

Guatemalan Migration:
The Historical Origins and the Many Influences
Impacting the Transition from
Political Refugee to Economic Migrant

By:
Rachael Leigh Ronald

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in
Political Science

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

May 2009

Approved by:

Dr. Ramiro Berardo
Political Science

Guatemalan Migration:
The Historical Origins and the Many Influences
Impacting the Transition from
Political Refugee to Economic Migrant

By:
Rachael Leigh Ronald

Abstract: In the 1980's Guatemalan refugees left their homes and fled to safety in Mexico. Today, Guatemalan migrants leave their homes in search of economic prosperity and security in the United States. Migration is an increasingly topical and controversial issue both in the United States and within Mexico and throughout Central America. However, through an analysis of the historical origins and the many influences impacting the transition from political refugee to economic migrant, is it then possible to examine the past thirty years of Guatemalan migration and, by extension to better understand the modern migratory current. Migration out of Guatemala to Mexico and later, the United States stems from a legacy of political, social, and economic instability that followed the decades of repression and violent civil war. The transition from political refugee to economic migrant is a product of Guatemala's longstanding and deeply rooted history of insecurity and instability in conjunction with the influence and involvement of the United States. Only through a historical and political analysis is it then possible to examine changes in migration trends out of Guatemala. This thesis will illuminate the connection between the political refugees of the Guatemalan Civil War's most violent era, with the current day's economic migrants through a thorough discussion of the historical origin and many influences impacting the shifting migrant population over the past thirty years.

**Guatemalan Migration:
The Historical Origins and the Many Influences Impacting the Transition from
Political Refugee to Economic Migrant**

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction:

The Past 30 Years of Guatemalan Migration

Chapter 2: From Revolution to Civil War 1931-1954:

The Roots of Guatemalan Revolution and the Guatemalan Civil War

The Origins of the Guatemalan Civil War

A Dictatorship of Accommodation

The Guatemalan Revolution and the Decade of Spring

United Fruit Company and the Communist Threat

1954: The Fall of Arbenz and the Dismantling of the October Revolution

Chapter 3: Guatemalan Army's Consolidation of State Rule and the Guatemalan Civil War 1956-1996:

The Counterinsurgency Campaign and the Concurrent Refugee Population

The Guatemalan Civil War: Guerilla Movements and the Army's Consolidation of State Rule

The Impact of Policymaking on the Guatemalan Refugees in Southern Mexico

Policymaking: Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States

Chapter 4: The Rise of Insecurity and Instability in the Post-Conflict Era 1996 Present:

The Transition to Economic Migrant and the Current Economic Crisis

The Modern Day Migrant

The Impact of the Current Economic Crisis on the Migrant Population

Remittances

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Past Thirty Years of Guatemalan Migration

At present, migration out of Guatemala is as salient an issue as ever. The unstable political, social, and economic conditions within the country remain among the varied and complicated factors encouraging the tide of migrants out of Guatemala into Mexico, and later the United States. In turn, the current pattern of migration has had significant political, social, and economic impacts for both Mexico and Guatemala. Notably, this migratory pattern is not a recent phenomenon, but rather historically rooted. The past 30 years have signaled a transition in the type of migration occurring within the region. Harsh dictatorships and the 36-year Guatemalan Civil War created a population of political and social refugees that, during the Counterinsurgency Campaign of the 1980's flooded the states at Mexico's southern border. Yet today, while a steady flow of Guatemalan migrants may still be found in southern Mexico, their motivations have shifted as migrants enter Mexico in search of economic opportunities further north in the United States.

This has left Mexico in a crucial position as nation at a crossroads. While the trend suggests that the migrant journey will not necessarily end in Mexico, many migrants in the 1980's nonetheless found themselves navigating the complex myriad of political, social, and economic issues that continue to plague Mexico. Such issues coupled with the overt strong-arm influence of the United States, have managed to dictate a series of often contradictory policies geared towards the migrant population within Mexico's borders. The purpose of this thesis is to look at the transition of the

Guatemalan migrant from a political refugee from Guatemala's fiercest decade of violence, to today's economic migrant. In so doing, it is critical to also examine the historical context of armed conflict and policy making in the region. There is no mistaking that the refugees of yesterday are in many ways connected to the migrants of today. This thesis will seek not only to examine how policies crafted in both Guatemala and Mexico impacted the migrant population but also how such policies initially originated. A historical context of armed conflict will aid in fostering an understanding of the legacy of insecurity and instability that continues to impact Guatemala today. Critical to this discussion is Mexico's role, not necessarily as the nation at the receiving end of this migratory current, but as the nation through which the migrant journey continues as well.

Many questions persist as to the reasons or push-pull factors encouraging the tide of migration out of Guatemala and through Mexico. In Dr. Oscar Martinez's study of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, he provides various models of borderland interaction (Martinez 1994: 7). The Guatemalan-Mexico border today most closely resembles the model of coexistent borderlands which Martinez defines: "Stability is an on-and-off proposition. The border remains slightly open, allowing for the development of limited binational interaction. Residents of each country deal with each other as casual acquaintances, but borderlanders develop closer relationships" (Martinez 1994: 7). As my research in Guatemala progresses, this characterization appeared to be most appropriate for the Guatemalan-Mexico border region.

Dr. Martinez's characterization of coexistent borderlands would prove to be even more accurate as my research into the subject continued. Additionally, this definition

allowed me to pinpoint the questions and points of examination I would need to seek out in order to provide a fair and accurate depiction of the migration issue in both Guatemala and in Mexico. Furthermore, my application Dr. Martinez's definition of co-existent borderlands suggested that it is impossible to understand this border region today, without properly understanding its historical context. My analysis of migration trends out of Guatemala begins in Chapter 2, with a thorough historical foundation by which to frame the broader issue. Both the 1944 Revolution and The 36-year Civil War had such a profound impact on Guatemalan society, politics, and economy. In understanding these two watershed events, it is then easier to examine the instability and insecurity that has precipitated the movement within the past 30-years of the hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans out of their homeland.

After acquiring an understanding of the historical context, the analysis of migration and migration patterns will commence in Chapter 3 with an introduction to the Guatemalan Civil War and a detailed account of the 1980's and the Counterinsurgency Campaign. During this tumultuous period, estimates reach as high as 250,000 Guatemalan refugees residing in Mexico as a direct result of the counter-insurgency operations launched by the Guatemalan military, at the time the most powerful institution within the state (Migration Information Source: *Guatemala: Economic Migrants Replace Political Refugees* www.migrationinformation.org). The issue of political refugees from Guatemala residing in southern Mexico not only contributes to a discussion of the conditions of instability and insecurity on both sides of the border, but also suggests some type of participation or accommodation on the part of the Mexican state, to receive this population within Mexican borders. Today, Guatemalan migrants

continue to enter Mexico as a result of the legacy of such participation and/or accommodation.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that approximately 200,000 Guatemalans fled to Mexico in search of protection between the years 1982-1985 during the height of the counterinsurgency campaign (Migration Information Source). As the Guatemalan Civil War eventually came to a close, with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, the refugee population returned to Guatemala. Yet, this population would return to a country in shambles. Political, social, and economic instability contributed to a climate of increased violence and insecurity. Returning migrants, the majority of which were from the rural highlands, found it difficult to reintegrate into Guatemalan society and reunite with the villages they had left behind. As Beatriz Manz writes in her book, Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope, “In the beginning, reunification was difficult and called for major, at times painful, adjustments on everyone’s part” (Manz 195). I will argue, that the transition to economic migrant commenced at the moment the former refugees were reintegrated into Guatemalan society. Chapter 4 will deal primarily with modern migration trends through Mexico and into the United States and the transition from political refugee to economic migrant.

This paper seeks to analyze the migration trends of the past thirty years, starting with the late 1980’s and the Counterinsurgency War in the Highlands of Guatemala to today. The Counterinsurgency War displaced vast amounts of rural indigenous people who either stayed in Guatemala and were forced to align with the enemy—the Guatemalan Army—and participate in Civil Defense Patrols, flee to the mountains and

form Communities of Peoples in Resistance (CPRs), or settled as in search of safe haven political refugees in Chiapas, Mexico.

The Counterinsurgency War not only signaled the first of many policy initiatives by the Guatemalan government aimed at rural peasants (the supposed rebels), but also the complicated and complex reactions (manifested in state policy) by Mexico. By examining the historical context of migration and migration policy making, it is then possible to look at and evaluate the migration trends and policy initiatives of the modern era, and what if any policy changes or recommendations should then be made, by either of the actors or parties involved, in the future. Through this analysis of Guatemalan migration, I would like to create a continuum that examines the past thirty years and how a population of refugees would later become a population of economically motivated migrants. In order to do this it is necessary to look back at Guatemala's violent history, and examine the historical origins of the violence and repression that first created a population of political refugee and later, created a population of economic migrants.

There is no mistaking that that the discussion of Guatemalan migration over the past thirty years requires a historical and political analysis. There exists a multiplicity of elements and influences that contribute to framing the issue of Guatemalan migration most adequately. Such elements include: a context of the Guatemalan Revolution and the Guatemalan Civil War, the policy-making efforts in Mexico, and importantly, the unsolicited influence of the United States in both Guatemala and especially in the case of policy-making in Mexico. Such elements not only make it possible to frame and examine Guatemalan migration in the past thirty years, but also call into question the motivations of the heavy hand of the United States as well as the actions of Mexico.

I had the opportunity to conduct the majority of my research in Guatemala. The historical and photo archives at the Center for Mesoamerican Research and Investigation or CIRMA, located in Antigua, Guatemala provided an invaluable research opportunity. I was able to look at primary and secondary documents from the 1980s including newspaper articles from Mexico and Guatemala as well as letters to the sitting Guatemalan President from refugees in Mexico negotiating their return home. I also had the opportunity to talk to people directly impacted by the exodus and slow return home of the refugee population. Needless to say, it is their insights that provide the most significant policy recommendations.

Chapter 2

From Revolution to Civil War 1931-1954:

The Roots of Guatemalan Revolution and the Guatemalan Civil War

For the purposes of this paper, the discussion of Guatemalan migration will be limited to the past thirty years, as the status of the migrants themselves has significantly shifted from political refugee to today's economic migrant. In order to understand these issues it is crucial to grasp the historical context of the political, social, and economic issues that have served as the motivation for the continuous tide of migrants leaving Guatemala for Mexico. While the analysis of Guatemalan migration will begin with the political refugees created by the Counterinsurgency Campaign in the 1980's, it is critical to understand the roots of this conflict.

The Guatemalan Revolution of 1944 created a climate of democratic change throughout Guatemala, lasting for only ten years. Notably, the Revolution of 1944 represents the first attempt by any Guatemalan leader, since the country had gained its independence in 1821, at democratic consolidation. In 1960, the Guatemalan Civil War ushered in more than three decades of violence, repression, and insecurity reaching all corners of Guatemalan society and economy. The lasting effects of which are prevalent in modern Guatemala. The tenuous historical context of Guatemala provides a basis by which to understand the not only the escalation of armed conflict but also to understand the conditions by which Guatemalans have been prompted to leave their country of origin.

The Origins of the Guatemalan Civil War

The 36-year Guatemalan Civil War spanned the years of 1960-1996, with the most violent years occurring in the late 1980's with a state backed military campaign termed the Counterinsurgency War. The Guatemalan Civil War is credited with 250,000 disappearances, 200,000 deaths, and the displacement of as many as 1.5 million Guatemalans (Booth et.al. 128). Understanding the origins of the Guatemalan Civil War provides the means of beginning to understand the influence of the United States.

The Guatemalan Civil War began in 1960, in wake of the turbulent aftermath of the 1954 CIA sponsored coup on President Jacobo Arbenz and Guatemala's first democratic government. Prior to 1954, Guatemala had experienced what historians and political scientists alike have termed the "Decade of Spring", or the Guatemalan Revolution. Legitimate elections throughout the country in 1944 put Juan Jose Arevalo, a former teacher, in the Presidency and ended the brutal thirteen-year dictatorship of Jorge Ubico. The election of 1944 ushered in a new era of politics and reforms in Guatemala that was continued by Jacobo Arbenz until 1954.

The involvement and influence of the United States is a recurrent theme in understanding both the origins of armed conflict in Guatemala and later, the policies created by Mexico in order to deal with the influx of political refugees in the mid- to late 1980's. The legacy of the influence of the United States is evident from the very beginning of the 20th century. Even prior to the 1931 dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, Guatemala's leaders had maintained a trend of accommodation to the business interests of foreign investors, mainly from the United States. Such accommodation to the whims

of foreign investors was one of the principle tenants of the Liberal Development Program. Guatemala followed the lead of *more developed* nations, and thus attempted economic growth through a variety of internal infrastructure projects throughout the country.

For example, under the Liberal Development Program a railroad was constructed linking the interior to the Atlantic coast. Interestingly, while the railroad was built by Guatemalan labor, it was owned by a company in the United States. That company IRCA—International Railways of Central America—was a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 12). In Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change, the authors note that it was the construction of this railroad that created a booming banana industry within Guatemala (Booth et. al. 116). While at the time, this infrastructure project did little to stimulate the Guatemalan economy, it managed to deepen the pockets of the company's owners in both Boston and Washington D.C. Later in 1944 with the Decade of Spring, the vast reforms of the Guatemalan Revolution would be perceived as a clear threat to the previously established interests of the United States both politically and economically, ultimately ushering in what would soon become a protracted Civil War raging for 36-years throughout the country.

A Dictatorship of Accommodation

As Guatemala entered the 20th century the brutal dictatorships of both Manuel Estrada Cabrera and later President Jorge Ubico accommodated and favored United States business interests so much, that the U.S. based United Fruit Company was able to

not only create and maintain a monopoly in Guatemala (and the rest of Latin America for that matter), but also, "...to own key public utilities and vast landholdings" (Booth et. al. 116). The United Fruit Company, through the help of leaders like Ubico, had succeeded in eliminating any Guatemalan competitors in the banana industry. The Guatemalan Revolution during the Decade of Spring would bring about significant reforms throughout Guatemalan society. Such reforms would serve to threaten the previously established status quo and implore the United States to exert more pressure on Guatemala, as the country entered a new era of governance.

President Jorge Ubico left office after a thirteen-year dictatorship distinguished by brutal force used against his own people while providing accommodations to the United States. Some characteristics of Ubico's rule include the lowering of working wages in order to stave off inflation during the world recession of the 1930's. For example, as Eduardo Galeano writes in Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent, "Just before the dictator fell in 1944, *Reader's Digest* ran a eulogistic article about him; this harbinger of the International Monetary Fund had avoided inflation by lowering wages from \$1 to \$.25 a day in the construction of a military highway, and from \$1 to \$.50 for jobs on the air base in the capital" (Galeano 1973: 112). Ubico was praised in the United States for both his decisiveness and boldness as a leader.

As an action further aimed at indigenous laborers, Ubico passed a series of Vagrancy Laws. Such laws required that a Mayan Indian always carry a book listing his days of work, if he didn't have the book or the amount of days was deemed insufficient, he would be forced to pay a fine through a year of forced labor (Galeano 1973: 112). Moreover, in conjunction with Ubico's willingness to appease the business interests of

foreign investors like the United States, he gave the owners of foreign owned plantations (including United Fruit Co.) permission to kill their labor supply in the instances of insolence or even worse, evidence of labor organization amongst the workers. As Galeano notes in the text of Open Veins of Latin America, “This decree—number 2,795—was revived in 1967 during the democratic and representative government of Julio Cesar Montenegro” (Galeano 1973: 112). Ubico’s administration of Guatemala amounted to little more than fostering a system of debt peonage throughout the rural and impoverished countryside of Guatemala. In so doing, Ubico created vast amounts of poor and displaced day laborers. There is no coincidence that this population so viciously marginalized under Ubico, would later become the subject of an all out war on the rural, poor, and indigenous. Not incidentally this population would soon become the refugee population within Mexico’s southern border and later, today’s economic migrant.

Additionally, Ubico was responsible for the brutal repression of student activists, trade unions, and political leaders. His dictatorship ended as opposition swelled amongst both University students and a few military officers. On June 25 and 26 of 1944, tensions within these groups, particularly the academics reached a boiling point. Guatemala City was at a standstill as widespread protests continued and business remained closed. U.S.

Ambassador to Guatemala Boaz Long remarked in light of the situation:

“To any person who has been familiar with the thirteen years of iron-bound discipline maintained by the Ubico administration...it was difficult to believe that an incident at first confined to a small group comprised of University students should so swiftly have spread as to involve the entire city in a serious situation marked by public disorder and civil disobedience” (Gleijeses 1991: 25).

The United States viewed the mass protests as a crisis and in turn viewed Ubico’s inability to suppress the demonstrations as a signal of a weakening leader. As Ubico’s thirteen-year dictatorship neared an end, the Americans perceived him as an ineffectual

right-wing dictator of the past. In his book Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States 1944-1954, Pedro Gleijeses explains:

“During his presidency, Ubico proved himself worthy of the Americans’ favor, and the United States was not ungrateful. U.S. officials had welcomed Ubico’s accession to the presidency in 1931, praising him in extravagant terms as the man who could best maintain pro-American stability in Guatemala during the world recession. Their approval was steadfast until the last months of the dictator’s rule. Even useful dictators can become expendable” (Glejeses 22)

In the case of Ubico, the United States exerted their political muscle. The U.S could have saved Ubico’s political career in Guatemala. Yet, even leaders that closely and carefully conducted day to day business in favor of U.S. political and economic interests would at some point be disposable. This case shows the power of the heavy handed influence of the United States in Guatemalan politics. Combined with the lessening support of the United States and overwhelming opposition within Guatemala, Ubico left office on July 1, 1944 only months before the Guatemalan Revolution would begin in October of the same year.

The Guatemalan Revolution and the Decade of Spring

Juan Jose Arevalo won the presidency in 1944, in the country’s first free and fair democratic elections. The election of Arevalo signaled the beginning of the Decade of Spring, also referred to as the Guatemalan Revolution. Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer in their work Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala, refer to the Guatemalan Revolution as ushering in a new era of reform that Arevalo’s presidency would bring about in Guatemala (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 37). “When Juan Jose Arevalo took office in March 1945, he set four priorities to guide him during his six-year

term: agrarian reform, protection of labor, a better educational system and consolidation of political democracy” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 37). The sweeping changes of Arevalo included instituting a labor code, rural education, and public health promotion (Booth et al 2006: 116). Additionally, contrary to the tone of the previous Ubico regime, Arevalo also supported the organization and unionization of students, workers, and peasants, in addition to open elections throughout the country (Booth et al 2006: 116).

Even despite very clear leanings towards democratizing a society that had barely changed since independence in 1821, the United States viewed the actions of Arevalo as communist leaning. This is especially the case in the reforms Arevalo made to the labor code. “Former Ubico supporters piqued FBI interest by alleging ‘communist influence’ in Arevalo’s legalization of labor unions” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 40). However, it wasn’t until Jacobo Arbenz was elected to the presidency that the reforms were expanded upon and thus perceived as a viable communist threat to the political and economic interests of the U.S in Guatemala. It appears that the period of accommodation to the whims and demands of U.S. foreign investors was coming to an end as a new era in Guatemalan politics, society, and economy emerged.

Arbenz furthered the reforms established by Arevalo at the onset of the Guatemalan Revolution. As Schlesinger and Kinzer point out, “The nation was arguably better off than the one which had faced Arevalo six years earlier. At least two giant steps had already been taken: democracy had been introduced, and the country’s political leadership had publicly committed itself to altering existing economic structures” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 49). Arbenz continued the reforms of Arevalo, yet went one

step further. Arbenz set out on Central America's most ambitious and only successful agrarian reform program.

United Fruit Company and the Communist Threat

While the reforms of Arevalo at the inception of the Guatemalan Revolution did not necessarily accommodate the United States (or the United Fruit Company), there was a growing concern in the U.S. that Guatemala was increasingly leaning to the left. That concern grew sizably with the administration of Jacobo Arbenz. "The administration of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman continued and extended the reforms. Highways and the new port of San Jose broke United Fruit's monopoly of transport and export. With national capital, and without begging to any foreign banker, various projects were launched to lead the country to independence" (Galeano 1997: 113). Most notably, and to the alarm of many in the United States, Arbenz seized the lands unused and left vacant by the United Fruit Company. He redistributed that land to rural peasants and small subsistence farmers, the same population of debt peons previously displaced by Ubico in his accommodation to foreign investors. In the book Open Veins of Latin America author Eduardo Galeano explains:

"An agrarian reform law, aimed basically at developing a peasant capitalist economy and an agriculturalist capitalist economy in general, was approved in 1952. By 1954 over 10,000 families had benefited, although the law only affected idle lands and paid expropriated owners indemnity in bonds. Since United Fruit was using a mere 8 percent of its land, which extended from ocean to ocean, its unused lands began to be distributed to the peasants" (Galeano 1997: 113).

This action was immediately perceived as a threat to U.S. business interests in Guatemala and fear quickly spread that such revolutionary and markedly communist reforms would spread throughout Central America. With the influence of Cold War politics, the

ambitious and incendiary programs and actions of Arbenz—Guatemala’s first true attempt at democratic consolidation—would prove to be short lived.

While both Arevalo and Arbenz are considered to have set the groundwork for democratization in Guatemala; the strong-arm of the United States viewed the reforms of the Guatemalan Revolution, especially the expropriation of United Fruit lands, as not only a threat to the business interests of the United States but also as a move closely associated with communist regimes. Many questions surround the role of the United States and the escalation of violence in Guatemala in the summer of 1954. As the authors of Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala, suggest, “...a more complete answer lay in the events of the past ten years in Guatemala. Though the American public was only dimly aware of it, an audacious social experiment had been underway in Guatemala, which seemed so threatening to powerful interests in the United States that they felt obliged to intervene to halt the process” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 23). The challenges to the political and economic interests of the United States in Guatemala, as well as the increasingly contentious climate of Cold War Politics, compelled the U.S. to take action in Guatemala in 1954.

In order to understand just how influential both the United Fruit Company and the United States were in Guatemala, Schlesinger and Kinzer explain:

“United Fruit controlled directly or indirectly 40,000 jobs in Guatemala. Its investments in the country were valued at \$60 million. It functioned as a state within a state, owning Guatemala’s telephone and telegraph facilities, administering its only important Atlantic harbor and monopolizing its banana export. The company’s subsidiary, the International Railways of Central America (IRCA), owned 887 miles of railroad track in Guatemala, nearly every mile in the country” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 12).

Clearly, the United Fruit Co. had established a vast and widespread presence within Guatemala. Due to the favorable policies and actions of dictators like Ubico, Guatemala

was perceived by the United States as a country to be exploited from and profited on. Prior to the Revolution of 1944, Guatemala was a country where foreign investors were able to freely establish monopolies not only in trade, but also in the functioning and delivery of basic services in the 20th century. Furthermore, while the United Fruit Company was based out of Boston, Massachusetts, many influential Washington politicians sat on the firm's board. For example, Allen Dulles, the Director of the CIA and his brother, John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State under President Eisenhower were both not only large stakeholders in United Fruit but also instrumental in orchestrating and coordinating the 1954 overthrow of Arbenz.

It is for this reason, that the actions of both Arevalo and Arbenz were understood by the United States as a threat to the previously established order of wealth and power in Guatemala. Schlesinger and Kinzer go on to comment, "The Arbenz government had embarked on a land reform program that included expropriation of some of the vast acreage belonging to the United Fruit Company. The land reform was not popular either in the company's Boston boardrooms or in Washington, where the firm had enormous influence" (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 11). The United Fruit Company had so much influence in the United States, that as a result, the U. S. was implored to take action in Guatemala on behalf of the stakes of UFCO in the country.

Yet, bananas are just one part of this story. As explained in Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change:

"Arbenz's reforms and peasants and worker organization threatened the rural labor supply system and shifted economic power toward workers and away from latifundists and employers...the nationalization, the presence of a few communists in the government, and Arbenz's purchase of light arms from Czechoslovakia caused the United States to label the Arbenz government communist" (Booth et. al. 117).

It is important to note the climate of world politics at this time. The Cold War and the communist threat were increasingly perceived as a real danger to the preservation of peace, security, and democracy in the west. In 1951, the United States grew even more concerned with the spread of communism in Guatemala. Arbenz had formally legalized the Communist Party—the PGT or the Guatemalan Labor Party (Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo). As a result, in Guatemala the PGT immediately began organizing and promoting Arbenz’s social agenda including the controversial agrarian reform (Booth et al 2006: 117). “Over 500 peasant unions and 300 peasant leagues formed under the Arbenz government” (Booth et al 2006: 117). In the United States however, as a result of all of these actions of Arbenz’s government, “A frenetic international campaign was launched: ‘The Iron Curtain is falling over Guatemala,’ roared the radio, newspapers, and the bigwigs of the Organization of American States” (Galeano 1997: 113). Fear was quickly spreading as it was becoming increasingly clear that the United States must take action in Guatemala.

As Jose Manuel Fortuny, the general secretary of the PGT commented: “They would have overthrown us even if we had grown no bananas” (Gleijeses 1991: 7). It is widely accepted that the U.S. intervened in Guatemala due to both the communist leanings of the Arbenz administration as well as the perceived assault on the U.S. backed United Fruit Company. The business interests of the U.S. had become so entrenched in Guatemala, that even the mildest reforms of the Guatemalan Revolution posed a threat. Yet, scholarship on the subject reveals that Guatemala’s communist leanings were perceived as a truly profound threat for the United States. To the United States, Arbenz’s expropriation of United Fruit’s land was simply one manifestation (out of many) of the

deeply held communist principles that were alive and well within the Guatemalan government.

1954: The Fall of Arbenz and the Dismantling of the October Revolution

Piero Gleijeses in his book, Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954, remarks that with the fall of Arbenz in 1954, “The years of spring in the land of eternal tyranny had abruptly concluded” (Glejeses 1991: 319). On June 18, 1954, a CIA sponsored coup threatened the Presidency of Jacobo Arbenz. Prior to 1954, “In 1953 the United States set out to destabilize Guatemala’s Arbenz administration with financial sanctions, diplomatic pressure in the Organization of American States, and Central Intelligence Agency disinformation and covert actions” (Booth et al 2006: 117). In the early summer of 1954 the National Liberation Army succeeded in its invasion of Guatemala. The National Liberation Army originated as a rebel contingent from within the Guatemalan Army, led by Col. Castillo Armas, and more importantly backed by the United States.

The National Liberation Army represented a rightist contingent within the Guatemalan Army. The United States saw this faction as disloyal to and disillusioned by the policies and governance of Arbenz and thus seized the opportunity to topple the communist leaning government. In the fall of 1953, Arbenz was well aware that the United States intended to overthrow him (Glejeses 1991: 279). Arbenz was fearful of United States intervention, or worse an invasion. His response was the purchase and importation of arms from Czechoslovakia to be covertly given to the Partido Guatemalteco Del Trabajo or the Guatemalan Labor Party (PGT)—Guatemala’s

communist party of which Arbenz closely allied. Arbenz had hoped that the rural peasants and workers would be able to arm themselves and resist a potential invasion.

The action would only serve to heighten the aggression of the United States and antagonize some within the military. As Jennifer Schirmer writes in her book, The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy,

“...in 1954 Arbenz antagonized the older and more traditional officers (and wealthy landowners) with his attempt to create a civilian militia to protect his agrarian reform process. Fully aware of the army’s increasing uneasiness with the communist flavor of his government and fearful of a U.S. invasion, Arbenz secretly contracted for a shipment of weapons from Czechoslovakia. This shipment was discovered, fraying the already tenuous bond between the President and his Army” (Schirmer 1998: 13-14).

Eventually, officials in the United States got wind of the shipment of weapons from a Soviet Bloc county, destined for Guatemala. This move by Arbenz only made the communist threat more salient for the United States. The United States thus began to meticulously plot and coordinate the overthrow of Arbenz. In February of 1954, the CIA had already set up training camps in Nicaragua to train the rebel faction of the Guatemalan Army with the willingness and support of the Nicaraguan President, the U.S. backed Somoza (Glejeses 1991: 292).

The ardor to rid Guatemala of the so-called communist regime only deepened when Arbenz made a final effort to save the Revolution. Prior to the June 1954 invasion, Arbenz attempted to quell his opposition with the suspension of constitutional guarantees on June 8, a mere ten days prior to the initial invasion. As Glejeses explains, “In despair and self defense, the regime began to lash out at the only foe that it could reach—the internal opposition—in an attempt to destroy the fifth column [the rebel faction within the army] before the invasion began” (Glejeses 317). This action only served to bolster the cause of the United States. The suspension of constitutional guarantees was

perceived as communist repression at its worst. To the Americans the action signaled yet another step by Arbenz toward communism. “In the United States, the repression provoked an uproar. Congressmen and journalists inveighed against a ‘tyrannical Communist minority’ that was trying ‘to maintain itself against the will of the people’” (Gleijeses 1991: 317). The irony in the situation lies in the fact that Arbenz did far more than is credited to establish democratic principles and behavior throughout Guatemala. Even so, Gleijeses comments in Shattered Hope, “Arbenz, however, was the enemy. For too long, his government had posed a quieting paradox for the Americans: riddled with communists, it had nevertheless upheld political democracy and civil liberties that was highly unusual in Latin America” (Gleijeses 1991: 318). The invasion of Guatemala signaling the end of the Revolution of October 1944 took place on June 18, 1954 with Arbenz ultimately resigning just a few days later on June 27.

As the United States learned of the weapons deal, the opportunity was seized to increase aggression toward the Arbenz regime. As the authors of Bitter Fruit note, “...the divisions between Guatemala and the United States ran too deep and were too advanced...” to broker any kind of diplomatic alternative to the imminent U.S. invasion (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 11). As tensions boiled in June of 1954, Jacobo Arbenz declined to arm the local peasant unions of the countryside. Yet peasants and members of the PGT nevertheless began to demand arms. “All received the same reply: there was no need to arm the population; the ‘army is successful in defending our country’ ” (Gleijeses 1991: 324). This proved later to be a mistake as CIA trained rebels or saboteurs (to be distinguished from the army’s fifth column) managed to infiltrate Guatemala through a complicit and U.S. allied Honduras (Gleijeses 1991: 324). As it

was becoming clear that an overarching fear of the United States paralyzed the Guatemalan Army to the point of an inability to defend its homeland, Arbenz never lost confidence and thus refocused the 1954 battle for Guatemala on diplomatic efforts.

Diplomatic efforts stretched from within Central America to the United Nations. The Arbenz administration appealed to other Central American countries through the Organization of American States and the Caracas Conference.

“At the Tenth Inter-American Conference in Caracas, Venezuela, Secretary of States Dulles had exerted heavy pressure on Latin states to endorse a resolution condemning ‘Communist’ infiltration in Latin America. It was directly aimed at Guatemala, though no nation was named. Only Guatemala voted in opposition to it, with two others abstaining in meek protest” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 12).

In the United States, the result of the Caracas Conference made it increasingly apparent that it was only a matter of time before Arbenz would be overthrown and the communist threat in Central America would be eliminated. In both the Organization of American States and in the Caracas Conference the influence and dominance of the United States was obvious.

The United States already controlled much of Central America through either the support or the installation of strong-arm rightist leaders or through exerting great political and economic pressure throughout the region. Yet, in the wake of the Caracas Conference with the passage of the U.S. backed resolution, Gleijeses notes, “Decades of submission and ‘sordid calculations...based on the hope of receiving a *quid pro quo* on economic issues’ ensured the pitiful capitulation...those Latin American’s who had sold Guatemala for the lure of U.S. dollars were robbed of the payment” (Gleijeses 1991: 276). Central America had sold Guatemala out to the Americans on the basis of receiving an economic incentive that in time would never materialize.

Guatemala further suffered diplomatic humiliation and defeat at the United Nations. There was reason to understand why Arbenz had placed so much hope in the United Nations. “Guatemala’s case was so solid and the evidence of Honduras’s and Nicaragua’s complicity was so glaring that the United Nations would have to intervene” (Glejeses 1991: 329). In the end, the United Nations offered no assistance in halting the invasion.

Guatemala’s foreign minister, Guillermo Toriello pleaded with the United Nations Security Council: “‘to take the measures necessary...to put a stop to the aggression.’ Which he blamed on Nicaragua, Honduras, and ‘certain foreign monopolies whose interests have been affected by the progressive policy of my government’”(Glejeses 329). The influence of the United States proved to extend not only throughout Central America, but all the way to the United Nations. The battle for Guatemala in the summer of 1954, intensified as Toriello returned to the Security Council on June 21, “asking it to take ‘whatever steps are necessary’ to stave the flow of foreign assistance to the rebels” (Glejeses 1991: 330). However, the United States had already exerted such a significant amount of diplomatic pressure on countries like France and Great Britain, that while they intended to take a stand on the Guatemalan issue, they were implored by U.S. political interests and economic pressures to follow suit.

The failure of diplomatic efforts with the U.N. coupled with the refusal of army officers in Zacapa (located close to the border with Honduras) dealt Arbenz with a demoralizing and debilitating blow. On June 23, a member of the PGT was sent to Zacapa and later reported back to the PGT’s Central Committee that, “The officers at Zacapa...were demoralized, afraid, unwilling to fight” (Glejeses 1991: 332). Upon this

report, Arbenz sent an officer to Zacapa whose report on the situation reiterated the same sentiments. The message from the army officers simply asked for the resignation of President Arbenz stating, "...you must resign. The situation is hopeless. The officers don't want to fight. They think that the Americans are threatening Guatemala just because of you and your communist friends. If you don't resign, the army will march on the capital and depose you..." (Glejeses 1991: 332-333). Arbenz resigned four days later on the 27th of June.

The invasion of Guatemala was successful for a variety of reasons. To begin with, in the initial phase of the invasion, Arbenz did not take seriously the threat that rebel group (the army's fifth column) under Col. Castillo Armas posed to the security of the country or to his position as President. Secondly, Arbenz grossly underestimated the involvement of the United States. Nevertheless, as Piero Glejeses points out, "There was no way that Guatemala alone could defeat a U.S. invasion, and Guatemala was alone" (Glejeses 284). Arbenz was markedly confident that his army would be able to keep the actions of the rebels at bay, even despite the fact that he had antagonized many within his own army. At the beginning of the invasion, it appears that Arbenz felt little to no threat, and therefore made the decision ultimately to not arm workers or rural peasants. The arms deal with Czechoslovakia had caused so much tension between both the United States and Guatemala and between the army and Arbenz that aggression had escalated to the point that he was then left in the position of backing down.

The failure of both diplomacy and of action by the Guatemalan army each contributed to the resignation of Arbenz and the humiliation of Guatemala. Yet, that is only part of the story. Throughout the Guatemalan Army, it was becoming increasingly

clear that Arbenz had to go—a point which had been clear to the United States all along. Deals with the United States were proposed. Among such deals, was the offer from Colonel Carlos Enrique Diaz, one of Arbenz's most trusted senior military officers. Diaz proposed that he could broker the resignation of Arbenz in exchange for the assurance that Castillo Armas would not be named president. Diaz assumed that due to his position and gross overestimation of his influence with the army, that he would be the one succeeding Arbenz as Guatemala's next president.

Arbenz ultimately stepped down, at the insistence of Diaz and in the hopes of salvaging the Guatemalan nation he had fought so hard to forage. Diaz had assured Arbenz that the ideals of the Guatemalan Revolution would be preserved and that Castillo Armas (the leader of the National Liberation Army) would not assume power. Both of these promises would prove to be nothing more than lies. Diaz would never assume the presidency; the United States whom he had seemingly brokered a deal with had made sure of it. In the end, Arbenz was betrayed by his closest and most senior military officers, and Guatemala was betrayed by the United States.

In the conclusion to his book, Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954, Piero Gleijeses sums up: "Ever since Jefferson cast his gaze toward Cuba, three forces have shaped U.S. policy toward the Caribbean: the search for economic gain, for security, and for imperial hubris. These were the forces that shaped the American response to the Guatemalan revolution" (Glejeses 1991: 361). Col. Castillo Armas would become not only the head of the Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional or the National Liberation Movement (MLN), but would also assume the presidency of Guatemala with the support of both the United States and the Catholic

Church despite the promises of those who had swindled Arbenz out of the presidency. Not only were the ideals of the Guatemalan Revolution and the Decade of Spring to be lost, but Castillo Armas (due to the influence of the United States) would usher in a new era in Guatemalan politics, economy, and society that has had lasting impacts.

Those most deeply impacted by the violence in Guatemala in 1954, were the same marginalized class of poor indigenous peasants and workers from the countryside that were impacted by Ubico's brutal dictatorship. As the violence of 1954 grew into a Civil War in 1960, it would again be this population that would bear the brunt of repression and brutality. Many within this marginalized population would soon become the population fleeing Guatemala as refugees residing in southern Mexico and later as today's economic migrants. Furthermore, the influence of the United States is critical in understanding the crafting of policy in both Guatemala and Mexico as the violence would continue to rage and the 36 years of Civil War would undeniably create conditions of instability and insecurity in the two countries. The rest of this thesis will look at the legacy of such instability and insecurity with respect to the last thirty years of migration out of Guatemala and into Mexico.

Chapter 3

Guatemalan Army's Consolidation of State Rule and

the Guatemalan Civil War 1956-1996:

The Counterinsurgency Campaign and the Concurrent Refugee Population

In his 1973 book, Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent, Eduardo Galeano writes, “Arbenz’s fall started a conflagration in Guatemala which has never been extinguished. The same forces that bombed Guatemala City, Puerto Barrios, and the Port of San Jose on the evening of June 18, 1954, are in power today” (Galeano 1997: 114). The abrupt end to the Guatemalan Revolution ushered in six years of brutal military dictatorships, until the beginning of the Guatemalan Civil War in 1960. The reforms of the Guatemalan Revolution were not merely stopped, they were reversed.

“In the months that followed, thousands of civilians were arrested, tortured, and killed, while many of the officers that supported Arbenz were demoted, retired or exiled...by the end of 1956, only 0.4 percent of those supposed to benefit from the reform still retained their lands, leaving many peasants with only memories of their earlier gains” (Schirmer 1998: 14).

In the interim period following the collapse of the Guatemalan Revolution and the beginning of the Guatemalan Civil War, Guatemala witnessed the manner by which the army amassed both power and autonomy. The legacy of such action is manifested in the current insecurity and instability rampant in Guatemala today, which largely stems from the culture of fear and silence that the Guatemalan Army had been so successful in maintaining. A further legacy is reflected in the migrant population, once forced to flee

Guatemala as political refugees and later motivated to leave once again as economic migrants.

The Guatemalan Civil War: Guerilla Movements and the Army's Consolidation of State Rule

While the official beginning of the Guatemalan Civil War is in 1960, the six year interim was nonetheless marked by not only violence and opposition, but also by attempts by the Guatemalan Army to effectively lead the country. As Jennifer Schirmer describes, "The army that arose after the U.S. financed invasion of 1954 was fiercely anticommunist and bound to the Cold War fears of both Guatemala's upper class and Big Brother to the north" (Schirmer 1998: 14). In the years following the collapse of the Guatemalan Revolution in 1954, the army sought to sustain itself and the power that it garnered. Just two years after Arbenz's fall, "...the army's legal autonomy was ensured in the 1956 constitution, and doubly guaranteed in the Army's Constitutive Law of 1956", in which the army was guaranteed complete autonomy from the constitution (Schirmer 1998: 14-15). In the years that followed 1956, the army became increasingly authoritarian as it attempted to lead the state.

The army however, had a problem. There were deep divisions between those that had supported Arbenz and those that had not. Those that supported Arbenz attempted to remove the fraudulently elected General Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes in a coup on November 13, 1960. Schirmer provides an interesting analysis of the coup and what it says about the 36-year Civil War:

“On November 13, 1960 some 120 left leaning junior officers attempted a coup in the name of ‘social justice, a just distribution of wealth’ and against *los gringos imperialistas*. The layers of motivation for this coup attempt to help us understand not only the significance of the post-revolutionary period for the army, but the resultant thirty-six years of armed conflict: there was hatred, some officers argue between the younger officers and the older officers because of High Command’s betrayal of Arbenz, because of the rampant corruption within the upper ranks of the army, because of the older officer’s reluctance to embrace the new irregular warfare combat training...” (Schirmer 1998: 15).

After the coup, it was the army that was running the Guatemalan state. Guerilla movements including the Movimiento Revolucionario del 13 de Noviembre (The Revolutionary Movement of November 13), the FAR—Frente Revolucionario de 12 de Abril (the Revolutionary Front of April 12), and the PGT, were mobilizing. Notably, the guerilla movements were directed by former army officers that had been trained by the U.S.

As guerilla movements gained momentum, the army sought to consolidate and secure its rule over Guatemala. Due to a large presence of opposition to the army, this institution began a process of eliminating that opposition while also amassing and consolidating power. Thus, as Schirmer explains:

“... the army moved into decisive political action *in the name of the armed forces*, resulting in a state of siege, suspension of all rights (including habeas corpus), as well as assassinations, kidnappings, and ‘the cavalry of terror’; the army moved from being a determinant presence within the civilian state structure to assuming control of the state itself. The military began to function as a political force, ‘giving orders’ and growing ‘accustomed to making political decisions within a special framework directed by the concept of national security...” (Schirmer 1998: 17).

For the next 36-years, guerilla movements like the URNG, or the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity of the 1980’s, would continue to proliferate throughout Guatemala in an attempt to oppose an increasingly authoritarian government. For 36-years, the environment in Guatemala would be marked by repression, violence, and fear. The most

violent years of the Civil War would come in the 1980's as the government launched a fierce Counterinsurgency Campaign aimed at eliminating both insurgents and their supporters. It is not coincidental that those most viciously impacted by the violence were the rural, poor, and indigenous Maya of Guatemala's highlands. These are the same debt peons beholden to the whims of Ubico, given hope by both Arevalo and Arbenz, and stripped of a nation by the army. It is this marginalized population that out of fear would become the political refugees living within neighboring Mexico's borders.

Considered to be the most violent years of the Guatemalan Civil War, the Counterinsurgency Campaign of 1982-1985 gained a new momentum under the newly installed President, General Efraim Rios Montt. Rios Montt had been installed as president only after a military coup deposed President Lucas Garcia in 1982. Lucas Garcia had already launched a counterinsurgency effort as part of a state policy to eliminate any and all threats to the national security and stability of Guatemala. This included the insurgents and guerillas hiding in the highlands and mountainous regions of Guatemala. In 1981, Lucas Garcia was deposed in a military coup. The Civil War had already lasted twenty years, and despite an environment of silence and repression, questions arose as to whether the army was actually winning. Additionally, it was widely thought that the guerillas in the central and western highlands were becoming successful in organizing and mobilizing the indigenous population (Schirmer 1998: 20).

A combination of political motivations and military objectives acted as the driving force behind the actions of this newly installed government of General Rios Montt. For example, "The coup leaders apparent dual strategy was to increase repression to crush the rebels and demobilize growing opposition while simultaneously reforming the

political rules of the game with elections and eventual civilian rule under military tutelage” (Booth et al 2006: 123). As a result of the newly invigorated zeal to use repression as the means by which opposition could be swiftly defeated, the Counterinsurgency Campaign was launched by the newly inaugurated administration.

The object of this state policy of repression and scorched-earth campaign was defined specifically, as the URNG or the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity and their supposed supporters, the rural indigenous population of the Guatemalan Highlands. The indigenous population was already a marginalized group within Guatemala, with a history of systematic repression and discrimination at the hands of the state. Under the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, it was this population that was the target of Vagrancy Laws and ultimately forced into submission as debt peons on foreign owned plantations. Yet, “On the military agenda [under Guatemalan President Rios Montt], repression escalated again as the Guatemalan army mounted a new rural Counterinsurgency Campaign in indigenous zones” (Booth et al 2006: 123). This Counterinsurgency Campaign tightly linked the opposition or guerilla movements of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) with the indigenous communities predominately located in the Guatemalan Highlands. Thus, indigenous communities unabashedly comprise the majority of the killings and dislocations that occurred during this era. In 1999 the Historical Clarification Commission released its report: *Guatemala Memory of Silence*. The report found that the killings rose to the level of genocide, as 83 percent of the victims were Maya (Booth et al 2006: 128).

In the eyes of the Guatemalan state, the indigenous population of the Highlands was closely allied with subversion, if not subversives themselves. Interestingly enough,

as noted by Booth et al, “Rios Montt’s press secretary Francisco Bianchi justified the campaign with the following reasoning: ‘The guerillas won over many Indian collaborators. Therefore, the Indians were subversives, right? Clearly, you had to kill Indians because they were collaborating with subversion. And they would say ‘You’re massacring innocent people.’ But they weren’t innocent. They had sold out to subversion’” (Booth et al 2006: 123). The purpose of the Guatemalan military was to use any and all means necessary under the policy of systematic repression to defeat and raze any and all opposition felt by the state. “The army massacred numerous whole villages and committed many other atrocities against suspected guerrilla sympathizers...estimates of the rural counterinsurgency’s death toll range up to 150,000 persons between 1982 and 1985” (Booth et al 2006: 123). Indigenous residents of the rural Guatemalan Highlands were not only vulnerable to military raids and massacres, but also were forced to take part in army sponsored Civil Defense Patrols, or else flee to mountains and form Communities of Peoples in Resistance (CPRs), or to cross the border into southern Mexico as political refugees.

The Impact of Policymaking on the Guatemalan Refugees in Southern Mexico

While the discussion at hand is confined to the changing condition of Guatemalan migrants over the past thirty years, it is important to understand the dramatic impact that the policies of both the Guatemalan and Mexican governments had on the refugee and/or migrant population. Going further, understanding the often contradictory policies coming out of Mexico, means also understanding the influences coming from all directions.

From the United States, Mexico was pressured to keep the refugees at bay while the increasing violence in Guatemala posed a clear threat to Mexican national security. Curiously, it is critical not to forget Mexico's longstanding reputation within Latin America as a nation hospitable to those escaping from political and social persecution. All of these elements provide a context for understanding the many political issues represented by the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico.

Policymaking: Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States

Policymaking within the Guatemalan government during the 1980's, and even prior, was markedly aimed at eliminating any type of guerilla or insurgent faction that opposed the actions of the government. The Counterinsurgency Campaign of Rios Montt represents not only the autonomy of the Guatemalan Army-led government, but also the brutal policies crafted by that government. For example, the Counterinsurgency War was termed a scorched-earth offensive by the policymakers wielding power in Guatemala. The policies and concurrent actions of the Guatemalan state are brutally revealing of the factors influencing the refugee population to leave their homes in the Guatemalan Highlands and become refugees in southern Mexico. On the other side of the border, the policies and actions of the Mexican government remain difficult to define as they often appear contradictory in nature. Finally, the involvement of the United States in both creating the conditions in Guatemala for the Civil War to ignite and in influencing policy decisions in Mexico, is telling of the importance placed by the U.S. on Mexico's border with Guatemala, as a strategic *southern border* of the United States.

The Counterinsurgency War was rampant with human rights violations and mass deaths. However, the Counterinsurgency War is also credited with creating a large number of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). Many of the IDPs would soon become the population of political refugees residing within southern Mexico. The emergence of this refugee population is directly attributed to the brutality of the Counterinsurgency Campaign. As cited in Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion and Change, “The Counterinsurgency War made at least 500,000 persons, mostly Indians, into internal or external refugees” (Booth et al 2006: 123). Furthermore, as a direct result of the Counterinsurgency Campaign Mexico saw an influx of up to 250,000 Guatemalan refugees permeate the country’s southern border.

The issue of the political refugees that relocated to southern Mexico, concerns much more than solely an issue of trans-boundary migration. First, it is important to examine the role of Mexico and its policies in response to both the Counterinsurgency War and the refugee population now located inside its borders. Additionally, the significant role and influence of the United States in this migration discussion must not be overlooked.

As the United States had initially aided in creating the conditions of insecurity present in Guatemala since the 1954 overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz and up through the mid- to late 1980’s, the increase in migrants entering Mexico once again garnered the attention of the United States. While the United States was no longer *as* fearful of a communist regime taking over in Guatemala and spreading throughout Central America, the U.S. was however concerned with the insecurity associated with the guerilla movements spreading through Mexico and into the United States. Thus, the U.S.

became increasingly interested and entrenched in the policies coming out of Mexico both with respect to the Counterinsurgency War and with the concurrent refugee population residing in southern Mexico.

Mexico's policy regarding the migrant population entrenched within its borders is, at best, difficult to define. There are many factors influencing both the policies and actions of the Mexican government. The policies created in the 1980's were intended as a means to handle the influx of migrants penetrating Mexico's borders. Documents from *The National Security Archive* further aid in understanding Mexico's contradictory policy in dealing with the refugee population from Guatemala. "On the one hand, the Mexican government criticized the political violence employed by decades of successive regimes in Guatemala, and extended a life-saving welcome to Guatemalans fleeing the brutality in their homeland. On the other hand, Mexico harbored profound concerns about the implications of the violence for its own internal security" (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). It is in this sense that Mexico's policy, while maintaining its historical precedent of responding to human rights crises throughout Latin America, was also cooperating with the repressive forces that the state internally opposed (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). As the Counterinsurgency Campaign continued, Mexico struggled in its effort to craft effective policy. Internal politics and economic pressures as well as external influences would ultimately create a policy stand in Mexico that remains difficult to pin down. Many factors, influences, and actors would make it virtually impossible for Mexico to truly deal with the Guatemalan refugees on its own terms.

Mexico's neighbors in both the north and the south expected that their previously established political ties with the Mexican Government would ensure that their interests were served as the conflict in Guatemala continued to escalate. The governments of both Guatemala and the United States harbored significant concerns, even prior to the height of the Counterinsurgency Campaign in Guatemala, that subversives might seek refuge within Mexican borders.

Documents from *The National Security Archive* further confirm the manner by which the governments of Guatemala and the United States suggested that Mexico tighten up its southern border in an effort to dissuade subversives (political refugees) from entering Mexico. "American documents indicate that as the internal conflict brewed inside Guatemala during the 1960's and 1970's, U.S. and Guatemalan officials repeatedly expressed concerns about the security and permeability of Mexico's southern border" (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). Despite such calls from both the United States and Guatemala, Mexico's policy towards the counterinsurgency and the refugee population continued to be contradictory. The external pressures exerted on Mexico by both Guatemala and the United States suggest a complicated, if not contradictory, stance on both the Counterinsurgency War as well as issues of national security within Mexico. From the perspective of the United States, while humanitarian aid was officially offered in assistance to the refugees in Mexico, the vested interest remained in ensuring that subversives or so-called insurgents did not penetrate Mexican borders.

According to documentation from *The National Security Archive*, "When the question arose, the U.S. embassy in Mexico City was confident that the Mexican

government would back Guatemalan counterinsurgency efforts” (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). Furthermore, it was also indicated by the Mexican embassy to the United States that in the event that Guatemalan subversives (refugees) seek haven within Mexico, then Mexican borders would be closed (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). Such information not only suggests the interests of the United States to ensure that refugees or subversives were kept at bay, but also the support of the actions of the Guatemalan military. It is in this sense that the United States utilized the Counterinsurgency Campaign in Guatemala in order to pressure Mexico to tighten up its southern border in the interest of the national security of both nations. Mexico however, would never close its border with Guatemala. The United States, in effect, treated the border between Guatemala and Mexico as its unofficial, yet strategic *southern border*.

As stated previously, Mexico was viewed throughout Latin America as a nation welcoming to those escaping political and social persecution in their respective country of origin. To further muddle the complex political pressures exerted on Mexico, in 1981 Mexico recognized insurgents from El Salvador as a politically legitimate force. This is significant in the discussion of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico because the Mexican government had held off from officially recognizing the Guatemalans residing within Mexican borders as political refugees. Additionally, the Mexican government had never officially condemned nor supported the Counterinsurgency War in Guatemala. Yet, in officially recognizing the FMLN (the insurgent or guerilla front) in El Salvador, Mexico was perceived as supporting all of the guerilla movements sweeping through Central America during the 1980's. This action on the part of Mexico alarmed the governments

of both the United States and Guatemala. Would Mexico then recognize the refugees also as a politically legitimate movement, just as it had recognized the FMLN? The United States and Guatemala were concerned that if Mexico was now recognizing insurgent forces from other nations within Central America, then surely they would follow suit with the Guatemalan subversives already present within Mexican borders.

In 1982, correspondence from within the U.S. State Department, under the new Reagan administration, revealed the sense of alarm felt by the U.S. as a result of Mexico's contradictory policies and actions: "Reports suggest a disturbing level of Mexican official accommodation to Guatemalan guerillas, despite the Mexican army's apparent desire to clamp down" (Mexico's Southern Front Guatemala and the Search for Security). It is clear that Mexico's policy regarding both the Counterinsurgency Campaign as well as the influx of refugees entering the country would require a delicate balancing act between maintaining internal national security and appeasing the external interests of Guatemala and especially, the United States.

Yet, while internally the Mexicans were opposed to the actions of the Guatemalan Army and offered support to the refugees, there is evidence that the Mexican government was engaged in an active support of the Guatemalan Army's Counterinsurgency Campaign. "On the border, Mexican troops at times supported counterinsurgency operations launched by the Guatemalan army. In the refugee camps in the south, Mexico alternated its policy of granting asylum to the massive tide of fleeing peasants with deportations, harassment, and, in 1984, forced relocation" (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). The contradictory policies and actions of the Mexican government are telling of the intense internal and external pressures impressed

upon the country at this time. According to a 1984 article published in *The Nation*, “Unfortunately for the refugees, Mexico’s normally liberal foreign policy has not been evident in its dealings with the Guatemalan government” (*The Nation* 1984). Both the United States and Guatemala expected and to some extent, had the support of Mexico in the counterinsurgency operations. Yet Mexico still remained a safe haven to the refugee population fleeing Guatemala.

Some political variables may aid in explaining this unclear policy stand. For example, further complicating the issue was Mexico’s effort to launch and promote the Contadora Group as a means toward establishing good relations with other countries in Latin America. Contadora was a peace initiative proposed in January of 1983 by Mexico, Panama, Venezuela and Colombia. In attempting to push through Contadora, the international diplomatic efforts of Mexico may have influenced the country’s responses to the immigration or refugee problem. At the time, Contadora was regarded as one of Mexico’s more significant and ambitious foreign policy initiatives. For Mexico fostering good relations with Guatemala (which translated into support for the actions of the Guatemalan state) were imperative in ensuring Contadora’s success, regardless of the internal opposition present within Mexico to Guatemala’s harsh actions. In order for Contadora to be viable, all Latin American nations needed to agree with the terms of peace laid out in Contadora. Such success would thus be regarded as a much needed political victory for Mexico on the international stage.

But in addition to political variables, there were also others that aid in a more complete explanation on how and why the Mexican government reacted the way it did, to the refugee population in the south. Internally, Mexico was facing severe economic

deterioration and social tension. Such issues had a hand in influencing the formulation of policies with regard to the new refugee population that had already begun settling in Chiapas, Mexico. At the time Chiapas remained one of the poorest states within Mexico. Concurrently, Chiapas has the largest population of indigenous Maya. Prior to the height of the Guatemalan Civil War, and by extension the Counterinsurgency Campaign, Chiapas shared a relationship with Guatemalan migrants (as temporary or seasonal workers) seeking work on the coffee *fincas* across the border. Not surprisingly, the demographic composition of this migrant worker population from Guatemala also consisted of the rural and poor Maya.

When refugees from the Guatemalan Highlands moved into areas of Chiapas there were already deeply rooted social and cultural ties established in the region. Shared beliefs, languages, and customs only served to strengthen the integration of the Guatemalan refugees into these communities. This establishment of communities and the integration of the refugees into Mexican society was aided by the COMAR—the Mexican Commission for the Aid of Refugees, which coordinated local and federal institutions so that the basic needs of the refugee population were able to be met.

The fact that the refugee population was so easily absorbed into Mexican society in Chiapas (as a result of a shared social and cultural heritage) alarmed both the United States and Guatemala. Additionally, the Mexican state was concerned, as the government of Guatemala continued to assure Mexican officials that all refugees crossing the border were truly subversives. Yet, little to no effort was made in distinguishing between the political refugees and the dangerous subversives. All Guatemalans fleeing the counterinsurgency were assumed to be subversives. It is documented that President

Rios Montt had once commented to President Reagan that “there were no refugees in Mexico, only guerillas” (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). Mexico’s fears, which were encouraged by the Guatemalan government, were that insurgent activity would soon begin to spring up within Mexico. As a result of the formation of communities in Chiapas, which were strengthened by the shared cultural heritage between the refugees and residents, these potential insurgents might not only threaten internal security in Mexico, but also spread through Mexico and reach the U.S. border.

The documents from *The National Security Archives* reveal, “The Mexican defense establishment agreed with the Guatemalan government that the refugee camps [in Chiapas] were being used by insurgents” (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). Due to Mexico’s fear of insurgent activity within its own border, the refugee populations were forced to relocate from Chiapas and into the Yucatan. This was done, in order to break the social and political structures of the Guatemalan refugee population in Mexico and curb the possibility of future insurgent actions occurring inside Mexico. “Out of this mix of concerns about Mexico’s international image, regional peace efforts, bilateral relations with Guatemala, and its traditional support for Latin American political exiles, the government’s preoccupation for internal security and stability emerged as the most significant and urgent reason to relocate the refugees” (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security). Political and economic variables were of increasing importance, as decisions of what to do with the refugee population were about to be made.

It is undisputed that Mexico not only provided a safe haven for the political refugees but also provided support for them via state initiatives including COMAR. Yet, at the same time, the Mexican government denied official political recognition of the refugee population located within its borders. Simply stated, as a result of economic strain and political and social tension, Mexico in the 1980's was ill-equipped to deal with the refugees and the political issues they brought with them into Mexico. While it remains a fact that Mexico did provide a safe haven for many refugees, state policy reflects national security motivations rather than humanitarian ones. The majority of the refugee population consisted primarily of the rural indigenous. While Mexico did maintain a widespread reputation of harboring individuals seeking political asylum, such practices and policies were not extended to the population of Guatemalan refugees for political and economic reasons.

According to the Mexican government the refugees maintained no significant or permanent immigration status, as Mexico (along with the United States) did not officially recognize refugees (*The Nation* 1984). In a 1984 article published in *The Nation*, the U.N. High Commissioner's program officer in charge of supervising refugee camps in Chiapas commented, "Mexico still has not ratified the U.N.'s Convention of Refugees. In Mexico, 'refugiado' is just another word" (*The Nation* 1984). As a result of Mexico's unwillingness to document or extend legal status to the refugees present within Mexican borders, the UNHCR—the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was only able to register and assist 46,000 refugees (Migration Information Source—Mexico: Caught Between the United States and Central America). Although as many as 250,000 Guatemalan refugees are believed to have fled to Mexico during the Counterinsurgency

War. Mexico altogether avoided the issue of dealing politically with the refugee population due to the increasing pressure placed on Mexico from both the United States and Guatemala. Had Mexico officially recognized the Guatemalans as political refugees, the Mexican government would also be acknowledging the brutal violence and repression present in Guatemala. Acknowledging the deteriorating and increasingly hostile social conditions in Guatemala would have been politically dangerous for Mexico.

Further compounding this increasingly political issue was the economic stress that Mexico was feeling at the time. The economic crisis of the 1980's in Mexico was coming to a head just as Guatemalan refugees were flowing into Mexico. As a result of deteriorating economic conditions, Mexico simply could not accommodate the needs of the thousands of refugees now entrenched in its borders. In 1982, a high ranking official in the Mexican Interior Ministry attempted to clarify the reasons as to why Mexico did not recognize nor should continue to harbor the Guatemalan refugee population. "They come looking for jobs and relocation...their presence causes a rise in delinquency...a rise in demand for jobs...displacement of Mexican nationals...and friction and irritation among Mexicans" (*The Nation* 1984). The devaluation of the peso in conjunction with an increase in the prices of basic consumer goods of 100 percent or more, contributed to rapid deterioration of the Mexican economy. Further compounding the economic issues faced by Mexico, the refugees were settling in Chiapas, one of Mexico's poorest states. Thus resources in refugee camps were becoming increasingly sparse. Within the government and across the country, the refugee population was increasingly looked upon as a drain on the nation's economy. As a result, a growing consensus within the Mexican

government suggested that repatriation rather than mere relocation of the refugee population was growing increasingly necessary.

The Mexican government forced the relocation of the refugees from Chiapas to the Yucatan. The economic deterioration and political pressures rampant within and externally imposed on the Mexican government led to efforts to relocate or repatriate the refugee population. “All the factors that point to it [repatriation and relocation of the refugees]—legal constraints that make official recognition of the refugees difficult, factionalism within the Mexican government and the country’s severe economic problems—remain as compelling as they were then” (*The Nation* 1984). Relocation and increasingly repatriation, was necessary in the eyes of the Mexican state, in order to ensure internal national security while also providing economic relief to both Chiapas and greater Mexico. The Mexican government also sought to break the social and political ties (which may encourage insurgent or subversive activity) established by refugees in Chiapas. The constant raids on the refugee camps located on Mexican soil by the Guatemalan army contributed to a lack of national or internal security. Because there was reason to believe that insurgents or subversives were among the refugees in Chiapas, the Guatemalan army extended its counterinsurgency efforts to include southern Mexico. Therefore, the prevalent motivating factors for the relocation and repatriation of Guatemalan refugees, was to put an end to the violence and insecurity present in southern Mexico.

Repatriation would prove to be a slow process occurring principally in the several years following the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords. While repatriation was the ultimate goal of the Mexican government in the 1980’s, many refugees feared returning

to their homeland. “The Mexican government also participated in the search for solutions for repatriation, but the Guatemalan government could not meet the refugees’ demands for resettlement, which related to security and land for farming” (Migration Information Source). After the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, the refugees finally began the arduous process of returning and reintegrating into Guatemalan society. However, as a result of their prolonged absence, reintegration into Guatemalan society would prove especially difficult. The refugees would return to country ravaged by 36-years of violence and repression. Refugees would not only find a hard time in reintegrating into their villages, but also in obtaining employment as well as housing. A climate of insecurity and instability would continue to persist within Guatemala. The same population of refugees displaced in the 1980’s by the Counterinsurgency Campaign would later become motivated to leave Guatemala once again, this time in search of the economic opportunities nonexistent in Guatemala in the post-Civil War period.

Chapter 4

The Rise of Insecurity and Instability in the Post-Conflict Era, 1996-Present:

The Transition to Economic Migrant and the Current Economic Crisis

In 1996 the 36-year Guatemalan Civil War was finally over. On December 29, 1996 leaders from both the government and the guerilla movement signed the “Global Agreement for a Firm and Lasting Peace”, or the Peace Accords. The Peace Accords included ambitious plans for not only addressing the causes of the protracted Civil War, but also for the rebuilding of Guatemala. The Civil War had destroyed Guatemalan society, politics, and economy. There would be great difficulties and challenges in stabilizing and putting a broken and demoralized country back together in the post-conflict period.

In a discussion of the ambitions of the Peace Accords, the legacy of violence, and the poor conditions still present in Guatemala, Schlesinger and Kinzer explain in their conclusion to Bitter Fruit:

“The peace agreement did not, of course, resolve all of Guatemala’s problems. Guatemala remains a country in which the judiciary is weak, the police are accustomed to threatening public security rather than defending it, and the army—though committed to reducing its size and power under the terms of the agreement—is shackled by a history of unspeakable brutality. Criminal gangs some of them made up of former soldiers and police officers, have emerged to illicit livings from kidnapping, car theft, and narcotics smuggling. Perhaps even more important, Guatemala’s great economic potential is matched by equally great poverty, environmental destruction and social inequities. Less than five percent of the landowners own more than two-thirds of the land. Rates of infant mortality, malnutrition and illiteracy are appalling. The peace agreement stopped a long and cruel war, but difficult as it was to reach that agreement, it pales beside the difficulty of establishing true peace” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 262).

Despite the current challenges and issues present within Guatemala today, the Peace Accords represent a tangible blueprint for reconstructing and stabilizing Guatemala in the future. There is no mistaking that those most profoundly impacted by the violence of the Civil War, are those still suffering from the state of insecurity and instability present in Guatemalan society.

In 1996, while the country was faced with the task of reunification and rebuilding, the returning refugee populations were attempting the same task. This population returned to a country in shambles. The poor state of the economy made joblessness and poverty the norm. Meanwhile, discrimination and criminality were still hugely prevalent throughout Guatemalan society. Concurrently, Guatemala saw an increase in urbanization in the late 1990's, as the returning migrants were unable to reintegrate into their previous villages and they searched jobs in the capital. The jobless, impoverished, and displaced population from the Highlands and countryside flooded Guatemala City, further contributing to urban insecurity and unrest. Many within this population turned to gangs, which have proliferated in the wake of the Civil War. Others looked either to the informal sector or migration in search of economic opportunities. Unable to make a living in Guatemala, this population of poor, often indigenous and displaced people looked once again toward Mexico.

This time however, Mexico would not be at the receiving end of the modern migratory current. Today, Mexico represents a nation at a dangerous crossroads for Guatemalan migrants as they continue their journey north, to the United States. Instability and insecurity has stretched across the Mexico-Guatemala border. Illicit industries have popped up in the Mexico-Guatemala border. Such businesses include

both drug and human trafficking. Increasingly, migrants are the lifeblood of the border economy in northwestern Guatemala and southern Mexico. Guatemalans are looking for economic opportunity either through leaving their country for the United States or in establishing a black market service.

In order to further frame the conditions found in modern day Guatemala, Schlesinger and Kinzer provide the following information: “Twenty percent of the twelve million Guatemalans controlled 80 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. At least seventy-five percent of the population and by some estimates as much as ninety percent, lived in severe poverty. Taxes remained exceedingly low, allowing the rich minority to prosper while depriving the government of resources to help the poor majority” (Schlesinger & Kinzer 2005: 266). Clearly, the legacy of corruption and violence has had a significant impact on Guatemala. These factors have come together in encouraging and motivating migrants to leave Guatemala in search of economic opportunities in the north.

The Modern Day Migrant

A National Geographic article comments on the current migratory tide through Mexico, “Every year, hundreds of thousands of Central Americans cross illegally into Mexico...nobody knows how many of those migrants are headed to the United States, but most put that figure at 150,000 or more a year, and the pace of illegal migration had picked up dramatically over the past decade, propelled in part by the lingering aftermath of the 1970’s and 80’s civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua” (*National*

Geographic 2008). As illustrated through the prior description of the presence of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, the issue of migration out of Guatemala and into Mexico is just as complex as it is dynamic. The contemporary pattern of migration leading north—out of Guatemala and into Mexico—has its roots in the longstanding legacy of insecurity and instability present within Guatemala since the tumultuous collapse of the Guatemalan Revolution in 1954, to the post-conflict period following 36-years of Civil War. Throughout the past thirty years, as political refugees have transformed into economic migrants, they have been motivated by the lack of security and economic opportunity in Guatemala

From Guatemala, the economic migrants of today must undertake a perilous journey to the United States. A February 2008 article in *National Geographic* entitled “Mexico’s Other Border”, describes the Mexico-Guatemala border and the perilous journey that Guatemalan migrants take to reach the United States. Migrants must first sneak into Mexico, which, “...is as easy as rafting across the Suchlate River from Tacun Uman, Guatemala to Ciudad Hidalgo. But once on the other side migrants face ruthless bandits and officials demanding bribes” (*National Geographic* 63). In order to continue their journey northward, migrants chose to ride the trains—a dangerous proposition. Migrants cling on to the trains for hours at a time often falling off and losing limbs and also their lives. Furthermore, Mexican officials and gangs are increasingly aware of the routes that the migrants take as they move northward. Police, migration officials, and gang members have been known to brutally attack the migrants for bribes and money. The migrant journey through Mexico is a treacherous one. Yet, the economic incentive

posed by *El Norte* remains the primary motivating source in leaving behind Guatemala's broken political and economic system along with friends and family.

The Impact of the Current Economic Crisis on the Migrant Population

Migration out of Guatemala either into or through Mexico has largely been influenced by the modern economic realities and conditions. The current economic crisis in the United States has had a significant impact on the recent migration trend out of Guatemala. The economic crisis of the first world has the potential to permeate the fragile economic systems and exacerbate the already existing conflicts present in Guatemalan society.

Today many of the migrants coming from Guatemala may be classified as economic migrants as they are in search of economic opportunity. According to the *Migration Information Source*, "As of the 2000 US census, over two million foreign-born from Central American countries...were living in the United States" (Migration Information Source). The quest for economic opportunity is a clear push factor encouraging the tide of migrants out of Central America. Yet, as economic opportunity lessens in the United States with the current crisis, the dynamic relationship between the migrants of the third world and the economic incentives present in the first world is revealed.

In the United States, there is an obvious and unique relationship shared with Central American countries like Guatemala. As described earlier in the paper, the United States may be credited with contributing to the instability and insecurity prevalent today

in Guatemala. Additionally, according to the *Migration Information Source*, in Guatemala, "...the rate of emigration has steadily accelerated since 1999" (*Migration Information Source*, www.migrationinformation.net). When the Peace Accords were signed in Guatemala in 1996, many expected that reverse migration would occur, and that Guatemalans would return back to their country of origin.

But, the 36 year Civil War had severely impacted and weakened the national economy, and as a result of vast unemployment within the country, Guatemalans continue to immigrate to the United States. As opposed to the refugees of the 1980's, approximately 95% of the migrants leaving Guatemala in the late 1990's and early 2000's went to the United States (Migration Information Source). The current economic crisis in the United States has served to limit the economic opportunities Central American migrants might find in the United States.

Interestingly, this may end up hurting the United States in the long run. As the Udall center for Public Policy acknowledges in its many publications, the United States derives great benefits from the presence and labor of undocumented migrants (The Udall Center). It was the political and economic influence and involvement of the United States that created a culture of violence and repression in Guatemala. As a result, Guatemala's marginalized population fled as political refugees to Mexico. Today, it is the legacy of United States' heavy hand in the politics, economy, and society of Guatemala which has created inhospitable, insecure, and unstable encouraging migrants to make a perilous journey to the United States. While many in the United States continue to rail against migration, it may very well be the United States that is next to be adversely impacted by it's own policies.

Remittances

Remittances are important to this discussion, in that they provide a further example of the relationship shared between the United States and Guatemala. The current economic crisis in the United States has served to significantly limit the economic opportunities that the Central American migrants may find once they succeed in their journey across Mexico and ultimately cross the border into the United States.

Demographically, it is important to look at the Central American migrant population in order to understand how they are impacted by the economic crisis. In September 2008, the United States Labor Department released the unemployment rate, which reached 6.1 percent. Since September unemployment has continued to grow. It is important to note, that the unemployment rate remains consistently lower for Hispanics at 7.8 percent (Americas Society Journal). The economic crisis in the United States has severely impacted the housing market as a result of depreciating home values, the sub-prime mortgage fiasco, and a severe drop in new home sales. With the economic crisis and the slump in the housing market, the construction industry has been hit especially hard. This information is crucial in understanding today's economic migrant.

According to the 2006 Pew Hispanic Center Survey, the foreign-born (immigrant) population in the United States reflects an overrepresentation of Mexicans and Central Americans working in the construction industry, with 19.1 and 16.2 percent represented respectively (which is a significantly higher representation of foreign-born workers than any other region) (Pew Hispanic Center). More than any other industry within the United States, both documented and undocumented Guatemalan migrants are dependant on construction jobs. In the late 1990's and through the early years of the 21st century, the

construction industry—during both the housing bubble and the boom of suburbs in the border states of the American southwest—was once luring to Guatemalan migrants searching for economic opportunities in the United States. As Beatriz Manz who has studied rural Guatemalan communities comments, “For uneducated youth, migration to the United States provides an alternative to the lack of jobs and land in their own country...the possibility of working as a construction worker in the United States may look better than being unemployed or underemployed with an accounting degree in Guatemala” (Manz 2005: 234).

Therefore, the demographics from 2006 depict that the majority of Hispanics (Central Americans and Mexicans) and primarily represented and thus are primarily dependent on employment in the construction industry. The economic crisis which seems to have come to a head in 2008 and has grossly impacted the housing market especially in the construction of new homes. Thus, foreign born migrants working in the industry will likely face a lack of economic opportunity and incentive. It will be interesting to see how this population reacts, either by seeking new opportunities in the United States or perhaps going back to their country of origin, like Guatemala with a skill, expertise, and maybe even an education.

One sizable impact of the economic crisis in the United States may be in a lessening amount of remittances sent by family members in the U.S. to others in Guatemala. Remittances make up a significant part of the Guatemalan economy. “Remittances from Guatemala emigrants have been and will continue to be a pillar of economic support for hundreds of thousands of urban and rural families” (Migration Information Source). In the Guatemalan Highland community of Huehuetenango, it was

explained to me how many infrastructure projects, like the building of roads and schools, weren't undertaken by the government. Instead, the community who had pooled together money sent by relatives in the United States in order to improve their situation. There wasn't a family in this community that wasn't benefiting from the remittances, yet there was concern that with the rapid deterioration of the United States economy, that the flow of money might slow or altogether stop. In Guatemala, estimates suggest that 97.6 percent of the remittances are primarily sent from the United States (Migration Information Source). Additionally, "Guatemala's remittances now exceed the total volume of its annual exports or income from tourism" (Migration Information Source). Clearly, while remittances have become a significant part of the Guatemalan economy it would be devastating for the people that depend on them should the remittances cease.

With the current deterioration of economic conditions in the United states, it may be inferred that there will be a cut in the amount of remittances sent back to Guatemala. According to the *Americas Society Journal*, reports from the Inter American Development Bank foresee that Guatemala will face a drop in the annual amount of remittances totaling 12 percent (Americas Society Journal). Those who have immigrated to the United States in search of economic opportunity are now faced with the financial crisis. As jobs are cut and money becomes tight, it will be harder to send money back home. The economic crisis not only impacts many aspects of the United States economy and society but also has the power to impact even the most isolated village in the Guatemalan Highlands.

The role and impact of remittances is just one of many examples of the dynamic and multifaceted relationship shared with the United States and Guatemala. In looking as

far back as the 1931 dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, the historical origins of United States political and economic influence on Guatemala and the economic dependence of Guatemala on the U.S. more easily understood. Remittances then, represent a further form of economic dependence of Guatemalans on the American economy. It is in this light that Guatemalan political refugees fled to Mexico due to the strong arm influence of the United States and conditions of instability and insecurity that had been created by the influence and involvement of the United States. Today, economic migrants are leaving Guatemala in droves in search for wealth and prosperity—the two things that the Guatemalan government either can't or won't provide.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Future of Migration and Migration Policy

As the economic situation continues to deteriorate, countries like the United States and Mexico must examine their respective migration policies aimed at the population of Guatemalan migrants, and others leaving Central America in search of economic opportunities. The current economic situation serves not only to further illuminate the many factors that have created and encouraged to the migratory current, but also suggests the already established relationship of dependency between the United States and Latin American nations. Migration out of Guatemala to Mexico and later, the United States stems from the political and social instability that followed the decades of repression and violent civil war.

This thesis sought to illuminate the historical background as well as the many influences that have over time influenced a fairly modern trend of migration out of Guatemala. The past thirty years of Guatemalan migration stems from conditions of violence and repression. Understanding the history of displaced populations and land tenure under Ubico, makes it possible to understand just how revolutionary—and incendiary—the reforms of Arevalo and Arbenz truly were. The land reform proposed by Arbenz exacerbated the many justifications for the United States to become deeply entrenched and in the politics of Guatemala. The 1954 CIA sponsored coup ignited more than five decades of violence, repression, and fear in Guatemala, the legacy of which extends to the present day.

This turbulent history allows scholars, historians, and social scientists to begin to understand the origins of modern migratory trends out of Central American countries like Guatemala. The United States not only strong-armed its way into the politics and governance of Guatemala, it also influenced critical policy in Mexico during the most violent decade of the Guatemalan Civil War—the 1980’s and the Counterinsurgency Campaign. With the end of the Civil War in 1996, Guatemala was left with a broken economic system, a failed Army-led political system, and an alienated, repressed, and marginalized society. The refugee population of the 1980’s returned to their country with high hopes for a better future. Yet, that future is increasingly found in the United States, as economic migrants from Guatemala make the treacherous journey each day through Mexico and into the United States.

As migration and migration policy continue to be hotly debated in the United States, it is important to have a clear understanding of the history of the factors and the influences that serve to shape the daily decision of migrants to leave their homes in Guatemala. The past thirty years of Guatemalan migration involves deeply complex and dynamic social, political and economic issues. In the 1980’s Guatemalan refugees left their homes and fled to safety in Mexico. Today, Guatemalan migrants leave their homes in search of economic prosperity and security in the United States. Just like in the 1980’s, each of the migrants I spoke to anticipate the day when they can return to Guatemala, and build their future and the future of their children in their homeland. Their families continue to await their return.

This thesis made an attempt, through a historical and political analysis, to connect the motivations of political refugees with those of economic migrants. Many factors and

influences are involved in understanding the connection I proposed. The most important connection is the climate of violence and repression that has persisted since the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, and is responsible for the creation of a submissive and marginalized class of refugees and migrants. Ten years of democratic change were not enough. The instability and insecurity unleashed after 1954, has only created a more heightened climate of fear and repression, due to the involvement and influence of the United States.

While the future of migration may echo many of the same themes expressed in this thesis, there is hope that migrants will return to Guatemala with skills and an education and help rebuilt not only a broken economic system, but also a broken society. Perhaps as the United States focuses on the economic crisis and on the concurrent political issues, attention will be shifted away from Guatemala. Finally, as Latin America continues its move to the left, as witnessed in the recent Presidential win of the FMLN in El Salvador, there is hope for a new era in governance in Guatemala. If the goal is to stem the tide of Guatemalan migrants entering the United States, then migration policy must begin in Guatemala. Only social programs, democratic consolidation, and the distribution of wealth and land will aid in restructuring and developing the Guatemalan economy while also creating responsiveness in the political system. Such actions will be the only tool in stemming the tide of migration out of Guatemala.

The government of Mexico more or less did provide a relative safe haven for the Guatemalan refugee population—saving thousands of lives. Yet, the interests of national security, rather than humanitarian interests, were more often than not the motivation behind Mexico’s contradictory policies and actions toward this population. As stated in *The National Security Archives*, the Mexican government maintained “...ever-present concerns about the dangers posed by the Guatemalan conflict to Mexican stability. The nations’ long and porous shared border meant that the violence burning inside Guatemala could—and often did—spill into the mostly poor and indigenous southern state of Chiapas” (Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security).

Additionally, Mexico’s political posturing is telling of the vested interest that the United States had in Mexico’s southern border, as well as the political ties Mexico shared with both Guatemala and the United States. Internal and external pressures mounted and eventually created a policy towards the refugees that is both complex and complicated in nature. The policies and actions of the Mexican government reveal the political, social, and economic stress felt by the nation at the time.

Reference List:

- Bacon, David. 2005. Communities Without Borders. *The Nation*, October 24.
- Booth, John A., Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker. 2006. *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change*. Westview Press.
- Brill, Julie. 1984. Will Mexico's 'Welcome' Last?. *The Nation*, May 19.
- Castillo, Manuel Angel. 2006. Mexico Caught Between the United States and Central America. Migration Information Source. <http://migrationinformation.org>. (accessed October 25 2008).
- Doyle, Kate. 2003. Mexico's Southern Front: Guatemala and the Search for Security. www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv. (accessed October 27 2008).
- Galeano, Eduardo. 1997. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gleijeses, Piero. 1991. *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gorney, Cynthia. 2008. Mexico's Other Border. *National Geographic*, February.
- Manz, Beatriz. 2005. *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Martinez, Oscar. 1994. *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Mahler, Sarah J. and Dusan Ugrina. 2006. Central America: Crossroads of the Americas. <http://migrationinformation.org>. (accessed November 26 2008).
- Schirmer, Jennifer. 1998. *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Smith, James. 2006. Guatemala: Economic Migrants Replace Political Refugees. Migration Information Source. <http://migrationinformation.org>. (accessed October 24 2008).
- Pew Hispanic Center. Statistical Portrait of Foreign Born Population in the United States, 2006. Pew Hispanic Center. <http://pewhispanic.org>.
- Schlesinger, Stephen and Stephen Kinzer. 2005. *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Guatemalan Migration:
The Historical Origins and the Many Influences
Impacting the Transition from
Political Refugee to Economic Migrant

By:
Rachael Leigh Ronald

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

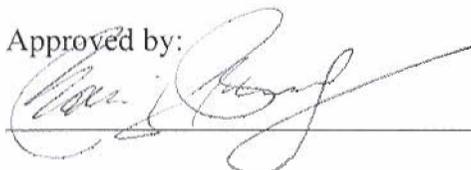
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in

Political Science

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

May 2009

Approved by:



Dr. Ramiro Berardo
Political Science

STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

I hereby grant to the University of Arizona Library the nonexclusive worldwide right to reproduce and distribute my thesis and abstract (herein, the "licensed materials"), in whole or in part, in any and all media of distribution and in any format in existence now or developed in the future. I represent and warrant to the University of Arizona that the licensed materials are my original work, that I am the sole owner of all rights in and to the licensed materials, and that none of the licensed materials infringe or violate the rights of others. I further represent that I have obtained all necessary rights to permit the University of Arizona Library to reproduce and distribute any nonpublic third party software necessary to access, display, run, or print my thesis. I acknowledge that University of Arizona Library may elect not to distribute my thesis in digital format if, in its reasonable judgment, it believes all such rights have not been secured.

SIGNED: Rachael L. Renard.