

Amid propaganda campaign over Iraq:

# Guatemala's mass graves ignored by mass media

By Bill Vann  
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Last month, the people of Xiquin Sanahi, a small village in the Guatemalan highlands, reburied the remains of 75 of their family members and neighbors who were massacred two decades ago by the Guatemalan army. The skeletal remains had been exhumed a year earlier by a team of forensic anthropologists.

A moving report on the reburial ceremony written by T. Christian Miller of the *Los Angeles Times* (“Dignity Recovered at last,” June 26, 2003) was all the more notable because of its rarity. The mass media has virtually ignored what is a gruesome ongoing exposure of massive atrocities carried out during a protracted US-backed counterinsurgency operation.

Given the voluminous coverage given to the unearthing of similar mass burial sites in Iraq—universally proclaimed by government officials and media hacks in the US and Britain alike as an *ex post facto* justification for an illegal war of aggression—the near-total silence over the harvest of remains in Guatemala speaks volumes.

“Of the 44 bodies whose sex and age could be determined, only seven were adult men,” Miller wrote. “The rest were women and children. The estimated ages range from 5 months to 87 years.” Most were shot, some beaten to death and at least three decapitated.

The reporter described how, due to a bureaucratic error, one set of remains, those of a 15-year-old cousin of Juliana Diaz, were brought late to the ceremony. There, they were taken from a manila envelope and placed in a plain pine box.

“As the worker was about to shut the lid, Diaz stopped her, and pulled a white handkerchief from her bag,” Miller writes. “She laid it across the bones, then closed the lid. Later she explained that she did not want her cousin to be cold. ‘I wanted to feel like he was a little bit dressed,’ she said.”

These exhumations and reburials are taking place across Guatemala. While remains have been exhumed at some 250 secret cemeteries, those involved in the effort say that there are thousands of such sites scattered around the country, enough to keep them digging for another 10 years.

The effort to recover remains has confirmed claims long made by Guatemalan human rights advocates—and dismissed

by governments both there and in Washington—as to the scale of the bloodletting. It is now generally accepted that more than 200,000 people—most of them from the country’s Mayan Indian majority—were slaughtered by a succession of military and military-backed regimes representing Guatemala’s ruling oligarchy.

In their vast majority, the victims were killed simply because they were poor and oppressed and therefore suspected of sympathizing with a guerrilla movement that advocated a more equitable distribution of the country’s wealth.

US backing for this carnage dates back to 1954, when the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated a military coup to overthrow President Jacobo Arbenz. The elected government of Arbenz had run afoul of Washington by introducing a limited agrarian reform that infringed upon the vast holdings of the politically influential United Fruit Company. The carnage reached its apogee in the early 1980s, when the Guatemalan right forged the closest political ties with the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan.

In those years, the Guatemalan military unleashed a sadistic “scorched earth” campaign modeled in large part on lessons that its US advisors had drawn from the war in Vietnam. Basing itself upon the murderous theory that the only way to combat guerrilla resistance was to “empty the sea” in which the guerrillas swam, the army set about to bleed and break the population. In addition to the hundreds of thousands slaughtered, over a million were displaced from their homes and countless thousands were tortured and raped.

This is not a matter of a dark but closed chapter in Central American history. The CIA and other US agencies still refuse to declassify documents containing information ranging from the identity of individuals responsible for these crimes against humanity to the actual location of secret prisons and mass graves.

With an election set for November in Guatemala, the candidate of the ruling party is General Efraim Rios Montt, the leader of a 1982 military coup that brought to power the most ruthless in a long line of murderous regimes. His 18-month junta carried out the biggest bloodbath in the country’s history.

While the Guatemalan constitution bars coup leaders from running for president, the ruling Guatemalan Republican Front has packed the country's Supreme Court with its own nominees and expects to prevail against legal challenges.

In the runup to the elections, human rights workers, journalists and Mayan priests involved in the exhumations have been attacked and killed. Forensic anthropologists working at the gravesites have been subjected to mounting death threats, presumably from those implicated in the mass killings.

It is worthwhile keeping the case of Guatemala in mind when considering the Bush administration's seizing upon the discovery of mass graves in Iraq as the ultimate answer to charges that the US president lied to the American people about alleged Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" and launched an illegal war based on false pretexts.

Thus, Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice recently admonished the public not to "lose sight of the mass graves that are being found there that are a testament to what this regime was like."

Another staunch defender of Bush's war, Republican Senator John McCain, told ABC News: "The day I saw the mass graves uncovered, it was ample testimony of the brutality and repressiveness of this regime. It was the day that I believe our liberation of Iraq was fully vindicated."

This argument was summed up most crudely by the *New York Times*' contemptible foreign columnist Thomas Friedman, who wrote a column last April titled "The meaning of a skull," referring to a picture published on the *Times* front page of a skull unearthed from a mass grave in Iraq.

"As far as I'm concerned, we do not need to find any weapons of mass destruction to justify this war," Friedman wrote. "That skull, and the thousands more that will be unearthed, are enough for me. Mr. Bush doesn't owe the world any explanation for missing chemical weapons...Who cares if we now find some buried barrels of poison? Do they carry more moral weight than those buried skulls? No way."

The argument is hypocritical and fraudulent. The claims by the Bush administration and its apologists that the Iraqi graves legitimize US military occupation are evidently not shared by the Iraqi people. In the predominantly Shi'ite south, where many of the graves have been unearthed, it is widely understood that those whose remains are being recovered were the victims not only of Saddam Hussein's regime, but of US policy as well.

At the close of the first Persian Gulf war in 1991, George Bush senior called upon the Iraqi people to revolt against Saddam Hussein. When the Shi'ite population, backed by the Kurds in the north, did just that, the Bush government panicked. It had counted on a coup by Hussein's military, which failed to materialize.

Fearing a revolution that could spread throughout the Shi'ite population of the gulf region, Washington signaled the regime in Baghdad that it would tacitly support its suppression of the

revolt. *Wall Street Journal*—a paper not unempathetic to either Bush administration—reported at the time: "A decision had been made to let Saddam suppress the rebellion...the quicker the better. Having decided it did not want Iraq's revolts to succeed, the administration stood fast as the slaughter continued..."

Moreover, the Ba'athist regime was itself brought to power in a coup aided by the CIA. Throughout most of his career, Saddam Hussein's regime was a trusted client of Washington, which supported its catastrophic war against Iran as well as the continuing suppression of the both the Shi'ites in the south and the Kurdish minority in the north.

So, what is the "meaning of a skull" unearthed in Iraq? As the Iraqis know, it is far more complicated than the self-serving propaganda peddled by Rice, McCain and Friedman.

And what of the "meaning" or "moral weight" of a skull dug from the soil of Guatemala? What does it say about the claims that US foreign policy is dedicated to the liberation of the oppressed and the toppling of tyrants everywhere?

The answers are suggested by the media's guilty silence about Guatemala's mass graves. The horrific death toll in that country is ultimately the product the US banks', corporations' and government's determination to stamp out any challenge to their unfettered hegemony over a region that Washington has long regarded as its "backyard." The same essential impulse—now extended to the Persian Gulf and the world as a whole—has driven the US military occupation of Iraq.

The profoundly reactionary attempt to recolonize Iraq in order to assure US hegemony over strategically vital oil supplies can only be realized through barbaric methods of repression, much like those employed in Guatemala. Before this criminal project is brought to an end, it will fill many new graves, both in Iraq and in the US.

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