ABSTRACT

Guatemala's Perfect Storm: The Relationship Between General Efraín Ríos Montt, the News Media, and the U.S. Religious Right

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This thesis explores the connections between General Efraín Ríos Montt and the conservative evangelical Christians in the United States through the lens of secular and Protestant media. In order to make sense of the two competing images of Ríos Montt, the secular media used rhetoric to discredit on Ríos Montt's religious convictions while the religious press cast suspicion on the human rights accusations leveled against him. This thesis will fill this gap in the current discussions of Ríos Montt's role in Guatemala's history. By looking in-depth at media coverage of him from not only the Christian press, but also the secular press, this thesis works to advance an understanding of the unlikely alliance between U.S. conservative evangelicals and a Guatemalan dictator.

Guatemala's Perfect Storm: The Relationship between General Efraín Ríos Montt, the News Media, and the U.S. Religious Right

by

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Papa: you have instilled a love of history in me and I would not be here without your encouragement—be it verbal or in the form of gold dollars. Thank-you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

"You Heard It Right: The Dictator is an Evangelical Christian"
"Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator"
"Guatemala Aid Born Again?"
"Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan: Says Evangelical Christians in U.S. Offer Millions and He Won't Need Other Help."[1]

These headlines, as well as others, heralded the rise of a new Guatemalan head of state in March 1982. General José Efraín Ríos Montt became leader of the military junta in Guatemala through a military coup on March 23 and by June had consolidated power to become sole chief of Guatemala. Although these events did not appear extraordinary on the surface, he quickly stood out among other political figures in Central America due to his fervent Protestantism. "I have confidence in my God, my Master and my King, that he will guide me, because only He can grant or take away power," he proclaimed the night he took office.[2] With this pronouncement, he caught the attention of evangelicals in the United States.

Ríos Montt not only caught their attention, but also he drew sharp lines among Christians in the United States. Conservative evangelicals provided financial, material, and spiritual aid.[3] Other Christians accused him of flagrant human rights violations as a

[1] Harry Genet and Stephen Sywulka, "You Heard It Right: The Dictator is an Evangelical Christian," *Christianity Today*, April 23, 1982; Dean Peerman, "Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator," *Christian Century*, May 5, 1982; "Guatemala Aid Born Again?," *Sojourners*, August 1982; Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan," *New York Times* (May 20, 1982).

[2] Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Junta Suspends Charter and Bars Politics: Moves Come as Surprise Nation's New Rulers Make No Mention of Vote That U.S. Officials Had Expected Guatemala's New Rulers Suspend the Constitution," *New York Times* (March 25, 1982).

[3] The term "conservative evangelical" will be defined below.

result of the campaign to suppress a Communist insurgency in the highlands. These two conflicting views of Ríos Montt's government were evident in the Christian media coverage of the time. The combination of these two elements—Christian support and human rights accusations—provides a story worth investigating.

A perfect storm of contexts converged to create an environment in which conservative evangelicals were willing to support a controversial head of state in Guatemala. What exactly were these contexts and how did they set up an environment of support? Why did the conservative evangelicals support Ríos Montt? Why did all Christians not support him? What tied some Christians in the United States to Guatemala? What role did rhetoric in the press, both secular and religious, play in this process? These questions must be answered to understand further the unlikely alliance of conservative evangelicals and the Guatemalan dictator. Conservative evangelicals felt a kinship with him because his moral plan for Guatemala echoed their own plan for the United States. He used the same rhetoric and professed the same beliefs they did. In Ríos Montt, they found a perfect solution to the troubling problems of Communism in Central America. Even more so, they found a leader who spoke their language and understood their beliefs.

Historiography

The relevant historiography for this study of U.S. Christianity in the twentieth century includes works on evangelicals, fundamentalists, the Religious Right, and the evangelical left. These scholars attempted to explain the surge of religious conservatives, especially fundamentalists Christians such as Jerry Falwell, and their involvement in politics after a seemingly inactive period. Historians provided a timeline for when this

involvement began and the factors that led to the fundamentalists moving away from their separatist roots and becoming militantly active in politics. These works also discussed how powerful the movement actually was and how many the "Moral Majority" contained. Some scholars considered the movement a unique phenomenon, while others considered it a moment in a cycle of involvement and separation. Throughout this discussion, scholars complicated the understanding of the Religious Right and their motives.

George Marsden's work provided necessary definitions and categories in which to place various U.S. Protestants. He wrote *Fundamentalism and American Culture* to define the fundamentalist movement and place it properly within the greater understanding of U.S. culture.[4] He studied interactions between fundamentalists and the culture in which they lived and he pushed back against previous interpretations of the fundamentalist movement and emphasized the importance of fundamentalism as a movement born out of true religious faith and motivations. This work, as well as his *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, provided not only the arguments concerning fundamentalism's place in American culture, but also defined the boundaries of the groups labeled "fundamentalist" and "evangelical."[5] By defining a fundamentalist as "an evangelical who is angry about something" and then elaborating, "a subtype of evangelicals and militancy is crucial to their outlook," he built a foundation for understanding the various groups who were and were not a part of the Religious Right.[6]

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[4] George M Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture : the Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

[5] George M Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).

[6] Ibid., 1.

This paper will use Marsden's categories to define the various groups of Protestants involved with Ríos Montt and Guatemala.

It is just as important to understand who was not a part of the Religious Right as who was. A recent book by David Swartz, entitled *Moral Minority: the Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism,* covered the oft-neglected group of evangelicals who did not support the Religious Right.[7] Swartz chronicled the left wing of the evangelical movement throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. He explained what the evangelical left did to lose favor and thereby fall away from the public eye by the time of the rise of the Religious Right. This argument helped to illuminate the lack of uniformity among evangelicals during the 1980s and accounted for the possibility of a periodical like *Sojourners*, which stood for the evangelical left position. Although the Religious Right stood out far more by the time of President Reagan, the evangelical left remained active.

Steve Bruce offered his account for the emergence of the Religious Right in his 1988 work *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right*.[8] Bruce used a sociological approach to clarify where the movement came from and to predict its fall. While admitting his proximity to his topic, he was still able to see the cracks in the Religious Right. He argued that fundamentalism in and of itself was not new, but instead that the public was newly aware of this movement. He also pointed to divisions within the movement—theological, economic, and racial—as signs of the Religious Right's weakness. By broaching the movement's vulnerability, he resisted the tendency scholars

[7] David R Swartz, *Moral minority : the Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[8] Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-1988* (Oxford: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1988).

and others had to overestimate or underestimate the movement's influence. As one of the earlier treatments of the Religious Right, Bruce's sociological perspective was valuable to gain a fuller picture of the strengths and weaknesses of this new religious and political phenomenon.

By 1993, the Religious Right had lost much of its earlier influence. Michael Lienesch recognized this in his book *Redeeming America*.[9] He treated the Religious Right as part of a cycle of U.S. conservative religious political involvement that ebbs and flows. His goal was to understand the worldview of the members of the Religious Right in "preparation for next time."[10] He organized *Redeeming America* as study of spheres; beginning with the self and moving outward, he analyzed the different views of the Religious Right within each sphere. Like Bruce, Lienesch commented on differences within the movement itself to refute the monolithic view of the Religious Right. He differentiated between the theology of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who were both an integral part of the movement, but who did not agree on many matters of doctrine. While he complicated understanding of the Religious Right by highlighting differences within the movement, he also saw various parts of the movement working together. His final metaphor compared the Religious Right to a comet: something that appears briefly, receives a lot of attention, and then fades from sight until it reappears again.[11]

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[9] Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America : Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

[10] Ibid., 21.

[11] Ibid., 248.

Daniel Williams' *God's Own Party*, written in 2010, picked up similar themes from earlier works attempting to explain the rise of the Religious Right.[12] He pushed back against the monolithic image of the Religious Right and strove to paint a more realistic picture about how large the "silent majority" really was. Williams' study contributed new ideas as well; in particular, he presented a timeline for the movement stretching back to the beginning of the twentieth century: his chronology of this movement starts in the 1920s. He also pointed out what was new about conservative evangelicals in the early 1980s: a strong allegiance to the Republican Party. He concluded that the Christian Right was a force that would remain powerful and attached to the Republican Party for the foreseeable future.

Historiography of Guatemala's civil war is also a vital piece to understanding Ríos Montt's regime. This historiography includes scholars from multiple disciplines working through the conflict's complexities to explain the turmoil of the last half of the twentieth century. Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, forensic teams, and religious leaders have all contributed to this conversation.[13] Some scholars highlight U.S.

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[12] Daniel K Williams, *God's Own Party : the Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[13] Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit : the Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982); Phillip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984); George Black, Milton H Jamail, and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984); Robert M Carmack, *Harvest of Violence: the Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Carol A Smith, Marilyn M Moors, and Latin American Studies Association, *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540 to 1988* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Phillip Berryman, *Stubborn Hope : Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America* (Maryknoll N.Y. ;N.Y.: Orbis Books ;New Press, 1994); Veronica Melander, *The Hour of God?: People in Guatemala Confronting Political Evangelicalism and Counterinsurgency (1976-1990)* (Uppsala: [Swedish Institute of Missionary Research], 1999); Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City : Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre : Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago

involvement, and the importance of the Cold War. Many of these works focused on participation of the Mayan people in the Guatemalan civil war. One of the main questions scholars debate is: was this genocide against the Maya in Guatemala? In recent years, opinion among scholars and human rights activists has shifted. Today, most agree that the Guatemalan government committed genocide against the Mayan people.[14] The conversation over what happened in Guatemala, and why, continues to be debated by scholars and others to find answers and to open the road for peace and justice.

Guatemala presents a unique environment for study because over half of its population is comprised of indigenous people. *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540 to 1988*, edited by Carol Smith, is a collection of studies dealing with the Maya and their place in the Guatemala.[15] The work explored cultural identity in Guatemala as well as class, race, and community interactions between the indigenous people and the Guatemalan state. This collection contained various perspectives to provide a fuller picture of these complex relationships. Even in this early work from 1990, some scholars raised questions of genocide. Arturo Arias, a Latin American scholar, wrote about the challenges the Maya faced as Guatemala moved into modernity. He argued that the Guatemalan government realized the power of a mobilized Mayan community and therefore systematically began to eliminate them in the highlands in November 1981.[16]

Press, 2004); Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit : Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[14] This idea, as well as an update on the current trial for genocide in Guatemala, will be discussed in the Conclusion to this thesis.

[15] Smith, Moors, and Latin American Studies Association, *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540 to 1988*.

[16] Ibid., 255.

Arias also raised another theme found throughout the scholarship of the Guatemalan civil war: Mayan participation. He argued that between 250,000 and 500,000 indigenous people were involved in the civil war in one-way or another.[17] Other scholars after Arias took issue with his understanding of the scope and nature of indigenous involvement.

David Stoll, an anthropologist challenged the understanding of Mayan involvement in the Guatemalan civil war in his 1993 work *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala.*[18] Stoll wanted to expose a third side to the story by arguing that not only the Guatemalan army, but also the guerrillas forced the Mayan people into the war. He crafted this thesis from his personal experiences and from interviews of Mayan people in the Ixil region. Stoll offered a different perspective on Ríos Montt's time in power than that of scholars who followed him. In Stoll's view, he was an improvement over the previous military dictator General Romeo Lucas García because, "Ríos Montt replaced chaotic terror with a more predictable set of rewards and punishments, that is, what passes for law and order under the country's normal level of repression."[19] This argument helped Stoll explain continuing popular support and allegiance to Ríos Montt found in the rural areas of Guatemala after he left power. Stoll did not engage with discussions of genocide, but his work stirred up heated debate about the events in Guatemala.[20]

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*.

[19] Ibid., 111.

[20] Much of this controversy stemmed from David Stoll's treatment of Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú and her book *I, Rigoberta: An Indian Woman in Guatemala.* For further reading, see David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1993 and Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Scholars working in the aftermath of the violence in Guatemala aimed to bring justice and truth in the country. Victoria Sanford, a cultural anthropologist, compiled her experiences, research, and interviews in a 2003 book entitled *Buried Secrets*.[21] In this book, she addressed three themes—forensics, ethnography of genocide, and local work for truth, justice, and rebuilding—through a variety of methods. Sanford worked on a hands-on level to bring to light the experiences of Mayan people through testimonies recorded in her book. She was also a part of the project of exhuming mass graves in Guatemala, which helped to begin the process of community healing and memory. She sought to build a framework of understanding by explaining the culture of terror impressed upon the indigenous people. Ultimately, Sanford concluded that the Guatemalan state carried out genocide against the Mayan people. She wanted to employ these themes as an aid to Guatemala as it transitioned from dictatorship to democracy. Sanford strongly disagreed with Stoll's analysis of the Mayan involvement in the war and places Ríos Montt as part of the willful attempts to wipe out the Mayan people.

Greg Grandin's 2004 work on Guatemala, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, explained the role of terror in bringing about democracy in Latin America.[22] Specifically, he studied the Panzós massacre of 1978 as a way of understanding social transformation and the Mayan people. He used a Cold War lens to analyze the massacre, which he saw as a turning point in Guatemala's civil war. After this massacre, resistance to the Guatemalan government unified.[23] He was among scholars who place the beginning of Guatemala's

[21] Sanford, *Buried Secrets*.

[22] Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*.

[23] Ibid., 165.

turmoil at the 1954 overthrow of Jacabo Árbenz Guzmán. Grandin also considered violence against the Mayan people beginning in 1981 to be genocide.[24] By chronicling the events that led up to Panzós massacre, Grandin argued that the roots of Guatemala's struggles in the 1970s and 1980s were a product of the struggles in the 1930s and 1940s.

The most comprehensive work on Ríos Montt and his role in the Guatemalan civil war is Virginia Garrard-Burnett's *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit.*[25] In this book, she chronicled the eighteen-month reign of General Efraín Ríos Montt and tied together many of the themes from discussions that preceded her. She addressed ideas of genocide, memory, truth, justice, and rebuilding as she crafted an image of Ríos Montt as a responsible actor in the genocide of the Maya. Her work contained the most complete study on Ríos Montt himself, offering biographical details, and pointing to specific connections between him and the U.S. conservative evangelicals. Even in this, the most comprehensive study of Ríos Montt, Garrard-Burnett mentioned connections between the Religious Right in the United States and the general, but did not delve into them.

In most studies specifically about Ríos Montt, scholars report ties between him and Christians in the United States only briefly. Garrard-Burnett discussed the role of the Religious Right in his regime and she explicitly named Pat Robertson's relationship with Ríos Montt. She did mention the religious press' tendency to discount human rights accusations leveled at Ríos Montt. She cited *Christianity Today*'s article about not trusting secular coverage as well as the religious biography of him. While she provided evidence of rhetoric in the Protestant press, she did not contrast this rhetoric with the

[24] Ibid.

[25] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*.

secular press' attempts to reconcile the conflicting images of Ríos Montt. Nor does she analyze the coverage of Ríos Montt in depth.

In trying to understand this unlikely allegiance between conservative evangelicals in the United States and Ríos Montt, it is necessary to examine the words they chose to describe the situation. It is not enough to assume the motivations behind the members of Religious Right; one must study their rhetoric to understand further how this alliance came about. This thesis will fill this gap in the current discussions of Ríos Montt's role in Guatemala's history. By looking in-depth at media coverage of him from not only the Christian press, but also the secular press, this thesis works to advance an understanding of the unlikely alliance between U.S. conservative evangelicals and a Guatemalan dictator.

To do so, it is imperative to study both secular news media and Christian media to understand why conservative evangelical leaders supported Ríos Montt. A contrast of secular media with Christian media highlights what Christian periodicals regarded as most important. Although secular newspapers and magazines did discuss his religion, they did not interpret it in the same way Christian periodicals did, nor was it the main feature of their coverage. For conservative evangelical magazines, Ríos Montt's religion was the most important part of his leadership; it was the guiding principle with which he approached changing Guatemala for the better. Thus, a contrast of secular and Christian media underscores the importance of his evangelical Christianity for the Religious Right.

One discrepancy between secular and Protestant coverage of Ríos Montt lies, unsurprisingly, in focus on religion. While the secular press did talk about his religion, they did not offer the depth of analysis the religious press did. Although this is indeed an

expected difference, it speaks to larger implications in uncovering the reasons behind his support in the United States. If conservative evangelicals mostly focused on him as an anti-Communist leader, their articles about him would have focused on his anti-Communism. However, some Christian periodicals emphasized his religion and ability of evangelicals in the United States to relate to him. Periodicals achieved this concentration by using specific rhetoric. Conservative evangelical leaders also saw this moment as an opportunity for a victory in the conflicted context of Central America. A relatable leader who was not only anti-Communist but also held the same religious beliefs as they did was certainly a triumph for conservative evangelical leadership in the United States. This prominence of his faith implied the attention of wider Christian audience: Ríos Montt's evangelicalism.

A vital part to understanding this complex story was conservative evangelicals' approach to the secular press. They mistrusted secular media because it did not use their worldview.[26] The leaders discounted secular media accounts of Mayan massacres. They based their hesitation on various factors. Conservatives completely dismissed reports from secular agencies such as Amnesty International or Americas Watch. The secular news cited conflicting reports regarding the human rights situation. For example, Ríos Montt reduced violence and crime in urban areas, which was a sharp contrast to his predecessor General Fernando Romeo Garcia Lucas. Many of the arguments for resuming U.S. military aid to Guatemala referenced this improved situation in cities as evidence that the violence was abating. When conservative evangelical supporters of

[26] "The Central American Power Keg: How Can Christians Keep It from Exploding?," *Christianity Today*, July 15, 1983; Tom Minnery, "Why We Can't Always Trust the News Media," *Christianity Today*, January 13, 1984.

Ríos Montt cited this improvement, they referenced urban areas and when skeptics of his regime argued the opposite, they talked about rural areas.

Definition of Terms

To clarify specific people who supported Ríos Montt, it is necessary to define the religious terms used to describe actors in this narrative. This paper will use Marsden's five-point definition of evangelical explained in *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.* He defined evangelicalism by belief in: "(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of Scripture, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life."[27] This definition is particularly helpful for a study of Ríos Montt because it highlights a few of the similarities he shared with evangelicals, which in turn helps to explain partially why evangelicals eagerly supported him. The most prominent similarity is in the last belief: "the importance of a spiritually transformed life." Ríos Montt considered personal morality to be the cornerstone for transforming the corrupt society of Guatemala. His slogans included simple admonitions to encourage personal morality, which he then assumed would permeate into the society as a whole. This emphasis on personal transformation greatly resonated with evangelicals in the United States who were fighting for the same thing in their own society.[28] It also provides evidence for why mainline Christians who believed structural changes were necessary did

[27] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 4–5.

[28] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 66.

not support Ríos Montt's idea of personal moral transformation as the cure to his nation's ills.

For the purposes of this paper, the term conservative evangelical will describe those Protestant Christians who supported Ríos Montt. The term evangelical is broad enough to contain both Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, as well as the wider audience of periodicals such as *Christianity Today*. The qualifier "conservative" is necessary as many evangelicals maintained a more liberal stance even in the midst of the rise of the Religious Right. The periodical *Sojourners*, a product of a liberal evangelical viewpoint, emphatically did not support Ríos Montt or his government. Conservative evangelical also does not include a Catholic viewpoint, which was as equally divided as its Protestant counterparts. Space does not allow for a study of Catholic periodicals such as the *Catholic Worker* and *Commonweal*. By using the term "conservative evangelical," this paper will discuss the specific involvement of prominent fundamentalist leaders such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, periodicals such as *Christianity Today*, and movements such as the Religious Right.

The Religious Right is another category needing clarification. This term defines the political involvement of conservative evangelicals in the 1980s. The pivotal distinction here is the conservative evangelicals' involvement with the Republican Party specifically.[29] Leaders of this movement combined various issues into a single platform, which the Republican Party and their candidate for president, Ronald Reagan reflected.[30] The timeline is based, among other things, on Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, founded in

[29] Williams, *God's Own Party : the Making of the Christian Right*, 2.

[30] Ibid., 159.

1979 and disbanded in 1989. Another common theme among the leaders of the Religious Right was their use of television and other forms of media for their ministries.[31] These leaders mobilized their followers by articulating U.S. politics in a framework of culture war. They were fighting to restore the morality of the United States by electing their candidates and then convincing them to legislate favorably on issues such as abortion, pornography, and prayer in schools.

It is also important to note some evangelicals did not fit neatly into the category of "conservative evangelical" or the Religious Right. Throughout the 1980s, a liberal group of evangelicals maintained separation from their more visible conservative counterparts. These liberal evangelicals, according to David Swartz, "stood for antiwar, civil rights, anti-consumer, communal, New Left, and third-world principles, even as they stressed doctrinal and sexual fidelity."[32] Other more moderate evangelicals also did not join with the Religious Right. Influential leaders such as Billy Graham did not engage with the U.S. political realm in the same way Falwell and Robertson did. As Swartz wrote, "Even prominent evangelical moderates such as Billy Graham and representatives of the National Association of Evangelicals felt compelled to explain that they were 'not part of the New Christian Right.'"[33] Instead, they focused more on evangelism and the spiritual sphere and left the political realm to others.

Even within the category of "conservative evangelical," full unity did not exist. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, for example, came from different traditions and did not

[31] Lienesch, *Redeeming America*, 5.

[32] Swartz, *Moral Minority : the Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, 3.

[33] Ibid., 234.

agree with each other on many tenets of faith. Robertson was a charismatic Pentecostal while Jerry Falwell was a fundamentalist Baptist who, as George Marsden explained, condemned Pentecostalism.[34] The Religious Right provided an environment for these two leaders to put aside their religious differences to achieve political goals. Falwell's Moral Majority also contained members who were Catholic, Mormon, and Jewish.[35] These people banded together to bring about moral change through the political system. They put aside their theological differences to pursue a Judeo-Christian moral agenda for the United States.

Methodology

This thesis focuses on rhetoric used by both mainstream and Christian press. The secular press studied included the newspapers *New York Times*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and a selection of smaller local newspapers. These newspapers, a large East Coast paper, a smaller West Coast paper, and a variety of small local papers, were selected to provide a fuller view of the coverage available to the public at the time of Ríos Montt's leadership. Because this study emphasizes involvement of conservative evangelicals scattered throughout the United States, it is important to consider local papers that laymen had available. The *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Examiner* provide an understanding of discussions about Ríos Montt in larger and more public fora. Additionally, magazines from two contrasting viewpoints were selected: *New Republic* and *National Review*. Magazines are a different medium than newspapers and offer their

[34] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 4. Marsden also includes further distinctions between fundamentalists and neo-fundamentalists. For the purposes of this paper, the term fundamentalist will be sufficient.

[35] Williams, *God's Own Party*, 160.

authors more room for analysis and opinion. These periodicals provide evidence through their rhetoric about Ríos Montt and Guatemala through a secular lens, but from both a conservative and a liberal viewpoint.

The Christian periodicals chosen also consist of a variety of viewpoints. *Christianity Today* represented a well established and widely read conservative evangelical view. In his study of American religion, Robert Wuthnow described *Christianity Today* as an "interdenominational journal" that was "founded in hopes of drawing readers from among conservative Christians of widely differing backgrounds."[36] Billy Graham founded this magazine in 1956 and Carl F. H. Henry served as the first editor. By 1968, Harold Lindsell replaced Henry affording the periodical a more "militantly conservative political stance."[37] For this study, *Christianity Today* openly supported Ríos Montt's regime and therefore stood out for its rhetoric deployed to garner support for the dictator.

The other evangelical periodical selected is *Sojourners.* Although it and *Christianity Today* were both written by evangelicals, they stood firmly on opposite sides of many issues. While *Sojourners* remained evangelical in theology, its political stance was a liberal one. According to Marsden, the "militantly conservative political stance" caused the evangelical left to launch *Sojourners* in 1971.[38] *Sojourners* did not support Ríos Montt or anyone who allied with him: it blatantly opposed both Reagan and U.S.

[36] Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 179.

[37] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 74.

[38] Ibid., 74–5.

foreign policy at the time.[39] *Sojourners* also presented the most critical analysis of Ríos Montt and covered other Latin American issues not considered by other magazines: these articles included an interview with liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and updates on the situation in Argentina at the time. Again, for this study specifically, the rhetoric found in this magazine stood out as negative descriptions of Ríos Montt, which contrasted to *Christianity Today*.

Christian Century was chosen to round out coverage of Ríos Montt in the Christian media and to broaden the scope to include a mainline—therefore not evangelical—periodical. In his book *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ*, John Turner labeled *Christian Century* as a more liberal periodical.[40] This magazine used a more moderate voice in its discussions of Ríos Montt. It also provided follow-up articles after his loss of power in 1983. These articles maintained the same rhetorical techniques used by the magazine during his time in power.

Finally, this thesis used selections from *Fundamentalist Journal*, one of Jerry Falwell's magazines, to illustrate how his followers stood on these issues. Selections included letters to the editor, which echoed those sent to *Christianity Today*. This agreement between fundamentalists and evangelicals helps to build a category in which to place those Christians in the United States who supported Ríos Montt.

The time period 1981-1984 was used in both the mainstream and the Christian periodicals. Although Ríos Montt was only in power from March 1982- August 1983,

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[39] "Ronald Reagan Is Lying About Nicaragua, Cover," *Sojourners*, August 1984; Swartz, *Moral minority : the Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, 235–43.

[40] John G Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ : The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 26. Part of the evidence for placing *Christian Century* into a mainline Christian category also includes the regular observations of the season of Lent, which is not typical of evangelical Christians at this time.

this study brackets media attention given to Guatemala or Ríos Montt before his time in power and after his fall from his position. As will be discussed later, the press gave little attention to him or Guatemala as a whole before or after his reign. These periodicals featured him when he came to power in March, as he consolidated power in June, when President Reagan visited in December, and when the Pope visited in March. They published articles at other points as well, but the most prevalent coverage surrounded those events.

In analyzing articles in these periodicals, this study focused on rhetoric about Ríos Montt and his government, Guatemala, and the Central American region in general. The goal was to see not only how the authors treated him, but also what importance they placed on his religion and on those critics who accused him of human rights violations. All of these publications used their word choice to paint him in the light of their choosing: as a dictator, as a leader blessed by God, as a religious fanatic, as an anti-Communist leader. They also used the same tactic to discuss the human rights accusations many critics leveled against Ríos Montt. Some of the rhetoric used was blatant and other rhetoric was more subtle. Regardless, this study employed a method of close reading specific articles to gain an understanding of how they used rhetoric to support or discredit Ríos Montt.

Thesis

Through this method of close reading, two questions became apparent. This thesis seeks to answer both of these questions by analyzing rhetoric from the periodicals listed above. First, how did the secular press and the Christian press solve the conundrum of the two competing images of Ríos Montt? To make sense of the

conflicting reports of Ríos Montt and his government, the media cast suspicion on the idea of him with which they disagreed. Secular publications regularly cast doubt on the sincerity of his religious beliefs. These periodicals employed skeptical rhetoric about any beliefs or church involvement Ríos Montt or those who supported him claimed. In contrast, they presented human rights accusations in a believable light. The religious press that did not support him used this same strategy. Conservative evangelicals who supported him, however, used doubtful rhetoric when considering the human rights accusations Ríos Montt's critics cited. These articles pointed out the human rights improvements under Ríos Montt. They also credited his character and the veracity of his religious claims.

The second question this thesis will address is: did U.S. conservative evangelicals support Ríos Montt because of his anti-Communist agenda or his evangelical religion? This thesis argues that U.S. conservative evangelicals considered his evangelicalism more important. If anti-Communism provided the key to alliance between Ríos Montt and these Christians, he would not have been the only leader they supported so adamantly. The press that supported him focused on his religious faith, his church attendance, and similarities between his beliefs and those of conservative evangelicals. Ríos Montt believed change for Guatemala began with each individual, which echoed the individual focus of evangelicals. They understood him when he proclaimed God's plan for himself as the head of Guatemala. They praised his faithful church attendance and his servant-leadership. Conservative evangelical leaders also saw this moment as an opportunity for a victory in the conflicted context of Central America. A relatable leader who was not

only anti-Communist, but also held the same religious beliefs as they did was certainly a triumph for conservative evangelical leadership in the United States.[41]

The following chapters offer an in-depth study of secular and religious press from Ríos Montt's time in power to provide those answers to the above questions. Chapter two is an examination of the context into which Ríos Montt stepped as head of Guatemala in 1982. It explains the political and religious context of both the United States and Guatemala, as well as a brief biography of Ríos Montt. These threads are vital for understanding his story and conservative evangelicals in the United States. The elements discussed in chapter two merged to create the perfect storm for his appeal to U.S. conservative evangelicals.

Chapter three contains a study of the secular press. These newspapers and magazines covered various stories about Ríos Montt all which used rhetoric in the same way: to discredit either his religious beliefs or the human rights accusations. This chapter follows coverage of his time in office. The secular press reported arguments used by supporters of Ríos Montt to prove the human rights situation in Guatemala was improving. Mainstream publications also presented the narrative of U.S. political relations with Guatemala during this time. The Reagan administration supported his regime and set out to remove the military aid ban put in place under President Carter's administration due to human rights abuses. The secular press also discussed the ties between Ríos Montt and conservative evangelical leaders.

[41] Pat Robertson, for example, supported the Contras in Nicaragua throughout the 1980s. But, in works such as his 1991 book The New World Order, he does not praise them for their godly leadership in the same ways he lauded Ríos Montt. Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Dallas: Word Pub., 1991).

Chapter four surveys the Protestant press from this time period. As previously described, some periodicals supported Ríos Montt while other did not. This chapter explains this dichotomy as well as possible reasons for the unlikely alliance between conservative evangelicals and Ríos Montt. A central theme this chapter explores is the mistrust some of the Protestant press held for the secular press. This section also includes an analysis of a biography written by Joseph Anfuso and David Sczepanski, Protestant church leaders, as well as a forward by Pat Robertson. This biography plays a pivotal role in understanding the conservative evangelical mindset toward Ríos Montt. These elements combine in such a way to provide evidence for basing the conservative evangelical's support of Ríos Montt on his evangelical religion.

Finally, the conclusion will include the current discussions surrounding the search for justice and healing in Guatemala. Protestant press coverage of Ríos Montt since his fall from power in 1983 will be analyzed: *Christianity Today* and *Christian Century* both followed up with Ríos Montt after he lost power in 1983. The debate about genocide among scholars will be addressed. Some consideration will be given to the ongoing trial of Ríos Montt and its role in the healing of Guatemala. Following Ríos Montt from his loss of power until now will allow him to be placed in the wider conversation of how Guatemala can rebuild after their years of violence.

In retrospect, conservative evangelicals in the United States supporting a military dictator in Guatemala sounds improbable. This thesis seeks to explain the convergence of factors that produced perfect storm that allied these two parties. Further, this thesis argues that looking at press coverage of Ríos Montt, a pattern emerges regarding rhetoric. Finally, this study concludes that conservative evangelicals related to Ríos Montt's

religion above all else. By a careful reading of the coverage, both secular and religious, it becomes clearer why U.S. conservative evangelicals would turn their attention from their own country to a Central American dictator and his vision for Guatemala.

CHAPTER TWO

The Perfect Storm: Context

The story of Ríos Montt and U.S. evangelicals emerged from the convergence of several contexts. The confluence of political activism by conservative evangelicals in the United States and a surge of Protestantism in Guatemala in the middle of the Cold War created the perfect storm for a relationship between the new dictator and the Religious Right. Absent any one of these factors, his regime and the U.S. response would have looked very different. To understand fully connections between Guatemala and the United States at this time, the context of not only the political sphere of these states, but also the religious atmosphere must be discussed. Five specific questions set the stage for discussion of Ríos Montt and conservative evangelicals in the United States: What was happening in Guatemala which led up to his presidency? Who is Efraín Ríos Montt? What was going on in the United States politically to lead to President Reagan's support of Ríos Montt? What was the Religious Right and what was its role? What specific ties existed between Guatemala and the United States? Exploring the answers to each of the questions illuminates the environment in which Cold War rhetoric, the Religious Right, and the evangelical dictator Ríos Montt converged in Guatemala.

Guatemalan Context

When Ríos Montt came to power on March 23, 1982, he was one of a long line of military rulers in Guatemala. From the time of the U.S. sponsored coup in 1954 that ousted President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán from power, Guatemala had been riven by

turbulent civil war. The army ran the government and carried out a deadly war against so-called Communist guerrillas. Guatemala suffered from corrupt, fraudulent, or even ignored elections. Although the story of Guatemala in the late twentieth century echoed many of its neighboring states' problems, it remained unique because of the high percentage of indigenous people living in the highlands. Over half of Guatemala's population was Mayan. The civil turmoil Guatemala experienced under Ríos Montt emerged long before the evangelical dictator rose to power.

Part of the trouble in Guatemala stemmed from the relationship between the Maya and non-indigenous Guatemalans. The Mayan people have struggled to survive and maintain their own identity within the larger Guatemalan state since the Spanish conquest. They lived in the highlands and kept plots of land to grow corn, beans, and other crops. As the twentieth century progressed, their population grew, but the land they had for farming did not. As a result, the competition for land became a theme in the fight between the ladinos (non-indigenous people) and the Maya.[1] Many scholars have argued that tensions between indigenous people and ladinos were economic, class-based, religious, racial, and cultural. The key for this study is that tensions between the Maya and other Guatemalans led to inequalities of resources, power, and voice in the government. The Maya were completely isolated within Guatemala and Guatemalan culture had not assimilated them. Many Guatemalans considered the Maya a hindrance to the progress of a modern Guatemalan state. Understanding these tensions between the

[1] Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 182n16; This paper will use the term ladino as Garrard-Burnett does: to refer to anyone who does not consider themselves indigenous.

non-indigenous Guatemalans and the Maya is critical for considering the violence in Guatemala as genocide, which will be discussed in the conclusion of this study.[2]

The struggle between the Maya and the rest of Guatemala was not the only source of tension in Guatemala, nor was it the only context into which Ríos Montt stepped. The political context also shed light onto the particular circumstances of his government. Most scholars trace trouble in Guatemala to the 1954 overthrow of Jacobo Árbenz's freely elected government: the CIA ousted the elected president. This not only proved the United States would get involved in Central American affairs when it deemed necessary, but it also set Guatemala on a path to civil war and disruption. It established the importance and pervasiveness of Cold War ideology in Inter-American relations. The U.S. cited Communist leanings of both Árbenz and his cabinet as the reason for overthrowing the government.[3] U.S. business interests played a role as well with Árbenz's attempt to nationalize land belonging to the United Fruit Company and other U.S. corporations. From 1954 onward, Guatemala suffered unstable governments and a civil war between the military and the insurgents who wanted change.

As the twentieth century progressed, the military continued to suppress any opposition to the government. Starting in 1974, Guatemala had a series of military dictators who increased violence and repression. The first of these dictators, General Kjell Laugerud García, took over after the army declared the elections fraudulent. Ríos Montt had run for president as a member of the Christian Democrat Party and had won

[2] Smith, Moors, and Latin American Studies Association, *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540 to 1988*; Carmack, *Harvest of Violence*; Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*; Black, Jamail, and Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala*; Sanford, *Buried Secrets*.

[3] Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*; Black, Jamail, and Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala*, 2.

the elections. Instead of Ríos Montt becoming president, the military placed their candidate in power. After this defeat, Ríos Montt left Guatemala for Spain as a military attaché. While he lived in Spain, Guatemala continued to face changes, both politically and physically.

Another important event in Guatemala is the 1976 earthquake. This natural disaster opened Guatemala up to outside relief efforts, which influenced the religious landscape of Guatemala. This damaging earthquake killed and wounded tens of thousands and displaced over a million people.[4] Both secular and religious relief agencies responded and the majority of them came from the United States. Protestant presence in Guatemala greatly increased as denominational aid groups moved into the country. Gospel Outreach, a conservative Pentecostal church from California, sent a team to Guatemala for relief purposes and they later founded Verbo Church. Many critics found it convenient that Protestant church attendance increased at the same time these Protestants offered material aid. They called the process "lámina por ánima" or tin roofing for a soul.[5] While all Protestant membership continued to grow even after need of material relief passed, Pentecostals grew most during this time in Guatemala.

The earthquake in Guatemala brought to light the growing Protestant presence in the country. Protestantism did not appear in Guatemala directly as a result of the 1976 earthquake, although the disaster spurred growth of Protestantism in Guatemala. As Virginia Garrard-Burnett argued in her *Protestantism in Guatemala*, a surge of Protestantism in the form of neo-Pentecostalism began in Guatemala in the 1960s. For

[4] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 43.

[5] Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Protestantism in Guatemala : Living in the New Jerusalem*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 121.

indigenous Guatemalans, this branch of Protestantism offered cultural ties to their own Mayan religions. The worship services also provided an emotional outlet as well as a form of entertainment for the people in rural areas. While these doctrinal elements explain the allure of neo-Pentecostals for rural people, Verbo church was part of the urban movement of Pentecostalism. For the wealthy in the cities, Verbo and other Pentecostal churches emphasized moral living and a prosperity gospel mentality.[6] Although relief agencies such as Gospel Outreach came to Guatemala to aid after the earthquake, they remained in the country and built lasting churches there.

Despite the outpouring of aid to assist in rebuilding after the earthquake, Guatemala's government continued to be in a state of turmoil. General Fernando Romeo Lucas García ruled Guatemala from 1978 to 1982. Under his leadership, government repression in Guatemala increased. He instituted death squads in cities and assassinations were commonplace in the middle of the night. The government also massacred people in large numbers with a scorched-earth campaign in the highlands. However, his intensified campaign in the highlands did not suppress the opposition to the government. The Guatemalan economy suffered and corruption ran rampant in both the army and the government.[7] On March 23, 1982, young military officers overthrew the government of Guatemala and placed General Efraín Ríos Montt and two other officers as heads of state. This new government, led by Ríos Montt, professed a need for order and security in Guatemala. This program for a new cleaned-up Guatemala placed Ríos Montt in a favorable light as compared to his predecessor.

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[6] Ibid., 117-8, 139.

[7] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 45, 50.

Who is José Efraín Ríos Montt?

An examination of Ríos Montt's biography explains his personal context, both military and religious. His biography illuminates his military training, both in Guatemala and the United States, as well as his church experiences later in life. These details clarify the ties he had to the United States in his military and church involvement. As his biographical details show, two different sources provide his story. Military records show the education, training, and respectable career of a Guatemalan general. Church leaders provide a story of his character, his faith, and his church involvement. These two sources reinforce the conflicting images of Ríos Montt as a dictator and a church member.

José Efraín Ríos Montt was born to a middle-class, well-respected family in a village of Huehuetenango on June 16, 1926. He was the eldest of twelve children after his older brother died. He entered the Guatemalan army in 1942 at age sixteen. Throughout his life, he received military education from distinguished schools such as Escuela Politécnica in Guatemala City. He also received instruction from various U.S.-run training programs at the School of the Americas and Fort Bragg where he studied insurgency techniques based on Mao Zedong's theories. He received additional counterinsurgency and irregular warfare instruction at the Italian War College from 1961-1962. By the end of his education, Ríos Montt was a respected army officer who had risen in through the ranks of the Guatemalan military.[8]

[8] Kate Doyle, "Indicted for Genocide: Guatemala's Efraín Ríos Montt," *The National Security Archive*, March 19, 2013, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB419/; Anfuso and Sczepanski, *Efraín Ríos Montt: Servant or Dictator?*; Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit.* Details from each of these sources were compiled to provide the reader a brief biography of General Ríos Montt. The National Security Archive used Department of Defense and State Department documents to detail Ríos Montt's education and military accomplishments. Anfuso and Sczepanski's book tells Ríos Montt's story through a religious viewpoint and is more informal and anecdotal in style. Garrard-Burnett's book contained both religious and non-religious aspects of Ríos Montt's life.

An important element of his education was his experience in the United States. The Guatemalan military picked up tactics from the U.S. experience in Vietnam and applied them to its war in the highlands. The "scorched-earth" campaign, the model villages, even the press censorship used in Guatemala all had been implemented during the Vietnam War.[9] The militaries based their techniques on Mao Zedong's idea of removing any support from the guerrillas in order to weaken their movement. The idea, according to an interview with Guatemalan Colonel Gordillo, was "water is to the fish what the people are to the guerrilla. The fish without water dies. The guerilla without the people dies."[10] After destroying the Mayan villages, the army would route them into model villages, the same strategy the U.S. used in Vietnam.[11] As for the press coverage, Ríos Montt kept a tight hold on the press, not allowing them to even use the word "guerilla" and only printing the official reports of events in the highlands. The Guatemalan army reported they had learned this from the U.S. actions in Vietnam.[12] It is likely Ríos Montt learned these techniques while studying at the School of the Americas.

After his military education, he worked in various leadership positions as he rose through the ranks. From 1970 to 1972, he served as director of Escuela Politécnica, his alma mater. In 1972, President Carlos Arana Osorio appointed him army chief of staff. By this time, Ríos Montt had reached the rank of general. His involvement with military

[9] Bradley Earl Owens, "Phoenix Rising: Echoes of Vietnam in the Guerrilla War in Guatemala" (The University of Texas, 1991); Black, Jamail, and Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala*; Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, *The Politics of Intervention: The United States in Central America* (New York, N.Y.; Berkeley, Cal.: Monthly Review Press ; Center for the Study of the Americas, 1984).

[10] Pamela Yates et al., *When the mountains tremble* ([Burlington, Vt.]; New York, NY: Docurama ; Distributed in the U.S. by New Video, 2004).

[11] Burbach and Flynn, *The Politics of Intervention*, 57.

[12] Black, Jamail, and Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala*, 126.

actions in rural Guatemala began early in his career: on March 27, 1973, he ordered a massacre of *campesionos* in Sansirisay, El Progreso. He returned to the United States in 1973 to serve as Director of Studies of the Inter-American Defense College. After his tour in the United States, Ríos Montt entered into Guatemalan politics.

His political career started when he ran for president in 1974. He did not attach himself to the ruling party, the MLN, which was the far-right party that had been in power since the 1954 overthrow of Árbenz. Instead, he ran as a reformist candidate as a member of the Christian Democrat Party and therefore as a Roman Catholic candidate. Ríos Montt and his vice president candidate Alberto Fuentes Mohr won the popular vote, but the army canceled the election and placed their candidate in office instead.[13]

This set him on the trajectory to become an inactive member of the army, eventually return to Guatemala, and become a convert to Protestant evangelicalism.

After his failed election attempt, Ríos Montt's life took a turn away from military leadership. He spent 1974-1977 as a diplomat in Spain and went on inactive status with the army in 1977. He returned to Guatemala and converted to an evangelical faith, as did many Guatemalans around this time. He attended a Pentecostal church in Guatemala called Church of the Word or Verbo (from the Spanish name Iglesia Cristiana Verbo), which came to Guatemala as a result of the earthquake. Verbo church fit into the previously defined category of neo-Pentecostal. This clarification of neo-Pentecostalism is important to his story because it helps to explain why Pat Robertson in particular, also a neo-Pentecostal, so vigorously supported his regime. At this point, he semi-retired from the army and became heavily involved in his church. The church he became a part

[13] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 42–3.

of was one planted during the efforts to provide Guatemalans with physical and spiritual relief after the 1976 earthquake. Verbo Church in Guatemala arrived from a U.S.-based mission called Gospel Outreach. By the time of his involvement, the church maintained some U.S. ties, but was a fully Guatemalan operation.

Here biographical details of his life shift from his military record to being recounted by fellow church members and those supporting his religious transformation. In their biography *Servant or Dictator?* —which contained a forward by Pat Robertson— Joseph Anfuso and David Sczepanski detailed his integrity before and after his conversion. They highlighted his faithful involvement in the church as a servant-leader and a teacher in the church's school. According to these authors, Ríos Montt was teaching in this school when the young officers called him on March 23, 1982 to lead a junta of army officers in ruling Guatemala.[14]

An alternative source of biographical details of Ríos Montt is the U.S. government. A U.S. Department of Defense memo from March 27, 1982 provided a few comments on his personality as well as his role in the government, military history, and education.[15] A general biographical profile of him circulated immediately after the coup on March 23.[16] This profile was a recycled Department of Defense Intelligence Information Report from 1974 when he became military attaché to Spain.[17] According to

[14] Anfuso and Sczepanski, *Efraín Ríos Montt: Servant or Dictator?*.

[15] *A Junior Officer's Comments on the Coup-Before, During and After* (Department of Defense, March 27, 1982).

[16] *Biographic Report-BGEN Jose Efrain ((Rios)) Montt* (Defense Intelligence Agency, March 23, 1982).

[17] *Bio Data-Brigadier General Jose Efrain RIOS Montt*, Department of Defense Intelligence Information Report (Department of Defense, April 2, 1974).

this report, he was a practicing Catholic, unsuccessful presidential candidate, and had an impressive list of military positions. The memo that circulated the day of the coup that brought him to power did not include his religious conversion. However, in a more in depth explanation of the coup, Ríos Montt, and Guatemala in general, the report describes him as "eccentric" and religious. It stated that, "It would be easier to accept his religious and moral idiosyncrasies than the dishonesty found in the previous administration."[18] The memo then implied he would only be in power a short time until Guatemala could return to civilian rule. Even in this Department of Defense biography, his religion is an element worth of mention, but the specifics of religion are inconsequential. The memo only mentioned it to explain some of his eccentricities.

With these biographical details in place, other elements of his regime become clearer. As a faithful member of Verbo church and a recent convert to Protestantism, he felt compelled to include church leaders as advisors in his government. Although Protestantism was growing in Guatemala, Catholics maintained a majority and Verbo members' involvement in the government made Catholics in the state uneasy. The story of his failed attempt at presidency in 1974 also highlights the importance he placed on holding office. His education prepared him for waging war against insurgents in the highlands and his training by U.S. based schools offers an explanation for the similarities between his 'scorched-earth' campaign and the tactics used by the United States in Vietnam. An understanding of the ties between his Pentecostal church in Guatemala and other Pentecostals in the United States helps to make sense of the early relationship between Pat Robertson and Ríos Montt. His conversion to evangelical Protestantism was

[18] *A Junior Officer's Comments on the Coup-Before, During and After*, 3.

absolutely vital for understanding the support he received from various evangelicals in the United States.

His biography provides a base for understanding two conflicting views of this general and his rule in Guatemala. Details about him typically come from two different perspectives: secular and religious. Scholars such as Virginia Garrard-Burnett focus on outward details of his life that include military service, education, religious conversion, and involvement in the church. She offered his previous military experience and failed attempt at presidency as the reasoning for his leadership role in the March coup.[19] Anfuso and Sczepanski's biography focuses on inward motivations of his actions. From this religious perspective, Ríos Montt did not ask for his place in Guatemala's government. He merely answered the call when the young officers asked him to lead a junta. This view placed him merely as a man of God trying to do what he was called to do.[20] Both of these biographers underscore the importance of his religion throughout his presidency. However, each perspective casts suspicion on a different element of his to further its own case.

The narrative of how he achieved power fits into the two conflicting images of this military man. From a conservative evangelical angle, Anfuso and Sczepanski claimed Ríos Montt knew nothing of the coup beforehand. When the young officers called on him to be a part of the ruling junta, he was teaching at Verbo's school. He accepted the position of leader of the junta because, "beyond anything he could ever

[19] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 54–57.

[20] Anfuso and Sczepanski, *Efraín Ríos Montt: Servant or Dictator?*, 116.

adequately explain—God was somehow involved in all this."[21] This version of the story clarified one of his first comments as leader of Guatemala: he called on God as "the only One who gives or takes away authority."[22] From this perspective, the young officers chose Ríos Montt based on his character and reputation as a man of integrity and a good leader, but God was the final author of his rise to power.

The other narrative of his rise to power focused more on his military career and background in politics. This viewpoint considered his vision for Guatemala to be based on a military foundation and did not highlight the importance of religion. U.S. Department of Defense memos that served to brief the U.S. government on the new head of Guatemala did not consider his religion to be a factor in the opening days of his time in power.[23] Even without religious overtones, sources cited his character as a reason for his rise to power. In a press release given to journalists at the first anniversary of the coup, the army stated they gave power to Ríos Montt "because he was a distinguished, capable and honest soldier, and because his professional and moral background guaranteed that corruption would be stamped out in every sphere of national affairs."[24] Regardless of the motivation behind the choice, he quickly brought his religious beliefs into the spotlight with his pronouncements of God's authority. His supporters and opponents navigated these two conflicting images by carefully choosing their words.

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[21] Ibid., 116.

[22] Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Junta Suspends Charter and Bars Politics: Moves Come as Surprise Nation's New Rulers Make No Mention of Vote That U.S. Officials Had Expected Guatemala's New Rulers Suspend the Constitution," *New York Times*; Anfuso and Sczepanski, *Efraín Ríos Montt: Servant or Dictator?*, 117; Harry Genet and Stephen Sywulka, "You Heard It Right: The Dictator Is an Evangelical Christian," *Christianity Today*, April 23, 1982.

[23] *Biographic Report-BGEN Jose Efrain ((Rios)) Montt*.

[24] Black, Jamail, and Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala*, 128.

U.S. Political Context

President Carter's human rights policy became the basis for U.S. relations with Guatemala, even though Carter was not president during the Ríos Mont regime. The Carter administration banned all military aid to Guatemala in 1977 based on its human rights record under General Lucas García. Many people criticized this focus as idealistic and ineffective: the economic ban did not stop all flow of monetary aid into the country and the human rights situation did not improve.[25] In November 1979, Dr. Jeane Kirkpatrick published an article in *Commentary* magazine that offered an analysis of the foreign policy under President Carter. The article, entitled "Dictatorship and Double Standards," provided an explanation for the actions of the United States in situations such as Iran and Nicaragua's revolutions in 1979.[26] As part of her article, Dr. Kirkpatrick wrote of Carter's new approach to foreign policy, "The principal elements of this new approach were said to be two: the conviction that the cold war was over, and the conviction that, this being the case, the U.S. should give priority to North-South problems and help less developed nations achieve their own destiny."[27] Although Dr. Kirkpatrick did not know it when she wrote her analysis, the Reagan administration would completely reverse this theme of Carter's foreign policy.

When Ronald Reagan became President in 1981, his administration brought the Cold War back to the forefront of U.S. foreign politics. This renewed focus soon turned to Central America. With the recent events in Central America, such as Somoza's fall in

[25] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 150.

[26] Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorship and Double Standards," *Commentary*, November 1979.

[27] Ibid., 38.

Nicaragua, the administration quickly reiterated its support for all anti-Communist forces in the region and brought defense against Communism to the forefront of U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere. This often resulted in U.S. support for unlikely candidates in Central America, a tendency which Dr. Kirkpatrick's noted in her article. According to her article, the United States was more likely to support dictatorships with the hope they would eventually give power over to the people of the state. The United States considered Marxist governments more dangerous because they were less likely to give power over when the time came. This understanding of U.S. foreign policy underpinned the Reagan administration's decision to support a dictator such as Ríos Montt in spite of human rights accusations surrounding his presidency.

The United States concentrated on situations in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and later Honduras until Ríos Montt's rise to power in 1982. The Reagan administration preoccupied itself with keeping Communism out of the Western Hemisphere and Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution was a threat to this goal. El Salvador's insurgency also threatened security of the region according to the Reagan administration. Guatemala's ongoing civil war did not stand out among the turbulent region until a dedicated anti-Communist who was also an evangelical Christian gained power. Ríos Montt not only represented secular interests of President Reagan, but he also reflected vitally important religious components of Reagan's presidency. U.S. attention shifted to Guatemala when he was in power and then turned back to other more persistent problems after he lost power in August 1983. This fading U.S. focus proved supporters found his stance on Communism and his religious beliefs attractive. Military leaders of Guatemala after him

were equally vigilant against the Communists, but they did not receive the level of media or public attention Ríos Montt did.

U.S. interest in keeping Guatemala as an ally was not based solely on anti-Communism. Many U.S. businesses had economic interests in keeping Guatemala on their side. CBS aired a special on Guatemala on September 1, 1982 and it included the economic side of this discussion.[28] The report contained an interview with Fred Sherwood, a U.S. businessman and former president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Guatemala. Sherwood spoke out against the guerrillas and described the Guatemalan government as "very, very cooperative." He went on to explain, "We don't have restrictions for environmental things, no restrictions or rules at all so that makes it nice."[29] He also argued that Guatemala did not repress anyone and that the human rights violations were "exaggerated." The CBS report also highlighted the role of United Fruit in the 1954 coup against President Árbenz. U.S. business interests in Guatemala played a role in the desire for President Reagan and his administration to maintain friendly relations with Guatemala. One of the ways it sought to restore a strong diplomatic relationship with Guatemala was by restoring the military aid banned by President Carter.

Because Carter's ban, much of the Reagan administration's dealings with Ríos Montt and Guatemala were based on its attempts to resume military aid to Guatemala. Supporters and opponents of Ríos Montt drew battle lines. They sent many fact-finding commissions to Guatemala to gather information about the human rights situation. Congress debated sending Guatemala more aid in the form of money and military

[28] "CBS Reports: Guatemala," *CBS Evening News* (CBS, September 1, 1982).

[29] Ibid.

supplies. Ríos Montt was especially interested in spare helicopter parts to add to the Guatemalan army's fleet. The Guatemalan military used helicopters extensively in their campaigns to eradicate the Communists in the highlands. For those who saw these attempts as simply a cover for human rights violations, this type of aid seemed particularly undesirable.

Reagan's rhetoric suggested he was thoroughly convinced of the importance of Central America to U.S. security. In a speech to Congress on April 27, 1983, used in Pamela Yates' documentary *When the Mountains Tremble*, Reagan stressed the vital nature of winning peace in Central America.[30] He said, "There can be no question that the national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, the safety of our homeland will be in jeopardy."[31] He provided this as the justification for Congress to allow aid to be sent to countries in Central America fighting insurgents. He continued, "All our neighbors ask of us is assistance in training and arms to protect themselves while they build a better, freer life."[32] The Reagan administration wanted to be free to resume aid to Guatemala and continue aid to other Central American countries. To accomplish this goal, it had to persuade Congress and public opinion that not only was aid vital for national security, but also that states of Central America deserved aid.

To seal the deal for military aid to Guatemala, the Reagan administration employed a campaign of contrasts between Ríos Montt and Lucas García. In the opening

[30] Ronald Reagan, Speech, April 27, 1983, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/search/speeches/speech_srch.html; Pamela Yates et al., *When the Mountains Tremble* ([Burlington, Vt.]; New York, NY: Docurama ; Distributed in the U.S. by New Video, 2004).

[31] Yates et al., *When the Mountains Tremble*.

[32] Ibid.

days of Ríos Montt's regime, death squads stopped roaming streets and urban areas of Guatemala felt safer. His supporters compared his government to that of his predecessor Lucas García and declared Guatemala's human rights situation much improved. While his government continued their scorched-earth campaign in the highlands, cities felt safer and supporters lauded this as a step toward restoring peace and stability. Those who supported resumption of military aid compared his regime to its predecessor and argued that Guatemala had improved markedly under the new president. Those who were skeptical of human rights improvements pointed to rural areas of Guatemala that were still experiencing massacres.

The media also picked up these contrasts between the two generals and the urban and rural areas. CBS Reports highlighted this dichotomy by interviewing two statesmen: one who supported aiding Guatemala and one who did not. Representative Tom Harkin, a Democrat from Iowa, expressed concern with reports of the human rights situation improving. When CBS asked if he believed the State Department's assessment of human rights in Guatemala, he answered, "Absolutely not. There's no way. The pattern has been there for years. . . . I would say that Guatemala probably above all the countries in Central America is the furthest from meeting the criteria of meeting our human rights legislation."[33] Stephen Bosworth, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, countered by saying the Reagan administration did not want a lot of aid, simply a little more military and economic aid. He claimed Guatemala had a favorable trend for human rights and that Ríos Montt's government was not following the same policies as Lucas García's. In Bosworth's mind, Guatemala did not require U.S. aid to succeed, but it would make the

[33] "CBS Reports: Guatemala."

process easier for them and would prove that the United States supported its neighbors in their fight against Communism. These arguments would filter throughout the media coverage of Ríos Montt's time in power.

Eventually, the Reagan administration won the war of words. By January 1983, it convinced Congress to allow military aid to Guatemala in the form of money and equipment, including helicopter parts.[34] In addition to U.S. government aid, U.S. evangelicals sent supplies to Guatemala.[35] Gospel Outreach organized International Love Lift that sent material supplies to Guatemala's neediest areas. According to journalist Sara Diamond, "350 U.S. evangelicals set sail for Guatemala on a boat carrying $1 million worth of food, clothing, medical supplies and housing materials" on the same day Congress allowed aid.[36] This is one of many examples of the U.S. conservative evangelical support for Ríos Montt and his rule in Guatemala. The environment of support for him was not merely one of political allegiances, but one of religious connections as well.

The Religious Right Context

One of the most important clarifications in the discussion of the ties between the United States and Guatemala is who specifically was supporting Ríos Montt's regime. Sources that discuss this topic refer to Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell by name most often. These sources also mention Loren Cunningham, founder of Youth with a Mission,

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[34] Black, Jamail, and Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala*.

[35] Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: the Politics of the Christian Right* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 165.

[36] Sara Diamond, "Pat Robertson's Central America Connection," *Guardian*, September 17, 1986.

because of his involvement with a meeting of religious and political leaders about Ríos Montt in June 1982.[37] Each of these leaders represented a large group of conservative evangelicals who were eager to engage politics to bring about their moral ideals for the world. The rise of the Religious Right is a vital piece of the stage into which Ríos Montt stepped.

A mentality of culture war helped these leaders unify their followers to achieve their common goals. For the Religious Right, the political sphere was a battlefield in which they had to fight to reassert and maintain their moral ideals. They attacked forces of Communism, atheism, and secularism by electing candidates who believed in the same moral tenets they did. By using the language of a war against these forces, the Religious Right circumvented ideological differences in favor of moral unity.[38]

This rhetoric also fit in with language used by government leaders such as Reagan who spoke of winning the war against Communism. The Religious Right related to Reagan and considered him one of their own because he used the same culture war mentality they did. Reagan also embodied the ideals of this movement by using language of morality, evangelicalism, and anticommunism.[39] He used slogans such as "Let's make America great again," and called the United States a "shining city on a hill."[40] Along with his strong moral rhetoric, Reagan also condemned Communism as "the evil

[37] Melander, *The Hour of God?*, 171; Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare*, 165; Sara Diamond, "Pat Robertson's Central America Connection."

[38] Williams, *God's Own Party*, 5–7.

[39] Ibid., 188.

[40] Ibid.

empire."[41] Such pronouncements reassured the Religious Right that Ronald Reagan was the president for them. He aided the Religious Right in putting aside their religious differences and uniting behind a common cause: electing him as president and beginning their moral program for the United States.

A key point for the Religious Right in regards to Guatemala and Central America was an anti-Communist stance. For these conservative evangelicals, Christianity and Communism were mutually exclusive. Communism represented an atheistic worldview that repressed Christians and the church at every opportunity. In the midst of the Cold War, the Religious Right adamantly wanted to keep Communism out of the United States and, by extension, the entire Western Hemisphere. As Michael Lienesch explained in *Redeeming America*, "All told, communism embodies cosmological evil. To these thinkers, it is not simply immoral, it is self-consciously immoral, at war with God and all goodness."[42] Their understanding of Communism as unacceptable both politically and religiously mirrored their own desire to blend politics and religion in the United States.

When Ríos Montt came to power in Guatemala in 1982, he stepped into a U.S. context of President Reagan and the Religious Right. In both the political and religious realm in the United States, influential groups in power stood poised to support an anti-Communist, evangelical leader. Ríos Montt used the same language they did and purported the same goals for his country that both Ronald Reagan and the Religious Right had for theirs. Ríos Montt wanted to strengthen the people of Guatemala from within, just as the Religious Right did. He also fought against the Communists in his

[41] Lienesch, *Redeeming America*, 211.

[42] Ibid., 214.

country, which Reagan supported in his efforts to keep Communism out of the hemisphere as a whole. The combination of the Religious Right and President Reagan created a perfect storm for Ríos Montt to garner the support of many in the United States.

Specific Ties between Guatemala and the United States

When discussing the support of the Religious Right for Ríos Montt, it is important to clarify specific connections between conservative evangelicals in the United States and his government. This support was not just based on similar ideologies or rhetoric; the conservative evangelicals sent monetary aid and supplies to Guatemala during his time in power. The leadership was not alone in its support of him. Conservative evangelical leaders published their support for Ríos Montt in their periodicals and books, which their followers read and responded to. They also used the influential medium of television to convince their followers to believe in his vision for Guatemala. Part of this agenda of support for Ríos Montt included discrediting those who spoke against him. Many leaders and their publications discounted human rights accusations by mainstream organizations such as Amnesty International or Americas Watch. By openly condemning his opponents, conservative evangelical leaders further endorsed his actions as the leader of Guatemala. The specific ties between conservative evangelicals in the United States and his Guatemala included financial aid, media coverage, supplies for recovery, and rhetorical endorsements for the direction Ríos Montt wanted to take Guatemala.

Pat Robertson represented the strongest tangible link between Ríos Montt and conservative evangelicals in the United States. As a charismatic Pentecostal, Robertson's religious traditions were most similar to those of Ríos Montt's own Verbo Church. Ríos Montt had general evangelical appeal for U.S. conservative evangelicals and he also held

specific kinship with Pat Robertson and his Pentecostal followers. Robertson traveled to Guatemala City mere days after Ríos Montt gained power through a coup. The purpose of his visit was to interview Ríos Montt for his "700 Club" television program. This trip also contributed a strong show of allegiance on the part of Robertson: he clearly believed Ríos Montt's assertion that God had called him to be head of Guatemala. Robertson recounted in his 1991 book *New World Order*, "I was in Guatemala City three days after Ríos Montt overthrew the corrupt Lopez Garcia government [*sic*]. The people had been dancing in the street for joy, literally fulfilling the words of Solomon who said, 'When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice.'"[43] Robertson's trip provided an opportunity for a pro-Ríos Montt eyewitness account of the days following his rise to power. It would be easier for conservative evangelicals to discount reports of Ríos Montt as anything less than a good Christian leader because they had witnesses such as Robertson to counter negative reports.

Secular media turned their attention to this connection between Robertson and Ríos Montt when the *New York Times* reported his statement about aid from U.S. evangelicals in May 1982.[44] According to Ríos Montt, the United States would send a billion dollars to Guatemala by way of Pat Robertson and his followers. In Ed Rable's CBS Reports interview with Ríos Montt, he clarified his claim by explaining, "The North American economy is based on dollars, the Christian economy is based on love. . . . When I say one billion dollars, I'm saying a little because when one person works for the

[43] Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Dallas: Word Pub., 1991), 228.

[44] Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan."

benefit of another person, its value cannot be measured."[45] This claim by Ríos Montt became the most used example of U.S. conservative evangelicals' support.

Another often-cited example of connections between Ríos Montt and the Religious Right was a June 1982 meeting held in Washington, D.C. Ríos Montt's advisor and fellow church member Fransisco Bianchi traveled to the United States to meet with other evangelical leaders to discuss how to support the new Guatemalan leader. Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Loren Cunningham from Youth with a Mission attended this meeting as well as political leaders who were also evangelicals such as OAS Ambassador William Middendorf, advisor to the President Edwin Meese, Interior Secretary James Watt, and U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala Fred Chapin.[46] CBS also reported this meeting in their 1982 special report on Guatemala.[47] According to Sara Diamond's 1986 *Guardian* article, this meeting and a later State Department briefing focused on the need to offer Ríos Montt private support while the Reagan administration could not provide military aid to him and his government.[48] The conservative evangelical leaders who attended this meeting were interested in supporting Ríos Montt and his new government in tangible ways: they wanted to send financial and material aid to Guatemala to help him realize his vision for a new Guatemala.

Although Ríos Montt did not receive the quoted billions of dollars, he did receive aid from conservative evangelicals through organizations such as International Love Lift.

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[45] "CBS Reports: Guatemala."

[46] Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare*, 165.

[47] "CBS Reports: Guatemala."

[48] Sara Diamond, "Pat Robertson's Central America Connection."

Gospel Outreach started International Love Lift to assist Guatemalans with material aid.[49] In a February 1983 report on the connection between U.S. evangelicals and Ríos Montt, Donna Eberwine wrote about supplies sent to Guatemala as soon as Congress lifted the aid ban. Her report echoed the facts of Sara Diamond's report of the same incident, but Eberwine included, "500,000 Spanish-language Bibles. All of this cargo had been collected by American fundamentalists. . . ."[50] She reported the supplies were sent to rural areas in Guatemala where they were most needed. Eberwine also pointed to the usefulness of such organizations for the Reagan administration's campaign to resume military aid to Guatemala. International Love Lift provided an opportunity for conservative evangelicals in the United States to make their support for Ríos Montt and Guatemala tangible.

Conservative evangelicals provided Ríos Montt with spiritual aid in addition to their material efforts. Pat Robertson heavily promoted International Love Lift on his '700 Club' television program, where he asked his viewers not only for financial and material support, but also for prayers and spiritual encouragement.[51] CBS Reports included a clip of Robertson praying specifically for Ríos Montt and then charging his viewers, "You continue to pray if you would and don't stop round the clock because he's going to need all of our prayers continuously."[52] According to Pat Robertson and his fellow conservative evangelicals, Ríos Montt needed assistance from God to discern how to rule rightly and with integrity. Conservative evangelicals considered prayers as

[49] Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare*, 165.

[50] Donna Eberwine, "To Ríos Montt, With Love Lift," *The Nation*, February 26, 1983, 238.

[51] Sara Diamond, "Pat Robertson's Central America Connection"; Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare*.

[52] "CBS Reports: Guatemala."

helpful as any sort of material aid sent to Guatemala. Ríos Montt affirmed the necessity of this support when he described the "economy of love" to Ed Rable during his previously mentioned CBS interview.

Another much reported connection between Ríos Montt and the United States was President Reagan's assessment of the human rights accusations leveled against Ríos Montt. On his tour of Central America, President Reagan met with him in Honduras in December 1982. After the meeting, Reagan declared him a man of good character who simply received a "bum rap" from human rights activists. Publications such as *New York Times, New Republic,* and *National Review* recorded this quote in their coverage of Ríos Montt and Guatemala.[53] Those who supported Ríos Montt and Reagan agreed with his assessment and considered the human rights accusations as unfounded and the result of secular attacks on a Christian leader. Conservative evangelicals again opposed eyewitness accounts of human rights abuses with witnesses of their own. First Robertson and then President Reagan met with Ríos Montt and declared him worthy of support.

U.S. missionaries also served as eyewitness sources to explain the situation in Guatemala for conservative evangelicals. Ray and Helen Elliot served as missionaries to Guatemala sent by Wycliffe Bible Translators. *Christianity Today* reporter Tom Minnery used them extensively as sources in his 1984 article "Why We Can't Always Trust the News Media."[54] This article, which will be discussed in greater detail below, contained many arguments conservative evangelicals used against secular media who reported

[53] Steven R. Weisman, "Reagan Denounces Threats to Peace in Latin America: Winds up a Five-Day Tour On Flight Home, He Says He Is Leaning Toward Giving Guatemala Military Aid," *New York Times* (December 5, 1982); Anthony Lewis, "Howdy, Genghis," *New York Times* (December 6, 1982); "Confession Time in Guatemala," *New York Times* (March 21, 1983), "Southern Strategy," *National Review*, December 24, 1982; "Flying Down to Rio," *New Republic*, December 27, 1982.

[54] Minnery, "Why We Can't Always Trust the News Media."

human rights violations by Ríos Montt's government. Veronica Melander's dissertation included an interview with Ray Elliott who served as an advisor for Ríos Montt and worked as a liaison between people in the Ixil area and the government.[55] Melander's interview portrayed him as pro-government and intent on fighting the guerrillas in his area. Witnesses such as Elliott further strengthened the conservative evangelical reasoning for supporting Ríos Montt and his government.

These specific examples of support are necessary for understanding the connections between the conservative evangelicals in the United States and Ríos Montt's government in Guatemala. Conservative evangelicals were not simply cheering for his vision for Guatemala, they were also sending him money and prayers to achieve his goals. Skeptical of mainstream media coverage and human rights accusations, they had their own sources to counter these stories. The conservative evangelical press portrayed him as an evangelical leader with beliefs just like those of U.S. Christians. Leaders such as Pat Robertson lent verbal, spiritual, and material aid to Guatemala to fulfill the ideal of an anti-Communist, evangelical Guatemala. When news media, secular or religious, spoke of conservative evangelicals' "support" of Ríos Montt, they were not merely speaking of rhetorical flourishes and TV prayers. They were speaking of financial, material, and spiritual aid flowing from the United States to Guatemala.

Conclusion

When Ríos Montt came to power on March 23, 1982, these five threads of context came together to create a unique environment for his time in power. To understand the paradox presented by Ríos Montt and his government, it is vital to consider the context

[55] Veronica Melander, *The Hour of God?*.

surrounding him. Without the strong presence of the Religious Right in the United States, and President Reagan's renewed commitment to fighting Communism, U.S. conservative evangelicals may not have considered Ríos Montt important. Without the relatively strong presence of Protestantism in Guatemala, Ríos Montt may have been another military dictator with no religious focus. All of these factors came together to create a perfect storm: a possibility for conservative evangelicals in the United States to support a military dictator in Guatemala who claimed to be born-again.

Ríos Montt presented a conundrum for those covering him in the media. He spoke of being born-again, was a faithful church attender, and proclaimed a moral vision for Guatemala that would bring peace and justice and remove all corruption. At the same time, critics of his administration called attention to thousands of people dying in the highlands, most of who were Maya. To navigate these competing images of Ríos Montt, the media and those following his story employed rhetoric to cast doubt on one image or the other. Those who opposed him cast suspicion on his religious beliefs and his moral vision for Guatemala. Those who supported Ríos Montt doubted the accusations his opponents leveled against him.

Most of these supporters believed in him because of his anti-Communist vision and his evangelical religion. For the U.S. conservative evangelicals who sent him aid, both the anti-Communist and the evangelical rhetoric appealed to their political goals. However, as their rhetoric shows, his evangelical image made him a relatable leader in their eyes. The conservative evangelicals in the United States supported Ríos Montt more for his evangelical religion than for his anti-communist program.

The following chapters will focus on these two themes. By analyzing secular and religious media—such as newspapers and magazines—this thesis will examine the use of rhetoric to grapple with the competing images of Ríos Montt. It will also provide evidence from the evangelical Christian press that speaks to the importance of Ríos Montt's religion over and above his anti-Communism. The context described above is the foundation on which all of the press coverage rests. The environment into which he came to power helps to explain why any U.S. evangelicals were supporting this leader in Guatemala. Without an understanding of the particular context, the rhetoric and specific evidence provided by the media does not present a full picture of the unlikely pairing of a Guatemalan military dictator and leaders of the Religious Right.

CHAPTER THREE

Witnessing the Storm: Secular Press

"Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan: Says Evangelical Christians in U.S. Offer Millions and He Won't Need Other Help." [1]
"U.S. team: Guatemala massacres go on." [2]

These two headlines presented conflicting opinions about Efraín Ríos Montt. A swirling discussion on religion in politics, human rights abuses, evangelical Christianity, and turmoil in Central America centered on him. Throughout 1982 and into 1983, newspapers documented his tumultuous term. Some coverage accused him of genocide while others hailed him as the solution for Guatemala's ailments. The mainstream newspapers recorded these opinions and added information to the conversation about Guatemala. Mainstream magazines contributed their opinions to the debates by filtering news reports through a specific viewpoint. This chapter will explore secular news reports about Ríos Montt and the situation in Guatemala to uncover what information the average reader had available and to explore how these newspapers reconciled conflicting images of him.

An in-depth analysis of newspaper coverage of his regime illuminates the difficulty of gaining evidence about the Guatemalan situation. Not a lot of press coverage circulated about either Ríos Montt or Guatemala. In Guatemala, the government restricted the press. News reports coming to the United States came from

[1] Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan."

[2] Associated Press, "U.S. Team: Guatemala Massacres Go On," *San Francisco Examiner*, May 23, 1982.

urban areas or government officials. Information from the highlands, where most human rights violations occurred, originated from organizations affiliated with the Catholic Church or from human rights organizations such as Amnesty International or Americas Watch. Many conservative evangelical leaders did not trust these mainstream sources and refused to credit the human rights abuse claims.

Studying these newspapers and magazines in contrast to Protestant press helps identify how each group dealt with the conundrum of Ríos Montt. Both mainstream and Protestant media presented the idea that an evangelical Christian dictator accused of genocide was a contradiction. These groups then had to decide how to frame the paradox in order to understand it. The secular press chose to cast suspicion on his religion: they labeled him a fanatic, his church a sect, his actions as strange, and his alliances with U.S. Christians as unusual. By framing the rhetoric to discount Ríos Montt's religious beliefs, the secular press found its way of reconciling the unlikely pairing of Christianity and human rights abuses.

The newspapers selected provide a representative sample across the United States. The *New York Times* represents how a large and influential East Coast paper treated Guatemala, while the *San Francisco Examiner* supplies a view from a smaller newspaper from the West Coast. Various regional papers studied fill in the regional gaps as well as represent those likely read more frequently by the same conservative evangelicals who were reading *Christianity Today* and other evangelical publications. Each newspaper contained news reports with general information about the Guatemalan events. The selection also offers a variety of editorials to help clarify different biases in reporting. *New York Times* coverage will begin the study. This in-depth analysis of

rhetoric surrounding Ríos Montt and Guatemala will serve as a base to contrast with the later newspapers.

From the beginning of their coverage, the *New York Times* [hereafter *NYT*] introduced Ríos Montt's religious beliefs. The *NYT* coverage of General Efraín Ríos Montt and his reign in Guatemala first appeared on March 25, 1982, two days after the coup that brought him to power.[3] The newspaper's foreign correspondent Raymond Bonner referred to Ríos Montt as a "born-again Christian" and included his speech in which he credited God with his rise to power.[4] The article quoted Ríos Montt as saying, "I have confidence in my God, my Master and my King, that he will guide me, because only He can grant or take away power."[5] Six days after the coup took place, Bonner again mentioned his religion by labeling him a "fundamentalist Christian and a lay preacher in the Church of the Christian Word."[6] Most of the words these *NYT* articles used to describe his religion placed his beliefs in a negative light by employing a tone of skepticism when considering the effects of his faith on his ability to lead Guatemala. Other reporters adopted this rhetorical device and used it to solve the paradox of an evangelical dictator.

After Ríos Montt spent three months in office, Raymond Bonner again highlighted his religion when he reported on Ríos Montt's relationship with conservative evangelicals in the United States. Bonner wrote, "The military junta has asked for neither

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[3] David Bird, "Guatemala's New Chief: Efrain Rios Montt" (New York, N.Y., March 25, 1982).

[4] Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Junta Suspends Charter and Bars Politics."

[5] Ibid.

[6] Raymond Bonner, "Behind the Guatemala Coup: A General Takes Over and Changes Its Course" (March 29, 1982).

military nor economic aid from the United States, primarily because the country has been offered millions of dollars by evangelical Christians in the United States, according to Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt."[7] The article further clarified that Ríos Montt believed this aid would come from Pat Robertson and the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). According to the report, "Dr. Robertson said his organization sent $350,000 to Guatemala for earthquake relief several years ago and 'we hope that we would be able to give comparable assistance at the present time.'"[8] Robertson's reported promise of aid represented the strongest demonstration of support from conservative evangelicals that appeared in the secular news. Other reports before and after this one would allude to support from U.S. evangelicals, but this outright promise of aid remained the strongest connection.

Ríos Montt's religion continued as a topic in *NYT* coverage until the end of his rule in 1983. Much of the rhetoric surrounding him concerned his beliefs. *NYT* reporters labeled Ríos Montt a "born-again Christian" in many articles, as well as, "fundamentalist," "evangelical," and "Pentecostal."[9] The secular *NYT* reporters did not parse out distinctions between religious terms describing him. Christian periodicals, as

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[7] Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan."

[8] Ibid.

[9] Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan," *New York Times* (May 20, 1982); Raymond Bonner, "Behind the Guatemala Coup: A General Takes Over and Changes Its Course" (March 29, 1982); Kenneth A. Briggs, "John Paul's Journey Is His Hardest Yet," *New York Times* (February 27, 1983); Richard S. Meislin, "Guatemalan Lifts Curb on Freedoms: New Leader's Move Is Seen as a Step Toward Civilian Rule New Leader in Guatemala Lifts Curb on Civil Liberties," *New York Times* (August 10, 1983); "The Dirtiest War," *New York Times* (October 17, 1982); Richard J. Meislin, "Pope to Visit Salvador Next Year; Other Stops in the Area Expected: John Paul to Pay Visit to Salvador Next Year," *New York Times* (November 29, 1982); "Guatemalan Calls Pope an Ally," *New York Times* (March 6, 1983); Barbara Crossette, "Tension High in Guatemala As Chief Is Pressed on Vote," *New York Times* (June 20, 1983); Barbara Crossette, "Guatemala's New Strife: A Savage War of Words," *New York Times* (July 5, 1983).

will be discussed later, used these particular terms to garner and reinforce their support or rejection of Ríos Montt. The *NYT* reporters never defined any of the religious terminology used and appeared to use terms such as evangelical, Pentecostal, and fundamentalist interchangeably. They only offered the clarification that he was not a Catholic, an important fact to note of a leader in Latin America. As a mainstream publication, this newspaper's reporters did not attempt to distinguish his type of Protestant Christianity. They simply reported the anomaly of a "born-again Christian" as a ruler in Central America.

As well as terminology concerning Ríos Montt's faith, reporters focused on how his faith interacted with his politics. *NYT* reporter Marlise Simons noted his weekly television addresses and described them as "sermon-like speeches" which were filled with his own moral code for Guatemala.[10] Originally, she saw these moral sermons encouraging his people, "More modest folk are said to like his appeals against corruption and in favor of a new morality."[11] By July 1983, however, reporter Barbara Crossette cited these weekly broadcasts as part of his tensions with the Catholic Church and the middle-class. She reported, "The general's weekly Sunday night 'sermons' on the Government-owned channel are a source of annoyance to many middle-class people, who say they feel they are being patronized."[12] Ríos Montt also used members of his own

[10] Marlise Simons, "For Elite in Guatemala City, Nervousness Amid Splendor," *New York Times* (October 26, 1982).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Barbara Crossette, "Guatemala's New Strife."

church as advisers in his political role.[13] Philip Taubman noted rising tensions with his government reporting that these advisors added to discontent with his leadership: "the military objected to his moralistic style and his reliance on advisers from the Church of the Word, a California-based evangelical Protestant church . . . ." [14] Again, the *NYT* reports about Ríos Montt highlighted the negative aspects of his faith.

NYT coverage of Ríos Montt also focused on human rights violations early in his regime. In a report by Michael Massing on May 5, 1982, he brought up both violence in urban areas and rural areas. Massing wrote, "General Ríos Montt . . . may well be able to curb the urban violence."[15] In contrast to his hesitant optimism about violence in cities, Massing appeared skeptical about the general's ability to cease violence in rural areas: "Military violence in the countryside, however, is deeply entrenched. . . . he [Ríos Montt] is a product of the military and has given no sign that he understands the deep social and economic tensions that have produced the war in the countryside or that he has the vision and will to reduce them."[16] Mainstream reports about him clearly distinguished between ceasing violence in urban areas and ending rural violence. This thread continues throughout the *NYT* coverage of Ríos Montt: multiple articles written between 1982 and 1983 chronicle the decrease of violence in urban areas.[17]

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[13] Philip Taubman, "Guatemalan Army Reported Divided: Junior Officers Called Restless Four Weeks After Coup -- Little Policy Change," *New York Times* (September 7, 1983); Richard J. Meislin, "Guatemalan Lifts Curb on Freedoms."

[14] Richard J. Meislin, "Guatemalan Lifts Curbs on Freedoms."

[15] Michael Massing, "Courting Guatemala," *New York Times* (May 5, 1982).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Raymond Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan: Says Evangelical Christians in U.S. Offer Millions and He Won't Need Other Help," *New York Times* (May 20, 1982); Bernard Weinraub, "Guatemala Exiles Assail Junta," *New York Times* (June 3, 1982); Raymond Bonner, "Some Rights Gains seen in Guatemala: Improvement for Middle Class -- Violence Is Said to Grip Indians in Countryside,"

Marlise Simons specifically dealt with the lack of information in the city concerning the highland areas in her article "For Elite in Guatemala City, Nervousness Amid Splendor." Her interview with an urban Guatemalan woman produced this statement, "We don't know what's going on in the highlands. . . . There has to be trouble because the Indians have not come to sell [their embroidery] for months. But we almost prefer to know nothing. It's better for our nerves."[18] Comments such as this illuminated for reporters the difficulty of uncovering information from rural areas. Part of this difficulty lay with the government that had placed restrictions on Guatemalan press. Amnesty International's fact-finding missions were one of the only sources of information. Since people in Guatemalan cities had trouble receiving information about the highlands, it was not surprising that conservative Protestants in the United States doubted what information they had.

Ríos Montt and his predecessor Romeo Lucas García offered another contrast found in *NYT* reports of Guatemala's government. In many of the reports about reconsideration of U.S. aid to Guatemala, the rhetoric used included terms such as "improved," "positive change," "considerable improvement," and "significant steps" toward solving the problem of human rights violations.[19] Ríos Montt's Guatemala

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New York Times (June 3, 1982); Raymond Bonner, "Article 5 -- No Title," *New York Times* (June 6, 1982); Anthony Lewis, "Howdy, Genghis," *New York Times* (December 6, 1982); Steven R. Weisman, "Reporter's Notebook: A Winning Smile: A Reporter's Notebook: All Smiles on Latin Trip," *New York Times* (December 6, 1982); Richard J. Meislin, "Rights and Central America: For Many, Situation Is Grim: For Central Americans, A Grim Rights Situation," *New York Times* (January 24, 1983); "Confession Time in Guatemala," *New York Times* (March 21, 1983); "News Summary: Sunday, November 13, 1983," *New York Times* (November 13, 1983),.

[18] Marlise Simons "For Elite in Guatemala City, Nervousness Amid Splendor."

[19] Richard J. Meislin, "U.S. Military Aid for Guatemala Continuing Despite Official Curbs: U.S. Military Aid for Guatemala Continuing Despite Official Curbs," *New York Times* (December 19, 1982); Raymond Bonner, "President Approved Policy of Preventing 'Cuba-Model States': Reagan Approved a Policy Against 'Cuba-Model States'," *New York Times* (April 7, 1983); Tom Wicker, "A Dictator or

looked better than Lucas García's and this enabled the Reagan administration to reconsider sending military aid to Guatemala. As one article in the *NYT* stated, ". . . the Government of Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt has taken 'significant steps' to end human rights abuses and was a considerable improvement over his predecessor, Gen. Romeo Lucas García, whose repressive policies were anathema to both the Carter and Reagan Administration."[20] Seven months later, the *NYT* ran an article that stated, "There seems little question but that the Ríos Montt regime . . . is less violent than its predecessor, under Gen. Romeo Lucas García."[21] The differences between Ríos Montt and Lucas García allowed supporters of Ríos Montt to call the Guatemalan situation "better" even when international agencies still reported human rights violations.

The *NYT* also noted U.S. reaction to Ríos Montt's rise to power regarding his requests, or lack thereof, for aid for Guatemala. The first mention came in an article entitled, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan."[22] This article ran two months after he became Guatemala's leader and it highlighted a promise of aid from evangelical Christians in the United States. In early June 1982, he again denied any assistance offered by the U.S. government. This denial may have been connected to the meeting held in Washington D.C. to discuss ways to privately support the Guatemalan leader. By

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Something," *New York Times* (August 8, 1983);"Special Envoy Praises Guatemala," *New York Times* (June 13, 1983); Raymond Bonner, "U.S. Now Backing Guatemala Loans: Reporting Gains on Rights, It Plans to Halt Blockage of Development Bank Aid," *New York Times* (October 10, 1982); Bernard Weinraub, "Reagan Policy in Central America: After 2 Years, Tough Tone Softens: Reagan's Policy in Central America: After 2 Years, the Tough Tone Softens," *New York Times* (January 25, 1983); "U.S. Expected to End Long Freeze On Military Aid for Guatemalans," *New York Times* (January 3, 1983).

[20] Weinraub, "Reagan Policy in Central America."

[21] Wicker, "A Dictator or Something."

[22] Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan."

November of the same year, the Reagan administration reconsidered aid to Guatemala and the media ceased reporting Ríos Montt's denials of U.S. aid.[23]

The discussion of sending military aid to Guatemala included many voices. Amnesty International's October 1982 report on the state of Guatemalan human rights affected the conversation by convincing Ríos Montt's opponents he did not deserve aid. This report claimed, "2,600 Indians and peasants of Guatemala, many of them women and children, had been massacred since Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt took power in March."[24] The distinction between violence in urban areas and violence in rural areas came into play here again. Amnesty International's report cited violence to Indians and peasants, while the State Department emphasized improvements in human rights in cities.

President Reagan inadvertently entered into this conversation in December of 1982. On his way back from a visit to Latin America, President Reagan told reporters he thought Ríos Montt was getting a "bum rap" with his human rights record and that he would support resuming military aid to Guatemala.[25] The *NYT,* and the mainstream press in general, quoted this comment multiple times throughout the duration of coverage of the U.S. decision about aid to Guatemala.[26]

During this decision process, another difference of opinions surfaced when the Reagan administration cited the calmer countryside as proof the human rights situation

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[23] Bernard Weinraub, "U.S. Considers Guatemala Arms Aid," *New York Times* (November 24, 1982).

[24] The Associated Press, "Report on Guatemala Killings" (October 12, 1982).

[25] Steven R. Weisman, "Reagan Denounces Threats to Peace in Latin America."

[26] Ibid.; Lewis, "Howdy, Genghis"; "Confession Time in Guatemala"; "Southern Strategy"; "Flying Down to Rio."

was improving.[27] Again, organizations such as Amnesty International, Americas Watch, and church-related groups disagreed with the State Department's assessment. They argued that, "the military conducted a five-month wave of terror in enough selected locations in the countryside to cause widespread intimidation of the people, thus convincing them that continued support of the leftists was hazardous to their lives."[28] On January 8, 1983, the United States lifted the embargo on selling arms to Guatemala.[29] The discussion continued past this decision in January in the same vein: the Reagan administration praised Guatemala's government for its improved human right record while various human rights organizations condemned Guatemala for continuing to murder people in the highlands. These groups urged the U.S. government to cease aid to Guatemala for human rights reasons, but government aid continued.[30]

To present a fuller picture of the news and discussions that took place about Ríos Montt beyond the East Coast, other newspapers from other parts of the country must be considered. The *San Francisco Examiner* [hereafter *Examiner*] was a newspaper on the opposite coast. Although this paper often had similar information to the *NYT*, it also contained different stories, opinions, and information about the Guatemalan situation. Some of the same discussions occurred including the contrast between cities and rural areas, reports of both President Reagan and the Pope's visits, and a general mixing of

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[27] Richard J. Meislin, "Uneasy Peace Comes To Rural Guatemala But Disquiet Lingers: Peace Comes to Guatemala, but Disquiet Lingers," *New York Times* (December 22, 1982).

[28] Ibid.

[29] Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Lifts Embargo on Military Sales to Guatemalans: Reports Rights Progress $6.3 Million Purchase Allowed -- 77 Critics in Congress Trying to Block Move U.S., Reporting Gains on Rights, Lifts Arms Embargo on Guatemala," *New York Times* (January 8, 1983).

[30] "Rights Unit Cites Guatemala," *New York Times*, (May 8, 1983).

religion and politics. The *Examiner* also brought up more specific details about the actual church Ríos Montt attended. This West Coast paper referred to Ríos Montt with less focus on his religious beliefs than the *NYT*. By studying these differences in information, a more complete picture of the information available concerning him emerges; the *Examiner* also offers another opportunity to consider the rhetoric used to reconcile the paradox of Ríos Montt.

Examiner reporters dealt with Ríos Montt's religion differently than the *NYT*. It did not initially draw attention to his religion in the news articles about the new leader. Reports which chronicled events in Guatemala simply referred to him as "leader of the junta," "rightist army officer," and a "strongman."[31] The first mention of his religion came in Dick Nolan's editorial entitled "Guatemala's Mr. Chips." The more notable difference between the *Examiner* and the *NYT* was the placement of the discussion of religion. For the *NYT,* Ríos Montt's religion came up in the news articles first chronicling his rise to power. The *Examiner,* however, discussed his religion in depth in editorials, not in news reports. Nolan's piece not only referred to Ríos Montt as "recently converted born-again Christian," but he also included his quote about God placing him in authority.[32] When *Examiner* articles did use religious rhetoric to describe Ríos Montt, they employed similar terms to other papers: "born-again Christian" appeared most frequently.[33] In many of the articles included in this study, the term evangelical

[31] "Guatemala Army Rightists Rebel; President Flee," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 23, 1982); "Guatemala Junta Tightens Grips on Country," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 24, 1982); United Press International, "Guatemala Strongman: How Right?," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 25, 1982).

[32] Dick Nolan, "Guatemala's Mr. Chips," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 26, 1982).

[33] George de Lama, "Hints Surface of a Second Guatemala Coup," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 27, 1982); United Press International, "Guatemala Gets Sole Ruler After 2 Ousted," *San Francisco*

described his rhetoric, beliefs, church, and weekly-televised speeches.[34] Most of these occurrences of "evangelical" appeared after General Óscar Humberto Mejía Victores replaced Ríos Montt as leader of Guatemala. As with other news sources, the *Examiner* cited religion as one possible reason for Ríos Montt's loss of power.

The *Examiner* ignored a vital link between Ríos Montt and evangelical Christians in the United States featured in the *NYT*. While the *NYT* reported Pat Robertson's offer of financial aid to Guatemala, the *Examiner* did not report this story in any form. *NYT* reported Pat Robertson's offer of millions on May 20, 1982.[35] Instead, the *Examiner* ran a story with the headline "Guatemala says guerillas kill 43 Indians."[36] In the days following, the newspaper continued coverage of fact-finding missions seeking out the truth of Guatemala's situation, but no mention of Pat Robertson's aid appeared.[37] For the remainder of Ríos Montt's time in power, the *Examiner* mentioned his religion, referred to his specific church, and used religious terms to describe himself and his actions. However, the newspaper paid a significant lack of attention to the ties present in the United States.

Examiner (June 10, 1982); "Church, U.S. OK New Chief of Guatemala," *San Francisco Examiner* (August 10, 1983).

[34] Dave Mitchell, "Guatemala's Big News is Corruption," *San Francisco Examiner* (April 11, 1982); Associated Press, "Rios Montt is Dumped for Defense Chief," *San Francisco Examiner* (August 8, 1983); Associated Press, "Tough, Taciturn Mejia Victores Hates Marxists," *San Francisco Examiner* (August 9, 1983); "Church, U.S. OK New Chief of Guatemala."

[35] Bonner, "Guatemala Leader Reports Aid Plan."

[36] United Press International, "Guatemala Says Guerrillas Kill 43 Indians," *San Francisco Examiner* (May 20, 1982).

[37] Associated Press, "U.S. Team: Guatemala Massacres Go On"; "Amnesty Offer for Terrorists," *San Francisco Examiner* (May 25, 1982).

Other details also set the *Examiner* apart from the *NYT*. In the first articles after Ríos Montt's coup and rise to power, the *Examiner* provided maps of Guatemala and other basic introductory features for the readers.[38] The *NYT* simply stated the events in Guatemala without extra information. The San Francisco paper, therefore, did not appear to cover Guatemala frequently and did not follow the country closely until this coup in 1982. As in other publications, secular and Protestant, this paper limited the Central American coverage to other states such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras. Those places existed more in the news and periodicals than Guatemala.

The *Examiner* included more details about Ríos Montt's specific church than the *NYT*. These distinctions occurred mainly at the end of his time in power and after his Defense Minister, Mejía Victores, took power. In these instances, Ríos Montt's church is labeled a "sect," "Church of the Word," "Evangelical Church of the Word of California," and "Eureka-based Protestant evangelist sect, the Church of the Word."[39] The fact that this paper utilized 'sect' was particularly notable. "Sect" carried negative connotations and cast doubt on the legitimacy of this particular evangelical church and therefore his beliefs. Throughout the rhetoric used about him in of all these secular publications, suspicion and a questioning tone appeared concerning his faith. These publications resolved the contradiction of his claims of evangelical Christianity with the accusations of genocide leveled at him by doubting his religious claims.

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[38] "Guatemala Army Rightists Rebel; President Flee"; "Guatemala Junta Tightens Grips on Country"; United Press International, "Guatemala Kills Election but Doesn't Call Another One," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 25, 1982).

[39] Associated Press, "Pope Preaches Hope to Needy Honduras," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 8, 1983); Associated Press, "Rios Montt is Dumped for Defense Chief"; Associated Press, "Guatemalan Leader Ends Secret Court," *San Francisco Examiner* (August 9, 1983); Associated Press, "Tough, Taciturn Mejia Victores Hates Marxists."

One article contained a unique comment about Ríos Montt's church tucked among these details. The *Examiner* ran an Associated Press (AP) article on March 8, 1983 about the Pope's visit to Honduras. In this article, the AP reported the Church of the Word wanted "to convert the predominately Catholic Indians. He [Ríos Montt] says he wants to help improve their lot. . . . "[40] The article contrasted this note about the church with a statistic from the Amnesty International report: "But Amnesty International . . . says Ríos Montt's security forces have slaughtered at least 2,600 Indians, many of them women and children."[41] The newspaper did not offer readers a concluding statement siding with either the church or Amnesty International. Instead, the periodical left judgment to its readers. Some evangelical readers could focus on his words while others might look to his deeds. If evangelicals who supported Ríos Montt and did not trust the secular media read this detail, they could have considered this report an attempt by the mainstream media to cast doubt on a faithful man who tried to convert an unsaved people group. Others who did not support him might look to his actions in the highlands instead.

More specific details about Ríos Montt's faith showed up in an article about his government. April 11, 1982, just a few weeks after the coup, an *Examiner* article discussed his early strategies for combating corruption in Guatemala. Reporter Dave Mitchell quoted Guatemalan army officers as "surprised that Ríos Montt in his statements has depended on little more than evangelical rhetoric and has not addressed the guerilla

[40] Associated Press, "Pope Preaches Hope to Needy Honduras."

[41] Ibid.

war here and the government's financial troubles."[42] Other articles in this paper and in the *NYT* mentioned Ríos Montt's sermons and tendency to sound as if he were preaching, but none used this specific term of "evangelical rhetoric." By labeling Ríos Montt's words as 'evangelical,' Mitchell gave U.S. evangelicals something to claim while those who were not evangelical could consider this label dismissive. This article also contained a fairly accurate description of his church: "He is a convert from Catholicism to the charismatic movement and its belief in the power to heal, prophesize and speak in tongues."[43] Other accounts of his faith did not use these specifics, but they were significant because they linked him to a particular category of Christianity both in Guatemala and in the United States. These religious ties were especially important in the *Examiner*'s coverage because the paper reported no financial or material aid efforts. Unlike the *NYT*, the *Examiner* ignored the more tangible connections between the conservative evangelicals and Ríos Montt and instead mentioned the theological ties.

Editorials also offered a way for newspapers to record opinions and different elements about Ríos Montt, Guatemala, and even Central America as a whole. David E. Halvorsen wrote an editorial for the *Examiner* about President Reagan's trip to Central America that chronicled reasons for the visit. Halvorsen discussed Reagan's assertions that Guatemalan aid would resume and how Ríos Montt may have affected that decision: "He [President Reagan] may have gone too far in hints that U.S. military aid to the Guatemalan dictatorship will be resumed. . . . He may have been too impressed with the fast talk of Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt and hence too praiseful of that

[42] Dave Mitchell, "Guatemala's Big News Is Corruption."

[43] Ibid.

voluble head-knocker."[44] Again, the reporter mentioned Ríos Montt's rhetoric and speaking ability, but not in a positive light. Halvorsen used an editorial platform to provide conclusions about Reagan's visit to Central America as well as add aspects of Ríos Montt's personality to the broader conversation. He also expressed skepticism about Ríos Montt in line with the secular media's tendency to doubt his religious conviction.

One other editorial in the *Examiner* provided a different perspective of the Guatemalan situation. Although William Randolph Hearst wrote about the entire situation in Central America and not specifically Ríos Montt, his comments added to the greater discussion of the civil war in Guatemala. According to Hearst, the Central American wars were simply facades of the greater fight between world powers in the Cold War:

> It is time to be aware that the leftist revolutionary movements in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are not simply indigenous political reform movements of peasants and urban workers seeking liberation from oppressive oligarchies and military dictatorships. It is time for us, and especially our idealist young people, to open our eyes to the incontrovertible evidence that the Soviet Union and Castro's Cuba have been engaged for the past five years in promoting proxy-wars to establish Marxist-oriented regimes in the Caribbean and Central America.[45]

The Cold War context is vital for understanding many of the discussions surrounding Central America at this time. This also led some conservative evangelicals to use similar arguments. Hearst's editorial provided a sample of some of the rhetoric used when attempting to understand the Central American turmoil.

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[44] David E. Halvorsen, "Latin Trip Could Bring Rewards," *San Francisco Examiner* (December 7, 1982), sec. Editorials.

[45] William Randolph Hearst, Jr., "Endangered Bastions," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 20, 1983), sec. Editor's Report.

While the *NYT* and the *Examiner* represented news printed about Ríos Montt and Guatemala, many evangelicals did not have access to those particular newspapers. Instead, they relied on their smaller local newspapers to give them world news. Many of these local newspapers relied on news services such as AP or United Press International (UPI) to supply them with news stories. A few local papers also had their own reporters covering world news or picked up stories from larger papers. Even though some conservative evangelicals did not always trust secular media, many of them received their information from local newspapers before deciding whether to trust that source or not. Local papers have been included in this study to extend further the scope and the discussions surrounding Ríos Montt and his tenure in Guatemala. These papers employed some of the same rhetorical strategies as larger papers to the same end: casting doubt on the authenticity of Ríos Montt's Christianity to make sense of his contradicting images.

Local newspapers often printed stories written for larger publications. *Washington Post* writer Loren Jenkins penned a story that ran in newspapers as far away as Manitoba, Canada, about the first two weeks of Ríos Montt's time in power.[46] Some newspapers ran it in the Religion section due to its religious focus. Jenkins outlined Ríos Montt's religious tone and included a scene of his return to a church service after he took power. Jenkins described him as a "lay evangelical preacher for the Church of the Complete Word."[47] Although he favorably contrasted Ríos Montt with predecessor Lucas García, Jenkins reported other hesitations about his religious beliefs: "The

[46] Loren Jenkins, *The Carillon*, May 5, 1982, sec. Religion.

[47] Ibid.

religious fervor of his speeches and the constant references to 'God, my master, my king' with which he laces his pronouncements already have caused many uneasy Guatemalans to dub him 'Ayatollah Ríos Montt.'"[48] Jenkins added Guatemalan voices to the chorus of those doubting Ríos Montt's good intentions with his religion.

This piece also contained an element linking Ríos Montt with evangelicals in the United States. Jenkins quoted Jim Durkin, "the founder and presiding elder of Gospel Outreach, an evangelical movement based in Eureka, Calif." as saying, "God has raised up a leader of this nation . . . a man of destiny, a man of God."[49] Durkin clearly supported him and believed him to have God's blessing as leader of Guatemala. His comments reflected Ríos Montt's own assertion that God had granted him authority to be ruler of Guatemala. The secular press noticed and reported the link between the evangelicals in the United States and Ríos Montt. The connection between Pat Robertson and Ríos Montt also appeared in smaller newspapers. The *Courier News* in Blytheville, Arkansas printed a *NYT* story by Raymond Bonner that recounted Robertson's promise of financial aid to Ríos Montt.[50] The Protestant press was not the only place where readers could find reports of conservative evangelical support of Ríos Montt and his leadership.

The press reiterated this connection between Robertson and Ríos Montt when newspapers printed a *Washington Post* story entitled "Robertson Charges U.S. May Have Helped Oust Ríos Montt."[51] The story appeared in newspapers in November: three

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Raymond Bonner, "Montt Says Christians Offer Millions," *Courier News*, May 24, 1982.

[51] "Robertson Charges U.S. May Have Helped Oust Rios Montt," *The Carillon*, November 23, 1983.

months after the coup that removed Ríos Montt from power. In this article, Robertson "charged that the U.S. government may have played a part in the August overthrow of the Ríos Montt regime in Guatemala."[52] The article also called Robertson "a personal friend of Ríos Montt" who "backed the former dictator's regime because Ríos Montt was a Pentecostal Christian who proclaimed his support for Biblically based government."[53] This description of Ríos Montt's religion as "Pentecostal Christian" was important because it aligned his beliefs with those of Robertson. The Pat Robertson-Ríos Montt alliance did not end with his fall from power. This article showed an evangelical Christian casting suspicion on the politics surrounding the coup against Ríos Montt. This position stood in contrast with many of the secular commentators' use of skeptical rhetoric concerning Ríos Montt's religious beliefs and their place in government.

Small town newspapers often confined coverage of Ríos Montt to their religion page. In this section, people expected a focus on his faith. The *Daily Republican Register* in Mount Caramel, Illinois profiled his church attendance in a February 25, 1983 article by Larry Reynolds.[54] This article quoted a "conservative Evangelical group based in Orange [California]" as reporting Ríos Montt's habit of attending different churches on any given Sunday morning.[55] This group also quoted his encouragement to fellow church member: "I insist on their taking seriously II Chronicles 7:14 and also Romans 13."[56]

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Larry Reynolds, *Daily Republican Register*, February 25, 1983, sec. Religion.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid. The paper clarified the Scripture passages this way: "The first promises forgiveness and national prosperity to those who turn from evil; and the second counsels obedience to the civil authorities as servants of God."

Reynolds highlighted Ríos Montt's church attendance and knowledge of the Bible in this article in the secular press. Because the paper placed the article in the religion section, no skepticism or accusations of human rights abuses accompanied this profile of Ríos Montt.

When columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak interviewed Ríos Montt in May 1982, they wrote their report using rhetoric that set Ríos Montt up as a less than skillful politician. The *Syracuse Post-Standard* published it on May 31, 1982. The article included a conversation Ríos Montt had with foreign correspondents which made him appear odd as a head of a state: "Most recently, his meeting with several foreign correspondents last week raised eyebrows when he said 'love' was the answer to the insurgency."[57] The writers continued this tone when they reported Ríos Montt's aid from Pat Robertson: "Ríos Montt told us he meant the $1 billion only figuratively as they true worth of volunteer service, but also said 'we are convinced that the North American Christians will contribute money that they don't even have.'"[58] These comments, combined with Evans and Novak's description of Ríos Montt's own rhetoric as "flamboyant evangelism," fit in with the rest of the secular press' tendency to be suspicious of Ríos Montt and his religion.

The mainstream news also used the idea that Ríos Montt would evangelize to portray him as abnormal in his integration of faith and politics. The *Hutchinson News* from Kansas printed an analysis by UPI's Frederick Kiel that employed this tactic. Kiel wrote, "Military President Efraín Ríos Montt, a born-again Christian intent on

[57] Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "As the Guatemala Junta Sees It," *Syracuse Post-Standard*, May 31, 1982, sec. Columnists.

[58] Ibid.

proselytizing his Protestant faith . . . ."[59] The *Galveston Daily News* printed an article by Sol Sussman, an AP writer, who called Ríos Montt "the born-again Christian who makes no secret of his evangelical views." [60] Other references accused him of "flamboyant evangelism" and referring to Ríos Montt himself as a "Protestant evangelist."[61] These examples of him talking about his faith in a political realm clearly established the Guatemala leader as a religious fanatic who did not know when it was appropriate to share his faith.

Ríos Montt's Sunday addresses to Guatemala stood out as one of the most prevalent ways he integrated his faith with his politics. Various reporters and the Guatemalans they interviewed described his weekly addresses to his country as "sermons." The *Farmington Daily Times* in New Mexico ran an article where these Sunday talks featured prominently. The article began with a description of the television opening of the address and concluded: "It's another Sunday sermon from Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt . . . ."[62] The article included a few different responses from Guatemalans:

> The messages from Ríos Montt—a short man with a pencil-thin moustache—are viewed with interest, indifference or amusement. "I'm sick and tired of that preaching," a doctor told a reporter. "He appears to be a preacher," said a university professor. "Every Sunday he gives his sermon. The people love it, but there are some who can't stand it."[63]

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[59] Frederick Kiel, "Pope's Central American Trip Presents Minefield of Controversy," *Hutchinson News*, March 2, 1983.

[60] Soll Sussman, "New Faces Appear This Year in Souther American Leadership," *Galveston Daily News*, June 9, 1982.

[61] Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "As the Guatemala Junta Sees It"; "Guatemala President Protestant," *Farmington Daily Times*, June 15, 1983.

[62] "Guatemala President Protestant."

[63] Ibid.

As his power receded, these weekly talks became part of the reasons he lost popularity and control. On August 8, 1983, the day Mejía Victores overthrew Ríos Montt in a coup, Tom Wicker wrote an opinion piece which the *Lawrence Journal-World* in Kansas published. In this article, Wicker wrote, "A born-again Christian devotee of the Church of the Word, Ríos Montt . . . likes to take to television to admonish military officers to give up their mistresses and ordinary Guatemalans to cling to family values."[64] As more reports about the coup surfaced in the United States, Ríos Montt's religion remained prominent as a factor in the explanation of his political demise.

After his removal from office by his Defense Minister Mejía Victores, many people in Guatemala pointed to Ríos Montt's religious nature as part of his unpopularity. Those who supported him felt his opponents had used his beliefs against him unfairly. Pete Jacobs, an AP writer, reported, "The religious convictions that helped Efraín Ríos Montt become president of Guatemala ultimately were used as an excuse to depose him, says a leader of an evangelical sect to which he belonged."[65] This leader Jacobs spoke to was Joseph Anfuso, a Ríos Montt supporter from Eureka, California.[66] Anfuso went on to detail Ríos Montt's religious activities while in office and concluded, "I think people felt that he was himself too much into religion."[67] Mejía Victores also claimed Ríos Montt's religion to be part of the problem. Frederick Kiel reported Mejía Victores "pledged to restore democracy and end religious interference in the government."[68] This

[64] Wicker, "A Dictator or Something."

[65] Pete Jacobs, "Religious Zeal Was Montt's Undoing," *Courier News*, August 20, 1983.

[66] Joseph Anfuso wrote a biography of Ríos Montt which will be studied later in this thesis.

[67] Pete Jacobs, "Religious Zeal Was Montt's Undoing."

[68] Frederick Kiel, "Guatemala: Troubled by Another Coup," *Hutchinson News*, August 19, 1983.

"religious interference" also included Ríos Montt's many advisors who were fellow church members. By the end of his time in power, almost all secular press references to Ríos Montt's evangelical beliefs turned negative.

Throughout the coverage of Ríos Montt's leadership in Guatemala, the mainstream press attempted to make sense of the evangelical military dictator accused of committing human rights violations. Newspapers in the secular realm chose to understand this contradiction by casting suspicion on his religion. Reporters interviewed Guatemalan people who were skeptical of Ríos Montt's weekly addresses and the way he infused his moral code into his ideas for running Guatemala. The papers dwelled on his tendency to share his faith and up-front attitude about his beliefs. As his rule ended, newspapers included religion as an important factor in his loss of power. They also reported accusations of human rights abuses by groups such as Amnesty International and church organizations. When the press printed these reports, they did so without using rhetoric to cast doubt on the findings. Unlike conservative evangelical press, the secular media chose to use their rhetoric to doubt Ríos Montt and his religious claims.

Newspapers were not the only media reporting the story of Ríos Montt and Guatemala. Magazines also included information about the Central American situation, but with a different viewpoint. Magazines addressed the facts to a specific audience who held a particular worldview. The magazines studied contained much more interpretation and analysis of greater implications of or reasons for the complicated events in Guatemala. The periodicals studied, *National Review* and *New Republic,* did not cover Ríos Montt and Guatemala at great length. These periodicals focused on the Central American situation as a whole: they compared and contrasted Guatemala to El Salvador,

Nicaragua, and other Latin America countries. For these periodicals, Ríos Montt served as just another dictator fighting off the Communists in Central America. His religious convictions were unimportant within the framework of the Cold War.

The *National Review* included only two articles concerning Ríos Montt between 1982 and 1983. The first summarized President Reagan's trip to Central America.[69] It echoed familiar themes from *NYT* coverage: Reagan's famous "bum rap" assessment of the human rights violations accusations, contrasts between Ríos Montt and Lucas García, and a contrast between urban and rural violence. No mention was made of his religion. Next time he appeared in the pages of *National Review* was a month after his ouster. The article recounted his promise to step down after election in 1985 "unless they get rid of me before then."[70] The rest discussed Mejia Victores alignment with U.S. policies and the shifts in Guatemala. Again, the periodical ignored Ríos Montt's religious beliefs. *National Review* coverage of Central America during Ríos Montt's time in power focused on El Salvador with brief comments on Nicaragua or the region as a whole. This magazine considered Ríos Montt and Guatemala as minor players within the larger framework of the Cold War in Central America.

Not all secular periodicals were as succinct on the topic of Ríos Montt and Guatemala. The *New Republic*, a liberal periodical, contained articles about Ríos Montt approximately four times between 1982-1983. Although the number of articles was not impressive, the length and specificity of the coverage offered a better picture of where *New Republic* stood on the subject. The first mention of a new ruler in Guatemala came

[69] "Southern Strategy."

[70] "The Week," *National Review*, September 2, 1983.

in July 1982, four months after Ríos Montt and his junta took power. This article, "The Postwar Hemisphere," simply stated that President Lucas García has been "replaced . . . with a leader intent on restoring democracy and ending human rights abuses and corruption."[71] Again, no mention of his religious beliefs occurred in the new leader's first reference. An article that ran on December 27, 1982 chronicled Reagan's trip to Central America and includes his meeting with Ríos Montt.[72] Unsurprisingly, the article quoted Reagan's "bum rap" assessment of the human rights situation. In comments about Ríos Montt and his actions in Guatemala, the article left no room for doubt about how the author felt. The author described Ríos Montt as a "thug" and Guatemala as "savage . . . [the] Indian population is being wantonly massacred."[73] The author considered Reagan's assertion that Ríos Montt is "totally dedicated to democracy" as "simply delusional."[74] The author also included request for Guatemalan aid and concluded in a bleak manner: "Ronald Reagan wants to keep Communism out of these tormented countries. So do we. But the only consequence of looking away from the likes of Ríos Montt will be to make Communism look good to his victims."[75] The article in general provided a pessimistic view of Ríos Montt and did not refer to his religion at all.

New Republic's April 1983 article by Allan Nairn, "The Guns of Guatemala," specifically discussed Ríos Montt and the condition of Guatemala.[76] Nairn entered into

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[71] "The Postwar Hemisphere," *New Republic*, July 12, 1982.

[72] "Flying Down to Rio."

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Allan Nairn, "The Guns of Guatemala," *New Republic*, April 11, 1983.

the discussion and whether or not human rights had improved under Ríos Montt. His assessment stood in stark contrast to the optimism of Reagan and the U.S. government. Nairn wrote about the reduction of army massacres and killings and decided, "These developments were widely interpreted to mean that the government had begun to curb human rights abuses and had succeeded in crushing the guerillas. The interpretation was wrong on both counts."[77] He also brought up distinctions between rural violence and urban assassinations. Nairn recognized that urban assassinations had abated under Ríos Montt, but he focused on the rampant violence in the countryside. Nairn briefly mentioned Ríos Montt's religion when he referred to him as "an evangelical Protestant."[78] Overall, the article presented a largely negative assessment of Guatemala, Ríos Montt, the human rights situation, and the U.S. involvement. But it did so through a decidedly secular lens.

While magazines offered less coverage than newspapers, these articles still maintained similar rhetorical themes to the newspaper stories. The magazines focused on the Cold War more because they had the ability to go into more detail with their analysis of Rios Montt's government. Within this Cold War framework, religion was irrelevant. The magazines did not attempt to discredit his religion; instead, they focused on the contrasts between urban and rural environments in the human rights debates. More importantly for these mainstream publications was the Communist angle. The magazines considered Ríos Montt's religion merely a footnote or another item in the list of reasons the memo labeled him eccentric. The secular press deemed Ríos Montt worthy of

[77] Ibid., 17.

[78] Ibid., 21.

attention because of the conflicting images presented: dictator accused of genocide and a savior of Guatemala. To make sense of these conflicting images, the mainstream press that did not support Ríos Montt chose to doubt his religious claims and present the human rights accusations in a truthful way.

CHAPTER FOUR

Weathering the Storm: The Protestant Press

The Cold War created many strange bedfellows. U.S. leaders eagerly supported anyone who claimed to be anti-Communist and intent on ridding the Western Hemisphere of the Communist plague. At the same time, the Religious Right adamantly wanted to win the culture wars and needed allies to do so. Ríos Montt appealed to both of these very strong sentiments that coalesced by the early 1980s because he fit both qualifications: he claimed to be a born-again Christian who wanted to fight against Communists in his home country of Guatemala. As a result, he appeared on the radar of some of the most visible and influential conservative evangelicals in the United States. In studying this curious pairing, a few questions need to be asked: which was more important for these conservative evangelicals? Was Ríos Montt the answer to problems in Central America because of his staunch anti-Communist stance? Or was his religious faith the key to unlocking the support of U.S. conservative? Although a definitive answer to this question may never be settled, evidence found in periodicals that conservative leaders read and influenced suggests a possible solution.

This chapter presents an analysis of Protestant media coverage of Ríos Montt's time in Guatemala. They offer a way to understand why some conservative evangelicals supported him while other evangelicals staunchly opposed him. The rhetoric analyzed here helps explain how and why Protestants divided. Christian media that supported Ríos Montt used rhetoric to discredit accusations of massacres and other human rights violations during his regime. Christian media that opposed him reported human rights

accusations as accurate to cast doubt on Ríos Montt's religious sincerity. Christian press coverage of Ríos Montt and Guatemala also clearly revealed what was more important to the conservative evangelicals supporting him.

As with the secular media, Protestant media focused on Guatemala much less than neighboring countries such as Nicaragua as seen in figure 1. *Christianity Today* did not follow this trend: it published one less article about Nicaragua than about Ríos Montt and Guatemala. This highlights the conservative evangelical focus on Ríos Montt. In contrast, both the left and the mainline periodicals focused more on Nicaragua than Guatemala or Ríos Montt.

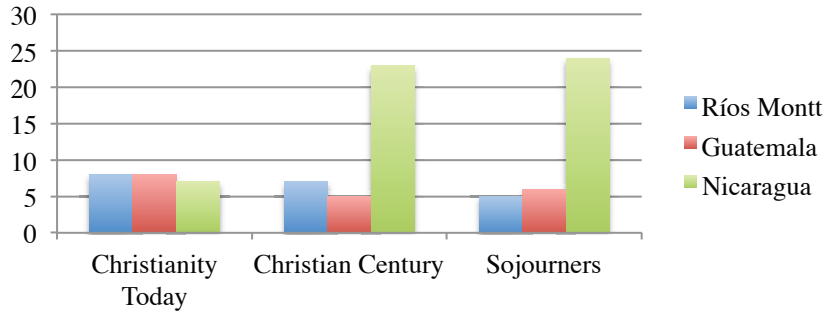

Figure 1. Protestant Coverage 1981-1984.

When these periodicals discussed Guatemala, they talked about Ríos Montt more often than they talked about the country as a whole as seen in figures 2-4. *Sojourners* published in exception to this trend because they were a left-leaning periodical that had more focus on Latin American issues than the others. Therefore, it stands to reason that their coverage of Guatemala would be more extensive than the other two magazines.

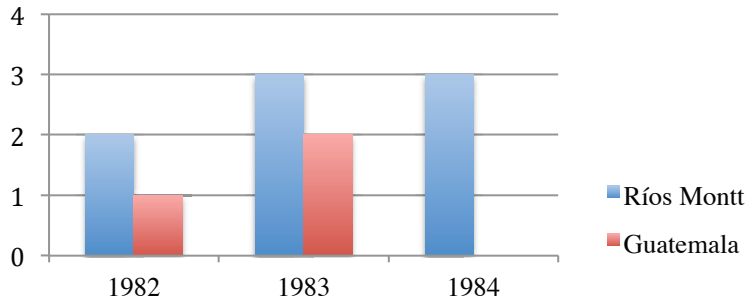

Figure 2. *Christianity Today*

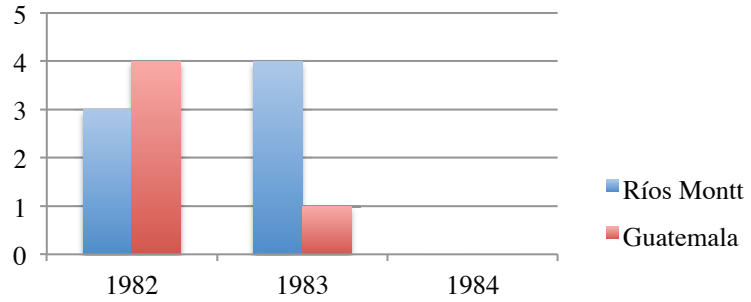

Figure 3. *Christian Century*

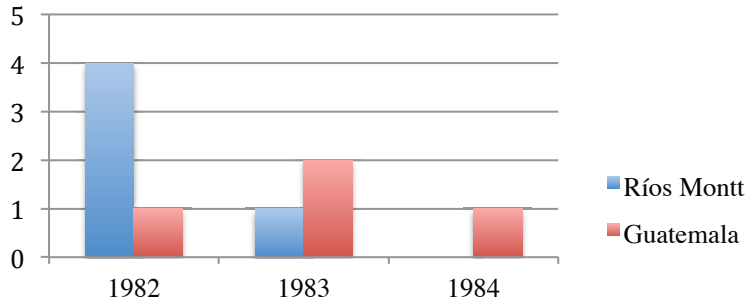

Figure 4. *Sojourners*

The Protestant press turned its attention to Guatemala because of Ríos Montt's leadership. Whether they supported him or opposed him, magazines discussed his controversial regime. The Protestant periodicals considered his religion at length. From the outset, this discrepancy in the attention to religion spoke to the Protestant periodicals'

opinion that Ríos Montt merited coverage. Regardless of whether they were conservative, moderate, or liberal, they zeroed in on his religious beliefs from the beginning. The rhetoric found in each of these periodicals aided in answering questions about the relationship between Christians in the United States and Ríos Montt.

The rhetoric deployed provided keys to understanding the periodicals' approach to Ríos Montt's rule and Guatemala. His main attraction for conservative evangelical leadership was his own religious beliefs. Supportive periodicals therefore used relatable language to describe him and his faith. Those who were skeptical or blatantly against him and his government used language to isolate him, situating him outside the realm of relating to readers. This ability to relate began with terms used to describe his faith. The phrase most often used concerning his religion was "born-again" or "born-again Christian." Most of the Protestant periodicals and secular news media studied used this term. Conservative evangelicals who supported him used this term to create an image of Ríos Montt as a fellow evangelical. Secular use of this term proved how pervasive "born-again" became in describing Ríos Montt. The secular press often used this term to frame his religion negatively.

Protestant periodicals, where distinction among different groups of Christians would have been more likely acknowledged and utilized, described Ríos Montt as born-again in two of the three periodicals studied. *Christian Century* and *Sojourners* used this descriptor while *Christianity Today* did not. Within these periodicals, the rhetoric diverged when authors added other qualifiers in anti-Ríos Montt portrayals. *Sojourners* added words such as "self-avowed" and "claimed to be" in front of the adjective born-

again.[1] This use of rhetoric cast doubt in the mind of readers about the authenticity of his faith. As a more politically liberal periodical, *Sojourners* accepted accusations about his human rights violations as fact. This publication wanted to separate him from the identity of Christian by using phrases that colored his faith claims with doubt. *Christian Century* used the term born-again as well, but as an adjective to describe the noun "dictator."[2] By referring to Ríos Montt as a "born-again dictator," this article in *Christian Century* stood clearly against his leadership. Regardless of the periodicals' particular stance for or against him, the use of Christian labels to describe his faith informed readers of the ability to relate to him or not. Those terms helped solidify his image—one way or the other—in the minds of readers.

Christianity Today was the one periodical studied that does not use the term born-again. Instead, the magazine described Ríos Montt as an "evangelical" or an "evangelical Christian." This rhetorical choice made sense because *Christianity Today* was an evangelical periodical. By labeling him as "evangelical," they were affirming his religious faith and portraying him as part of the club to which their readers belonged. The magazine rarely referred to Ríos Montt as dictator (save for one headline) or even a general. Instead, articles in *Christianity Today* labeled to him as "president" or occasionally "chief of state."[3] Calling him an evangelical president made him more familiar: evangelicals in the United States could relate to both the term evangelical and the term president. Unlike *Sojourners* or *Christian Century*, which qualified descriptions

[1] Peter Browning, "Scorched Earth in Guatemala," *Sojourners*, October 1982, 10; Dana Martin, "A Change of Masks," *Sojourners*, November 1983, 26.

[2] Peerman, "Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator," 524.

[3] "News," *Christianity Today*, January 13, 1984, 41.

of his faith to make his religious commitment appear doubtful, *Christianity Today* not only gave Ríos Montt the benefit of the doubt, but it also branded him as a relatable leader not so different from one found in the United States.

Christian Century also used terms that Christians in the United States would have been familiar with to associate Ríos Montt with a particular type of Christian. As a moderate periodical, *Christian Century* used the term "fundamentalist" to place him in the same category as fundamentalists in the United States. By describing him as such, readers of this article may have associated Ríos Montt with fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell. Because *Christian Century* targeted a more mainline— not evangelical— Christian audience, this association of Ríos Montt to fundamentalists would not have worked in his favor. *Christian Century* also modified the term fundamentalist much like born-again. The periodical labeled him a "self-proclaimed fundamentalist Bible-believer."[4] "Self-proclaimed" raised doubts about his faith. *Christian Century* then articulated a less than flattering description of him as "a man with a pronounced messiah complex."[5] The periodical also repeated the nickname "Ayatollah Montt" that secular media reported at this time.[6] This label clearly tied him to the religious fanatics controlling Iran at the time. By using qualifiers, specific terms, and relatable language, these articles placed him in a position that allowed their readers decide whether to support him or not.

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[4] "Guatemala's Horrors," *Christian Century*, December 1, 1982, 1224.

[5] Dean Peerman, "Changing of the Guard in Guatemala," *Christian Century*, August 17-14, 1983, 736.

[6] Peerman, "Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator," 525; "Guatemala; Beans-and-Bullets Politics," *Newsweek*, December 13, 1982, 56.

Christian periodicals included descriptions of the coup in the first mentions of Guatemala and Ríos Montt's role in that country. Some conservative periodicals labeled his rise to power as a "bloodless coup." *Christianity Today* described his coup as a request by fellow officers and used terms such as "bloodless coup" and "national sigh of relief" to describe the change of power and its results.[7] *Christian Century* described it as happening "quietly, quickly, and without violence," but also added, "one important test will be how Ríos Montt deals with the insurgents—whether he will escalate the slaughter or opt for negotiation."[8] This article depicted the coup much as the conservative ones, but it also brought up concerns of human rights violations immediately and used the strong term "slaughter" to describe the situation. *Sojourners* simply used the word "coup" but also quickly framed it within the context of U.S. intervention and the "massive human rights violations" the country was facing.[9] Although *Christianity Today* mentioned human rights as well, it portrayed the issue in a positive light: "A new respect for human rights was immediately apparent."[10] By mentioning human rights in a positive light, these periodicals gave a hopeful portrayal of new Guatemalan leadership. In contrast, by bringing up human rights in such a negative portrayal, liberal periodicals cast doubt and even suspicion on Ríos Montt's government.

In describing his rise to power, *Christianity Today* used its rhetoric to shift responsibility of actions away from Ríos Montt toward those around him. The initial

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[7] Harry Genet and Stephen Sywulka, "You Heard It Right: The Dictator Is an Evangelical Christian," *Christianity Today*, April 23, 1982, 32, 33.

[8] Peerman, "Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator," 524.

[9] "Guatemala Aid Born Again?," 8.

[10] Genet and Sywulka, "You Heard It Right: The Dictator Is an Evangelical Christian," 33.

report placed him at his church during the coup. He prayed with church elders before agreeing to become a part of the ruling junta. *Christianity Today* commented, "Why an active general was serving as an administrator of an evangelical institution is an eyebrow-raising story that could only occur in Latin America."[11] The article added, "The junior officers who plotted the coup apparently sought out Ríos Montt because of his integrity . . . ."[12] The way reporters phrased these descriptions transferred action away from Ríos Montt and toward others in the coup. This continued when *Christianity Today* reported Ríos Montt becoming sole leader of Guatemala. It stated, "The move appeared to be either instigated or supported by the junior officers who staged the March coup that brought the junta to power."[13] In both of these instances, writers for this magazine carefully removed any negative action away from Ríos Montt and onto others.

This rhetoric reinforced the idea that God had called Ríos Mont to power; he did not seek it on his own. This move of accountability helped to strengthen his image as an evangelical Christian thrust into the political spotlight in Guatemala because of qualities ascribed to him due to his faith. By labeling his rise to power as a calling, the press that supported him portrayed him as a relatable layman who was simply obeying God's calling. This image contrasted sharply with a power hungry military man who would do anything—including massacring innocent people—to maintain his power. This image also reinforced his personal relationship with God, a point vital to maintaining an approachable persona for conservative evangelicals.

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[11] Ibid., 32.

[12] Ibid., 33.

[13] "News," *Christianity Today*, July 16, 1982.

Only one of the magazines mentioned the direct links Ríos Montt held to some evangelicals in the United States. *Christian Century* reported ties between Ríos Montt and Pat Robertson a few times during his rule in Guatemala. Dean Peerman's article "Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator" served as an introduction to Ríos Montt and Guatemala in May 1982.[14] Peerman reported Pat Robertson's special trip to Guatemala to interview him shortly after he gained power. *Christian Century* also ran a story that included Robertson's promise of aid to Guatemala: "The born-again Christian leader said that Pat Robertson . . . has offered to send missionaries and 'more than a billion dollars.' At his headquarters Robertson indicated that his organization plans to send a team of medical and agricultural experts."[15] The periodical mentioned Robertson and Ríos Montt one final time in March 1983 in a news article about Love Lift. It reported, "Ríos Montt . . . has close ties with members of the Reagan administration, Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network, and Jerry Falwell. Robertson, taking up the cause of Ríos Montt, has made numerous appeals for prayers and financial support."[16] By including reports of his ties to a conservative evangelical leader, the mainline periodical *Christian Century* distanced themselves from the contradicting image of a born-again dictator.

Other specific terms used to describe Guatemalan leftists revealed opinions about the situation in Guatemala. In their introductory article about Ríos Montt, *Christianity Today* gave a basic description of leftists by terming the situation a "civil war with leftist

[14] Peerman, "Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator."

[15] "Aid for Guatemala," *Christian Century*, June 1982.

[16] "Love Lift," *Christian Century*, March 16, 1983.

guerillas."[17] The author wrote the comment in favor of Ríos Montt, but used the term "guerillas" to discredit the leftist fighters. On the other hand, *Christian Century* chose to bring up the "insurgents," a term more neutral than "guerillas," and called the actions against them a "slaughter" in a clear attempt to discredit the rightist government prior to Ríos Montt and highlight the extrajudicial nature of the campaign against the guerrillas.[18] In their first article about him, *Sojourners* did not discuss leftist resistance in Guatemala. However, two issues later it printed an article titled "Scorched Earth in Guatemala" which left no doubt about their feelings towards Ríos Montt: *Sojourners* remained explicitly against him and his government.

Peter Browning's "Scorched Earth" article in the October 1982 issue of *Sojourners* is worth a closer read because of its polemic rhetoric. Subtitled "Ríos Montt's rule of destruction," this article left no doubt about Browning's—and the editorial board's— position on the situation in Guatemala. In response to his oft-quoted statement about God guiding his government, Browning wrote, "Ríos Montt's invocation of God's enlightenment, however, is drowned out by cries of the victims of increased violence directed at the country's rural Indian peasants."[19] After calling him a "bundle of contradictions," Browning asked, "Why, then, does Montt apparently have no qualms about the thousands of men, women, and children being killed by army massacres?"[20] For Browning, not only did no doubt exist about massacres occurring among rural people

[17] Genet and Sywulka, "You Heard It Right: The Dictator Is an Evangelical Christian," 33.

[18] Peerman, "Guatemala's Born-Again Dictator," 525.

[19] Browning, "Scorched Earth in Guatemala," 10. By using the term 'scorched-earth,' Browning is invoking images of the Vietnam War for his readers.

[20] Ibid., 10–11.

in Guatemala, but also no question existed about who held responsibility for these deaths. The indictments Browning handed out with no hesitations were not limited to Ríos Montt and his government; Browning described U.S. policies in Guatemala as "bumbling," "a cruel hoax," and shortsighted. He attributed U.S. policy's many deficiencies to the problem of "couching its interpretation of the Central American conflict in terms of an East-West confrontation." Browning heaped additional criticism on Ríos Montt by portraying him as simply ignorant of what his country truly needs: "Unfortunately, Ríos Montt shows no understanding of the peasants' urgent desire for needed social reform and has opted instead for a military solution." In his final paragraph, Browning combined accusations against Ríos Montt and the United States to prove his point:

> In Ríos Montt's view, opposition to his rule equals subversion. Subversion equals communism. Communism equals the anti-Christ. Therefore, in the name of God an all-out war is being mounted against the 'communist' opposition. Several great leaps over gaping chasms of reason were necessary to complete Montt's equation. Unfortunately, it is an equation that the current U.S. administration appears anxious to buy.[21]

This article was a prime example of rhetoric used to make a strong case against Ríos Montt: it was perfectly clear after reading this article that Peter Browning strongly opposed him and his rule in Guatemala.

On the other side, *Christianity Today* employed favorable rhetoric to describe Ríos Montt's regime even after his time in power ended. In November 1983, the magazine ran a news update claiming "Guatemala's human rights record had worsened since the overthrow in August of President Efraín Ríos Montt…."[22] *Christianity Today*

[21] Ibid., 12.

[22] "News," *Christianity Today*, November 11, 1983. In every issue, *Christianity Today* published paragraph-long news updates for their readers. This news section contained national and international news

personalized this sentiment when it published a news article in January 1984 which reported " . . . Ríos Montt is now missed by many who once were his critics."[23] Both reports implied his regime was more favorable to that of his successor General Óscar Humberto Mejía Victores. The magazine also speculated about the cause of his fall from power and presented it as a negative step for the Guatemalan government. This article, entitled "Guatemala After Ríos Montt: More Political Killings," included a mention of possible U.S. involvement with the coup to remove him.[24] The article even framed Guatemalan reactions to him in a supportive manner: "Reaction among Guatemala's evangelicals to Ríos Montt's ouster was generally outrage and sorrow . . . ."[25] *Christianity Today* remained steadfast in its support of him even after he left office. It continued to use language painting him in a positive light and discrediting those who opposed him.

A foundational piece for understanding conservative evangelicals who supported Ríos Montt lay in their conception of secular news media. These evangelicals did not believe the secular press reported news accurately or without bias. An in-depth look at "Why We Can't Always Trust the News Media," an article in *Christianity Today*'s January 13, 1984 issue, is pivotal in analyzing the support of conservative evangelicals. Tom Minnery, the author, attempted to reconcile conflicting images of Ríos Montt: born-again Christian and violent dictator. As with other Christian periodicals that supported

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that usually contained an element of religion or was relevant *CT*'s particular readership. Unlike the articles in the rest of the magazine, these news features do not have a cited author and tend to be more objective.

[23] "News," *Christianity Today*, January 13, 1984.

[24] "Guatemala After Rios Montt: More Political Killings," *Christianity Today*, February 3, 1984.

[25] Ibid.

Ríos Montt, Minnery cast doubt on the veracity of mainstream media outlets. He dismissed reports of human rights abuses while maintaining Ríos Montt as a true believer. Minnery outlined the details of his biography and his rise to power in Guatemala. He highlighted the disappointments Ríos Montt faced with the failed election of 1974 as well as his conversion story and upstanding character. He included a sketch of news coverage surrounding him and drew attention to the trend of reporting his regime as negative. Minnery wrote, "If these ugly reports out of Guatemala were true, then this man who prayed publicly, who attributed his very presence in the National Palace to the grace of God, seemed to be grinding his heel into all that is meant by Christian compassion and love."[26] This was the very conundrum Christian press and secular press attempted to solve.

Minnery's solution to the contradiction was to present the secular press in a conspiratorial light. In trying to explain the differences between reports in mainstream press and reports from evangelical missionaries in Guatemala, Minnery claimed, ". . . an important factor in the equation is that Ríos Montt was at the mercy of an international press already skeptical of any military dictator who gained office in a coup."[27] He argued that Amnesty International's facts were not verifiable and lamented how the secular press chose to trust this organization. He claimed Amnesty International "must clamor for attention" and therefore felt the need to provide "gory anecdotes of atrocities."[28] These explanations echoed previous solutions to this paradox: guerillas were supplying false

[26] Minnery, "Why We Can't Always Trust the News Media," 16.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., 17.

information to the press who printed it without taking the time to dig for more accurate facts. Minnery also supported the war against Communist guerrillas as necessary. Sources that claimed Ríos Montt had a part in these killings Minnery dismissed as "left-leaning" and as confused about who was part of the conflict and who was an innocent bystander.

To correct this, Minnery provided "the other side of the story." He interviewed missionaries on the ground in Guatemala to counter inaccurate stories offered by secular news outlets. He focused on two missionaries in particular: Ray and Helen Elliot with Wycliffe. Allan Nairn also interviewed these missionaries for his story in *New Republic* magazine. The Elliots did not have a positive review for Nairn. Helen said, "He apparently had his story written before he came to the field. He was totally cynical about the present [Ríos Montt] government . . . . He was predisposed to interpret everything in a negative way." Ray Elliot added, "We gave him plenty of stuff to go on to begin to balance the pictures. He wasn't receptive at all."[29] The Elliots also refuted many of the facts Nairn printed in his article. Both they and Minnery cast Nairn himself and all of the secular press attempting to find the truth in Guatemala as biased from the beginning and unable to see what was really happening.

Minnery concluded his investigation into secular press coverage of Ríos Montt and Guatemala by charging the secular media with not trying hard enough to understand the situation. He brought out the influence of profit on the reporting by commenting, "For business reasons, then, American news organizations have not invested themselves in thoroughly understanding Guatemala." He continued his accusations, "There is no

[29] Ibid., 20.

market for the probe, the challenge, or the deliberation. There is only a market for the quick, the brief, or the outrageous. And many are lined up to fill the demand." He charged the secular press of being lazy and producing inaccurate accounts of Guatemala because they wanted a quick profit. This mattered because it hurt Ríos Montt's ability to witness: "Occasionally, as in the case of Ríos Montt and Guatemala, great misunderstandings are the result, and the witness of the gospel itself may be damaged."[30] Minnery wrote this article to frame Ríos Montt's rule in Guatemala as a victim of lazy reporting, biased press, and a secular media that did not understand the complexities of the struggle in Guatemala or his authentic Christianity.

Letters to the editor that commented on this article showed how much of the readership of *Christianity Today* supported Minnery's assessment of secular news in general and Guatemala specifically. Because the editorial board of *Christianity Today* assisted in choosing which letters to print, these also offer a show of support from the editorial board. Rev. Donald E. Hoke from Knox, Tennessee wrote, "On their own admission media men are now arrogating themselves the right and authority to mold public opinion. And their standard is one of personal prejudice, limited observation, inadequate research, and slanted reporting."[31] Rev. F.D. Wiebe from Hayward, California combined the indictment of the secular press with a challenge to fellow believers: "It is time for churchmen and –women to demand accountability as well as 'coverage' of far-off corners of the world by the news media."[32] These letters

[30] Ibid, 21.

[31] Rev. Donald E. Hoke, "Wrong Title?," *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1984.

[32] Rev. F.D. Wiebe, "Letter to Editor," *Christianity Today*, March 16, 1984.

demonstrated that the readership of *Christianity Today* agreed with Minnery and the editorial board on how the narrative of Ríos Montt and Guatemala should be written.

One other letter to the editor of *Christianity Today* spoke to both problems with the news media in general and the situation in Guatemala in particular. Juan Felipe Conneally from Los Angeles wrote:

> I was so pleased with 'Why We Can't Trust the News Media' [Jan 13]. It agrees with so much of what my first-hand sources in Guatemala were saying about the situation during Ríos Montt's presidency. Tom Minnery has done a real service to the cause of truth by seeking out witnesses who can refute Amnesty International's and the press's misrepresentation of Ríos Montt's wonderful days of reform in Guatemala.[33]

This letter echoed the sentiments of Minnery's article about news reports and the use of rhetoric to further support Ríos Montt. Conneally labeled Ríos Montt's time in power as "wonderful days of reform" and discredited those who said otherwise by referring to "the press's misrepresentation." Although these letters represented only three readers, they offered a sample of the opinion about Minnery's analysis. The lack of trust in the secular news media was pivotal in the construction of Ríos Montt's Guatemala as a positive place managed by a born-again president.

The *Christianity Today* article was not a lone instance of mistrust of secular media in a conservative evangelical periodical. Jerry Falwell's *Fundamentalist Journal* reiterated many of these sentiments in an October 1983 issue. Falwell wrote a monthly column for this magazine, which in this issue was entitled "Morality and the Press." In this issue, Falwell is addressing the need for Christian news outlets in lieu of left-biased secular news. He wrote, "The media are managed by those with a strong liberal political bias, as more than half placed themselves solidly on the left and only 19 percent say they

[33] Juan Felipe Conneally, "A Real Winner," *Christianity Today*, March 7, 1984.

are right of center." Falwell went on to remark, "Far from reflecting what the public thinks, the press reflects what it thinks . . . ."[34] Falwell's comments showed a mistrust of the media from inside the fundamentalist category of conservative evangelicals and cast serious doubt about what the majority thought.

Fundamentalist Journal also printed letters to the editor that supported Falwell's comments. The letters all demonstrated a skepticism about news presented by anyone outside the conservative evangelical realm. The letters were not prompted by Falwell's comments specifically; they came in earlier than Falwell's October 1983 column. Mildred Smith from Arnold, Kansas wrote in to say, "I especially like the news sections. We can find out what is going on around the world. Our news media is a very unreliable source."[35] Donald Webster from North Carolina spoke of the need for specific news for fundamentalists when he wrote in, "As a pastor, I need information like this which is hardly ever found in the secular news."[36] Although these are only two of readers of many who subscribed to the *Fundamentalist Journal*, their comments further proved the readership of Falwell's magazine agreed with his mistrust of secular media.

Periodicals were not the only way conservative evangelicals learned about Ríos Montt and chose to support him. In 1983, Joseph Anfuso and David Sczepanski wrote a biography of him with the title *Efraín Ríos Montt: Servant or Dictator?* The subtitle read "the real story of Guatemala's controversial born-again president."[37] Pat Roberson wrote the forward as a further show of support for the deposed leader of Guatemala. Anfuso

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[34] Jerry Falwell, "Morality and the Press," *Fundamentalist Journal*, October 1983.

[35] Mildred M. Smith, "Letter to the Editor," *Fundamentalist Journal*, December 1982.

[36] Rev. Donald Webster, "Letter to the Editor," *Fundamentalist Journal*, January 1983.

[37] Joseph Anfuso and David Sczepanski, *Efraín Ríos Montt: Servant or Dictator?*.

and Sczepanski used the book to explain what really happened in Guatemala during Ríos Montt's reign.

Pat Robertson's forward set the tone for the whole book. He discussed his time in Guatemala shortly after Ríos Montt came to power. Robertson described him as "a man of humility, simplicity, impeccable personal integrity, and a deep faith in Jesus Christ."[38] He recounted his time in power as he attempted to reform his country and the success he had. Robertson said, "The world's press—often leftist in orientation—was making Ríos Montt out to be a pietist buffoon."[39] Robertson concluded with questions the book hoped to answer: "Who was this 'born-again general' whose emotional style and deep Christian beliefs captured, if only for a moment, the world's attention?"[40] Robertson's forward fit neatly into the rhetorical categories set out for supporters of Ríos Montt by claiming the press was biased and he was a genuine Christian.

In the introduction, Anfuso and Sczepanski echoed the desire to set the record straight. They posed a similar set of questions about Ríos Montt and then related his life story. Again, they faced the same paradox of a born-again dictator accused of human rights abuses. They employed the same rhetorical strategies as other writings which supported him: they cast doubt on secular press, human rights organizations, and anyone who his authenticity. They maintained Ríos Montt was an evangelical Christian who had become the victim of biased media and others who wished him ill.

[38] Ibid., ix.

[39] Ibid., x.

[40] Ibid.

As early as their introduction, secular news media came under fire for their treatment of Ríos Montt. The authors claimed, "There appears to be much more to Ríos Montt than the mass media or any of his critics were willing to acknowledge."[41] This subtle indictment of the press followed the arguments from *Christianity Today* about the press not only being biased, but also being uninterested in doing the work to discover the real story.

The theme of secular press being unreliable and lazy ran throughout the entirety of this book. The authors used this rhetorical strategy in overt ways and subtle ways. They would use qualifiers in their descriptions of the press to discredit them, such as "Supposedly 'neutral' human rights groups alleged that thousands of innocents Indians were being slaughtered . . . . Orders for these wholesale killings allegedly flowed directly from Ríos Montt."[42] Words such as "supposedly" and "allegedly" appeared to discount the reports from secular news outlets. The chapter then went on to cite sources from Ríos Montt himself to editorials in secular newspapers to prove further the press stood against the evangelical leader. Most of these sources argued for a conspiracy of secular press, which stood against Ríos Montt and in support of the leftist guerrillas in Guatemala.

Anfuso and Sczepanski moved from discrediting the secular media for bias to unrolling a press conspiracy in the book. They quoted Ríos Montt from an interview in *Newsweek* in December 1982, in which he said, "It's all disinformation, world orchestrated and well funded and very effective."[43] He believed Guatemala's image was

[41] Ibid., 25.

[42] Ibid., 130.

[43] Ibid., 132.

being sabotaged in the international sphere. He, and others, saw the secular media as actively against his rule in Guatemala. The authors also quoted Richard Raushenbush of the Council for Inter-American Security Educational Institute as agreeing with Ríos Montt: "The Guatemalan revolutionaries have targeted the American public for a propaganda blitz aimed at preventing the American government from aiding the Guatemalan regime in the terrorist war."[44] Raushenbush saw this propaganda campaign as one of the strategies of revolutionary war that the leftists in Guatemala used. Anfuso and Sczepanski cited these arguments about secular press to further their refutation of Ríos Montt's opponents.

Since some of the loudest critics of Ríos Montt were the human rights agencies who claimed he was committing atrocities against the Mayan people, Anfuso and Sczepanski targeted these groups, especially Amnesty International. They claimed Amnesty International did not gather evidence accurately or report findings truthfully. To prove this, they gathered a variety of sources disputing the human rights abuses. Anfuso and Sczepanski cited Kenneth S. Kantzer's questioning of the accuracy of the Amnesty International findings in an editorial in *Christianity Today*.[45] They cited *Commentary* magazine articles multiple times to portray Amnesty International as strongly anti-rightist and biased in favor of any left-leaning groups.[46] The authors concluded after citing some of these opinions, "With this information about the source of

[44] Ibid., 133.

[45] Qtd. in Ibid., 135.

[46] *Commentary* magazine was a conservative publication that focused on intellectual topics such as Judaism, democracy and democratic ideals, and Western ideologies. For more information, see http://www.commentarymagazine.com/about/

the organization's reports, it is hard to consider them objective and unbiased."[47] By including various comments from myriad sources, Anfuso and Sczepanski, for their readers, not only discredited Amnesty International as inaccurate, but also as biased and unable to report objectively the facts of the Guatemalan situation.

Servant or Dictator? contained other reasons for supporting Ríos Montt that also appeared in conservative evangelical periodicals. Anfuso and Sczepanski presented him as a sympathetic Christian figure for evangelicals in the United States. They included his conversion from Roman Catholicism to the Church of the Word in detail. The authors described his faith experience by saying, "he began to openly acknowledge Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior."[48] They also deployed the phrase "born-again" when describing Ríos Montt post-conversion. Part of his conversion story as recounted in this book involved two members of the church being wary of his conversion: they met with him and after hearing him talk about his past experiences in politics, the authors concluded, "They had wondered just how real his conversion had been, how deep his faith had really reached. Now they saw that it was reaching very deep, down into his heart . . . Efraín's hunger for Bible teaching and serving his church grew."[49] This anecdote not only provided first-hand accounts of the sincerity of his faith, but it also included the importance of Bible study and being involved in the local church. These two elements of faith were pivotal for evangelicals and served to align further Ríos Montt with evangelicals in the United States.

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[47] Joseph Anfuso and David Sczepanski, *Efraín Ríos Montt: Servant or Dictator?*, 136.

[48] Ibid., 86.

[49] Ibid., 91.

Servant or Dictator? followed the same rhetorical strategies as other pieces of writing supporting Ríos Montt. Pat Robertson reiterated his support by endorsing the biography and writing its forward. The authors used entire sections of the narrative to discredit secular news media and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. Anfuso and Sczepanski described Ríos Montt in such a way that evangelicals in the United States would relate to him as a fellow born-again Christian. They expanded the arguments previously used to reconcile the contradicting images of Ríos Montt. *Servant or Dictator?* also reinforced his image as just another conservative evangelical trying to live for God: an image conservative evangelicals could and did support. This book's focus on his evangelical beliefs further proved that for evangelical Christians, his Christianity was more important than his anti-communism.

Conservative evangelicals supported Ríos Montt in spite of the human rights accusations leveled at him. They chose not to believe the secular press coverage of Guatemala and instead trusted their own eyewitnesses such as Robertson and the Elliots. Their support did not come through only in periodicals: church leaders supporting Ríos Montt compiled their arguments into a full-length biography to help explain the true image of Ríos Montt. But not all Protestant saw this same image. Liberal evangelicals and mainline Protestants chose to listen to the secular reports of human rights violations and used their rhetoric to doubt Ríos Montt's claims of faith. Both sides deployed emphatic rhetoric to convince others their view of the Guatemalan dictator was most accurate.

A study of Christian periodicals from the time of Ríos Montt's rule in Guatemala revealed the rhetorical strategies employed by different groups. Those who supported

him painted his faith in an authentic manner while casting doubts on secular press and accusations of human rights abuses. Other evangelicals were more skeptical of his faith and considered the human rights accusations true. The religious periodicals' coverage of him also revealed what was most important to those siding for or against Ríos Montt. While the context of Communism and turmoil in Central America played a vital role, the periodicals' coverage proved it was not the most pivotal factor for the Christians. Instead, these periodicals focused on attempting to explain how his faith played into the situation as a whole. For those conservative evangelicals who supported him, his relatable evangelical beliefs swayed their support more than his anti-Communism and made it impossible to credit the stories of massacres in the highlands.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Conservative evangelicals in the United States supported General Efraín Ríos Montt because of his commitment to their own evangelical religion. These U.S. Christians found Ríos Montt's evangelical rhetoric much like their own; they also saw his program for Guatemala mirrored their own agenda for the United States. With this relatable evangelicalism, Ríos Montt garnered financial, material, verbal, and spiritual support from conservative evangelicals in the United States. Those who supported Ríos Montt deployed rhetoric to cast doubt on accusations of human rights violations leveled against him and his government. They argued against secular reports of atrocities in rural Guatemala and assumed these non-Christians simply could not handle a Christian in a position of power. Those who did not support Ríos Montt, or remained unsure, also used doubtful language to cast his religion in a skeptical light. For them, he presented a paradox that needed to be solved: a professing Christian accused of genocide. The many voices attempting to figure out this puzzle used targeted rhetoric either to cast skepticism on his religion or the human rights accusations.

To comprehend fully the unlikely allegiance between conservative evangelicals in the United States and Ríos Montt in Guatemala, one must study their own point of view through what they wrote. Periodicals from the period offered the opportunity to see how those who supported Ríos Montt and those who did not used rhetoric. In studying publications from the early 1980s, it becomes abundantly clear that even within the evangelical community, people stood divided on the issue of Ríos Montt. *Christianity*

Today chose to support Ríos Montt and worked to discredit reports of human rights violations. *Sojourners*, in contrast, vehemently objected to Ríos Montt and his policies: in their reports, they expressed horror at reports of army massacres in rural Guatemala. Neither side hesitated to articulate where they stood on the contradiction of a Christian dictator accused of genocide.

Ríos Montt did not fade from Guatemalan politics after the 1983 coup took his office from him. In 1989, he founded the Guatemalan Republican Front (Frente Republicano Guatemalteco, FRG) party. He ran for president multiple times, but the Supreme Court barred him from the ballot because he had received his previous political office from a coup. While he never again held the office of president, Ríos Montt did serve in the Guatemalan Congress from 1990-2004 and then again from 2007-2012; he was the president of Congress from 2000-2004. This political position granted him immunity and therefore protected him against prosecution for his role in the civil war. In 2006, Spanish courts brought charges against him and had a warrant for his arrest, but Guatemala refused to extradite him. The most recent trial, where he was charged with genocide, began shortly after his last term in Congress, and his amnesty, expired. He continued to have popular support from people in Guatemala and *riosmonttistas* – those who ascribe to his vision for Guatemala—served as president of Guatemala in 1990, 1995, and 1999. When Ríos Montt attempted to run for president himself, many polls showed him as a favored candidate by the people of Guatemala.[1]

[1] Larry Rohter, "Pamela Yates's 'Granito' Revisits Guatemala," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2011, sec. Movies, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/movies/pamela-yatess-granito-revisits-guatemala.html; "Who's Who « The Trial of Efrain Rios Montt & Mauricio Rodriguez Sanchez," http://www.riosmontt-trial.org/trial-background/whos-who/; Garrard-Burnett, *Protestantism in Guatemala*, 167–8; Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 10.

In the years since Ríos Montt fell from power in Guatemala, *Christianity Today* featured his story in two more articles. Kevin Piecuch wrote the first, published in 1987, as a follow-up on Ríos Montt's life after his removal from office.[2] In this article, Piecuch highlighted his church service and leadership by reporting his now full-time position as an elder of the church. This article continued use of religious rhetoric to support Ríos Montt and to locate him sympathetically as an evangelical. In an interview for the article, Ríos Montt told *Christianity Today* that he did not struggle with the move from government to church leadership because, "back then [as president] I was simply ministering to a bigger church."[3] He also blamed his critics for not fully understanding the Guatemalan situation and for being "humanists [who] divided human beings into separate compartments with separate physical and spiritual needs."[4] Although the article mentioned the human rights accusations leveled against Ríos Montt, it did not contradict Ríos Montt's own explanation of the circumstances in Guatemala. It seemed the magazine's editorial board still did not trust the 'secular' reports of troubles in Guatemala.

Christianity Today again covered Ríos Montt and his time as head of Guatemala in a 2006 article entitled "The Truth is Somewhere."[5] This article, written by Deann Alford, came out two months after a Spanish court issued its arrest warrant for Ríos Montt on charges of genocide, terrorism, and state-sponsored torture. In this article,

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[2] Kevin Piecuch, "Rios Montt: From President to Full-Time Church Elder," *Christianity Today*, 1987.

[3] Ibid., 46.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Deann Alford, "The Truth Is Somewhere: Legacy of Guatemala's Evangelical Depose Dictator Remains Unsettled," *Christianity Today*, 2006.

Alford recounted the earlier coverage of Ríos Montt during his time in power and concluded, "*Christianity Today* ran multiple articles promoting his presidency."[6] He also included how the secular realm had reacted to Ríos Montt's legacy by reporting the 1999 truth commission and President Bill Clinton's apology for U.S. support during the Guatemalan civil war. In the interviews with evangelicals in Guatemala, the general feeling was if atrocities did occur under Ríos Montt's watch, it was without his knowledge or consent. Danny Carroll Rodas, a seminary professor at Central American Theological Seminary, believed the truth commission reports and said, "He [Ríos Montt] may have known something but couldn't do anything about it . . . Will we ever know that?"[7] Rodas hoped the newly found military records would help to clarify what really happened in Guatemala. This article did not back away from the earlier stance of support, but it did use a more hesitant tone than earlier coverage.

In both of these articles, *Christianity Today* did not recant its earlier stance of support for Ríos Montt.[8] Instead, it continued to hold out hope that his name would be cleared and he would be declared innocent of all accusations. The reporters and their interviewees seem to hang this hope on the possibility of Ríos Montt's ignorance of the human rights violations occurring during his time in power. These articles also focused on his evangelical religion and hardly mentioned his anti-Communist stance. Kevin Piecuch instead emphasized Ríos Montt's church attendance and leadership. This focus further highlighted the significance of evangelicalism—beyond their commitment to anti-

[6] Ibid., 21.

[7] Ibid., 22.

[8] *Christianity Today* has not followed up with the current events regarding Ríos Montt. They have yet to comment on his current trial for genocide or anything else after 2006. Whether they will publish anything more as more evidence appears remains to be seen.

communism—to those conservative evangelicals who supported Ríos Montt in the United States.

Christian Century also followed him after he lost power in 1983. Dean Peerman wrote "What Ever Happened to Ríos Montt?" in 1985, which chronicled his tour of the United States in a fund-raising effort. This article maintained *Christian Century*'s skeptical tone about his beliefs. Peerman quoted Ríos Montt as saying, "A Christian has to walk around with his Bible and his machine gun," as well as continuing to deny any part in the violence against the Mayan people.[9] Peerman called this claim, "disingenuous, to say the least. That several thousand noncombatant Indians were slaughtered during his brief tenure is a fact that has been well documented by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations . . . . "[10] This report on Ríos Montt employed the same rhetorical devices as the articles from his time in office. The evidence against him only reinforced *Christian Century*'s doubt of his authentic faith.

As Ríos Montt remained in the political spotlight in Guatemala, *Christian Century* continued to report on his actions. In 1990, the magazine published articles about his subsequent campaigns for presidency. In 1991, Ríos Montt failed to be on the ballot for presidency; another Protestant leader, Jorge Serrano Elias, won the election. David Stoll wrote a report on this new "born-again president" and included comparisons between Ríos Montt and Serrano Elias. In this comparison, Ríos Montt did not come out favorably: Stoll called him "self-righteous" and cited other evangelicals in the country as

[9] Dean G. Peerman, "What Ever Happened to Ríos Montt," *Christian Century* 102, no. 28 (September 25, 1985): 819.

[10] Peerman, "What Ever Happened to Ríos Montt."

"uncomfortable with [his] style."[11] *Christian Century* did not change their stance on Ríos Montt as time passed. They continued to print articles that portrayed him in a negative light and even accused him of responsibility for the massacres in Guatemala.

Guatemala has continued to search for truth, justice, and reconciliation since Ríos Montt's time in power. The 1996 peace accords ended the Guatemalan civil war. Since then, truth commissions have brought forth evidence of massacres and thousands of Mayan people killed. A central question quickly appeared: was this an act of genocide against the Mayan people? Human rights organizations and scholars struggled to make sense of the statistics from Guatemala and the existing definitions and examples of genocide. In 1999, the Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) estimated more than 200,000 deaths and reported 83 percent of these deaths to be Mayan. This report also blamed the army for 93 percent of the human rights violations that occurred in Guatemala. Based on these statistics, the CEH labeled government actions as a genocide.[12]

Part of the discussion about genocide in Guatemala stems from projects within the country itself. In 1998, the Archdiocese of Guatemala's Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI) published their *Nunca Mas* (Never Again). REMHI estimated 22,463 deaths during the Guatemalan civil war and blamed 89.7 percent of these deaths on the Guatemalan military. In their report, REMHI listed the qualifications of genocide, as well as the forms of human rights violations that occurred in Guatemala and concluded, "All of these forms of violence, which are examined throughout the REMHI report,

[11] David Stoll, "Guatemala Elects a Born-again President," *Christian Century* 108, no. 6 (February 20, 1991): 189–190.

[12] Sanford, *Buried Secrets*, 14.

include certain aspects of genocide."[13] REMHI also provided recommendations for Guatemala to continue on the path to healing. These proposals included plans for reparations, ways to create a new collective memory and official history of Guatemala, and ways to prevent further human rights violations from occurring. *Nunca Mas* provided a testimony of the violence from those who experienced it and offered an alternative history for the people of Guatemala.

In the conversation about genocide in Guatemala, numbers are not the only qualification for the label. Victoria Sanford broadens the understanding of genocide by not only studying the massacres of the Mayan people, but also examining the way the army employed 'scorched earth' techniques, hunted down those who escaped massacres, and reinstated those who survived in army-occupied model villages.[14] For Sanford, the army transitioned into a systematic policy of genocide when it moved away from targeted assassinations and instead carried out massacres in the highlands.[15] Sanford's work enabled her to understand Guatemalan human rights violations as genocide through both statistics and military tactics. She came to these conclusions as she worked with exhuming mass graves of those killed during the civil war as well as speaking with survivors who witnessed the terror. Sanford also addressed cultural aspects of the violence against the Mayan people. She saw destruction of the Mayan people's maize and lack of proper Mayan burials as an attempt to eradicate not only the Mayan people,

[13] Proyecto Interdiocesano Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (Guatemala), Catholic Institute for International Relations, and Latin America Bureau, *Guatemala, Never Again!* (Maryknoll, N.Y.; London: Orbis Books ; CIIR : Latin America Bureau, 1999), 292.

[14] Sanford, *Buried Secrets*, 143.

[15] Ibid., 122–3.

but also their way of life.[16] Cultural destruction accelerated when the army forced survivors into its model villages program; a military-run program that prohibited inhabitants to practice their Mayan culture. According to Sanford's understanding of genocide, the statistics in Guatemala were not the only qualification for labeling the atrocities as genocide: intent and cultural destruction also played pivotal roles.

Virginia Garrard-Burnett's work on Ríos Montt and Guatemala included a Mayan perspective on the question of genocide. Garrard-Burnett wrote about the pan-Mayan movement that rejected the Cold War lens for the Guatemalan violence and instead promoted a racial framework, which leads to the explanation of genocide. Within this framework, non-indigenous Guatemalans considered the Maya to be unable to modernize and therefore impeding progress.[17] She also considered a few critiques of using the label genocide for Guatemala. These arguments question the military's lack of presence in less 'politicized' Mayan areas as well as the atrocities committed by the guerrillas.[18] By including these dissenting arguments, Garrard-Burnett demonstrated how complex the situation in Guatemala had become. To this day, no consensus has been reached about what happened in Guatemala and how it can be classified. Nevertheless, a majority of those who study Guatemala consider the atrocities genocide.

Since Ríos Montt's time of power in Guatemala, Pamela Yates has also contributed to the conversation about the Guatemalan civil war and the genocide label. She released her first film, *When the Mountains Tremble*, in 1984. CBS purchased her

[16] Ibid., 178–9, 245.

[17] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 15.

[18] Ibid., 16.

footage from this film and used it in their CBS News Report on Guatemala. This documentary contained interviews with Ríos Montt, other government officials, guerrillas, and Mayan villagers. As part of her interviews with U.S. military in Guatemala, Yates uncovered further ties between the counterinsurgency in Guatemala and U.S. strategies in Vietnam. She interviewed U.S. Army Green Beret Jesse Garcia as he helped to train the Guatemalan military. He told Yates, "They often ask me about Vietnam and my experiences."[19] For those in the United States who did not support Ríos Montt and believed the reports from the Guatemalan highlands, echoes from the terrible Vietnam War reinforced their fears for the Mayan people.

Yates' footage later became a vital piece of the evidence against Ríos Montt in a 2006 trial. *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*, a second film by Yates, chronicled the process of finding evidence among her footage from Guatemala. She and those working for the Spanish searched for evidence that Ríos Montt ordered the massacres against the Mayan people.[20] In her introduction to *Granito*, she comments how young she was in 1982 when she was filming in Guatemala and how she did not realize into what she had walked.[21] In both of her films, Yates considered the acts of violence in Guatemala to be a genocide.

Yates continues to work to bring healing and justice to Guatemala through projects such as *Granito: Every Memory Matters*. The purpose of this project is to create

[19] Yates et al., *When the mountains tremble*.

[20] The trial against Ríos Montt in 2006 did not proceed: Spain issued a warrant for his arrest, but Ríos Montt was never arrested. Instead, he served another term in the Guatemalan Congress. By virtue of his political role, he was granted amnesty. In January 2012, when his term ended, amnesty was lifted which allowed him to be brought to trial in early 2013.

[21] Paco de Onís et al., *Granito a story in three parts* ([Brooklyn, N.Y.]: Skylight Pictures, 2011).

a "space to share memories about the armed conflict in Guatemala so that through our collective memory we may open a dialogue about the past."[22] This effort focuses on the importance of a collective memory in which Guatemalans can testify to what they went through during the turmoil. For Guatemalan society to heal, it is vital for people to have space to dialogue about the atrocities that took place.

The need for a space to testify about the human rights violations from the civil war is a critical part of the Ríos Montt's current trial. He is accused of genocide and is the first head of state to be tried for genocide in his own country. On May 10, 2013, he became the first head of state to be convicted by his own country for genocide. The court sentenced Ríos Montt to eighty years in prison: fifty years for genocide and thirty years for crimes against humanity. The trial is ongoing as the Guatemalan Constitutional Courts ruled the conviction unconstitutional and a new trial may be necessary. Much of the trial has been listening to witnesses give their testimony of what happened to the Mayan people. These form part of the evidence to make the case of genocide against Ríos Montt. The other piece necessary is to prove that he not only knew of the massacres, but also ordered them in a systematic manner. Establishing the chain of command is the legal way to convict Ríos Montt of genocide. Regardless of the final outcome of the trial, it will provide a step toward healing for Guatemala.[23]

The path toward healing and justice in Guatemala will be a long one. The trial against Ríos Montt provides an opportunity for national discussion to continue about the

[22] "Granito: Every Memory Matters," *Granito*, 2013, http://granitomem.com/.

[23] For more information on the trial in Guatemala, see http://www.riosmontt-trial.org/ ; http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/8920 . The analysis here of the trials as a space to testify more than a place of legal justice was first brought to my attention by Dr. Joan Supplee.

civil war and the genocide, which is vital for the process of rebuilding the country. Ríos Montt's trial also brings a sense of justice and chips away at these assumptions that those in power will not be punished for what occurred under their governments watch. An essential part of this process is deciphering which of the competing images of Ríos Montt is closer to the truth. Although his true character and motivations may never be uncovered, continuing to search for truth and justice in Guatemala is an essential piece of the healing process.

In her study of Ríos Montt, Virginia Garrard-Burnett concludes: "Those who are complicit—those who are willing to be led astray, both citizens and interested outsiders—or who, especially, condone outright a government's willingness to commit atrocities, must be willing to accept some small share of responsibility for what happens . . . ."[24] A study of the connections between Ríos Montt and U.S. conservative evangelicals evokes questions of accountability as Guatemala seeks truth, justice, and reconciliation. By choosing to support Ríos Montt based on his claims of evangelical faith, conservative evangelicals played a role in the turbulence in Guatemala. Unearthing the truth of Ríos Montt's claims to religion is difficult for a historical study and is arguably not the aim of history. However, by choosing to discredit reports of human rights violations and cling to an ally in the midst of a culture war, U.S. conservative evangelicals made themselves "interested outsiders" who are forever linked with a dictator convicted of genocide.

[24] Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, 178.

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