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www.afgazad.com

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afgazad@gmail.com

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Project Censored

The News That Didn't Make The News

“This American Life” Conceals U.S. Involvement in Guatemala’s 1982 Dos Erres Massacre

<http://www.projectcensored.org/american-life-conceals-u-s-involvement-guatemalas-1982-dos-erres-massacre/>

In May 2012, Public Radio International’s *This American Life* partnered with ProPublica and Fundacion MEPI to produce a broadcast titled, “What Happened at Dos Erres,” which gave a new account of a 1982 military massacre in that Guatemalan village. In March 2013, the broadcast received a prestigious Peabody Award for excellence in electronic journalism. What *This American Life* failed to mention in its account of “What Happened at Dos Erres” and the Peabody Board overlooked, Keanne Bhatt reports, was prior documentation of the United States’ direct involvement in supporting the murder of over 200 innocent Guatemalan civilians in that event.

Although *This American Life*’s Ira Glass reported that state-led massacres “happened in over 600 villages” and he cited a 1999 United Nations-sponsored truth commission report that found “the number of Guatemalans killed or disappeared by their own government was over 180,000,” Glass failed to report that the same commission also concluded that the “government of the United States, through various agencies including the CIA, provided direct and indirect support for some state operations” that resulted in atrocities like those at Dos Erres. As Bhatt notes in his report, the *Washington Post* and PBS both reported this aspect of the commission’s report at the time.

Bhatt’s report also clarifies the deep historical context of Guatemalan state-sponsored violence against its civilian population, in ways that the *This American Life* story failed to explain. In 1954, the US organized a coup d’état against Guatemala’s first democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz. Consequently, a series of US-backed dictators ruled Guatemala. The Dos Erres

massacre was part of the Guatemalan military's ongoing campaign, which the US had supported at least indirectly since the 1954 coup. Under the direction of Efraín Ríos Montt, who ruled Guatemala for 17-months from 1982-83, the state's security forces escalated their attacks on leftist insurgents. The US helped to train and arm Montt's troops. Declassified US intelligence documents revealed CIA and Pentagon involvement in the massacre.

During his rule, Montt counted President Ronald Reagan as a close ally. As Bhatt documents, the Reagan administration deliberately obscured "Guatemala's record of atrocities" under Montt. Although the *This American Life* episode included commentary by Kate Doyle, an expert on declassified documents at the National Security Archives, as Bhatt also reports the broadcast version of "What Happened at Dos Erres" omitted the portions of Doyle's in-studio discussion where she spoke about US complicity in the massacre. Similarly, Bhatt notes that the *This American Life* broadcast also "excluded content from its own media partner, ProPublica," which would have corroborated US involvement in the massacre.

"One would be hard-pressed," Bhatt writes, "to encounter another contemporary mainstream account of that period so thoroughly sanitized of Washington's involvement in crimes against humanity."