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### America's Responsibility in a War Not Our Own

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## **“America’s Responsibility in a War Not Our Own” by Rebecca Ehnert**

### **Instructor’s Notes**

In this persuasive essay, Rebecca sets up a duel argument: the US was partially responsible for the plight of the Mayan people in Guatemala, and, thus, is responsible to provide aid. Notice how she supports and refers to those arguments throughout the essay, never losing sight of her purpose in writing. Using references to her thesis like, “obligation to help,” “should provide continued assistance,” and “must take responsibility,” to support the first half of her argument and “America’s obsession with ending communism,” “the American-backed army targeted the indigenous people,” and “partially responsible for the economic hardships” to support the second half of her argument, Rebecca supports her thesis well.

### **Writers’ Biography**

Rebecca Ehnert is studying Spanish at Cedarville with a psychology minor and is in the honors program. She enjoys academic writing including research papers. She likes to travel and hopes to work in a cross-cultural ministry setting.

### America’s Responsibility in a War Not Our Own

I walk down the main street in the center of the small Guatemalan town, smiling at passersby as I go along. I come to a woman dressed in a colorfully decorated traditional outfit and look directly at her. Her unique outfit, short-stature, and dark skin are clear signs that she has mostly indigenous Mayan ancestry. Although I smile, she quickly turns her face and looks the other way. I cannot figure out why she, like the other Mayan people I have come across, is timid – almost fearful. Only later do I realize how strongly the society of Guatemala affects the mindsets of these indigenous people. The Mayan people of Guatemala are social outcasts, nearly invisible. This has been especially true since the recent civil war in which the army specifically targeted the Mayan people. This civil

war has drastically shaped their country, but here in America many people know little to nothing about this life-changing war. When asked why she believed the war in Guatemala has not gotten as much attention as other wars in Central America, Rigoberta Menchú (an indigenous woman) replies, “One of the reasons is racism itself. We [the indigenous people] don’t have means of communication in our hands. The media and politics has never allowed our people to speak through them” (McPherson 173). These people suffered great losses during the war, yet they have a minuscule voice when it comes to getting their story told. The whispered memories of this war, which exist primarily in the stories of those who lived through it, have been intentionally hushed by the powerful fabricators who began it all over five decades ago. This “silent war” warrants not only recognition but action as well. The United States should aid the Mayan people of indigenous descent in Guatemala because they continue to suffer long-term effects such as poverty and poor education from the recent civil war, which the United States was partially responsible for starting and continuing as they funded the Guatemalan government.

The responsibility to help the Mayan people began when the United States was involved in starting the recent civil war in Guatemala, which led to the murders and suffering of countless Mayan people. It was a natural response for America to become involved because Guatemala appeared to be in need of assistance. The United States assumes responsibility for maintaining liberty throughout the world as America is the land of the free and the home of the brave. When a situation, which compromises the freedom of a group of people, arises, the United States is usually the first country to step in, show its bravery, and try to fix the problem. During the time of America’s fight against communism, “Central America’s ruling classes learned that merely by labeling their opposition as ‘Bolshevik’ or ‘Communist’ they could usually win US support, ranging from direct armed intervention to economic and military aid” (Booth 26). In the 1950s, President Árbenz and his government at the time began to implement a “Law of Agrarian Reform” which would redistribute land and give more to the poor in an effort to “overcome the economic backwardness’ of the country and ‘improve the quality of life of the great masses’” (Wilkinson 83). The opposition of President Árbenz began to scheme how to stop this plan, which

would take land away from the large United Fruit Company. They accused the government which “might best be described as a liberal reform movement” of having communist tendencies; therefore, America got involved (Latin America: Its Problems and its Promise 251). With help from the CIA, the opposition overthrew Árbenz, so the country needed a new president. The United States tried to control the election outcomes in order to determine the type of government in Guatemala. American representatives helped initiate a “republic based on a constitutional democracy” (“Guatemala Information”). Shortly after the war, this government failed in many democratic ways such as not allowing the vast population of illiterate people to vote. The people do not have all the freedoms contained in what Americans view as a true democracy. America’s obsession with forming a democracy in Guatemala was one large factor in starting the civil war. If the Guatemalan army did not have the support from America, the war may have never started. The original opposition of Árbenz asked the CIA to help because they knew the task would be too difficult for them to accomplish on their own. Had the war never started, the Mayan people would not have suffered. The United States government provided aid at the start of the war that began the brutal conflict lasting 36 years, so they have the responsibility to continue to provide assistance in Guatemala until the damage from the war is reversed.

Not only did they help start the war, but also the United States aided the Guatemalan armed forces throughout the recent civil war. The United States was involved in many external wars, and according to historical authors and professors of political science, Booth, Wade, and Walker, “This outside manipulation of Central American politics... intensified and prolonged their conflicts” (Booth 2). This was definitely true in Guatemala where the United States government was economically involved throughout the war. America provided funding for the official Guatemalan military to fight the so-called communists: “From 1946 through 1992 the United States provided US\$1.8 billion in military assistance to the region [of Latin America] 98 percent of it to Guatemala” (Booth 26). Without this funding, the Guatemalan army would not have had the resources that it used during the war. This is more money (in current US dollars) than the United States spent on the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and Spanish

American war combined (Daggett 1). There can be no honest claim that the United States was not significantly involved in the economic aspect of the Guatemalan civil war. This type of claim implies that four wars in America's history were insignificant based on the amount of funds used during wartime. This funding provided by the United States prolonged the conflict in Guatemala also prolonging the suffering of the Mayan people. The US was partially responsible for the continual suffering of the Mayan people, so they should help correct these wrongs.

Although the United States government was involved in Guatemalan politics during the war, many believe it holds little responsibility because the Guatemalan military personnel were the ones actively involved during the killings of the war; nevertheless, the United States was involved in the war even from a distance. Even if the Guatemalan army is mostly responsible for the atrocities of the war, this does not let the United States go free of all responsibility. One side cannot assume all responsibility. There is combined fault in many situations from the war. The American CIA and other government groups were supporting the Guatemalan government throughout parts of the war both politically and economically. As the Guatemalan government performed countless murders and injuries against the Mayan people, the United States provided aid; therefore, the United States holds responsibility for these actions as well.

The Guatemalan army, which received aid from the United States throughout the civil war, targeted the Mayan people. During the Guatemalan civil war "the crisis was particularly cultural and racial," and the Guatemalan government fixated on "the poor ... indigenous groups who spoke little Spanish and had been banished to isolated mountain villages" (McPherson 82). The government targeted the Mayans directly, but the indigenous people also suffered from unintentional factors. During the civil war "most of the violence and massacres took place in the predominantly indigenous areas" (Booth 155). The indigenous people living in the mountains suffered a majority of the damages partly because of the geographical positions of the war. Today, "more than half of Guatemalans are descendants of indigenous Mayans and a substantial proportion of the population are of mixed European and indigenous ancestry" (Chamarbagwala 43). Most Guatemalans

identify themselves as having some indigenous ancestry. The majority of people in Guatemala can identify with those targeted during the civil war. Since so many people suffer, the United States must take responsibility for their actions.

As the American-backed army targeted the indigenous people, many Mayans were killed in Guatemala during the civil war. Historians consider the civil war a “‘dirty war’... in which thousands of people [were] murdered or simply ‘disappeared’” (Wiarda and Kline 89). Many of the people who “disappeared” were taken to remote parts of the country to be killed. The families of these lost people never knew where their loved ones were. For many years, the families of those victimized during the war never received any form of apology or explanation. As early as in the first years of the war, “in the cities and countryside suspects of left-wing sympathies picked up by the army increasingly tended to either turn up dead or remain ‘disappeared.’ The army and police consistently denied responsibility” (McClintock 83). Although thousands of people suffered and died during the war, the Guatemalans responsible for the murders never admitted to the atrocities. This caused emotional distress to family members from the mystery of where their loved ones could be. As a majority “more than four-fifths of the deaths from the civil war era were indigenous” (Booth 155). The families of these people suffered from the loss of loved ones and from the anxiety of the unknown details of their loved ones’ last days. Because of their anti-government opinions, some families also had legitimate fear of retaliation. The Mayan people suffered numerable losses and emotional distress; the United States should provide retribution to the families who lost loved ones.

Aside from those who suffered physical and emotional damage, other indigenous people who were living in the highlands were displaced during the civil war. Many indigenous people left their homes as the militants took over the land that once belonged to them because “much of the violence... took place in Guatemala’s indigenous highlands or lowland jungles and away from urban areas” (Booth 139). The poorest people living in the mountains of Guatemala owned precious highlands, which the army used for strategic positioning. The Guatemalan government easily took advantage of the poor, and “most of the poor were indigenous groups who spoke little Spanish” (McPherson 82). The army confiscated

land that indigenous families had passed down for generations. Without this land, the Mayan people had no choice but to re-locate to areas without jobs. They continue to suffer from this displacement, which occurred during the war, so the United States must provide permanent housing and other forms of humanitarian aid for these people.

Although the Mayan indigenous people of Guatemala were poor before the war, they suffer increased poverty because of displacement during the civil war. In 1987, in the middle of the war, the percent of population living on \$2 per day or less was highest in recorded history at over 70 percent of the total population (“Data: Guatemala”). This percent of severely impoverished people in Guatemala has slowly decreased since the end of the war but continues to be one of the highest in the world. Per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product), signifying the average standard of living in the country, increased during the civil war; “however, Guatemalan economic growth did not increase the income of the poor” (Booth 139). Although the country got richer, the poor stayed poor. The distribution of wealth in Guatemala meant that the richest people in Guatemala gained wealth without sharing any of it with the poorest people groups. Records show that “between 1970 and 1984 income distribution concentrated increasingly in the hands of the wealthiest fifth of the people,” still the Mayans did not benefit because “the income share of Guatemala’s poorest fifth shrank” in that same amount of time (Booth 139). The indigenous people were extremely poor before the beginning of the war, and this level of poverty has only worsened. The increased wealth of the country of Guatemala as a whole has not improved the lives of the poor, indigenous people. Although the country grows richer, the people who suffered during the war do not see any of this wealth; therefore, their lives continue to be difficult in post-war Guatemala. The Mayan people are in need of economic help after the war. America helped create a war, which left thousands of people in need of economic assistance. Because the United States is partially responsible for the economic hardships faced by the Mayan people, the U.S. should provide aid.

The indigenous people of Guatemala continue to have poor education, resulting from the displacement and poverty caused by the war. The Mayan indigenous people continue to be the poorest people group in Guatemala today. In 1995 as well as in 2008, the

indigenous people of Guatemala “were significantly poorer and less educated” than the people with European ancestry (Booth 155). In Guatemala, public education is theoretically free, but the fees associated with sending a child to school are so high that many poor parents choose feeding their family over educating their children. Another factor leading to an uneducated generation of indigenous people is that “poor access to schools in rural communities and a significant deficit of bilingual instructors posed serious impediments to indigenous education” (Booth 155). The schools that indigenous children attend are not up to normal standards. The displacement of families during the war resulted in an increased number of extremely poor indigenous people. These people often have no way to pay for the expensive school fees. Even if there were a way to send their children to school, the types of schools present in the areas that the indigenous people live in are not up to the standards necessary to provide the students with successful and prosperous adult lives in Guatemala. The war was the cause of an entire generation being under-educated, and the cycle continues; therefore, America has the responsibility to provide financial and other forms of aid to educate these people.

Although the Guatemalan government has provided some retribution for these hurting Mayans who lost family members or houses and continues to provide aid to the indigenous people, it is not enough. The Guatemalan government needs help because “it is increasingly difficult these days for isthmian governments [those of Central American countries] to reduce poverty” (Booth 9). There are myriad of problems which factor into the poverty crisis of Guatemala. The small and shaky government of Guatemala is having a hard time providing for its poorest people in this complex situation. Outside organizations like the Hispanic Clarification Commission knows that the indigenous people need help. The HCC “viewed the treatment of Guatemala’s Mayan people as so central to the problem of returning Guatemala to peace that it encouraged the government” to focus on training and preparing the Mayan people for public societal life “and to provide reparations for the injuries done during the violence” (Booth 155). The indigenous people continue to suffer many consequences of the war. Outside groups have noticed a need for aid and retribution to the victims of the civil war. The internal Guatemalan government is unable to



provide all the assistance needed. An outside source must step in, or these indigenous people will continue to suffer in Guatemala. The United States has the responsibility to step in, not only as the traditional humanitarians of the world, but also as offenders of the civil war.

Change for these indigenous people is possible. Experts consider the negative changes seen in Latin America in recent decades to be “limited, incomplete and perhaps even reversible” (Wiarda and Kline 611). Latin America in general seems to be doing well. In the last few decades “Latin America has gone from 70 percent rural to 70 percent urban, and from 70 percent illiterate to 70 percent literate” (Wiarda and Kline 611). These changes are averages across Latin America. Each country in Central America has its differences, but all five have similar histories and cultures. Perhaps Guatemala could mirror the improvements seen in other Latin American countries in recent decades. The indigenous Mayan people may be the last to see these improvements, but it is not out of the question to see significant change for the Mayan people in the next few decades.

The United States should aid the Mayan people of Guatemala who continue to suffer from the recent civil war that the United States was partially responsible for starting and continuing as the Guatemalan government targeted and murdered indigenous people and forced them out of their homes, which led to increased poverty and decreased education of the indigenous people. The Mayans have not received sufficient assistance in order for their lives to go back to normal. It has been difficult for the indigenous people to assimilate into the society. Although it has been difficult, the Mayan people have not given up. One victim of a violent attack during the war says, “Even though you never forget, you have to live always with the memory, but we have come together as a community” (Wilkinson 213). The people are not sitting there feeling bad for themselves, not doing anything to improve their lives. They are building their towns back and re-claiming their lives. The Mayan people are doing the best they can but cannot undo everything that the war has done on their own. The United States could provide a stipend for each family that suffers from the war. If it is too difficult to identify the families that are suffering, the American government could pay a sum of money to the country of Guatemala to provide

social services such as welfare for the suffering people. If finding the correct place to allocate money remains too difficult, the United States could designate a representative to investigate needs in Guatemala. This representative could find the hurting people, especially Mayans who go unnoticed. The United States could then be confident that the money would go towards helping people who truly need it. There are many ways that the United States could repay the Guatemalan people who suffered because of the actions of America during the civil war. Providing any retribution would be better than doing nothing, so America should begin reparations now.

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