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Editorial: U.S. should follow Guatemala's courageous example

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Editorial

The significance of the recent conviction in a Guatemalan court of former general and dictator Efraín Ríos Montt is difficult to overstate. It sets a new and courageous standard in Central America, a model for previously war-torn countries that were scenes of horrific violence and torture and are now struggling to gain their footing as functioning democracies.

Ríos Montt is a sorry figure, an old and now incarcerated man whose delusional and vicious politics, laced with a bizarre religiosity, accounted for the deaths of thousands during his 17-month rule. According to court testimony, as much as 5.5 percent of the indigenous Maya Ixil population died during that period. Even if Ríos Montt serves only a portion of his 80-year sentence, the 86-year-old will likely spend the rest of his life in prison.

Far more important than the fate of the former dictator, who also spent years as a member of Guatemala's congress, is the fact that some 150 witnesses had their day in court and were believed when they recalled the ghastly atrocities committed by military forces overseen by Ríos Montt.

As if confirming the significance of the verdict for the wider region, El Salvador's Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chávez repeated a sentiment he has voiced in the past about his own country: "In this the church is categorical: It is not possible to arrive at forgiveness and reconciliation without the moment of truth and justice."

To Catholics, that's familiar sacramental theology. Guatemala has just arrived at a significant moment of truth and justice. Along the path to this moment many have faced persecution and death, including Guatemala's Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera, who was murdered in 1998, two days after releasing a report of a diocesan Project to Recover the Historical Memory, which recounted many of the horrors of a 36-year civil war that claimed some 200,000 lives.

The legal wrangling in Guatemala is hardly over. Lawyers plan to appeal Ríos Montt's conviction. The deep divide between the country's oligarchy and those who have long suffered under brutal regimes and in poverty will likely be exacerbated in the short term.

Questions also linger about the current president, Otto Pérez Molina, a former military commander who may be culpable for some of the same killings for which Ríos Montt was convicted. Molina, as president, is currently protected by the same immunity that protected Ríos Montt during his time in congress. When Ríos Montt's term expired in 2012, he was arrested.

If Guatemala has reached its moment of truth, it appears the United States has yet to face up to its long and involved history there, beginning with the CIA-inspired and -executed overthrow in 1954 of the democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz. In the aftermath, the guerrilla movement in Central America was born.

The conviction of Ríos Montt, the self-proclaimed born-again Christian who was trained in counterinsurgency at the U.S. School of the Americas, also begins to peel back some of the layers of veneer that have accumulated on the Reagan administration. The 1980s were a period of wildly overstated communist threats, when the administration spoke of Soviet MIGs in crates in a Nicaraguan harbor (they didn't exist) and of leftist forces burning villages in eastern Nicaragua (the photos turned out to be from another era and another continent).

It was the era of Oliver North, the Iran-Contra scandal, and a kind of shadow government run out of the National Security apparatus. All of that has been airbrushed to near sweetness in the intervening decades, but the Ríos Montt case ushers in anew a welcome, if disturbing, dose of reality.

President Ronald Reagan apparently was so in need of an anti-communist narrative in Central America that he was willing to view the killings, later categorized as genocide in a lengthy United Nations report, as justifiable in warding off some imagined threat from a Soviet empire that was in the throes of dissolution.

The U.S. at the time accepted and amplified the Guatemalan government's exaggeration of "the military threat of the insurgency" to justify a "concept of the internal enemy," a scheme that allowed the state and its military to include anyone as a state enemy, according to the 1999 U.N. report.

Reagan met with Ríos Montt in December 1982 and, despite the mounting evidence of gruesome mass killings in the Guatemalan countryside, later declared that the dictator, by then a darling of the religious right in the United States, was "totally dedicated to democracy" and that he was "getting a bum rap" on human rights.

In many respects, Guatemala remains a divided and dangerous country. It took an hour to remove Ríos Montt from the courtroom, and the judge had to don a bulletproof vest before leaving.

A much larger hope comes from the fact that enough people persisted in pursuing the truth. In that regard, Guatemala is a model not only for Central America, but for the United States as well. The official version of our involvement in Central America during the brutal civil war era is a tortured string of justifications and misrepresentations.

Like the fictions that were quickly bared during the Reagan administration, we have to know that the larger picture will ultimately give way to the bard's wisdom: "At the length truth will out."

The sooner the better. It is time for the United States to discover its own courage in confronting the ugly truth of that period.

See also: **Ríos Montt found guilty of genocide[1]**

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