.

Many scholars have discounted the importance of American military aid as an important factor in fighting insurgency in Latin America, and statistics seem to support this view. By American standards, the military assistance to Guatemala was small: the total dollar value during the counterinsurgency drive from 1966 — 1970 was roughly equal to what the Vietnam war cost the United States in a single day.<sup>42</sup> Also, as detailed in Table 4-

1 below, the actual amount of American military aid in comparison to the military budget of Guatemala was not large.

Table 4-1

United States Military Assistance as a Percentage of Guatemalan Military Expenditures 1966-1969 (Millions of 1972 U.S. dollars)<sup>43</sup>

Year	United States Military Assistance (Column A)	Military Expenditures of Guatemala (Column B)	Column A as a Percentage of Column B (Column C)
1966	1.3	16.4	7.9
1967	2.5	17.3	14.5
1968	1.2	17.1	7.0

It has been argued by many that such small percentages (column C) make little difference in the operating capabilities of a nation's armed forces. However, unlike the United States military, which allocated large amounts of its defence budget for *matériel*, only about ten to fifteen percent of the military budget in Guatemala was spent on armaments. As was the case in most Latin American countries, the Guatemalan army was very labour-intensive, and most of the military budget was spent on personnel costs.<sup>44</sup> Taking this into consideration, American aid increased the Guatemalan arms budget by an average of fifty to one hundred percent or more.

This statistical data illustrates the quantitative support the United States sent to Guatemala, representing a fundamental increase in the armaments held by the military during the 1966-1968 counterinsurgency push. However, more important than this

material support was the qualitative support sent from the United States. American counterinsurgency expert Colonel George Blanchard described the steps involved for military assistance in anti-guerrilla operations. First to Guatemala were the soldiers of the Military Assistance Advisory Groups (MAAGs), operated as “efficiency experts,” surveying the country’s military abilities and requirements, and making recommendations. Next came the Special Action Force (SAF), which consisted of Special Forces units augmented by teams of engineering, civil affairs, psychological warfare, intelligence, medical, and military police personnel. The SAF split into Mobil Training Teams (MTTs) to assist the Guatemalan government in the development of the counterinsurgency plan for local ground forces. One Guatemalan Army sergeant relayed the training he received from Special Forces instructors between May and October 1966: “They taught us camouflage techniques, how to survive in the mountains, how to undo booby-traps. As for prisoners, we were advised to do away with them whenever we were not able to take them with us.”<sup>45</sup> This latter statement illustrates the ruthless techniques taught to the Guatemalan soldiers. This soldier was part of the first large wave of training by American specialists which took place in secret during the cease fire in the early months of Montenegro’s administration. This was a time of preparation for the army while the guerrillas demobilized. In addition to this on-site training of regular soldiers, many Guatemalan officers received American-sponsored counterinsurgency training. From 1950 to 1975, a total of 729 of 3,030 officers in the Guatemalan Armed Forces received training either in the United States base in Panama, or in Fort Benning, Georgia. Some have criticized the usefulness of this training, yet both Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima were veterans of it, and

there is no doubt that they were both highly skilled soldiers. This was proved time and again through the success of their guerrilla operations.<sup>46</sup>

The MTTs also advised on civic action projects such as road building, water procurement, and delivering medicines. Civic action was designed to improve the army's reputation among the local populace by making them appear as public servants. However, these actions were limited only to villages near guerrilla zones. Towns not located in rebel areas received no such help from the army.<sup>47</sup> In addition to military training and the implementation of civic action programs, the United States military was an important source of intelligence on the guerrillas' movements. The Guatemalan Army did not have an intelligence section, and during 1966 it relied solely on American sources.<sup>48</sup>

The final part of Colonel Blanchard's graduated steps for military assistance to counterinsurgency was the dispatch of conventional combat troops to the region. This occurred in Vietnam, but there was a much less well known use of United States combat troops in Guatemala. Unwilling to watch all of the action from the sidelines, the Americans became directly involved in the fight. Don Marroquín Rojas, Montenegro's vice president, told an interviewer about squadrons of United States Air Force planes taking off from Panama, making napalm and bombing raids on suspected guerrilla encampments in Guatemala, then returning to Panama without ever landing in Guatemala.<sup>49</sup> Although the United States denied categorically that their Special Forces detachments were involved in anything other than advisory positions, there were several reports which suggested that up to 1,000 Green Berets were on active combat duty in Guatemala. The commandos' presence was documented by many observers: an American

reporter for the *Chicago Daily News*, numerous travelers to Guatemala, and informants within the Guatemalan military. The job of the Green Berets was to back up the barely trained Guatemalan soldiers. Quite often they augmented the leadership of the counterinsurgency patrols, placed in direct positions of authority over Guatemalan soldiers in combat situations.<sup>50</sup> This group of Special Forces was reported by the United States as numbering only thirty, and their roles were reportedly strictly advisory. Yet the evidence shows that there were from several hundred to as many as one thousand Green Berets in Guatemala involved in much more than advisory positions.

In addition to bolstering the army, the United States gave a great deal of assistance to the Guatemalan police force through "public safety" programs which brought in money from the Agency for International Development (AID). The United States sent helicopters, paddy wagons, police cars and radio communications equipment. Also the Americans provided extensive training in riot control, intelligence and surveillance, and finger-printing. They donated \$400,000 for a new police academy, which in addition to training the police, gave the students anticommunist training and pro-American indoctrination. The cost of all of this American support — the advisors, the Green Berets, the equipment for police and the new academy — was not included in the military assistance package outlined in Table 4-1.<sup>51</sup> AID funds paid for some of it, but much of this assistance was an extra gift from Washington in its fight against communism.

Perhaps the most important contribution made by the United States to the counterinsurgency program was through top advisory personnel. Rather than dealing with the training of individual soldiers, civic action, or counterinsurgency patrols, these

advisors strengthened the Guatemalan military as an institution, making it more professional. The major institutional changes affected by Americans included the creation of the Central Maintenance Facility to provide the means to standardize and control material resources, the Central Resource Training Center for training recruits, and an airborne fast-attack force for the implementation of airmobile counterinsurgency warfare. Through American guidance, the Guatemalan Armed Forces became more centralized and gained better control over personnel, training, logistics, planning and maintenance.<sup>52</sup> The effects of the presence of the United States on the improvement of the function of the Guatemalan Army cannot be overstated. The greatly improved professional attitudes of the military helped decrease factionalism among the officers, and made them more resilient to fight a prolonged campaign against the guerrilla threat. The change was nothing less than remarkable. Before the election, and thus prior to the increased involvement of the United States, the Guatemalan military was in a state of disarray. Under-supplied and poorly trained soldiers had low morale due to the many defeats dealt them by guerrilla attacks. The American advisors changed the army on all levels, making it into an efficient fighting force. According to United States counterinsurgency planners, however, the army needed to be supplemented in its efforts to eradicate the guerrilla threat through the use of paramilitary forces.

One such paramilitary force was the *comisionados militares* (military commissioners) system. These were former military personnel, farm owners, administrators, and heads of local political families who served as a source of intelligence and commanded local army reserve units.<sup>53</sup> The military commissioners and their assistants

exercised control in the villages of each military zone. These commissioners in turn organized armed civilian irregular forces in their areas to combat guerrilla infiltration.<sup>54</sup>

Other paramilitary groups formed during this period were the right-wing vigilante death squads. These assassination squads were used to launch a program of counter-terror in Guatemala, the object of which was to frighten people to prevent them from collaborating with the guerrillas. According to *Time* magazine, Colonel John Webber, Chief of the United States Military Mission in Guatemala, was responsible for the introduction of counter-terror: "...it was his idea and at his instigation that the technique of counter-terror [was] implemented by the Guatemalan Army."<sup>55</sup> The death squads were "...armed local bands of 'civilian collaborators' licensed to kill peasants whom they considered guerrillas or 'potential guerrillas.'"<sup>56</sup> Jose Manuel Fortuny, a leader in the PGT, reported:

The U.S. advisors suggested... that the government, the military and the anti-Communist leaders should form and train special groups who would murder revolutionary leaders 'on the quiet.'

The 'advice' was accepted down to the last detail. Soon gangs of cut-throats appeared in various parts of the country, and primarily the areas of guerrilla action.<sup>57</sup>

These "cut-throats" were drawn from the army's anticommunist civilian backers, many of whom were members of the very right-wing MLN party. Off duty soldiers (mostly junior officers) and police with anticommunist feelings provided organization and leadership for the vigilante groups, strengthening the membership of the squads. Large property owners, whose interest in maintaining the status quo made them anticommunist by nature, often financed the formation of these groups. The largest and most active of these groups was

called MANO Blanca (White Hand). MANO was an acronym for *Movimiento de Acción Nacionalista Organizada* (National Movement for Organized Action). Others were the *Ojo por Ojo* (Eye for an Eye), CADEG or *Consejo Anticomunista de Guatemala* (Guatemalan Anticommunist Council), and the *Nueva Organización Anticomunista* (New Anticommunist Organization). These groups distributed leaflets that denounced communism, called for national support of the government's counterinsurgency campaign, and warned that those who supported the guerrillas would be punished.<sup>58</sup> The death squads began a reign of terror, torturing and killing large numbers of innocent people who were guilty only of having liberal or leftist leanings. The Guatemalan government categorically denied any involvement in the formation of the groups, and maintained that the right-wing terror organizations were strictly vigilante in nature, meaning that they were spontaneous and independent self-defence initiatives. In fact, the formation of these groups was neither spontaneous nor independent. The Guatemalan military formed the death squads on the counsel of the American advisors.<sup>59</sup> The United States wanted to ensure that the counterinsurgency program in Guatemala was successful, and the formation of death squads was simply another tool to help accomplish the destruction of the guerrilla movement.

#### AMERICAN-SPONSORED COUNTERINSURGENCY TAKES HOLD

President Méndez Montenegro placed Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio in charge of the counterinsurgency campaign in Zacapa. It quickly became apparent that Arana was not overly nationalistic because he welcomed his American advisors and worked well with



them in the regional pacification. Just a few days after the death of Turcios Lima, all of the United States-guided preparation, organization, and training was put to the test when the Guatemalan government forces invaded the Sierra de las Minas in the department of Zacapa. Louisa Frank commented:

This military offensive was radically different from preceding ones. Counterinsurgency techniques were applied methodically for the first time in a combination of civic action and terror designed to destroy the guerrillas' popular base.

The Army had changed radically. Whereas before their actions had been purely defensive, they now went on the offensive, occupying villages and liquidating peasant committees which were supplying the guerrillas with food. Next the area was bombed and napalmed, with the help of U.S. Air Force planes based in Panama. Thus, militarily it was hardly even a contest.<sup>60</sup>

The attack against the insurgents was three-fold, but the most important campaign was the army versus the guerrillas. The army concentrated on keeping constant pressure on the guerrillas, forcing the insurgents to move frequently and keeping them away from their peasant support bases, their main sources of supplies and intelligence. The FAR guerrillas split up into several patrols, trying to use mobility as a tactic to hide from the army, but the American-trained military now knew what it was doing. Spanish Colonel Alberto Bayo, who directed guerrilla operations for the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War, wrote about how counterinsurgents were most effective. He noted: "We are in greater danger if our guerrilla unit of 15 men is pursued by 25 soldiers than 5,000."<sup>61</sup> Neill

Macaulay continued:

Wars against guerrillas are won by de-escalating them into wars of patrol action. Instead of deploying a division to 'clear' an area of a regiment of guerrillas, a regiment of soldiers should be sent in to hunt down and destroy the guerrillas. Each component of the anti-guerrilla regiment, down

to the squad level, should be capable of sustained independent patrol action...<sup>62</sup>

The Guatemalan army followed these guidelines, and one by one eliminated the guerrilla patrols of the FAR over the next twelve months. The guerrilla units of MR-13 suffered the same fate.<sup>63</sup>

While the army pursued the guerrillas through the mountainous jungles of eastern Guatemala, the paramilitary forces moved against the guerrilla bases in the villages. The reserve units under the *comisionados militares*, a bunch of undisciplined rabble-rousing peasants who nonetheless were effective, worked in conjunction with the right-wing death squads to augment the counterinsurgency operations. The paramilitary groups were helpful in gathering intelligence about guerrilla sympathizers, often uncovered through the use of torture. Any suspected subversives were eliminated, implementing a reign of terror which wore down the guerrillas' support base.<sup>64</sup>

The paramilitary groups succeeded in turning the populace against the guerrillas, and the army was successful in eliminating a large number of the guerrilla forces. Constantly pursued by the army, separated from the support in the villages, and with most of the leaders dead, the insurgents' will to resist faltered. Of the guerrillas who survived, some disappeared into the countryside, but many others fled to the capital to continue their struggle as urban terrorists.<sup>65</sup> Although they preferred to call themselves urban guerrillas, Walter Laquer asserts: "What is now commonly called 'urban guerrilla warfare' is only terrorism in a new guise.... Urban terror certainly creates much noise and causes some destruction and indiscriminate killing. Its political significance, however, is very

much in doubt.”<sup>66</sup> The importance of the first guerrilla movement in Guatemala had passed, and with it went the possibility for a social revolution. Although there were repeated attempts to organize a new guerrilla movement in the remainder of the 1960's, the counterinsurgency proved to be too strong and well organized.

## NOTES

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**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**THE FAILURE OF SOCIAL REVOLUTION**  
**IN GUATEMALA**

A thousand times it has been well said that  
the Cuban revolution cannot be reproduced  
as a new phenomenon in Latin America.  
-Eduardo Galeano<sup>1</sup>

**THE LAST MONTHS OF THE FIRST GUERRILLA MOVEMENT**

The 1960's guerrilla movement lost all significance after the American-sponsored counterinsurgency campaign took hold. Although the government of Méndez Montenegro was unable to totally eliminate guerrilla activity, it ended the threat of a popular revolution to overthrow the state. The strength of the guerrilla groups, both MR-13 and the FAR, dissipated by the end of 1967, little more than a year after the counterinsurgency campaign began in earnest. Army patrols killed a large number of the guerrillas, including almost all of their leaders, and destroyed the rebel bases of support in the rural villages. Furthermore, the state's use of counter-terror eliminated the ability of the movement to rebuild its support base. As a result, the guerrillas changed their base of operations from rural to urban areas. At this point, the entire movement became largely ineffectual. The state's offensive altered the movement from a powerful popular rebellion into small bands of urban terrorists. During the remainder of the decade, the rebel movement succeeded only in committing random acts of violence against the state, the result of which served to provoke even harsher counter-terror response by right-wing death squads. This was the

first step in a transformation of Guatemalan society: a change to a state of permanent counterinsurgency and counter-terror.

The forced change to small urban terrorist movement removed any possibility of a social revolution occurring in Guatemala during the 1960's. Therefore, an analysis of the final two years of this decade is outside the scope of this study. It should be pointed out, however, that the date which represents the final demise of the first guerrilla movement corresponds with the death of Yon Sosa. The last remaining leader of the 1960's movement maintained a very small guerrilla front in the countryside, but in June 1970 he fled to Mexico, pursued by the Guatemalan Army. Sosa surrendered to Mexican authorities and asked for sanctuary, but the MR-13 leader misjudged the sympathies of the Mexicans, who had him executed.<sup>2</sup> The revolutionary dreams of the first guerrilla movement died in 1967 after the counterinsurgency campaign took hold. The first movement perished as a whole in June 1970 in Mexico with Yon Sosa.

#### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE 1960'S REBELLION

An examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the Guatemalan rebellion in the 1960's requires a certain degree of comparative analysis. During this decade, rebellions broke out in many Latin American countries, including El Salvador, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru and Bolivia. Although these movements made some significant gains militarily, few came close to achieving social revolution. Consequently, comparisons between these countries and the Guatemalan insurgency seem rather pointless. Instead, it is important to analyze the impetus behind the movements of the 1960's, the Cuban Revolution. The guerrilla

movement of Fidel Castro was successful in overthrowing the regime of Fulgencio Batista in 1959; therefore, a comparison between Cuba and Guatemala will outline the different circumstances which saw one rebellion achieve social revolution while the other failed.

In strictly military terms, there was little difference between the guerrilla movements of the two countries. While the Guatemalan guerrillas were at their strongest, during 1964, 1965, and part of 1966, their numbers totaled close to 500 fighters. The Cuban guerrilla movement was not significantly larger. In 1958, one year before the guerrilla movement usurped power in Cuba, Castro's fighters numbered only one hundred more than in Guatemala.<sup>3</sup> Another similarity in strength between the movements of the two countries was the size of their peasant support bases. In actuality, the Guatemalan guerrillas had a slightly larger base of peasant support than the Cuban insurgents just one year before the overthrow of Batista. In Guatemala, the number of peasants who helped the insurgency was approximately 3,000.<sup>4</sup> In terms of military accomplishments, the Guatemalan guerrillas were as successful as their Cuban counterparts had been in the previous decade: the two movements used traditional guerrilla tactics to inflict serious damage on the armed forces of the state. However, this is where the similarities between the two rebellions ended.

As a military group, the Guatemalan guerrillas were comparable with the Cuban insurgents, yet in terms of a popular rebellion, the Guatemalan movement lacked unity. According to the analyses of later Guatemalan guerrilla movements, the following were some of the principal weaknesses of the 1960's movement:

- 1) They lacked a long-term, national strategy that could have taken them beyond isolated *focos* and that could have integrated the political and military aspects of the struggle.
- 2) They lacked coherent organizations that could have effectively put a strategy into practice, or even adequately reflected the aspirations of the people.
- 3) They hadn't recognized the need for organizing the masses and incorporating them into the struggle on different levels.
- 4) For the most part, they failed to recognize the revolutionary potential of the Indians, who constitute a majority of the population.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of a national strategy and unified organization for the rebellion (points 1 and 2) prevented the incorporation of the masses into the anti-government struggle (point 3). One example of this was the failure to include the students as a whole in the revolutionary struggle. With regard to the fourth point, attempts were made to incorporate the Indians into the revolutionary struggle in the western department of Huehuetenango, but these met with disastrous results because of the linguistic and cultural barriers between the guerrillas and the Indians (this problem was overcome in the 1970's by the new guerrilla movements).<sup>6</sup> Overcoming barriers such as these is what could have made a strong guerrilla movement into a powerful revolutionary force, such as the one Fidel Castro organized in Cuba.

The guerrillas in Guatemala achieved many successes against the armed forces of the state. The losses suffered by the army served to weaken morale and to intensify factionalism in the military regime. However, even though the insurgents inflicted severe damage on the army, the guerrillas were still not a serious military threat. The army had twenty times the manpower of the guerrillas, and much better equipment. The guerrillas succeeded for a time due to a lack of coordinated effort by the state to repress them. If

this state of affairs had continued in Guatemala past the 1966 election, it is conceivable that the guerrilla forces might have continued to grow unabated, gaining an even broader base of support among the populace and gradually achieving some degree of political power. Prior to 1966, the rapid growth of the guerrilla movement represented its true power. While the insurgents were not a military threat which could seize power in an armed confrontation, they did offer long-range political alternatives. The strength of the guerrillas, therefore, was largely political in nature based on support they received from the Guatemalan people.<sup>7</sup>

From 1963 to 1966, the political strength of the guerrilla movement expanded as the *Gobierno Militar* weakened. As outlined in the third chapter, the factionalized military regime was ineffectual as a government. The regime turned to repression as a strategy to prevent anti-government dissent. Consequently, the presence of a weak regime which used force to maintain control allowed the guerrilla movement to grow. The growth of the guerrillas as a political power caused further deterioration in the strength of the regime, which in turn allowed the rebellion to continue growing. As Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley concluded: "The strength of the revolutionary challenges correlates inversely with the strength of party, military, government, and/or state institutions in those nations."<sup>8</sup> This means that the Guatemalan guerrillas were working toward a political "tipping point" that would transform the movement into a revolutionary contender for power. Clearly, the steady political strengthening of the movement, coupled with the growing ineffectuality of the government, demonstrated that the rebellion was close to achieving this tipping point. Had the *Gobierno Militar* not chosen to abandon power in

1966, this situation would probably have continued. What occurred was that shared popular animosity toward a common enemy provided the basis for cooperative action between different groups, all opposed to the government.<sup>9</sup> Although the movement suffered unification problems, there is evidence to show that as the power of the state deteriorated, these problems lessened. This assertion can be illustrated by the fact that during 1965, the PGT gradually became more convinced that armed struggle was the only path to change in Guatemala. If Peralta had remained in power, without massive assistance from the United States, his power base would have continued to wane while the rebellion gained popularity. The politically opportunistic PGT gave up on armed struggle completely in 1968 because there was no longer much of an armed struggle to endorse. Had the situation not been altered radically in 1966, leading to the destruction of the guerrilla movement, the alliance between the PGT and the guerrillas might have grown stronger, eventually bringing other sectors of the population into the anti-government struggle — the urban proletariat, university students, professionals, and other sections of the middle class. It is also likely that, as opposition to the government grew, some of the sectors of the armed forces would have defected to the rebellion, as was the case in Cuba in 1959. However, the situation changed dramatically in 1966 when the *Gobierno Militar* made the decision to hold “democratic” elections. A set of circumstances followed which created an inversion of the tipping point away from the guerrillas and in favour of the state.

## REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE AND REGIME WEAKNESS

Prior to examining the circumstances which led to a reversal of fortunes for the Guatemalan guerrillas, it is necessary to analyze the nature of how guerrilla movements can grow into popular rebellions, and how these rebellions can achieve social revolution. During the decade immediately following Castro's victory in Cuba, it was commonly believed that guerrilla warfare was a universal cure for the ills of the Third World, and that public support would prevent the use of any effective counterinsurgency campaign. In Latin America, it did not take long for these delusions to be shattered. Traditional Marxist doctrine declared that revolutionary organizers are the creators of social revolution: "[The communists] openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution.... Workingmen of all countries, unite!"<sup>10</sup> Although overly dramatic, this statement accurately detailed what a social revolution was: a complete reversal of the status quo. Marxists believe that general strikes, mass urban demonstrations and uprisings, and guerrilla warfare were the decisive actions responsible for drastic changes in the status quo called social revolution.<sup>11</sup> In 1977, Walter Laquer was among the first to question this theory, pointing out:

Unless the moral fiber of a regime is in a state of advanced decay and its political will paralyzed, the guerrillas will fail to make headway beyond the stage of provocation.... But even if the authority of the state is fatally undermined, even if a power vacuum exists, there is usually a far stronger contender for power — the army.<sup>12</sup>

Two years later Theda Skocpol addressed this issue in much greater detail. Marxists were not thrilled to read Skocpol's statements in her *States and Social Revolutions* which



asserted that the quest for social revolution had been taken out of the hands of the revolutionary, and was instead dependent upon the structural integrity of the regime, and upon international pressures. Skocpol attacked previous conceptions about the importance of mass mobilization for revolution:

[Marxist doctrine] strongly suggests that societal order rests... upon a consensus of the majority (or of the lower classes) that their needs are being met. This image suggests that the ultimate and sufficient condition for revolution is the withdrawal of this consensual support and, conversely, that no regime could survive if the masses were consciously disgruntled.... Yet, surely, any such consensual and voluntaristic conceptions of societal order and disruption or change are quite naïve. They are belied in the most obvious fashion by the prolonged survival of such blatantly repressive and domestically illegitimate regimes as the South African.<sup>13</sup>

According to Skocpol and Laquer, revolutionary opposition to a sufficiently strong regime is destined to fail. Therefore, a strong state can indefinitely counter a guerrilla movement's quest to seize governmental power, even if that movement is powerful and has the support of the masses. For a social revolution to be the outcome of an insurrection, the regime must be weak enough for a strong movement to overthrow it. The conclusions of Laquer and Skocpol about the potential for a guerrilla movement's success certainly apply to the case of Latin America during the 1950's and 1960's. During this time, many Latin American countries engendered strong guerrilla movements which, while they made significant gains militarily, did not achieve a social revolution. Prior to 1979, Cuba was the only case in which a social revolution actually took place, and this was largely due to the fact that Castro's strong guerrilla movement was able to take advantage of the incredibly weak state of the Cuban government to seize power. However, it is not

sufficient simply to say that the Cuban state was weak enough to allow a social revolution to take place.

Skocpol includes in her theory the importance of international considerations in determining regime strength.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Guatemala, the refusal of the *Gobierno Militar* to accept American support is indicative of the regime's continued ineffectuality as a political and military power. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in aid from the United States, both quantitative and qualitative, during the subsequent regime of Méndez Montenegro coincided with a strengthened state apparatus on military, political, and economic levels. Such international pressures played an important role in Cuba as well. Unlike the situation in Guatemala after 1966, the United States declined to give Fulgencio Batista large amounts of military assistance to fight insurgency. Also unlike Guatemala, there was no United States military mission sent to Cuba to help fight the guerrilla insurgency. It was felt in Washington that Batista was too corrupt and too undesirable as a leader to justify helping perpetuate his regime. Conversely, the Cuban guerrillas were well funded by Batista exiles and American sympathizers. Also, gunrunning from the American mainland to Castro's guerrillas was a common occurrence during the last two years of the rebellion in Cuba.<sup>15</sup> There was no similar support for the Guatemalan guerrillas, and to obtain weapons they were forced to raid army installations, or take them from soldiers they killed or captured in combat. Moreover, the FAR and MR-13 had to rely on kidnapping to raise money. The modest support they did receive came from Cuba, but only in the form of training in guerrilla tactics and political indoctrination.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from the roles played by international parties in determining governmental strength, there are many internal warning signs indicative of a weak regime. In *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley presented the following criteria for a weak regime:

(1) small numbers of persons involved in making political decisions; (2) low levels of solidarity among decision makers; (3) low levels of stable commitment to that group or organization by other members of civil society or the state. Hence a weak regime will be one envincing (sic) splits within the polity itself, or weak commitments to the government by its “supporters” (e.g., parts of the armed forces or members of the upper class).<sup>17</sup>

When a regime fits this model, the very things which make it weak can make the guerrilla movement strong, changing it into a revolutionary movement. The regime creates such hatred for it that national opposition is generated across *all* classes (an alliance of convenience), rather than just opposition from the lower classes. This strengthens the movement considerably, while at the same time furthering the weakness of the regime by exacerbating its inability to mobilize support against the revolution.<sup>18</sup> This leads to a phenomenon which Charles Tilly refers to as “multiple sovereignty,” which is when a new power emerges as a contender to replace control of the government.<sup>19</sup> Such a phenomenon occurred in Cuba in 1959, leading to a social revolution.

In Cuba, the upper and middle classes were relatively weak, as were the political parties, that led to the seizure of power by a military dictator (Batista). Rather than rely upon ties to upper and middle classes for support of his regime, Batista established a personal and very unprofessional control over the military, making it his own private army. Officers were promoted, demoted, and dismissed based on the favours of Batista, rather

than on an obligation to military professionalism. As a result, factionalism grew in the Cuban army, and loyalties became focused at the camp level, instead of to the military institution as a whole.<sup>20</sup> With sycophancy so common, the Cuban army was institutionally one of the weakest forces in Latin America. While this did not prevent Batista from using the army to rule Cuba, the presence of a growing guerrilla movement caused further disintegration of the Cuban Armed Forces. Furthermore, Batista alienated the upper and middle classes by excluding these traditional government supporters from sharing power. As a result, the upper and middle classes in Cuba, motivated by their hatred of Batista, joined in an anti-government alliance with the more typical supporters of social revolution: the lower classes. To be successful, this alliance had to tie the more radical ideologies of the lower classes with the more conservative feelings present in the middle and upper classes by changing the revolutionary message to a more moderate one. This cross-class alliance, of which the guerrilla movement was only one part, led to the formation of multiple sovereignty in Cuba. Without any allies other than sections of a weak and factionalized military, the Batista regime fell in the face of mass opposition.<sup>21</sup>

The situation in Guatemala possessed many similarities with that of Cuba. In some ways, Chief of Government of the *Gobierno Militar*, Peralta Azurdia, resembled Batista. Peralta was a military dictator who relied on personal relationships in the army for his base of support. Through his use of a sycophantic system of governmental control by his army friends, Peralta caused the military to become factionalized, similar to the situation in Cuba in 1958-1959. Unlike Batista, however, the Guatemalan leader did not totally exclude the upper and middle classes from sharing in governmental power. These classes,

while not strong supporters of the *Gobierno Militar*, nevertheless had closer relations to the government than to the anti-government forces. Peralta was not seen by these classes as so vile and exclusionary in his leadership that the upper and middle classes felt compelled to enter into a cross-class alliance with the peasant-based rebellion. Therefore, the Peralta regime drew vital, albeit unenthusiastic, support from the conservative sectors of Guatemalan society due to the fears of the radically left-wing ideals of the rebellion. However, as the *Gobierno Militar* grew weaker and the rebellion grew stronger, the relationships between the government and the elite groups became strained due to the increasing political uncertainties. Had the Peralta regime insisted on maintaining governmental control after 1966, the situation may have become exacerbated. If Peralta had chosen the path of Batista; that is, to hold power for as long as possible, the resulting state of disorder conceivably could have led to a breakdown in the alliance between the *Gobierno Militar* and the elite classes. This would have taken some time, but as already noted in this study, patience is a cardinal virtue of the guerrilla. However, Peralta chose to allow a peaceful transition to a civilian government. Thus, the “strained” relations between the elite groups and the *Gobierno Militar* never developed past the point of mild disaffection.

Clearly, Peralta’s decision to allow the 1966 election created the circumstances which saw the demise of the guerrilla movement. With the tacit approval of the United States, Méndez Montenegro won election to the Guatemalan presidency. This relieved the military of the burdens of political leadership, yet secret arrangements between the army and the president elect allowed the army to dictate policy. Although Montenegro

campaigns as a reformer, his arrangement with the army precluded any serious changes to the status quo in Guatemala. Unlike the three presidents who preceded him, Montenegro was a committed humanitarian, yet he was even more dedicated to self survival. In reality, the president did not have the political power to institute the reforms he wished. Instead, Montenegro acquiesced to the military's demands for a more conservative program.<sup>22</sup> The degree of his subservience to the army was outlined in his December 1966 statement: "The Revolutionary Party [PR] has decided to support the Army in those determinations that it takes in order to maintain peace and tranquillity, to strengthen our mutual relationship,..."<sup>23</sup> It was absolutely necessary for Montenegro to obey his military overlords if he wished to stay in power. Any divergence would almost certainly have resulted in his being overthrown. However, to strengthen and stabilize his administration, it was necessary for the president to enlist the help of the United States.

Montenegro needed financial aid from the United States to bolster the ailing Guatemalan economy. Part of the inherent weaknesses of the regimes of Ydígoras Fuentes and the *Gobierno Militar* included fiscal mismanagement which saw the country slide deep into economic recession. In order to secure American financial support, the president needed to seek military aid from the United States to suppress the guerrilla movement.<sup>24</sup> Montenegro's main goal as president was to last out his term without succumbing to a military coup, and this was dependent upon his successful eradication of the guerrilla movement.

During the 1960's, Guatemala was not the only recipient of American military aid to help suppress communist insurgency. Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, El Salvador and

Peru experienced guerrilla uprisings during this decade, none of which were successful in achieving social revolution. However, the role played by the United States in crushing rebellion in these five countries was minimal compared to Guatemala. Initially, American influence pressured Peralta into a return to the electoral process because policy makers in Washington had grown tired of an oppressive Guatemalan military regime. Although it is true that Peralta's personality precluded him from becoming a permanent dictator, it is likely that American pressure speeded up the return to "democracy."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the United States favoured Méndez Montenegro was confirmed two days after the release of the official election results. When a plot among military officers to affect a coup against the government became known, the United States Embassy issued a declaration which stated that the United States government: "...categorically denies that it favours or supports any attempt against the government or any effort of any party that would result in the annulment of the elections." Through United States intimidation, Montenegro was allowed to assume the presidency, provided that he grant sweeping concessions to the military. The presence of a moderate civilian president was an important circumstance because it justified increased American aid. Also, because Montenegro had the appearance of a moderate, he was the only man whom the guerrillas trusted enough to allow a cease fire to be implemented. This ruse of a cease fire, planned by the American advisors, allowed the state time to prepare its counterinsurgency offensive while the guerrillas were lulled into demobilization. Montenegro's image as a reformer also allowed him to present an amnesty to the guerrillas, which, when rejected by the rebels, gave the United States final justification for aiding in the Guatemalan

counterinsurgency efforts.<sup>27</sup> The façade was in place: Montenegro was a reform-minded civilian president who offered an amnesty to the guerrillas to end the violence. The guerrillas continued anti-government stance was the only excuse needed to launch a major counterinsurgency offensive to eradicate the movement.

Obviously, the United States played an important political role in helping to create the situation in Guatemala where a concerted anti-guerrilla campaign could be launched. Once in place, the United States took an even more active and direct function in supervising the counterinsurgency push. United States involvement in the counterinsurgency campaign was a decisive factor because the American aid: formed a large share of the Guatemalan military's armaments budget; produced significant advances in counterinsurgency training; was combined with a large amount of influence and control over the Guatemalan Armed Forces; and considerably improved the military's unity and strength. American aid was decisive because the guerrilla movement in Guatemala appeared significantly strong, while the government was weak and seemed incapable of dealing with the rebellion on its own.<sup>28</sup> Without the assistance of the United States, the political and military strength of the government could have continued to wane, while the rebellion expanded to include larger sections of the population. This situation was prevented, however, because a concentrated program of American military assistance produced a powerful Guatemalan counterinsurgency force capable of crushing the rebel threat.



## NOTES

- 1) Eduardo Galeano, *Guatemala: Occupied Country* translated by Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), p. 11.
- 2) NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America), *Guatemala* (Berkeley: NACLA, 1974), p. 187.
- 3) Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 53.
- 4) Milton H. Jamail, *Guatemala 1944-1972: The Politics of Aborted Revolution* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Arizona, 1972), p. 84.
- 5) Concerned Guatemala Scholars, *Guatemala: Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win* (San Francisco: Solidarity, 1982), p. 21.
- 6) Wickham-Crowley, pp. 106-107.
- 7) NACLA, p. 185.
- 8) Wickham-Crowley, p. 169.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 151, 169.
- 10) Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1948), p. 44.
- 11) *Ibid.*, this topic pervades the manifesto throughout.
- 12) Walter Laquer, *The Guerrilla Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), pp. 6-7.

- 13) Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 16.
- 14) *Ibid.*, pp. 19-22.
- 15) Wickham-Crowley, pp. 71, 81, 87.
- 16) A. P. Short, "Conversations with the Guatemalan Delegates in Cuba," *Monthly Review*, February 1967, p. 38; Center for the Study of the Americas, *Listen Compañero: Conversations with Central American Revolutionary Leaders* (Solidarity, 1983), pp. 54-55.
- 17) Wickham-Crowley, p. 157.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 19) Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1978), pp. 191-193.
- 20) Robin Blackburn, "Prologue to the Cuban Revolution," *New Left Review*, #21, October 1963, pp. 70-75; Samuel Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), pp. 20-22.
- 21) Wickham-Crowley, pp. 159, 173.
- 22) Thomas and Marjorie Melville, *Guatemala - Another Vietnam?* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971), p. 253.
- 23) *El Imparcial*, Guatemala, 7 December 1966, pp. 1-2.
- 24) Thomas and Marjorie Melville, pp. 212-213.
- 25) Richard N. Adams et al., *Crucifixion by Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), pp. 275-276; *The New York Times*, 23 February, 1966, p. 22.

26) *El Imparcial*, 15 March, 1966, p. 1.

27) NACLA, p. 185; Jose Manuel Fortuny, "Guatemala: The Political Situation and Revolutionary Tactics," *World Marxist Review*, vol. 10, February 1967, pp. 58-59.

28) Wickham-Crowley, p. 83.

## AFTERWORD

During the initial pacification campaign between 1966 and 1970, an estimated 7,000 Guatemalans died from rightist terror. Some individuals and groups within the petty bourgeoisie were targeted for elimination by the right-wing: students and professors, labour leaders, and journalists. However, the brunt of the terror was borne by the peasants and the working class.<sup>1</sup> In February 1968, Thomas Melville, a priest of the Maryknoll Order working in Guatemala sent a letter to United States Senator Fulbright describing the rightist terror:

In the past eighteen months, more than 2,800 labor leaders, union organizers, students, intellectuals and just plain peasants have been killed by the government secret police, army, and right-wing organizations. "[MANO] Blanca," one of the right wing organizations, staffed by policemen, with headquarters in the main police building in Guatemala City, admits that only "one in ten is perhaps a Communist." None of these deaths are publicized in the international press, and few bodies are found in a condition that enables them to be identified in the local press. This is all done under the auspices, albeit secret, of the U. S. Military Mission.<sup>2</sup>

In 1970, the same man who earned the nickname "the Butcher of Zacapa," for his brutal counterinsurgency campaign in that department, General Carlos Arana Osorio, was "elected" to the presidency. Leftist urban terror continued during Arana's administration, but this accomplished nothing other than to provoke intensified governmental repression.<sup>3</sup> Although there was no real guerrilla threat during Arana's entire four-year term, sporadic leftist terror prompted a violent response from both the government and the counter-terror groups. This campaign of permanent counterinsurgency and counter-terror did not have

the desired effect in crushing rebellion. Instead, the nation saw a reemergence of large guerrilla movements in 1974.

The movements of the 1970's were *Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres* or EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor), *Organización del Pueblo en Armas* or ORPA (Organization of the People in Arms), as well as a reemergence of the FAR unified with a cadre of PGT guerrillas. These groups learned from the mistakes of the 1960's movement, and were far better organized and more politicized. They also altered their strategies to overcome the cultural and linguistic barriers which allowed them to incorporate the large Indian population into the struggle.<sup>4</sup> The EGP and ORPA fielded numerically superior forces than did the FAR and PGT guerrillas. Both EGP and ORPA developed strong bases of peasant support in the Indian communities of the western highlands. The EGP founded its bases of indigenous support in the departments of Huehuetenango, El Quiché, Alta Verapaz, and El Petén, while ORPA was even stronger in the largely Indian departments of San Marcos, Quezaltenango, Totonicapán, Sololá, and Suchitepéquez (see map 1-1).<sup>5</sup> Due to the guerrilla formation of a long-term strategy, the focus on organization, and the realization of the need to include the Indian population in the struggle, the second wave of rebels in Guatemala experienced sustained growth until 1982. In some estimates, the combined number of combatants reached 6,000, most of whom were Indians.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, these groups were far stronger than the guerrillas of the previous decade. Although problems of guerrilla unity were not completely dispelled by the guerrillas of the second wave, the rebels made strong advances in the field with the formation of the *Unidad Revolucionario Nacional Guatemalteca* or UNRG, (Guatemalan

National Revolutionary Unity) in 1982 which brought together the various guerrilla groups in a moderately cohesive struggle against the state.<sup>7</sup> Although these guerrilla groups were superior in every way to their predecessors, the Guatemalan state defence apparatus was also much stronger than it had been in the previous decade. The counterinsurgency and counter-terror lessons taught by the United States had not been forgotten, and the security forces of the state were sufficiently strong enough to deal with a rebellion of even this size. The twelve year period from 1970 to 1982 saw a sequence of “elected” military administrations in Guatemala, but the formation of the UNRG in 1982 sufficiently frightened sectors of the Guatemalan military to prompt an internal coup which installed General José Efraín Ríos Montt as president. The period that followed Montt’s installation saw a massive increase in counterinsurgency and counter-terror. Montt lasted little more than a year as president because more traditional army officers disliked his evangelical religious affiliations and cronyism. Nevertheless, the escalated anti-guerrilla campaign continued after the overthrow of Montt. The Guatemalan government was no longer in the weak position it had been in the 1960’s. Although there was a lengthy return to military rule after Montenegro’s term ended in 1970, the Guatemalan Army was a significantly changed institution. Factionalism was no longer a serious problem, and the state’s security forces were unified in the face of yet another growing rebellion. Army counterinsurgency worked in conjunction with paramilitary counter-terror to crush the second wave of Guatemalan guerrillas. By 1985, the guerrilla threat was once again eliminated, yet the state sponsored terror continued for years after. To this day, the guerrilla movement in Guatemala has not recovered from the repression of that period.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

- 1) Victor Perera, "Guatemala: Always *La Violencia*," *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 June 1971, p. 50; Susanne Jonas, "Guatemala: Land of Eternal Struggle," *Latin America: the struggle with dependency and beyond* (New York: Schenkman, 1974) Ronald Chilcote and Joel Edelstein (Eds.), pp. 199-200.
- 2) Cited in Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 114-115.
- 3) Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, *Guatemala and the Dominican Republic* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, December 30, 1971), pp. 3-4.
- 4) Richard Gillespie, "Anatomy of the Guatemalan Guerrilla," *Communist Affairs*, vol. 2, October 1983, p. 490; Center for the Study of the Americas, *Listen Compañero: Conversation with Central American Revolutionary Leaders* (Solidarity, 1983), pp. 60-61.
- 5) Gillespie, pp. 494-495.
- 6) Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 212.
- 7) Unitary Statement from the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity - UNRG - January 1982, *Guatemala: The People Unite!* (San Francisco: Solidarity, 1982)
- 8) Ché Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), with and introduction and case studies by Brian Loveman and Thomas Davies, Jr., pp. 218-

219, 231; Otto Johnson (Ed.), *1996 Information Please Almanac* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996), p. 198.



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