

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
POLICY PLANNING COUNCIL
WASHINGTON

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March 29, 1968

MEMORANDUM

To: ARA - Mr. Oliver
From: S/P - Mr. Vaky
Subject: Guatemala and Counter-terror

I made the points in the attached memorandum in a private conversation I had with Ambassador Mein yesterday prior to the IRG meeting. These views are based on my experience as DCM in Guatemala and upon a close following of events since I left. They are the product also of extended reflections on the situation and my experience there. As I told Ambassador Mein I feel somewhat like Fulbright says he felt about the Tonkin Gulf resolution -- my deepest regret is that I did not fight harder within Embassy councils when I was there to press these views. I can in any case understand quite well how easy it is to be complacent or rationalize things.

Because I do feel so very strongly about the problem, I felt compelled to repeat these points to you with the hope they may receive a hearing.

Attachment: a/s

[Note: this is a response based on my conversation with INR/RAR.]

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GUATEMALA AND COUNTER-TERROR

The Guatemalan Government's use of "counter-terror" to combat insurgency is a serious problem in three ways:

- a) The tactics are having a terribly corrosive effect on Guatemalan society and the nation's political development;
- b) they present a serious problem for the U.S. in terms of our image in Latin America and the credibility of what we say we stand for;
- c) the problem has a corrosive effect on our own judgments and conceptual values.

A. Impact on the Country.

Counter-terror is corrosive from three points of view:

1. The counter-terror is indiscriminate, and we cannot rationalize that fact away. Looking back on its full sweep one can cite instances in which leftist but anti-Communist labor leaders were kidnapped and beaten by the army units; the para-military groups armed by the Zacapa commander have operated in parts of the northeast in war-lord fashion and destroyed local PR organizations; people are killed or disappear on the basis of simple accusations. It is argued that the "excesses" of the earlier period have been corrected and now only "collaborators" are being killed. But I question the wisdom or validity of the Guatemalan Army's criteria as to who is a collaborator or how carefully they check. Moreover, the derivative violence of right-wing vigilantes and sheer criminality made possible by the atmosphere must also be laid at the door of the conceptual tactic of counter-terror. The point is that the society is being rent apart and polarized; emotions, desire for revenge and personal bitterness are being sucked in; the pure Communist issue is thus blurred; and issues of poverty and social injustice are being converted into virulent questions of outraged emotion and "tyranny." The whole cumulative impact

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SECRET

2

is most unhealthy.

It is not true, in my judgment, that Guatemalans are apathetic or are not upset about the problem. Guatemalans very typically mask their feeling with outward passivity, but that does not mean they do not feel things. Guatemalans have told me they are worried, that the situation is serious and nastier than it has ever been. And I submit that we really do not know what the campesinos truly feel.

2. Counter-terror is brutal. The official squads are guilty of atrocities. Interrogations are brutal, torture is used and bodies are mutilated. Many believe that the very brutal way the ex-beauty queen was killed, obviously tortured and mutilated, provoked the FAR to murder Colonel Webber in retaliation. If true, how tragic that the tactics of "our side" would in any way be responsible for that event! But the point is that this is a serious practical political problem as well as a moral one: Because of the evidence of this brutality, the government is, in the eyes of many Guatemalans, a cruel government, and therefore righteous outrage, emotion and viciousness have been sucked into the whole political situation. One can argue about the naivete of the Maryknoll priests, but one should not discount the depth of the emotion and the significance of the reaction. One can easily see there how counter-terror has blurred the question of Communist insurgency and is converting it into an issue of morality and justice. How fortunate for us that there is no charismatic leader around yet to spark an explosion.

3. Counter-terror has retarded modernization and institution building. The tactics have just deepened and continued the proclivity of Guatemalans to operate outside the law. It says in effect to people that the law, the constitution, the institutions mean nothing, the fastest gun counts. The whole system has been degraded as a way to mobilize society and handle problems. Our objectives of helping Guatemala modernize are thus being undermined. The effect of the money we put into civic-action and the pilot program in the northeast is, in my personal opinion, more

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SECRET

3

than offset by the effect of the counter-terror. The value to the nation's political development of Mendez completing his term is probably already gone.

B. The Image Problem.

We are associated with this tactic in the minds of many people, and whether it is right or wrong so to associate us is rapidly becoming irrelevant. In politics just as important as the way things are is the way people think things are. In the minds of many in Latin America, and, tragically, especially in the sensitive, articulate youth, we are believed to have condoned these tactics, if not actually to have encouraged them. Therefore our image is being tarnished and the credibility of our claims to want a better and more just world are increasingly placed in doubt. I need hardly add the aspect of domestic U.S. reactions.

C. U.S. Values

This leads to an aspect I personally find the most disturbing of all--that we have not been honest with ourselves. We have condoned counter-terror; we may even in effect have encouraged or blessed it. We have been so obsessed with the fear of insurgency that we have rationalized away our qualms and uneasiness. This is not only because we have concluded we cannot do anything about it, for we never really tried. Rather we suspected that maybe it is a good tactic, and that as long as Communists are being killed it is alright. Murder, torture and mutilation are alright if our side is doing it and the victims are Communists. After all hasn't man been a savage from the beginning of time so let us not be too queasy about terror. I have literally heard these arguments from our people.

Have our values been so twisted by our adversary concept of politics in the hemisphere? Is it conceivable that we are so obsessed with insurgency that we are prepared to rationalize murder as an acceptable counter-insurgency weapon? Is it possible that a nation which so reveres the principle of due process of law has so easily acquiesced in this sort of terror tactic?

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4

I cannot, from my own personal experience in Guatemala and what I have seen since, honestly say to myself that the Guatemalan military have any reason to believe that we really are opposed to this tactic. I honestly think that on the contrary they believe we have accepted and encouraged it--even though we have pro forma remonstrated against excesses. We have talked to them to be sure, but not very insistently, and the image the Guatemalan military man gets from his total contact with the U.S. and U.S. advisors at all levels is very much a mixed bag. It betrays, I am afraid, intentionally or unintentionally, acquiescence and condonement.

Counter-terror is, in short, very wrong--morally, ethically, politically from the standpoint of Guatemala's own interest and practically from our own foreign policy point of view.

D. What To Do?

I am frankly not sanguine we can stop counter-terror. But one thing we can do is be honest with ourselves and admit to ourselves that there is a problem, and that counter-terror is wrong as a counter-insurgency tactic. I just do not think we have done that.

Beyond that there are three things to do:

a) The record must be made clearer that the United States Government opposes the concept and questions the wisdom of counter-terror;

b) the record must be made clearer that we have made this known unambiguously to the Guatemalans; otherwise we will stand before history unable to answer the accusations that we encouraged the Guatemalan Army to do these things;

c) Most importantly, we should put our thinking caps on and devise policies, aid and suggestions that can make counter-terror unnecessary. It is argued that if we can remonstrate strongly to the Guatemalans, they will say we encouraged them to go ahead and now what do we suggest?

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It is a good question, and we should ask ourselves that. If counter-terror is justified by Guatemalans in terms of the weakness of the legal system, is there nothing we can do to help and prod them on legal reforms? Is there nothing we can do to make them stop the brutality of torture and mutilation? Is there nothing we can do to help them develop philosophical concepts of institutions and a legal system? I know that primitive violence has gone on a long time in Guatemala and elsewhere. Do we just throw up our hands and accept all of its wrongness as long as it is also "effective", (and will history's verdict say it was "effective" in Guatemala)? If, in fact, the GOG pleads weakness in the conventional security apparatus, is that not precisely what our assistance and counsel is for--to help them perfect conventional, legal law enforcement?

If the U.S. cannot come up with any better suggestion on how to fight insurgency in Guatemala than to condone counter-terror, we are in a bad way indeed. But most of all, even if we cannot dissuade them, we owe it to ourselves to come to terms with our values and judgments and take a clear ethical stand.

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