

## EXCURSUS 1

### Richard O'Mara on GUATEMALA'S "NEW" REGIME

The most likely and immediate change in Guatemala as a consequence of the coup d'état of August 8 is that the regime of General Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores will assume a more emphatically belligerent posture toward Nicaragua than its predecessor. General Efraim Rios Montt, himself thrust into power following a coup in March, 1982, had declined to join the Reagan chorus against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

Rios Montt was an aberration among Latin American despots—a religion-saturated convert to one of those anti-establishmentarian California sects, a man whose hatred of communism was vast, deep, and relentless. For the U.S. administration, however, it was not a useful sort of hatred. Though Rios Montt had no fondness for the Nicaraguan Marxists, he tended to regard communism as a pandemic illness, preferring to denounce it in universal and occasionally hallucinogenic terms. Besides, he had his own Communists to deal with—the hard men operating in the hills of Quiche and Huehuetenango. And, of course, with God on his side, what need had he for the U.S. and its big guns?

Few actually believe the presence of a U.S. military attaché in the presidential palace at the moment of the coup was much more than an embarrassing coincidence. Still, as one experienced reporter in Central America remarked to me about the Guatemala coup: "It shows, if anything, how difficult it is for a right-wing regime to survive down here that is not in tune with Washington's policy. Rios Montt was not sufficiently anti-Nicaraguan and, when push came to shove, the U.S. did not back him up."

Rios Montt did so much to undermine himself, it is a marvel he lasted as long as he did. Among other things, he got on the wrong side of Guatemala's Catholic Church establishment by his lack of deference to John Paul II during the papal visit, by his unctuous sermonizing—worse, by winning converts. A Protestant in office was bad enough, but a proselytizing Protestant? That alone should have sealed his fate.

General Mejia is a duck of a different color—and quite a familiar one at that. His goals are fairly evident: Besides attempting to survive in the pestilential swamp of Guatemalan politics, he hopes to win the affection of the Rea-

ganites and start arms flowing to Guatemala again. These had been cut off by President Jimmy Carter, who found the regime of General Romeo Lucas García far too odious to deal with. After Rios Montt had replaced Lucas García, the Reagan administration began to move toward restoring arms shipments (some \$6.3 million in spare parts was authorized), but apparently without much alacrity; Rios Montt was just not "on board" as far as Nicaragua was concerned.

No sooner was General Mejia in office than he began pushing all the right buttons. He denounced Marxism-Leninism; offered a ninety-day amnesty to the guerrillas in the hills; abolished Rios Montt's sinister drumhead courts, where suspected subversives were tried before being shot; and announced his intention of reducing or abolishing a 10 per cent sales tax introduced just before the coup. Most recently it has been reported that he has agreed to train Salvadoran troops in Guatemala in exchange for some small arms (Rios Montt had expressed nothing but contempt for the Salvadoran army).

The anti-Communist drumbeat is calculated to endear Mejia to the right-wingers in Washington, both in the White House and Congress, and so too the acceptance of Salvadoran troops for training. The amnesty—one of those devices occasionally used in El Salvador for the purpose of demonstrating the reasonableness of the regime—is a gesture designed to appeal to still others in the U.S. Congress, where the aid money is voted.

Abolition of the secret courts is meant to appease the human rights organizations that have been spreading the word about the Guatemalan government's brutality. It is also a sop to Guatemala's politically influential lawyers, who were outraged at being cut out of the judicial process: Rarely were they allowed to present evidence on behalf of a client or to consult with the accused, and they were even kept away from the trial, informed of the verdict and sentence after the accused had been shot.

As to Mejia's pledge to reduce or abolish the Rios Montt tax—nothing is more likely to encourage popular acquiescence (popular support is not a goal the general can reasonably aspire to) than lifting a tax off the backs of the people who have to pay it.

In applying all these measures so soon after taking office, Mejia revealed something else: His standing among those who put him in power is not secure. He is, in fact, what one observer called somewhat sarcastically "a compromise candidate"—a compromise arrived at by members of the old Lucas García regime, which, in the words of one State Department official, had turned Guatemala into a "bucket



of blood" and in whose defense ministry Mejia served.

The presence of General Mejia also signals the recovery of control by the older and senior officers in Guatemala's army, lost briefly to their juniors. It was by and large the junior officers—lieutenants, captains, majors—who put Rios Montt in office, and it was the colonels and generals who turned him out and put in Mejia. There is every expectation that Guatemala will now return to the old style of doing business—the days of sordid violence, of Hobbesian political warfare, of the death squads working the streets on behalf of this or that political faction. It is a country distinguished not so much by the extremism of its ideologies (the political spectrum has been lopped off somewhere to the right of center, and the only politics of the Left are practiced in the countryside by men with beards and Kalashnikovs) as by the extremism of the means its political chieftains will use to gain advantage.

To describe Guatemala's prospects in this way is not to say that Rios Montt's regime was the City of God on earth. It is reported, among other things, that during his brief tenure the number of Indians killed in the countryside increased drastically. But Rios Montt did make the streets of Guatemala's cities safer, did make inroads into the endemic corruption of the government by appointing a number of apolitical bureaucrats and technocrats. And he thought the tax necessary in a country with a shrinking economy (-3.5 per cent last year) and unemployment estimated at between 35 and 40 per cent.

Some might say that Rios Montt's heart, though hard, was in the right place. Most acknowledge that he was a bastard. But he was not, as Franklin Roosevelt once declared of Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua, "our bastard."

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## EXCURSUS 2

### Leonor Blum on COLOMBIA'S PEACE OFFENSIVE

Colombian President Belisario Betancur is convinced that it is possible to negotiate with guerrillas—and not only in his country but in the hottest of Central America's current conflicts as well.

Betancur's approach to negotiations in Colombia is two-pronged. One tactic is to implement social programs that will steal the guerrillas' thunder. "When you speak of guerrillas," he says, "you are touching on only one part of a complex problem. For that reason we speak of 'social disorder,' of the *objective* and *subjective* elements of subversion. The first—employment and the absence of minimum social guarantees—are the determinants of the second, that is to say, of violent actions whose purpose is to destabilize governments." His Conservative government has already begun to build new roads, introduce electric power lines, and improve health and educational services in the most guerrilla-infested areas, and it is distributing unused land to peasants, even to terrorists who have agreed to cooperate with the government.

The second tactic is to initiate a dialogue with the guerrillas, with the aim of convincing them to lay down their arms and participate in what is one of Latin America's few genuinely democratic political systems. So it was that last November the Colombia Congress passed a bill granting amnesty to guerrillas who were willing to cooperate with the government and had not resorted to murder or kidnapping.

Civil disturbances are nothing new to Colombia, but neither is compromise. Ideological differences between the two major parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, were once so fierce that they frequently exploded into full-fledged civil wars; these politics by other means are estimated to have caused from 200,000 to 300,000 deaths. To put an end to *La Violencia*, as this phenomenon was called, the two parties agreed to sit down together. In 1957 they formed the National Front—an agreement to alternate the presidency between the two parties every four years for sixteen years and, during this time, to share equally the seats in Congress. In 1974, on schedule, the National Front was dissolved, and Colombia has held peacefully competitive elections every four years since. The first two were won by Liberal candidates. In the third, in 1982, Betancur led a Conservative government to victory. In each case the transition has been smooth and uneventful.

But a lessening of party rivalries did not curb other forms of violence in Colombia, which has been called the most violent country in Latin America. Urban street crime and rural banditry are a large part of the problem, but much is attributable to ideological warfare between left-wing guerrillas and right-wing ideologues. The Right has organized death squads known as MAS—*Muerte a los Secuestradores*, death to kidnapers—and many have close links with the Colombian military. Among the several left-wing guerrilla groups the largest are the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), a Moscow-line group affiliated with the Communist party of Colombia, and M-19, consisting primarily of students and intellectuals. It is M-19 that has specialized in the crimes which have captured worldwide headlines. Its members stole liberator Simón Bolívar's sword from a museum, claiming that the government did not deserve to own it; dug a tunnel under an army arsenal, "liberating" several thousand weapons; and, in February, 1980, took over the Dominican Republic's embassy while a party was in progress, holding hostage for two months the foreign dignitaries in their tuxedos.

So far the government's attempt to initiate a dialogue with the guerrillas has had mixed results. Several hundred were freed from jail, but only a minority of Colombia's estimated six thousand guerrilla fighters have agreed to talks, and leaders of M-19 and the FARC continue to press for concessions as a condition for sitting down with the government. All of the guerrilla groups have demanded energetic government prosecution of MAS members, which has begun. Among the strongest concessions demanded by M-19 and the FARC is the withdrawal of the military from guerrilla zones. There is strong resistance to this from the Colombian military in the face of a growing number of kidnappings and an increase in rural violence. The military, in fact, has urged Betancur to return the country to the state of siege under which Colombians were accustomed to live for thirty years. The president is resisting the pressure from both sides for hasty actions. He claims he is not looking for quick results but for gradual accommodation.

Both Conservatives and Liberals agree that, if anyone in the country can patch up the differences between Right and Left, it is Betancur. A popular president—the election, which he won handily, brought out a record number of voters—Betancur is one of the few Colombians who can call the guerrillas his brothers, as he did in his inauguration speech, and feel at home with bankers and businessmen. The same versatility marks his programs. For the massive rural education program and a dynamic low-cost housing program, he has attempted to involve the private sector to avoid overloading the public budget. Businessmen are pleased by the president's efforts to reactivate industry through special tax benefits for investors in the private sector and through