Central America: An Introductory Lesson

By Pat Scallen

Background

The grand narrative of Latino immigrant history in the United States has most often settled upon Mexicans, who make up the overwhelming majority of Latino migrants in the past half century. Yet many rural areas, mid-sized cities, and even large metropolitan areas boast rapidly rising immigrant populations from the countries of Central America: Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. According to the 2010 Census, approximately 4 million people in the United States claim Central American origin, more than double the number recorded in 2000.[1] In the Washington, DC metropolitan area, the Central American population has skyrocketed in recent years, dwarfing other immigrant populations.[2] This rapid rise in the Central American population is reflected in area public schools; in the District, Spanish-speaking populations make up the majority or a significant minority of the student body at several elementary, middle, and high schools.

Immediate reasons for the rapid increase in Central Americans crossing the U.S. border abound: high levels of poverty brought on by economic stagnation, political unrest, and violence are often cited as the most significant incentives to attempt the dangerous trek northward.[3] But many of the problems which currently plague Central America are rooted in centuries of structural economic inequality, state-sponsored oppression, and institutionalized racism.

This lesson is designed to introduce students to several of these concepts through brief biographical sketches of figures in twentieth-century Central American history. It then builds upon this knowledge in examining the role the United States has played in the affairs of these smaller nations residing in what many U.S. presidents have considered our own backyard.

From the time President Monroe issued his now-famous doctrine warning European powers not to stray too far across the ocean, the United States has kept a wary eye on its neighbors to the south, intervening at will to protect and promote U.S. economic and political interests. An analysis of the consequences of such actions and of the relationship between U.S. foreign policy and Central American immigration patterns will constitute the second of the two activities.

Goals

Students will emerge from the two lessons with a deeper understanding of the key concepts and themes which define modern Central American history, a more nuanced view of US foreign policy in that history, and an appreciation of its impact on Latino migration in recent years.

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[1] "Hispanic or Latino Origin Population by Type: 2000 and 2010." U.S. Census: http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf

[2] Singer, Audrey. "Latin American Immigrants in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area: History and Demography" Brookings Institution, November 2007.

[3] Hamilton, Nora and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla. "Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis." *Latin American Research Review* Vol. 26, No. 1. (1991) 75-110.

Activity 1: Famous Figures Meet-&-Greet

Objective

To introduce students to important historical figures and themes in modern Central America

Materials

- Meet-and-greet roles, one per student
- Blank nametags, one per student
- Copies of "Getting to Know Central America" questions

Time Required

45-50 minutes (5 minutes for the warm-up, 5-10 minutes to introduce and explain the activity, 20 minutes for the meet-and-greet, 15 minutes for discussion)

Procedure

1. **Assess prior knowledge (warm-up/Do Now)**: what do students know about Central America? Pass out a sheet of paper with 3-4 questions regarding the region. Possible questions include:

    a. Name 3 Central American figures of note (political, literary, etc).
    b. Name as many countries in Central America as you can
    c. Name as many capital cities in Central America as you can
    d. How many people of Central American origin live in … (the US, your state/city)
    e. Why might a Central American choose to migrate to the United States?

2. **Establish relevancy**: why is Central America important? Review the answers to warm-up questions.

3. **Introduce the activity**: pass out one role and nametag per student. Direct the students to read their respective roles and then write the names of their individuals on the tags. They will take on the persona of their characters, bringing them to life for the duration of the exercise. Ask students to memorize as much as they can about their assigned characters. Explain that they will be building upon their prior knowledge on Central America and learning about why Central America is important to our understanding of both Latin America and the United States. Teachers of U.S. history might review previous themes of Manifest Destiny and imperialism to provide some historical context. Language teachers might introduce Central American literature as an articulation of lived experience.

4. **Activity**: distribute copies of the "Getting to Know Central America: Questions" to students. Explain that they will use these questions as guides in their succeeding conversations. Then model the type of interaction which will take place with a volunteer student, making sure that the student communicates his/her character clearly. Set a timer for 20 minutes. During this time, students will circulate throughout the classroom and interview each other in order to answer the questions posed on the handout.

Rules of the activity

- Each question must be answered by speaking with a different individual
- Students may not show each other their written role descriptions; they must act them out
- Students should take their time interviewing each other

* While students are circulating, move around, listening to conversations and prompting students when necessary

6. **Discussion/Processing**: when time is up, lead a discussion based upon the conversations you have overheard. Potential prompts:

- What types of people did you encounter in your discussions? (*Write them on the board under general categories: military, guerrillas, priests, human rights advocates, dictators, politicians, writers, etc) Some individuals may fit into several categories.*
- Where did you perceive the potential for conflict among all of these people? *(guerrillas, human rights activists, writers, some politicians, & priests vs military, dictators, & some politicians)*
- Do any of the figures not fit into the schema? Who? Why/why not?
- What do these groups tell us about the reality of life in Central America? *(This should lead to a discussion on who held power and how they maintained it in the face of attempts to gain power by marginalized groups)*
- What were some of the issues you encountered in your conversations? *(i.e., social inequality, state-sponsored violence, land distribution, ideological conflict, racism)*
- Did anything surprise you?
- Why would an activity like this on Central American history include US politicians?

7. **Conclusion/Segue to next activity**: Explain that students will now view an excerpt from the documentary *Harvest of Empire*, which examines the connection between US foreign policy in Latin America and immigration.

***Activity #2 may be used as the second part of a longer class period or as the sole activity in a shorter period the following day.*

Activity 2: US Foreign Policy & Latino Immigration

Objective

To examine the nature of the relationship between the United States and Central American nations in modern times through the lens of foreign policy & immigration

Materials

- *Harvest of Empire* (film)
- Reflection/response handout

Time Required

25-30 min (20 minutes for video clips & discussion; 10 minutes for wrap-up)

Procedure

1. **Establish relevancy**: discuss the statistics on Central Americans in the United States and in the DMV region (see attached page). Tell students that it was not a coincidence that tens of thousands of Central Americans here; both political and economic factors encouraged them to migrate to the United States. This lesson will examine the connection between US foreign policy in Latin America and Central American migration.

2. **Introduction**: *Harvest of Empire* is a documentary released in 2012 and based on a book by the same name by Juan Gonzalez, a New York-based journalist of Puerto Rican ancestry. It chronicles the impact of the United States foreign policy in Latin America and its connection to migration. Students will see several clips and discuss them briefly each time a different clip is shown.

1. Show *Harvest of Empire* clip #1: Guatemala

For teachers: Guatemala stands as the most violent product of US foreign policy in Central America. Between 1966 and 1996, an estimated 200,000 Guatemalan civilians died. According to the UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission, the Guatemalan army was responsible for 93% of the disappearances, torture, and deaths during this time. This conflict, like others in Central America, had its roots in centuries of oppressive rule by landowning elites, undemocratic governance, and deeply seated racist attitudes towards native peoples.

For students:

- *why did the United States engineer a coup d'état in Guatemala in 1954?*
- *was the US justified in overthrowing Arbenz?*
- *how did this impact later events?*

2. Show clip #2: El Salvador (torture testimony & SOA)

For teachers: El Salvador, a country approximately the size of Massachusetts with over 7 million inhabitants, received more than one million dollars per day of foreign aid from the United States during the height of its civil war in the 1980s. The vast majority of that aid went to support the Salvadoran military, which was known as one of the worst human rights offenders in the Western Hemisphere during that time. Soldiers often moonlighted as death squad participants, kidnapping, torturing, and murdering political dissidents or others deemed "subversive" by the Salvadoran government.

For students:

- what are some similarities you have noticed between Guatemala and El Salvador?
- how do the two differ in their histories?
- why might the US Army continue to accept Latin American military leaders into the School of the Americas knowing their poor record of human rights upon return to their respective countries?
- How might what you have just learned relate to immigration?

Wrap-Up: Reflection/Response

With about 10 minutes left in class, wind down the discussion. Pass out the reflection/response handouts, and give the students five minutes to fill them out. Then lead a short wrap-up discussion in which students share what they have learned about Central America over the course of the two exercises.

Extensions of Lesson

1. **Research paper**: dig deeper into your historical figure and write a longer biographical essay, which you will then present to the class in autobiographical form.

2. **Letter**: write a letter from the point of view of your historical figure to a person or government of your choice. This will involve some research, as the letter must clearly convey your figure's ideology and values: what he or she stands for and why.

3. **Immigration:** Put yourself in the shoes of a recently arrived immigrant from Central America. Write a letter to a family member or a friend who still lives in Central America describing emigration conditions and how you are adapting to life in the United States.

4. **Policy paper**: the WHISC (formerly known as the School of the Americas) argues that it attempts to promote human rights and democratic ideals in its courses for Latin American military leaders. Implicit in this argument is that Latin American countries might be even worse off had such leaders not attended the school. Should the United States offer training programs

such as the School of the Americas for foreign militaries? Consider the role the U.S. has played in doing so, both historically and today in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Author

Patrick Scallen is an educator and social historian who specializes in cross-cultural and global studies with a focus on modern Latin America. A Detroit native, he holds graduate degrees in Latin American Studies (Tulane University) and history (Georgetown University). He has lived and worked in Central and South America, and his research focuses on urban social movements, the popular roots of state-sponsored violence, and Latino immigrant communities in the United States, specifically Salvadorans in the Washington, D.C. area.

For the past five years, he has taught Spanish and Social Studies at Archbishop Carroll High School in Northeast D.C. During this time he has designed the curriculum for and taught a variety of courses which have employed history, language, and cultural studies to analyze critical global issues and foster a deeper appreciation of the common threads which bind humanity. Through these classes, he has sought to lend a voice to those who have traditionally been denied agency in prevailing historical narratives.

Handouts

The roles and the question sheet are on the following pages.

Rigoberta Menchú Tum: I was born and raised in a Quiche Mayan peasant family in Guatemala. Growing up, we had little money or land and spent long hours picking coffee on large plantations which paid us poorly and always kept us in debt. Because of this, I became active in movements within the Catholic Church for social reform and women's rights; we lobbied for higher wages, better working conditions, and respect for human dignity. The Guatemalan government responded by arresting, torturing, and killing all of my family members. This only deepened my resolve, and I threw myself into helping people across Guatemala organize to resist the military's power. In 1981 I had to flee the country because I knew my own life was in danger, and I spent the succeeding years spreading the word around the world about the human rights abuses carried out by the Guatemalan government and military. During this time I gave my testimony to an anthropologist, and the resulting book gained me international fame and even the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize.

General Efraín Ríos Montt: I am a Guatemalan army officer who in 1982 overthrew my government to seize power. I suspended the constitution, shut down the legislature, set up secret courts, and tried to stamp out any opposition to my rule through kidnappings, torture, and assassinations by death squads. During this time Communist subversives were brainwashing poor peasants and indigenous communities into joining their ranks, so I ordered the army to kill anyone suspected of aiding them. We had to kill a few thousand of those backwards Indians to crush the Communist threat, but in the end we won. It helped that I had the support of the United States government and military; President Reagan even praised me as "a man of great personal integrity and commitment." The United Nations and Catholic Church both accused me of genocide, but it wasn't: I was just trying to wipe out the guerrillas and bring peace to my country, and I had to teach those Indians what would happen if they turned Communist. Even though I was overthrown a year later, I was still popular with my people: I served 14 years in the national legislature and even ran for president in 2003. In 2013 a judge convicted me of genocide and sentenced me to 80 years in prison. But ten days later, the Constitutional Court overturned the conviction, and I'm still living freely in my home country.

Otto René Castillo: I was a writer who supported the progressive social reforms of President Jacobo Arbenz during Guatemala's 10 Years of Spring (1944-1954). I was furious when the imperialists to the north and their CIA overthrew him. Who gave them the right to intervene in our democratic affairs and determine our destiny? I feared for my life after that and fled to El Salvador and then to Europe, where I lived and wrote in exile for a decade. But I couldn't stand to be away from my native land, so I returned and joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces, the leftist guerrilla group which had arisen to battle the oppressive military dictatorship which had taken over after Arbenz was overthrown. We had tried democracy, just to have the United States sabotage our attempt at creating a more just society and reinstall the same forces which had monopolized power and wealth for most of our country's history. So what other avenues were left but armed resistance? Although I was captured, tortured, and burned alive by the military soon after I returned, my struggle lives on in my poetry and inspired Guatemalans to continue the fight for social justice and equality in the decades to come.

Colonel Jacobo Arbenz: I was an accomplished Guatemalan military colonel; the CIA called me "brilliant." During my years as a teacher in the military academy, I became deeply troubled by the poverty and inequality in my country. The ruling upper classes had kept the poor impoverished for centuries, and something had to be done to address this injustice. So after the people of Guatemala elected me president in 1954, I struck at the heart of the inequality by taking land away from those who had too much and were not using it and distributing those lands to poor peasants so they could earn a living by farming for themselves. Even though we paid them for the lands we took, the owners – including some US corporations – were furious and labeled me a Communist puppet of the Soviet Union. But all I wanted to do was to give the poor a little dignity, not to make Guatemala into a Communist state. The United States didn't believe me, and President Eisenhower ordered the CIA to organize a small invasion force to overthrow me. The US spread lies about my government and did everything it could to cause economic and social chaos. I finally resigned in 1954, and the US installed its handpicked leader, who reversed all of my social reforms and gave power and land back to the rich. No wonder Guatemala had a revolution a few decades later.

The Dulles Brothers (John Foster & Allen): We are considered the most powerful siblings to manage foreign policy in the history of the United States. After President Eisenhower named us Secretary of State and director of the CIA, we worked closely with each other to combat the spread of Communism and promote US corporate interests around the world. When Iran's prime minister tried to kick a British oil company out, we overthrew him in 1951 and installed "our man," the Shah. The Shah wasn't the greatest on human rights, and he didn't care too much for democracy. But he defended US interests, which was really all we cared about. We then overthrew Jacobo Arbenz, the President of Guatemala. Even though he was democratically elected, we knew all along he was a closet Communist; he tried to take land away from the rich and give it to the poor. A lot of that land was owned by a US banana company named United Fruit, which we had close ties to and which had asked us for years to overthrow Arbenz. But we got him out because he was a Commie, and it just helped that US corporations benefitted as well. It was one of our greatest victories.

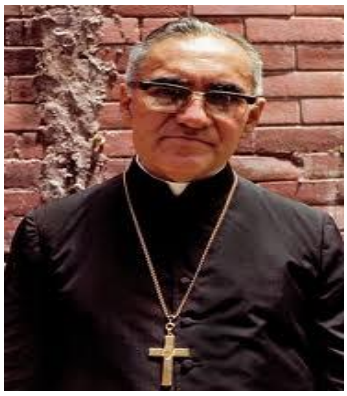
Agustín Farabundo Martí: As a young man, I saw that peasant farmers and farm workers in my country, El Salvador, struggled to survive on low wages and little land and endured horrific working conditions. The government helped the wealthy landowners keep their workers oppressed, and I wanted a government which would benefit all Salvadorans, not just the few rich. I dropped out of law school and helped found the Communist Party of Central America. But the military dictatorship, afraid that we might win power, intimidated and harassed us and prohibited us from taking part in elections. So what other option did we have but to fight for our right to freedom and dignity? In 1932, helped organize a rebellion of mostly poor Indians, but our machetes were no match for the army's rifles and machine guns. The army slaughtered entire villages, killing over 10,000 mostly indigenous people in three days in an event that became known as *la matanza*. The government got what it wanted: after that, Salvadorans were scared to openly oppose it, and Indians avoided publicly practicing their customs and culture for decades to come. Government forces captured and killed me, but my struggle proved an inspiration for generations of social activists.

General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez: I was an army general who took over the presidency of El Salvador when the old president was overthrown in 1931. I really admired Hitler, and like him, I had no problem ordering the slaughter of thousands of people – some say up to 30,000. It didn't matter to me that most of them weren't guilty of anything; I needed to teach those backwards Indians a lesson about what happens when you oppose your government. After that most of my political opponents were afraid to speak up, and I made sure they didn't by censoring the media, getting rid of local elections, and harassing, intimidating, and killing people who dared to oppose me. Many Salvadorans thought I was more than a bit odd, and they called me "El Brujo" (The Witch) due to my belief in dark magic and reincarnation. But I also allowed women to vote for the first time in my country's history and enacted a series of social security measures. The large landowners loved me because I killed off their political enemies, but they were not happy after I raised taxes and proposed redistributing some of their land in 1944. After I resigned I moved to Guatemala and then Honduras, where in 1966 I was stabbed to death by my driver. I guess I had it coming; my soldiers had killed his father.

Roque Dalton: I was one of El Salvador's best known writers. In my early years, I developed an interest in socialism and explored that through my literature and poems. The government kept arresting me and condemning me to death, but I always managed to escape, one way or another. I like to think it was fate that caused the earthquake to shatter my jail cell and allow me to avoid certain death by firing squad. I fled the country, and while in exile I published some of my most famous work and won the prestigious *Casa de las Américas* poetry prize in 1969. In 1970 I vowed to put my beliefs into action, re-entered El Salvador in disguise, and joined the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) as a soldier-poet. But some of my fellow guerrillas took issue with my tactics and tried to undermine me by spreading a rumor that I was collaborating with the CIA. I wasn't, but they used that as an excuse for ordering my assassination in 1975. In 2012 the Salvadoran government put my face on a stamp, but it has yet to bring my killers to justice.

Maria Serrano: If you had told me one day I would be launching raids on government military outposts, I would have called you crazy. I was just a young mother trying to raise her children in a poor village in El Salvador. Little by little, I became involved in organizing my fellow *campesinos* (farmers) to demand land and rights from our government – which had been denied us for centuries. All we really wanted was the opportunity to earn a decent living and not die of malnutrition. The military threatened and harassed me, and I saw companions disappear and then turn up a dead few days later in ditches by the side of the road, killed by the soldiers. I knew I was next. So I took my family and fled to the hills to join the guerrillas in their fight against the government. I didn't risk my life for any particular idea; I fought for the poor and disadvantaged – so that they could one day have a voice in the government. In the midst of the war, two North American women followed me around for a couple of months and filmed a documentary about me; they called it *Maria's Story*. After the peace accords, I became a legislator in the National Assembly and just finished serving my country as Minister of the Interior, where I continued my quest to bring dignity and rights to the poor of El Salvador.

Major Roberto D'Aubuisson: I was an army major in El Salvador, and I led the charge against the Communists who were taking over our country. My army buddies and I would threaten, intimidate, disappear, torture, and kill anyone who spoke out against the government: farmers, workers, students, businessmen, doctors, priests, nuns – anyone. If they spoke out against the government or challenged the status quo, they were Communists. What my opponents have claimed all along is true: I did order the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero. He was brainwashing the people with all of his talk of social justice, and after he called on the army to refuse orders from their commanding officers to kill, it was time for him to go. After Romero's death I founded my own political party and served as a legislator in the government. People accused me of being fascist and far-right, but I took pride in that. Someone had to cleanse the Communists before they overran our country. I once told a reporter that we might even need to kill 200,000 or 300,000 Salvadorans to restore peace in our beloved republic, and it's true. I died in 1992 of throat cancer at age 48.



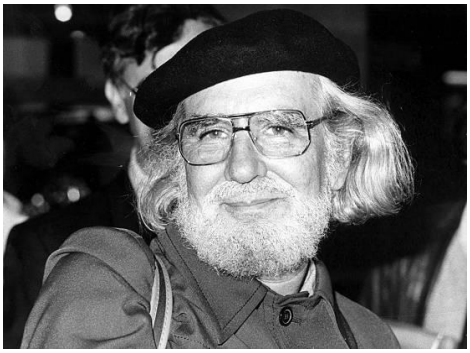
Archbishop Oscar Romero: I was a soft-spoken Catholic priest in El Salvador. But as I saw how oppressed the poor were in my country and how wealthy landholders worked with the government, the military, and even the Church to maintain their power, I began to speak out against the injustices. I saw my role as the defender of the poor; the voice of those whose voices had been silenced by poverty and fear. I used my Sunday sermons, which were broadcast across the country, to call on the Salvadoran government to stop killing innocent civilians who tried to speak out for their rights, and pursue peace. Many world leaders recognized my efforts to seek peace and nominated me for the Nobel Peace Prize. But my actions also frightened the leaders of my country and their powerful allies; they perceived me as a threat to their economic and political authority. In 1980 a member of the Salvadoran military – under orders from his superiors – shot and killed me while I was saying mass at the chapel near my house. I was a martyr for my people, and many believe I will be made a saint very soon.

Augusto César Sandino: I was the child of a wealthy Spanish landowner and his indigenous servant. This really shaped my early worldview as well as my later efforts to unify my country against those arrogant imperialists to the north. When the US Marines were sent to occupy our country and "enforce the peace," I harassed them with a small band of loyal fighters. Although I never came close to defeating the invaders, they couldn't defeat my army of freedom fighters either. But my struggle was not limited to Nicaragua; I fought for a united Central America, just as it had been after our independence from Spain. Our common Spanish-Indian heritage made us stronger together than apart, and only by uniting could we prevent the Colossus of the North from meddling in the affairs of Latin America. After the Marines left in 1933, I was true to my word and ordered my soldiers to lay down their arms. It turns out we shouldn't have. Anastasio Somoza García, that opportunistic traitor whom the Americans had appointed head of the National Guard, ambushed and murdered me along with my brother and two of my generals as were leaving the president's house. Two years later he overthrew the president and then ruled Nicaragua as a dictator for 40 years after that. But I got the last laugh: Somoza's son was overthrown in 1979 by a popular revolution that bore my name, and my story continues to inspire anti-imperialists throughout Latin America.

Anastasio Somoza Debayle: My father ruled for 40 years and brought stability and civilization to Nicaragua, and I carried on the family tradition. I used my political power to amass a fortune of just over a billion dollars; my family owned the Nicaraguan national airline, the national shipping line, car dealerships, the dominant TV and radio stations, banks, insurance companies, and construction agencies. Some people couldn't bring themselves to accept this, like those Communists who called themselves Sandinistas. They weren't a huge threat, but by the mid-1970s a few arrogant Catholic priests were also spreading lies about my not caring about poor people. Pretty soon the business community had turned against me as well; they complained that I had awarded my businesses government contracts over theirs – another lie. But the real indignity was when that traitor Jimmy Carter didn't come out and support me as the US always had. I ended up resigning the presidency in 1979 when it was clear the Sandinista rebellion was going to defeat my army. I fled to Paraguay, whose dictator had kindly offered me asylum. But the Sandinistas didn't just want me gone; they wanted me dead. They blew up my car with an anti-tank missile a few months later.

Daniel Ortega: I'm the most recognizable Nicaraguan politician to North Americans. I was the head of the Nicaraguan government from 1979, when we toppled the US – sponsored Somoza dictatorship, until 1990: the decade of the Nicaraguan revolution. During this time my Sandinista companions and I engineered wide-ranging social and economic reforms, redistributing land among landless peasants, collectivizing agriculture, raising literacy rates, and supplying much-needed health care to hundreds of thousands who before could not afford it.

I was shocked when I lost the presidential election in 1990, but I managed to get re-elected in 2006 after I made a pact with my rival. Since then I've embraced some market reforms and moderated my political message. But I've never given up on opposing US ambitions throughout the world: I've joined forces with Iran, Russia, Venezuela, China, and other rivals of the US to counter its power. Recently, some have accused me of bullying the courts and legislature into changing the constitution to allow me to run for more than two terms. But that's what I have to do to ensure that Nicaragua remains a free country.



Fr. Ernesto Cardenal: I am an ordained Roman Catholic priest and a lifelong poet and activist. When I was young I worked to overthrow the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza, and then I went to study under Thomas Merton in a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. After returning to Nicaragua I founded a Christian peasant community and artist colony; we became known for a type of primitivist art and also worked underground, helping the Sandinista struggle to overthrow the dictatorship. The Nicaraguan military didn't take too kindly to our efforts and burned our community to the ground. After Somoza fell in 1979, I served as Minister of Culture in the Sandinista government. The pope ordered me to resign and publicly chastised me when he visited, but my dedication to the revolution trumped my obedience to Rome. I left the Sandinista party in 1994 after it became clear to me that its leader was more concerned with enriching himself and accumulating political power than promoting the revolutionary ideals he had once espoused. I've continued to write and publish my poems; I was honored to be nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005.

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro: I was the first freely elected female head of state in the Americas; I served as President of Nicaragua from 1990-1996. I really wasn't too politically active until I met my husband, a newspaper editor who was assassinated in 1978 for his criticism of Anastasio Somoza, the US-backed dictator in my country. Somoza was overthrown by a popular revolution led by the Sandinistas a year later, but they were just too extreme for me: I was a businesswoman and a political moderate, not a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary. So I resigned my post and used my late husband's newspaper to expose Sandinista abuses and criticize their programs. In 1990, I ran for and won the presidency, beating out the Sandinista candidate with the help of $9 million from President Bush. During my one term in office, I did my best to transition my country from civil war to a lasting peace. I let some of the Sandinista social reforms stand but also privatized social services, cut spending on programs for the poor, and opened Nicaragua to foreign investors. This transition to free market capitalism was pretty controversial: unemployment skyrocketed, and many complained that the government had abandoned them. Regardless, I like to think that I put my country on the road to a more peaceful future.

Carlos Mejia Godoy: I am a Nicaraguan folk musician, guitarist, and songwriter. I believe that music can be a force for good; it can inspire people to break the bonds of oppression and give them hope in their struggle for liberation. During the 1970s, my brother Luis Enrique and I joined with other Central American musicians to write and perform songs which inspired peasants and revolutionaries in their fight against Latin American dictatorships. Perhaps my best known work is the music for the *Misa Campesina*, a folk mass I wrote for Nicaraguan peasants to sustain them in their daily sufferings and their collective struggle for social change. Another of my famous songs instructed Nicaraguan revolutionaries on how to assemble, use, and disassemble the rifles they were capturing from government troops during street battles. Ironically, my son Camilo joined the US Army – the same army which trained those who attempted to overthrow my government during the 1980s. But he made me proud when he refused to fight in the Iraq war and served a year in jail as a conscientious objector.

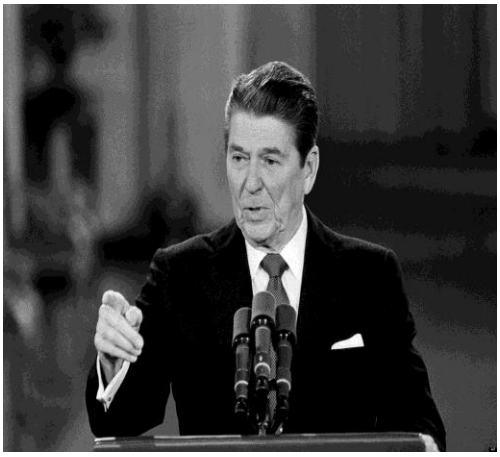
Gioconda Belli: I am a feminist, a writer, and a revolutionary. I was active in the underground Sandinista resistance movement against Anastasio Somoza, the dictator who ruled my county of Nicaragua, during the 1970s. After Somoza fell in 1979, I served the new Sandinista government as a public relations and communications liaison to the international press. I embraced the revolution, and its idealism penetrated many of my writings during that time. I tried to convey the passions of the revolution and what it was like to be a woman during that time: the romantic nature of the struggle against dictatorship, the intensity of emotions engendered by the fight, and the nature of the feminine experience during that time. I left the government in 1988 to pursue my writing career full-time, and five years after that I left the Sandinista Party in disgust. It had strayed from its original revolutionary goals and had become a party of self-serving corrupt politicians – no different from its opposition. Today I continue to write and lecture in literary circles, both in the US and in Nicaragua.

Mario Aguero: I am a hardworking *campesino* (peasant) in Quilalí, a mountainous region in Nicaragua. I joined the Sandinista resistance movement against the Somoza dictatorship and, when he fell, I wanted to give back to the revolution. So I signed up with the Sandinista's literacy crusade, helping educate my fellow *campesinos*. But the textbooks we used seemed more like government propaganda, so I quit the program. The revolution wasn't what we had hoped for; we wanted the freedom to farm our land and not be harassed by the military. But the Sandinistas forced us to combine our farms into cooperatives and work together. And it seemed as though the Sandinistas rewarded only their supporters with the land they had taken from rich landowners, even though they had promised to distribute it equally among all of us poor peasants. So my neighbors and I decided to join the *contras* and sabotage the Sandinista army. We knew President Reagan was sending the *contras* millions of dollars of US aid; we had better weapons, food, and uniforms than the Sandinistas. Our goal was to bring down the Sandinista government by raiding cooperatives and ambushing the national army. In the end, we were victorious; the war sapped the popularity and resources of the government, and the Sandinista leader lost the elections of 1990.

Brooklyn Rivera: I am the Coordinator-General of the Misurasata, the native peoples who populate the eastern coast and interior regions of Nicaragua. After the Sandinista guerrillas toppled the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, we expressed great faith in the new government. But the Sandinista leadership refused our proposals for self-rule in order to protect our culture and values. We were told that we had no choice but to join the Sandinistas: that we were either for the revolutionary government or against it. We were subjected to intimidation and threats. At the same time the literacy campaign was halted in our communities, and the government began its practice of teaching our Indian children in Spanish rather than their native languages. Here again we saw the dishonesty of a government which practiced instruction designed to assimilate our peoples to another way of life. The Sandinista government also forcibly relocated thousands of us during the 1980. We could only suffer such injustices for so long, and many of our people saw no alternative but to take up arms against the Sandinistas and their so-called revolutionary agenda to protect our indigenous rights and cultural freedom.

Jimmy Carter: When I took office as President of the United States in 1977 I made sure all US allies know they had to respect human rights in order to receive our military aid. Problems came when the Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua toppled the dictator we had supported for decades. I tried to keep them from coming to power because I feared that would open the door to Communism in Central America. They did come to power, but my government still worked with the Sandinistas and offered economic aid as a gesture of goodwill. The human rights policy didn't fare too well in El Salvador, though. I gave economic and some military aid to the Salvadoran government, even though it was clear the generals were using it to torture and kill their own people. In the end, my policy towards Central America wasn't consistent and proved one more weak spot that Ronald Reagan exploited to beat me in the elections of 1980.

Robert White: I was a career foreign service officer and a specialist in Latin American politics when President Carter named me to be the US ambassador to El Salvador in 1979. I arrived in the midst of chaos and violence: right-wing death squads were killing anyone who advocated reform or change, the military was out of control, and the situation was getting worse by the day. I tried to push the Salvadoran government to rein in the military and stop the killing, but it was futile. I used every chance I had to speak out against the rich landowners and businessmen who were funding the death squads; I received death threats in return. The tipping point came when the Salvadoran military raped and murdered four US nuns in 1980. I was furious but could do nothing, as Ronald Reagan had just won the presidency, and everyone knew he would yank me from my post. He did, and then he went on to grant millions in military aid to those cold-blooded killers. I left the Foreign Service and used my credentials to lead opposition to the Reagan policy in Central America. Since then I have worked to promote honesty and transparency in US foreign policy and, at age 88, am still going strong.



Ronald Reagan: I was one of the most polarizing presidents of the US in the twentieth century: millions loved me, and millions hated me. During my two terms in office, I did everything I could to stop the spread of Communism around the world, including in Central America, which might have turned "red" had I not used my presidential powers to intervene. I gave over $1 million per day to the government of El Salvador to fight the guerrillas in the 1980s and block potential Soviet influence. Sure, the Salvadoran military was butchering its people, but the alternative would have been even worse. In Nicaragua I spent $1 billion to have the CIA train rebels to overthrow the government there, which was also a bunch of Communists. In Guatemala, I threw my support behind a series of military leaders who presided over a genocide of Mayan communities. But can you imagine what would have happened if Central America had turned Communist? It would be a hundred times worse. I did the right thing, even though it might not have been the popular choice at the time and tarnished my reputation in the light of the world, especially in the eyes of Latin Americans.

Oliver North: I am a former Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps. I fought in the Vietnam War and then moved up the rank in the military until I landed in the National Security Council, where I helped to plan the US invasion of Grenada and its bombing of Libya in the 1980s. I also was one of the major players behind the Iran-Contra affair, in which we sold weapons to Iran and then illegally funneled the profits to fund the rebels (*contras*) who were fighting the Nicaraguan government. It was a brilliant scheme, but someone found out and squealed. Sure, I lied to Congress about my role and tried to cover up the scandal, but the goal of helping the *contras* bring down that Communist government in Nicaragua was worth the lies. I was eventually arrested, charged with 16 felony counts, and convicted on three minor counts. But that didn't seem to hurt my reputation: I went on to run for the US Senate in Virginia (I narrowly lost) and then host my own nationally syndicated conservative radio show from 1995-2003. I've published several bestselling books on the military since then, and I can still pull quite a crowd when I appear in public.

Getting to Know Central America: Meet-&-Greet

Your character for the activity: _____

Directions: Answer the questions below thoroughly. Take your time; the goal is to learn about the person with whom you are speaking. You should interview 3 different individuals: one per question.

1. Find someone from your country of origin: (name) _____
   - What values are important to him/her?
   - Would you be friends with this person? Why or why not?

2. Find someone who has an official gov't. role. (name) _____
   - What did s/he seek to do with her/his power?
   - Do you support this person's goals? Why or why not?

3. Find someone who has been assassinated: (name) _____
   - Why was s/he assassinated and by whom?
   - Do you agree with the political position of this person? Why/why not?