

Washington Trained Guatemala's Killers for Decades

The US Border Patrol played a key role in propping up Latin American dictatorships.

By Greg Grandin and Elizabeth Oglesby.

YESTERDAY 8:00 AM



Brutal legacy: Friends and family carry the coffin of Jakelin Caal Maquín, who died in US Border Patrol custody, San Antonio Secortez, Guatemala, December 2018. (*Reuters / Carlos Barria*)

John Longan was an agent with the US Border Patrol in the 1940s and '50s, working near the Mexican border, where two Guatemalan migrant children fell mortally ill in

the custody of border agents last month: 7-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquín, who died on December 8, and 8-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo, who died on Christmas Eve.

Longan had a reputation for violence, as did many of his fellow patrollers. Since its founding in the early 1900s, the Border Patrol has operated with near impunity, becoming arguably the most politicized branch of federal law enforcement—even more so than J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

As the Cold War heated up in Latin America following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Longan, who'd started his career as a police officer in Oklahoma, moved on to work for the CIA, providing security assistance—under the cover of the State Department—to allied anticommunist nations. Put simply, Longan taught local intelligence and police agencies how to create death squads to target political activists, deploying tactics that he'd used earlier to capture migrants on the border. He arrived in Guatemala in late 1965 and put into place a paramilitary unit that, early the next year, would execute what he called Operación Limpieza, or Operation Cleanup. Within three months, this unit conducted over 80 raids and multiple assassinations, including an action that, over the course of four days, led to the capture, torture, and execution of more than 30 prominent left-wing opposition leaders. The military dumped their bodies into the sea, while the government denied any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Longan's Operación Limpieza was a decisive step in the unraveling of Guatemala, empowering an intelligence system that over the course of the country's civil war would be responsible for tens of thousands of disappearances,

200,000 deaths, and countless tortures. (Greg Grandin describes Longan's work in his book *The Last Colonial Massacre*.)

Of course, the US role in that civil war wasn't limited to the covert operations of one former Border Patrol agent. Throughout the Cold War, Washington intervened multiple times in Guatemala, funded a rampaging army, ran cover for the death squads that its own security agents—like Longan—helped create, and signaled that it would turn a blind eye to genocide. Even before Ronald Reagan's 1980 election, two retired generals with prominent roles in his campaign traveled to Central America and told Guatemalan officials that "Mr. Reagan recognizes that a good deal of dirty work has to be done" (for this quote, see Allan Nairn's report "Controversial Reagan Campaign Links With Guatemalan Government and Private Sector Leaders," published by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs on October 30, 1980). Once in office, Reagan supplied munitions and training to the Guatemalan Army to carry out that dirty work (despite a ban on military aid imposed during the Carter administration, since existing contracts were exempt from that ban). Reagan was steadfast in his moral backing for Guatemala's *génocidaires*, calling de facto head of state Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, who seized power in a coup in the spring of 1982, "a man of great personal integrity" and "totally dedicated to democracy."

The civil war that the United States drove forward in Guatemala hit the home regions of Jakelin Caal Maquín and Felipe Gómez Alonzo—the two children who died recently in US custody—hard.

Jakelin was Q'eqchi'-Maya, from the town of Raxruhá in northern Alta Verapaz. There, as in much of rural Guatemala, Maya communities have struggled for more than a century to remain on their lands. For much of that time, the US government intervened on the wrong side of those struggles. The result was a vortex of violent displacement that continues to this day.

At the beginning of the 1900s, the Q'eqchi'-Maya lived mostly in Guatemala's lush, fertile northern highlands. But during the 20th century, many were pushed out. First, coffee planters, who were members of Guatemala's colonial and military elite, as well as new European and North American investors, dispossessed them of their lands through legal chicanery and violence. When Q'eqchi' villagers tried to fight back, they were killed or exiled.

The CIA-orchestrated 1954 coup against a democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, was a turning point in the Q'eqchi' region. An ambitious land-reform program that had widespread beneficial effects in Alta Verapaz was reversed, and poor Q'eqchi's began a great migration—fleeing political repression and hunger—to the lowlands, either east toward the Caribbean or north into the Petén rain forest. Raxruhá, Jakelin's home town, was founded in the 1970s by these internal migrants.

Caal and Maquín are common surnames among the Q'eqchi', with strong historical resonance. Adelina Caal Maquín, also known as Mama Maquín, is an icon of political struggle in Guatemala. Like Jakelin, Adelina was a refugee, having fled her mountain village after the 1954 coup for the lowland town of Panzós, where she became a leader in the fight

against land evictions. On May 29, 1978, she was murdered, along with scores of other protesters, by the army. The Panzós massacre kicked off a brutal period of violence: Over the next few years, the US-backed Guatemalan military murdered more than 160,000 Maya. The army especially targeted Q'eqchi' communities for slaughter, then rounded up the survivors in military-controlled model villages. A women's-refugee organization honored Mama Maquín by adopting her name.

The end of Guatemala's civil war in the 1990s brought no peace to the Q'eqchi'. The policies pushed by Washington created new afflictions: The promotion of mining, hydroelectric production, hardwood timbering, and African-palm plantations for "clean" biofuels destroyed their subsistence economy and poisoned their water and corn land.

Meanwhile, Q'eqchi' communities were caught in the crosshairs of an escalating international drug war. As Washington spent billions of dollars shutting down South American trafficking routes, Q'eqchi' communities were turned into a transshipment corridor for cocaine moving into the United States. Throughout the 2010s, drug-related crime and violence that had previously been concentrated in Colombia engulfed Central America, including Jakelin's birthplace, accelerating the migration north. In 2010, narcotics-related violence grew so bad, with the Mexican Zetas cartel effectively controlling large parts of Alta Verapaz, that the Guatemalan government placed the department under an extended state of siege.

Q'eqchi' men and women fought back, organizing social movements to defend their communities. But the repression continued. In 2011, soldiers working with private paramilitary forces evicted hundreds of Q'eqchi' families, turning their land over to agribusinesses financed by international development loans. One study estimates that between 2003 and 2012, 11 percent of Q'eqchi' families lost their land to sugar and African-palm plantations. By 2018, the situation had grown even more dire, with a wave of murders of Q'eqchi' peasant activists.

And so more and more Q'eqchi' refugees have been forced to leave the communities founded by their parents and grandparents, taking their chances on migrating to the United States. Why would a father bring his young daughter on such a perilous trek? CNN Español interviewed Jakelin's relatives in Guatemala, who said that her father, Nery Gilberto Caal, 29, did everything he could to "stay in his land, but necessity made him try to get to the US." According to the World Bank, the Q'eqchi' are among the poorest of the poor in Guatemala and suffer from chronic malnutrition.

The past two decades have brought changes in US border policy, with terrible consequences for Central Americans. The militarization of the border since the 1990s, especially the sealing off of urban entry points, has pushed migrants to cross in remote and treacherous desert areas, where thousands have died. Border militarization also helps explain why people would bring their children on such a dangerous journey. In the past, men usually migrated alone; they would work for a while in the United States and then return to visit their families. But now, border militarization has ratcheted up the cost of that trip. Where it used to cost around \$1,000

to travel from Central America to the United States, it now costs up to \$12,000, making shuttle migration impossible for many. Often the only way for families to stay together is for women and children to migrate as well. Yes, it's dangerous, but so is staying in Guatemala.

Intending to request political asylum, Jakelin and her father were among a group of 163 Guatemalans who turned themselves in to the Border Patrol at a remote entry point in the New Mexico desert on the night of December 6. This is legal: US law says that people may make an affirmative claim of asylum no matter how or where they enter the country.

Felipe Gómez Alonzo, the other guatemalan child who died in Border Patrol detention, was born in a different region of the country than Jakelin. But the history of his community is also one of land struggles and violent displacement, where Guatemala's peace accords brought little respite.

Felipe was from the western highlands, in the department of Huehuetenango, in an isolated village called Yalambojoch, a 10-hour drive from Guatemala City and not far from the Mexican border. The village sits in a sunken valley surrounded by pine-tipped hills. In the middle of this valley is a knoll that looks like a baby in its mother's womb. In Chuj, the Maya language of this region, this knoll is *unin witz*, the "child hill."

Where Jakelin was Q'eqchi', Felipe was Chuj, part of a community of former tenant farmers with a long history of fighting for their land. As in the Q'eqchi' region, the US-orchestrated 1954 coup overturned agrarian reforms and

kicked off decades of political strife in Huehuetenango, pitting local landowners allied with the military against impoverished Maya peasants desperate for land and a better future. Many communities in this region were influenced by the Catholic social-justice doctrines of liberation theology that swept through Central America in the 1960s and '70s. When the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor) entered Huehuetenango in the mid-1970s, large numbers of villagers greeted them as allies in the struggle against the “army of the rich,” and by 1980 the province was in open rebellion against Guatemala’s corrupt and violent military government.

On June 17, 1982, Guatemalan soldiers under the command of Ríos Montt entered the San Francisco cattle estate immediately adjacent to Yalambojoch. The estate’s owner, a military colonel, had fled because of guerrilla activity in the area. Soldiers went from house to house rounding up workers and their families, whom they accused of supporting the guerrillas. They separated children from their parents and killed them by slashing their stomachs or smashing their heads against poles. Women were raped and then burned alive. The soldiers killed the men with bullets or by beheading. After a day of slaughter, 350 people were dead. A lone survivor made his way into Mexico, where Guatemalan anthropologist and Jesuit priest Ricardo Falla interviewed him. The San Francisco massacre was highlighted in Guatemala’s 1999 Truth Commission report.

After the massacre, Yalambojoch residents fled along with thousands of others, leaving the border corridor between Guatemala and Mexico almost completely depopulated, as government troops razed their villages. Whereas villagers in

the Q'eqchi' region were pushed by massacres into the rugged mountain and jungle terrain within Guatemala, people from Yalambojoch fled across the border into Mexico. Some were captured and killed by the army as they fled. Others ended up in refugee camps or dispersed throughout Mexico's southern states. Still others continued on to the United States, beginning the great movement of Guatemalans to *el Norte*. All told, 1.5 million people were displaced by the Guatemalan military's scorched-earth campaign in 1981 and '82. Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification called the violent displacement in the Maya-Chuj region an "act of genocide." Young Felipe Gómez Alonzo's father, Agustín Gómez Pérez, was just a child of 11 during that exodus. Yalambojoch's villagers stayed away for 14 years, returning only after the signing of the peace accords in 1996.

Huehuetenango had been one of Guatemala's top migrant-sending regions. So why couldn't these returnees survive in postwar Guatemala? One reason is the legacy of the genocide: The army's broader purpose was not just to beat back the guerrillas but also to destroy any hope for a different future in Guatemala. Among the people from Yalambojoch who were scattered in Mexico after 1982, only half returned to Guatemala, and those who did were strangers to one another. Young adults who had fled as children didn't know much about the land or how to farm it. When Mexican and US labor recruiters arrived in Huehuetenango to hire Maya youth for jobs in US agriculture and poultry plants—as Mexican workers unionized, the Guatemalan workers were seen as more pliable—these young people jumped at the chance to go. As

Ricardo Falla and Elena Yojcom describe in *El Sueño del Norte en Yalambojoch (The Dream of the North in Yalambojoch)*, remittances sent from the United States rebuilt these war-ravaged communities. With few exceptions, international migration was the only reparation these communities had, as Guatemalan anthropologist Ruth Piedrasanta shows.

Residents of Yalambojoch subsist on plots of only a few hectares of marginal land per family. The peace accords didn't change the inequitable land-tenure structure or the concentration of political and economic power in the country. That chance had been lost with the 1954 coup and the counterinsurgency of the early 1980s, as time and time again the US government tipped the balance of power in favor of the Guatemalan ruling class. Elites in Guatemala are only too happy to see people emigrate, as the banks controlled by the oligarchy reap financial dividends from the transfer of remittances; and beginning in the 1990s, international development banks began to promote remittances *as* development.

Instead of pursuing a people-centered rural development, the Guatemalan government's postwar strategy, backed by international development loans, has been to open up large swaths of the country to foreign investment in megaprojects like mining and hydroelectric dams. As Guatemalan economist Luis Solano notes, there is not a single Maya name among the list of investors in these projects, where the profits go to international conglomerates in association with elite family networks in Guatemala.

One such project is the Northern Transversal Highway, a project initiated by Guatemala's military governments, in concert with foreign oil interests, to open up the northern reaches of the country to oil drilling and other forms of extraction. Guerrilla sabotage halted the project during the civil war, but since the peace accords were signed, it has returned with a vengeance. The Transversal now spans the entire region, from northern Huehuetenango, where Felipe Gómez Alonzo lived, to Alta Verapaz, where Jakelin Caal Maquín's grave is located. Much of the foreign mining activity in Guatemala is concentrated near the Transversal. Both Alta Verapaz and Huehuetenango form part of what the government calls the "hydro-electric ring," where water rights are granted to corporate interests.

In Yalambojoch, people banded together to stop construction of the highway through their village—not because they didn't want a road, but because the Israeli company contracted to build it threatened to cut down hundreds of trees in a protected forest reserve next to the community's only supply of fresh drinking water. Not too far away, community and environmental activists opposing the megaprojects have been jailed, attacked, or killed, and Guatemalan security forces have militarized the zone once again. The most recent killings in this region occurred two days before Felipe and his father crossed the US border.

Finally, there is climate change. While it is too simplistic to claim that Central American migrants are "climate refugees" (the assertion is dangerous, too, since it ultimately justifies even more apocalyptic border-enforcement policies), there is evidence that in some regions, climate change may be eroding people's ability to stay on their lands. In

Huehuetenango, including in Yalambojoch, the potential to earn cash by growing coffee on small plots is being undermined by the spread of a plant-choking fungus called *la roya*, or coffee-leaf rust, which some scientists attribute to climate change.

There are circles within circles in the tortured history of Guatemala, all spinning forward to this dismal moment. A Border Patrol agent began working with the CIA and helped put into place a death-squad regime that accelerated a civil war, which in turn produced biblical levels of displacement. When the refugees from that civil war, including families from Yalambojoch, tried to return home, many found that they couldn't survive in the society the war had created (according to news reports, Felipe's father was drowning in debt). Suffering yet more violence, more displacement, and more dispossession, and doing their best to fend off the worst social and environmental effects of resource extraction and grinding poverty, many tried to escape, with the only viable route being north, to the militarized border where, in a way, it all began. According to Stuart Schrader in his forthcoming book *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*, it was common practice during the Cold War to send former Border Patrol agents to train foreign police through CIA-linked "public safety" programs. Men like Longan helped speed up the pace with which local security forces could target and kill political reformers, thus accelerating political polarization and social misery.

As the Drive-By Truckers wrote in a 2016 song—about a murderous teen who became a Border Patrol agent and who went on to lead the NRA into its current militant right-wing

phase—“It all started with the border. And that’s still where it is today.”

Greg Grandin Greg Grandin, a *Nation* editorial-board member and New York University history professor, is the author of *The Blood of Guatemala*, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, and, forthcoming this spring, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*.

Elizabeth Oglesby Elizabeth Oglesby is associate professor of Latin American studies and geography at the University of Arizona. She is co-editor, with Greg Grandin Deborah T. Levenson, of *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics*.

To submit a correction for our consideration, click [here](#).
For Reprints and Permissions, click [here](#).

COMMENT (1)

Leave a Comment

For three decades, military strongmen ruled Guatemala. The covert American assault destroyed any possibility that Guatemala's fragile political and civic institutions might grow. It permanently stunted political life. Washington took the first step toward making amends when President Bill Clinton visited Guatemala in 1999 and offered a vague apology for America's support of violent and repressive forces there. This year is an opportunity for Washington to fully own up to its shameful role in destabilizing Guatemala and honor Arbenz for having the courage to lead one of Central America's first democracies and send a signal that America has learned to stop placing its ideological concerns and business interests ahead of its ideals.