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Review by **Lauren Turek**, Trinity University

In 1954, the CIA orchestrated a coup in Guatemala that removed the democratically-elected president Jacobo Arbenz Guzman and replaced him with military leader Carlos Castillo Armas. Armas established a repressive right-wing dictatorship and ordered the detention, harassment, and execution of thousands of Guatemalans suspected of having Communist sympathies. He also enacted a ban on political parties, labor unions, and other civic organizations. Although Armas served only three years as president before his assassination, his policies—and resistance to the authoritarian rule he instituted—contributed to the vicious civil war that lasted from 1960 until 1996. Over 100,000 Guatemalans perished and many more were ‘disappeared’ by the army over the nearly four decades of violence and repression. While U.S. leaders, including President Dwight Eisenhower, viewed the 1954 coup as a success and saw the covert operation that led to it as a model for removing other left-leaning leaders in strategic regions from power, the long-term outcomes belied their optimism. By the late 1970s, the rampant and egregious human rights abuses in Guatemala had complicated U.S. relations with the ruling regime. Despite the efforts of Congress and the Jimmy Carter administration to compel Guatemalan compliance with human rights norms, the United States found itself lacking the necessary leverage to accomplish this goal, as Michael Cangemi makes clear in his insightful article, “Ambassador Frank Ortiz and Guatemala’s ‘Killer President,’ 1976-1980.”

In this piece, Cangemi argues against the conventional wisdom about Frank Ortiz, who served as Ambassador to Guatemala during one of the most violent periods in that country’s decades-long civil war. When the State Department recalled Ortiz from his post in 1980, journalists in both the United States and Guatemala speculated that Carter administration officials feared that Ortiz had developed “excessively close” relationships with the brutal regime of General Romeo Lucas García and in so doing had undermined Carter’s human rights objectives in the region (614). Based on a careful reading of the cables that Ortiz sent to the State Department during his tenure as ambassador, Cangemi contends that this was not the case. Rather, he suggests that Ortiz failed in his mission to “persuade the Lucas government to halt its rampant human rights abuses” because of deficiencies within the Carter administration’s human rights policies that left the United States with “little diplomatic leverage to negotiate” with the ruling regime in Guatemala (614). The strong relationships the Lucas regime cultivated with other nations allowed it to circumvent U.S. restrictions on

military aid and development lending and, as such, it could more or less ignore pressure from the United States to improve its human rights record.

Cangemi begins with a brief overview of the human rights policies that Congress, the State Department, and the Carter administration enacted in the mid- to late-1970s. He focuses particular attention on congressional legislation, such as the Harkin Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1975 and the International Financial Institutions Act of 1977, which made U.S. military and economic aid “conditional on states’ human rights records” (617). He notes that this congressional activism, coupled with the creation of the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in the State Department and Jimmy Carter’s stated desire to embed human rights in U.S. foreign policy during his time in office, “complicated” relations with Guatemala and other repressive yet allied regimes. To build this case, Cangemi asserts that the Guatemalan government railed against the Harkin Amendment as an “infringement upon [its] sovereignty” and argued that its violent counterinsurgency programs aimed to put down “extremist” groups that threatened the human rights of other Guatemalan citizens (619). In rejecting conditional U.S. assistance and making the case that brutal repression protected human rights, the Guatemalan government set itself at odds with the human rights-focused U.S. Congress and Carter administration. Furthermore, as Cangemi makes clear, this tension did not just exist with Guatemala—the Carter administration faced similar challenges in dealing with abusive regimes throughout Latin America. Four other Latin American countries joined Guatemala in refusing any military assistance predicated on meeting U.S. human rights standards (624).

Cangemi then examines how the Carter administration sought to understand and address this mounting challenge. A presidential review committee determined that some of the issues originated from divergent definitions of human rights among advocates in the United States and Latin America. Where U.S. leaders tended to focus on bodily integrity and civil rights as core human rights, Latin American advocates concentrated on economic and social rights, as well as national sovereignty in the face of a history of muscular U.S. interventionism. In addition, the committee called attention to the fact that the United States was no longer the main provider of weapons and military assistance to the region. This left the country with diminished negotiating power with its erstwhile allies in Latin America. Cangemi makes clear that even before Ortiz became the ambassador to Guatemala, he shared this perspective, noting “Ortiz cited the Guatemalan government’s ability to secure arms from both foreign governments and private U.S. contractors to argue that the Lucas government had no reason to amend its human rights practices as long as there were other avenues to obtain arms” (627). Likewise, the committee recommended against withholding arms from Guatemala and other Latin American regimes that violated human rights, despite congressional inclinations and legislation such as the Harkin Amendment so that it would not lose what little leverage it still had (621-622).

Yet, as Cangemi argues, neither the Carter administration nor Congress could ignore the increasing violence of the Lucas regime, which perpetrated mass killings, torture, and other egregious human rights abuses in the name of fighting Communism. Given similar dynamics in El Salvador and Nicaragua, this created a serious dilemma for policymakers (625). Cangemi draws on Ortiz’s cables and reports to demonstrate the clear-eyed assessments the ambassador sent back to Washington. He also reveals the deficiency of the State Department’s responses, which gave Ortiz little direction “on how to engage Lucas on human rights issues” and “no viable diplomatic leverage in his negotiations” with the Guatemalan leader (628). When the United States cut military aid and economic assistance, the Lucas regime acquired what it needed from other sources. Human rights abuses intensified. Ortiz realized that Carter could not support the Guatemalan government as it committed atrocities, but nor could he withdraw his support lest he put Lucas on the defensive by appearing to back the regime’s internal opponents—a situation which might lead to even greater violence (635).

Given the institutional challenges he encountered as ambassador and his strong grasp on the realities on the ground in Central America, Ortiz recommended that the Carter administration work to support internal democratic change and avoid interventionism (635). Cangemi does not elaborate on the specific details of this proposed policy though, which leaves the reader with the sense that perhaps Ortiz himself did not have a clear plan for how the United States might implement this strategy. This perception seems to have similarly fed the critiques that Ortiz faced at the time that he “was either incapable of or uninterested in helping to stop the violence” (635). Nevertheless, as Cangemi masterfully illuminates, Ortiz recognized that U.S. human rights policies created paradoxical incentives in Central America and proved irreconcilable with local political conditions in Guatemala.

Cangemi’s core argument that Ortiz failed to effect human rights compliance in Guatemala because of inherent flaws in U.S. human rights policies is straightforward and convincing. He draws on extensive documentation in the form of official meeting minutes, cables, and White House files to illuminate Ortiz’s assessment of the deteriorating political situation in Guatemala and the inefficacy of U.S. threats to cut aid to the Lucas regime. Cangemi’s incorporation of documents from Guatemalan leaders reacting to U.S. legislation and proposed policy changes, as well as details about their escalation of ongoing state violence, lends further credence to the idea that Carter-era human rights policies were ill-suited to the challenge of compelling authoritarian allies to abide by human rights norms. Cangemi includes helpful charts that illustrate the paucity of U.S. arms sales and Military Assistance Program expenditures to Guatemala in comparison to arms sales from private contractors. These charts, coupled with the other documentation, amply support his point that the United States could not count on arms sales restrictions to induce good behavior.

This article contributes to a flourishing body of scholarship that is reappraising the institutionalization and implementation of human rights in U.S. foreign relations in the 1970s and 1980s. Cangemi rightly situates his article within the historiography of human rights and the Carter administration, which includes key work by Vanessa Walker, David Schmitz, John Soares, Kathryn Sikkink, and William Michael Schmidli, as well as broader works about U.S. human rights policy by Barbara Keys, Sarah Snyder, and Joe Renouard.¹ Indeed, the article complements Joe Renouard’s assertion that “inconsistency was central to human rights policymaking and enforcement” in the 1970s, in part because it highlights the intrinsic challenge of balancing human rights imperatives with U.S. interests.² Cutting military aid, a policy lever the Carter administration used with limited success to pressure other countries, proved wholly ineffective in Guatemala. Yet from a moral and political standpoint, the United States could not disregard the ongoing human rights abuses there.

¹ David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 28:1 (January 2004): 113-143; John A. Soares, “Strategy, Ideology, and Human Rights: Jimmy Carter Confronts the Left in Central America, 1977-1981,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:4 (Fall 2006): 57-91; Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Joe Renouard, *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

² Renouard, *Human Rights*, 17.

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In exploring this dilemma, Cangemi reveals just how muddled the Carter administration's human rights policy was, as well as how little leverage it actually had to effect change in other states. Cangemi also makes an important intervention by highlighting the Guatemalan perspective, explaining how and why Guatemalan leaders resisted U.S. efforts to compel human rights compliance. This provides essential context for fully understanding the weaknesses of U.S. policy, not to mention the agency of leaders in Latin America. Although the article focuses on a narrow case study of one ambassador's experiences in Guatemala, the challenges that Ortiz confronted during his short tenure tell us a great deal about why the problem of human rights abuses in Latin American proved so intractable for U.S. policymakers in the 1970s.

Lauren Turek is an assistant professor of history at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, where she teaches courses on modern United States history, U.S. foreign relations, and public history. She earned her Ph.D. in history from the University of Virginia. Her research centers on transnational religious networks and the influence of non-state religious actors on international politics, U.S. foreign policy, and domestic political culture. Turek's articles on religion in American politics and foreign policy have appeared in *Diplomatic History*, the *Journal of American Studies*, and *Religions*. Her book, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelicals, Human Rights, and U.S. Foreign Relations*, is under contract with Cornell University Press.

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