

# Our Debt to Central American Refugees

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The Trump administration says that Central American refugees are murderers and moochers who “invade” and “infest” the United States. Joe Biden isn’t a white nationalist like Trump, but he says foreigners “should have to get in line,” failing to mention that restrictive immigration laws leave no way for most of them to enter legally.

Trump and Biden agree on one thing: that the United States owes nothing to the people seeking refuge at its borders. Allowing foreigners to enter is an act of charity, or perhaps something we do to make our country stronger.

This framing is especially dishonest in the case of Central America, given that U.S. policy has played a central role in creating the violence and poverty from which Central American refugees are fleeing.

## Guatemala

Guatemala in the early 1950s was a hopeful place, at least for the poor majority. Starting in 1944, the country’s first two elected presidents enacted universal suffrage, public healthcare and social security systems, worker protections, and a land reform that benefited half a million peasant farmers. These reforms threatened the control that the U.S. government and corporations like the United Fruit Company had long exercised over Guatemala. So in 1954 the Eisenhower administration overthrew President Jacobo Árbenz and installed a military dictatorship.

U.S.-backed military regimes slaughtered some 200,000 people over the next four decades, mostly Mayan indigenous peoples. The height of the repression came in the early 1980s. In December 1982, as his administration was privately noting the military’s “large-scale killing of Indian men, women, and children,” Ronald Reagan publicly declared that the dictator was “totally dedicated to democracy.” The next day, the army murdered over 200 men, women, and children in the village of Las Dos Erres.



Ronald Reagan, 1986.

The U.S.-sponsored counterinsurgency also sought to transform Guatemalan political culture by discouraging working-class consciousness. As labor unions and other civic

organizations declined, violent gangs filled the void. Today's gangs, which recruit poor youth and prey mostly on other poor people, reflect the erosion of class solidarity and optimism for the future that remained strong until the 1980s.

Washington has also pushed pro-business economic policies that favor profits over public welfare. Guatemala has been turned into a sweatshop economy whose main asset is cheap exploitable labor.

The result is a hollow and corrupt version of democracy. In this context, emigration has become an act of both desperation and resistance.

## El Salvador

In El Salvador, too, U.S. policy has prevented the kind of equitable economic development that could allow people to stay in their country. Throughout the twentieth century Washington supported an oligarchy that brutally repressed all resistance. By 1980, a death squad apparatus equipped by the United States was killing roughly 800 people a month, in what the archbishop of San Salvador labeled "a war of extermination and genocide against a defenseless civilian population." The repression drove many people to take up arms, and a twelve-year civil war ensued during which the U.S. government supplied over \$1 million a day to help the regime kill tens of thousands of people.

The United States rejected almost all Salvadoran asylum claims in the 1980s. Many of the war-scarred refugees who did manage to enter were relegated to poor and dangerous areas in Los Angeles, where some responded by forming their own gangs. The Clinton administration then deported thousands of these Salvadorans, which helped create El Salvador's modern gang problem.

As in Guatemala, formal peace in the 1990s failed to bring real democracy or accountability. The security forces have resisted democratic restructuring. Washington has favored a militarized approach to gangs and

drugs that has exacerbated those problems. In the realm of economic policy, all U.S. administrations have forcefully opposed any deviation from the pro-business, cheap-labor approach.

## Honduras

In Honduras a chance at equitable development came in the early twenty-first century, when President Manuel Zelaya began making some modest reforms. Most notably, he raised the miserably low minimum wage by 60 percent.

In response, Honduran business elites and the military overthrew Zelaya in 2009. The Obama administration refused to cut off aid, despite secretly noting that the coup was "a patently illegal act." Hillary Clinton's State Department worked to ensure the new regime's consolidation.

The coup government unleashed terror on opponents and gave business free reign to murder activists and ignore laws. It slashed social spending and poured money into the military, leading to increased poverty and to mass protests that it violently repressed in 2019.



Honduran organizer Bertha Zúñiga Cáceres in Washington in April 2016. A month before, her mother Berta Cáceres was murdered for opposing a dam that would displace farmers. Berta had condemned the Obama administration's support for the coup regime. (Photo: Daniel Cima, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.)

The regime is now widely recognized, even by U.S. sources, as a highly corrupt “narco state” that enables gangs’ terrorization of the populace. The Obama and Trump administrations have steadfastly supported the post-2009 regimes through military aid and by recognizing the results of blatantly fraudulent elections.

## **Fossil Fuel Refugees**

In the years ahead, the climate crisis will amplify the pressures to emigrate. Thirty percent of residents in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Droughts and floods brought on by global warming are already forcing many farmers to flee. As elsewhere, climate disruption will lead to massive death and suffering.

The identity of the killers is obvious. The United States was responsible for 27 percent of global carbon emissions between 1850 and 2011, with other rich countries producing most of the rest. Large corporations are the main culprits: 63 percent of historic carbon and methane emissions are traceable to just 90 of them.

The same demagogues who have aided and abetted the fossil fuel companies will cast the United States as the victim of the

fossil fuel refugees who appear at our border. They’ll advocate ever more sadistic treatment in concentration camps. They’ll claim the refugees are not “self-sufficient” and must learn to “stand on their own two feet,” or they’ll say “our country is full,” to borrow recent phraseology from the Trump administration.

In reality, we broke it – or more accurately, the U.S. government and U.S. corporations broke it. Central Americans have resisted through a variety of means, including by emigrating. Free entry and support for these survivors is one essential piece of a reparations policy.

*For hyperlinks to sources, see the online version at [www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org).*

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