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Central America and the Burden of the Past

Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

Central America AND THE BURDEN OF THE PAST

Félix Masud-Piloto



The grandmother mourns, and remembers. Nebaj, Quiché, Guatemala, 2000. Photographer: Jonathan Moller

The 1980s was a decade of intense social, political, and military turmoil in Central America, as social and political tensions that had been brewing for decades erupted into full blown civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. In a flash, these conflicts made the region a top priority for U.S. foreign policy, and by 1985 Central America had become one of the biggest recipients of U.S. military assistance in the world. A dramatic change, since until 1979, U.S. foreign policy in Central America was designed to maintain political stability, even when it meant supporting repressive military dictatorships and ignoring gross human rights violations and deplorable living conditions.

U.S. intervention in the Central American conflicts was clearly aimed at preventing reformist and progressive governments from gaining or consolidating political power. In Nicaragua, where the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) established a revolutionary government in 1979 after overthrowing the repressive, 45 year old U.S.-supported Somoza dynasty, the United States launched a semi-covert war against the Sandinistas and provided billions of dollars to finance the opposition. U.S. intervention resulted in the death

of 20,000 Nicaraguans and the Sandinistas' electoral defeat in 1990. In El Salvador, the U.S. provided billions of dollars in weapons and military training to sustain a dictatorial military regime in office and fend off a revolutionary movement; 75,000 Salvadorans died before peace accords were signed in 1992. In Guatemala, for nearly forty years, the U.S. supported a series of military governments to wage war against the indigenous population and a seemingly unrelenting insurgent movement. More than 200,000 Guatemalans died during the 36 year conflict. In addition to the enormous death toll, the wars also resulted in the tragic displacement of more than two million refugees dispersed throughout Central America, Mexico, Canada, the U.S., and Europe.

The peace accords ended the armed conflicts, but did not bring about the social and political reforms demanded by those who took up arms against the region's long history of political repression and social injustices. Today, most Central American nations continue to be burdened by the conditions that gave rise to the conflicts: unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, and crime. The biggest change has been in politics. Somoza and the military governments are gone, replaced by fragile democracies vulnerable economies. That is why this issue of *Diálogo* focuses on post-conflict Central America.

To help us begin to unravel the complex social and political world of Central America, we requested and have received the generous contributions of a wonderful group of skilled and talented social scientists, political analysts, literary critics, poets, and artists from a wide array of universities, research centers, and communities in Latin America and the United States. Their great diversity of thought and analysis provide a rich panorama of the region's politics, economics, religion, human rights situation, immigration, cinema, literature, and art. We hope you enjoy the stimulating and informative analysis these authors have to offer on the current Central American situation and the burden of the region's past.