

Or consider the cable sent to Washington by the U.S. embassy just after the massacre in Sacuchum in 1982: "Village in San Marcos Department Reportedly Terrorized, Leaving At Least 38 Dead." The cable noted that "reports of torture and strangulation (and possible incidents of rape) suggest the modus operandi of the extreme right." It then speculated that the guerrillas might in fact have been responsible, which "would suggest a new level of savagery on their part, with possible overtones of the 'racial war' long feared by the right." That speculation, while off base, is nonetheless revealing: the embassy knew that this "savagery" would be "new" for the guerrillas, but was already the "modus operandi" of the "extreme right" (which could only have meant government forces and army-run death squads).

And consider what the State Department did with its knowledge. It told the world, in its annual report on Guatemala published shortly afterward: "The level and nature of the violence is such that one cannot definitively attribute the killing to one group or another." In July 1981, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Bosworth had told a congressional committee that leftists were primarily responsible for the violence in Guatemala and that there had been "positive developments" in terms of government forces "taking care to protect innocent bystanders." A year later, Bosworth again testified before Congress, acknowledging now that the Guatemalan government *had* committed abuses the year before, but saying, "I cannot emphasize strongly enough the favorable contrast between the current human rights situation in Guatemala and the situation last December." He told another congressional committee in August 1982: "The government has reduced political violence," and pointed out that "No specific charges of government torture have been brought to our attention." That same month, Ambassador Frederick Chapin told members of Congress: "Over the past three months, most of the killings in the rural areas have been done by insurgents." And when asked about army massacres he said, "Those incidents simply haven't taken place."

Now contrast these public statements with the classified memo that Bosworth wrote in November 1982, reporting that "the military continues to engage in massacres of civilians in the countryside," that the "em-

bassy recently informed us of a new, apparently well-founded allegation of a large-scale killing of Indian men, women and children in a remote area by the army," and that the president, General Efraín Ríos Montt, "seems either unwilling or unable to control this indiscriminate killing." Or consider this one written by Ambassador Chapin the following February: "I am firmly convinced that the violence . . . is Government of Guatemala ordered and directed" and "executions [were] ordered by armed service officers close to President Ríos Montt."

Consider also what Ronald Reagan had to say about Ríos Montt after the two presidents met in Honduras on December 5, 1982. Ríos Montt had come to power eight months earlier in a coup that ousted the previous president, General Romeo Lucas García. In addition to being a retired general, Ríos Montt was an Evangelical preacher, known for using colorful language, as he did at the meeting with Reagan when reporters asked him about the government's "scorched-earth" policy. "We have no scorched-earth policy," he told them. "We have a policy of scorched Communists."

In the months since the army struck Sacuchum, that policy had entailed hundreds of massacres and what the Truth Commission would later call "acts of genocide." In fact, even as the two presidents were exchanging pleasantries, a platoon of elite Kaibil troops was on its way to a community named Las Dos Erres with orders from the high command to commit yet another mass killing. Years later, a forensic team would exhume the remains of "at least" 162 people, including 67 children, and some of the soldiers would tell the Truth Commission what they had done there — how they had killed the younger children by grabbing hold of their legs and swinging them so their heads smashed against a wall, and how they had killed almost everyone else by making them kneel at the edge of a well and, with a blow of a sledge hammer to the head, sending them plunging into the mass of dead and dying bodies piling up inside. They would recount how they had spread the killing over three days and saved for last a group of women and girls whom they raped repeatedly up till the end, and how they forced several pregnant women to miscarry by beating on their stomachs. One would recount how, as they filled in the top of the body-packed well with dirt, they could hear the cries of some

of those who were still alive below. The only human remains that visitors would find inside the town afterward were blood on the walls and placenta and umbilical cords on the ground. Among those visitors would be U.S. embassy officers who would report in a confidential memo to Washington that the army had committed yet another massacre.

"Well, I learned a lot," the ever-affable Reagan told reporters on Air Force One as they left Central America that day. "You'd be surprised. They're all individual countries." As for Ríos Montt, Reagan praised the general as "a man of great personal integrity" who was "totally dedicated to democracy," but unfortunately was "faced with a challenge from guerrillas armed and supported from those outside Guatemala." And he dismissed the charges of widespread human rights abuses as simply "a bum rap."

The next day, as Ríos Montt's troops raped and killed the residents of Las Dos Erres, the U.S. news cycle was devoted largely to the question of whether or not the president had known before his trip that Central America consisted of "individual countries." It would seem that Ronald Reagan, while at the pinnacle of the world political order, may have had one thing in common with the Guatemalan peasants at the bottom: a mastery of the strategic use of professed ignorance.

The purpose of the Reagan-Ríos Montt meeting had been to pave the way for renewed U.S. military aid to Guatemala. The obstacle to that aid was Guatemala's human rights record, which had prompted Congress to cut off aid in 1978 after the Carter administration had done something highly unprecedented: told the truth about its ally's repressive practices.

Ever since that cutoff, the State Department had been looking for ways to renew direct military aid (even under Carter). Unable to make Congress budge, U.S. officials helped the Guatemalan army find ways to get what Congress intended to deny them. One technique was to classify such equipment as helicopters that would be used in combat as "nonmilitary" supplies. Another was arranging for U.S. allies to fill in the breach. (Israel in particular provided guns and other equipment, and sent advisers to help the Guatemalan government build its own munitions plant.) And U.S. cash continued to flow to the Guatemalan government, ear-

marked for nonmilitary purposes — essentially an accounting fiction that freed other money in the government budget to be devoted to the military. In short, the Guatemalan army never really stopped receiving assistance from the United States.

But even though the Guatemalan army continued to obtain weapons and supplies, they still wanted more. And the Reagan administration wanted to give it to them.

Ríos Montt had arrived at the meeting with maps and diagrams and figures to show President Reagan how the human rights situation had improved. But it wasn't Reagan who needed convincing. (And, in fact, declassified documents suggest that the administration was never really convinced.) It was the people in Congress who held the purse strings, and assuaging their concerns required hiding from them what the administration knew.

But there was a problem: information was reaching Congress from another source.



Reagan called it a bum rap. His men called it something more insidious: "a conspiracy." What they were talking about were the efforts by human rights organizations to document the atrocities being committed in Guatemala. And they set out to discredit these organizations.

Consider now the memo that the U.S. embassy circulated within the State Department in October 1982, accusing Amnesty International and other human rights organizations of "conducting a calculated program of disinformation which originated from Managua, Nicaragua and is part of the worldwide communist conspiracy."

According to the memo, "The campaign's object is simple: to deny the Guatemalan Army the weapons and equipment needed from the U.S. to defeat the guerrillas. Thus, the groups backing the guerrillas intend to win the war against the [Guatemalan government] by making the U.S. Congress the battlefield. It is the old but effective strategy of 'divide and conquer.'"

Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders used this memo as a basis for his efforts to publicly discredit an Amnesty International report on Guatemala. In a letter to Amnesty that the State Department publicized in the United States and Guatemala, Enders claimed that many of the vi-