

Secure the Soul

*Christian Piety and Gang Prevention
in Guatemala*

Kevin Lewis O'Neill



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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*To Sridhar, to Usha
For Archana, for Ignatius*

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I tore a page from my notebook, earnestly titled "Field Notes." Mateo rolled the joint with it as we finished our beers. On the outer edge of Guatemala City, with a volcano at our backs, we sat in a park. Grainy 1990s hip-hop music played from his cell phone, with the same song on loop, seemingly for hours. Nostalgia hit him. "I'm sad, Kev." Mateo pulled from the joint. His hand, the very one pinching the blunt, looked different. The 818 once tattooed across his knuckles had faded. Both time and lasers were doing the trick. His monthly visits to a reinsertion program for ex-gang members looked like they were paying off. The former area code of his former Los Angeles was hardly visible. But the numbers faded faster than his memories. "Why you sad?" I asked. "You've got a good job, great kid, and Jesus. You always talk about Jesus." His eyes, swollen from the weed, teared up. "I know I'm just sad, bro. I miss my family back in LA." I put my arm around him. "I know, Mateo. I know." The music then stopped, but only for a moment. The same song, that same goddam song, jumped off from the beginning. Mateo was right back where he had started.

Prologue

The streets were on fire. They were burning the devil. *La quema del diablo*. Every year, on December 7, at sunset, Guatemalans torch their trash. To purge the devil, some say. For spiritual purity, others add. Old newspapers, stained mattresses, and broken furniture—they set it ablaze in the streets, which is where I stood. Outside a small Pentecostal church, in an unplanned, undeveloped *zona c* Guatemala City, I stood with a pastor. The sun had set. Thick smoke gathered while dozens of bonfires cast shadows across otherwise unlit streets. He was on the phone with a young woman. Her sister had just been gang-raped on a public bus. The pastor struggled for answers. He offered prayers. He even promised to visit the very next day, on Monday; but for now, he said, he had a service to deliver, a congregation to minister. As he spoke, the flames grew closer. I turned away, only to find myself facing a red and black piñata. Shaped like the devil hanging from a post, by the neck, it had been lynched. His feet were on fire.

The church was modest. A metal roof balanced atop four cement walls, which oversized, overused speakers pushed Pentecostal music past the seats and out the door. The streets seemed to push it back. Inside the church, toddlers toddled and children ran while young men sat with young women, and old women sat with their daughters. Fire or not, the devil or not, it was Sunday night, and they were at church for a service. Men and women squeezed into the space while flames licked at the windows. The church had begun to take on smoke.



FIGURE 1. La quema del diablo. Photo by Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela.

A greeting, a prayer, and then another song—the pastor kept to the script. So too did the congregants. But then the pastor mentioned a guest. He mentioned an honored guest. He, not the pastor, would deliver the sermon. He, not the pastor, would share his testimony. This young man, the pastor insisted, would share his testimony with anyone who would listen. The thought of it brought a smile to the pastor's face. "Will you listen?" the pastor asked. "Will you really listen?" Fireworks popped in the streets. Some turned to watch. "Listen to the young man," the pastor pressed, "because he is here to help you. He is here to save you. To save us. You need to listen to him." A stray dog poked his nose inside the church. A little boy kicked at it. "The gangs are too much," the pastor continued. "The violence in Guatemala is just too much."

Mateo, the young man, took to the pulpit. He was not tall, but he was obviously strong. He had broad shoulders, a thick neck, and a sturdy back. He could be mistaken for an athlete, a boxer perhaps, were it not for his gait. He walked like a gangsta. This is his word, not mine. He walked a little slower, a little more

stridently than the average Guatemalan. Mateo had a kind of swagger that made him stand out. He knew it, and he liked it. The bald head, the baggy jeans, and the tattoos peeking out from under his collar—it all signaled a certain kind of time spent in the States. His stunted Spanish was also a tell. Mateo was not from Guatemala. Everyone knew as much. But, of course, he was. Everyone knew that too.

Mateo spoke softly. “Thank you,” he whispered, “Thank you, brothers and sisters.” Mateo always spoke softly, at least at first. It was a bit of trick. “Get them leaning forward,” he would tell me. “Get them on the edge of their seats,” he would say. “Don’t just yell at ‘em. Make ‘em work for it. They need to fuckin’ work for it.” He motioned for everyone to take their seats. “Sit, brothers and sisters. Please sit.” As they sat down, Mateo stepped back. Taking a deep breath, he picked up the microphone and started slowly. “The word of God touches me. . . . It touches me so much. I’m thirty years old. And I am alive by the grace of God.” The whisper worked. It usually did. The young men and the young women leaned toward him. So too did the mothers and the fathers. The children still ran, and the toddlers still toddled, but the old women, the hardest of all to hook, shifted a bit in their seats. “The word of God touches my heart deeply,” he said, with a cough. The smoke thickened.

“But let me back up,” he said. “I want to start from the beginning.” Mateo always started from the beginning. “When I was three years old, my dad and I left. We were here in Guatemala, but then we went to the United States illegally.” He let that fact sit for a bit. “We left for the United States without papers. You see, my cousin is American. He was born in Guatemala but his papers are American. And when I was young, when I was still really little, I looked just like my cousin. But I wasn’t him. We just looked the same. So I used his papers to cross the border.” Mateo’s pitch began to peak. He started to preach to the back of the room. “I arrived illegally . . . because my dad thought he was going to find something better. He was looking for what a lot of Central Americans are looking for.” It was a familiar story. “When, really, this country, this Guatemala, is rich. Guatemala is blessed! Guatemala is a rich country!” Mateo yelled that last part. He always yelled that last part.

“Praise be to God!” the congregation erupted.

“Praise be to God!” Mateo echoed. A group of kids suddenly streaked past the front door. They dragged their piñata, their devil, with a rope. He was on fire. Bits of charred devil followed close behind.

Mateo started up before the faithful quieted down. Preaching over them at clip, he said, "Guatemala is a beautiful country. God has blessed this country, but sometimes . . ." He slowed back down. "Sometimes we can't see beauty. Sometimes we can't even stand our own neighbor, our own land. Sometimes we don't know that God has already blessed us." He paused—to lower his voice, to stand in the moment. "Sometimes we're lost," he said. "Sometimes we're just totally lost." By this time smoke had filled the church. The smell of burning rubber and melting plastic mixed with the church's fluorescent lighting to create a surreal scene, one that toggled between a dream and a total nightmare. "Gang raped on a public bus?" the pastor had asked, with a mix of compassion and disbelief.

"I've been lost," Mateo admitted. "I still get lost." His voice stiffened. "But the pastor is right. The gangs are too much. The violence is too much. That's why I'm worried. I'm so worried for the kids here, for the youth. I'm worried about the neighborhood. I'm worried about the people involved in gangs. Because if you choose that life, you're going to get yourself killed. You're going to find yourself in a bag. You're going to find one of your friends killed, hanged, with his head chopped off. You're going to find yourself doing time in prison." Mateo spoke from experience. "Look," he said, "I'm not here to tell you to get out of your neighborhood. I'm not here to tell you what to do, or how to live your life. I'm just here to tell you that God loves you. To tell you that there is a way out. To tell you that there are ways to heal all those cuts that you have on your heart." Now Mateo started to cough. The smoke was too much.

Mateo leaned into his testimony. "When I arrived in South Central Los Angeles, I lived with my dad. I was young. Real young. And when I was like eight years old, my dad really started to get abusive. I'm not talking about anything sexual. No. My dad was tough with me. He's now a very caring man. He's older. He's wise. He prays to God. And God changed him. But back then . . ." Mateo shook his head. He hated bringing it all back. "Back then he used to hit me. And I'm not talking about a father going to the closet and getting out his belt. I'm not talking about spanking a child two or three times to teach him something. No, brothers. No sisters. My father hit me like I was twenty years old. He would punch me in the face. He would punch me like a man, and if I cried, he hit me more." The flame grew taller. Driven by curiosity as much as concern, I wrote in my notebook, "Does cement burn?"

Mateo's voice started to crack. "I didn't have a childhood," he preached, "I st

remember this one time when I came home from school. And I was happy. I had done really well on a test. Like B+ or something. And I was happy.” Mateo drifted a bit. On stage, in his mind, he drifted a bit. He lost himself in the smoke. But he came back. Stepping out from behind the pulpit, squaring himself to the congregation, he said, “My dad came home, and I said, ‘Hey, Dad, look, I got a good grade.’ But then he grabbed my homework and ripped it into pieces. And he grabbed me and he started punching me in my mouth, in my ribs, in my stomach. He started choking me.” Mateo then stepped out of his narrative. He literally stepped to one side, to make a kind of parenthesis. “He wasn’t beating me like you beat a child. He was hitting me like I was a man. He beat me like you beat a man. He wanted to make that point absolutely clear. “And he picked me up and opened the door and then threw me out. And I hit the floor with my back and my butt. And then I looked at him . . . I remember looking at him, and a teardrop started to fall out of my right eye. And I looked at him and I said, ‘Dad, what’s up? Why are you doing this?’ Standing on the front steps of our apartment, in the middle of South Central, he tells me, ‘Get out of here, you son of a bitch. You’re not my son.’” The crowd all sat in silence. Sounds from the streets jockeyed for their attention. Fireworks burst. Dogs growled. Babies wailed. The place was literally on fire. But these churchgoers did not stir. Mateo had their attention.

“I got up, I dusted myself, and he shut the door on me. And as I stood outside, in South Central, trying not to cry, I thought about what I was going to do. What was I going to do without a father? Without a family? Because at that time, brothers and sisters, I didn’t know God. I didn’t know anything about the Lord or about the Holy Spirit. I’m telling you, I didn’t know God.” One woman—a mother of many—called out, “But God knew you!” Mateo smiled. “That’s right, sister. That’s absolutely right. . . . Because I knew—deep down in my heart, under all the pain and the abuse—I knew that my blessed Father had my life in his hands.” Mateo lingered on this last point. “During it all, and I’m serious, I always knew there was someone looking out for me. I always knew that there was someone knocking at my door, trying to open my heart. I just didn’t know who it was. I didn’t even know God existed. I didn’t know he was trying to get my attention, that he was trying to restore me and to raise me up. I tell you, I didn’t know God.” He dropped his shoulders a bit. “All I knew were the gangs.”

“I was growing up in the streets of Los Angeles,” Mateo whispered, “seeing all the gangs and starting to see their sinfulness. And I would just watch them. The drugs, how they moved money, the cars, the guns, the prostitutes. But I also

started to feel a part of a family. I felt . . .” Mateo was near tears—at the pulpit, in front of everyone. But he fought them back. He could usually fight them back. I felt like . . . Oh, Lord. I felt like the gang was my family.” He wiped a tear from his face. “And I remember that the gangs were really active at that point. It was a really tense. And everyone would talk about who had juice. Who had power. That dude is dangerous, they’d say. Watch out for that cat. But you know what, brothers and sisters, my heart was already destroyed by that time. I started skipping school and getting suspended.” Mateo looked upward, toward the ceiling. “I was just so angry,” he confessed, “I had all this hatred. So I started to get involved with drugs. The weed got me high. It did, but then I wanted something more powerful. So I started doing cocaine and crack. I started doing heroin and crystal meth. I smoked it. But I still didn’t feel anything. It didn’t do anything for me. And I was still so young and all I wanted was to feel something!”

“The gangs let me feel something,” Mateo said. “But I was blind. I had like a bandage over my eyes, over my heart! I was angry. My heart was hard. All I knew was that I didn’t want to let anyone in. I had this look in my eyes that screamed ‘Do not come in!’” Mateo pointed to the window, with its fire and its smoke. He pointed toward the devil. “All I could hear was the devil.” Mateo flexed his voice, adding, “The devil is real. But the devil’s not in the streets. Look at them. Running around, lighting stuff on fire. What are they doing? The devil is real but he’s not out there. The devil is in our hearts. The gang was in my heart.”

Mateo preached for another hour—about getting beaten into the gang, the Los Angeles riots, and fistfighting his way through the U.S. prison system. He also talked about finding Jesus, alone in his jail cell. “Did I do too much dope?” he asked himself in front of the church. “That’s what I thought Jesus was. Too much dope. It was like three in the morning in jail and I heard this voice: ‘Mateo, let me in.’” He cupped the mic with his hands for effect. “Let me in! Open your heart!” Mateo stumbled around the pulpit, acting it all out. “What’s going on?” he asked in a seeming stupor. Suddenly snapping out of it, he said, “And that’s when I started to look for the Lord, brothers and sisters. And the Lord told me, ‘Stop.’ He told me that ‘I’m going to lead you,’ that I need to surrender to him.”

At the end of the night, Mateo turned to his deportation. It made for a colorful conclusion—because his new life in Guatemala, he said, had been hard. It had been lonely. “‘Cause when Satan comes,” Mateo warned, “he hits you. He strips you of all your belongings, and he leaves you half dead.” As he spoke, the street quieted; bonfires gave way to piles of soot. Families and friends turned in for the

night. Yet the smoke lingered. The cool night, with its humidity, held it close. So atop some kind of carcinogenic cloud, Mateo returned, one last time, to his message. With the children asleep on their parents' laps, Mateo confessed, "The devil was in my heart. The gang was in my heart. But not anymore. Today I am free. By the grace of God, I am free."

Introduction

Mateo preached amid chaos. The flames, the fireworks, the devil—each added to the drama, but the real tragedy had been brewing for decades. New regimes of deportation, as well as a blurring distinction between the United States' War on Drugs and its War on Terror, combined with a multibillion-dollar drug trade to expand and embolden transnational street gangs throughout Central America. Guatemala got hit hard. And Mateo felt every punch. Following a thirty-six-year genocidal civil war (1960–96), uneven efforts at democratization and economic restructuring met a criminally negligent state to make postwar Guatemala the most violent noncombat zone in the world. The numbers are bleak. Guatemala City's homicide rate is more than twenty times the U.S. average. An estimated two-thirds of these homicides are gang related, and less than 2 percent of them result in a conviction. "This ain't LA," Mateo would say. "This place is fuckin' wild. And wild it can seem—as 24,000 police officers work alongside some 150,000 private security agents, three-quarters of whom are unregistered and all are armed. With the guns and the murders, in the shadows of all this violence, postwar peace and prosperity proved nothing more than bloodied banners. Security is the new anthem.

La mano dura, or a strong-fisted approach to gang violence, has long defined the practice of postwar security. Its techniques include deportation, mass incarceration, and extrajudicial execution. The strategy is clear: stop the violence

for good. Yet, amid repatriation flights and paramilitary death squads, overcrowded prisons and angry lynch mobs, an alternative definition of security has emerged. Industry experts call it “soft security.” Its technique is prevention and its hope is to stop the violence before it starts.² Mateo is one of its agents. He is also one of its subjects. For his testimony, his talk of transformation, braided together a growing commitment to soft security with a dramatic shift in religious affiliation. Once overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, the country is today as much a 60 percent Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian.³ This confluence is crucial. In the shadows of an anemic postwar state, with unthinkable levels of urban violence, new forms of Christianity organize and underlie the practice of gang prevention. Jesus saves. And he also secures.



FIGURE 2. The daily news. Photo by Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela.

This book details the Christian dimensions of soft security in postwar Guatemala. It juxtaposes a set of ethnographies, each delineating how a church mission, a faith-based program, or an ostensibly secular security project traffics in Christian techniques of self-transformation. Much like Christianity, because of

Christianity, soft security presumes that its subject is lost and must be found, that he has sinned and so must be saved.⁴ Mateo's life evidences as much, but so do the sites that assemble him: maximum security prisons (Chapter 1), reality television shows (Chapter 2), bilingual call centers (Chapter 3), child sponsorship programs (Chapter 4), and Pentecostal rehabilitation centers (Chapter 5).⁵ Each faith-inflected intervention opens a window onto religion's knotted relationship with security. And this is the point. A range of scholars (in several disciplines) understand religion and security as distinct: religion as a threat to security or religion as a solution to insecurity.⁶ Yet, the practice of soft security demonstrates that religion, observed here through various manifestations of Christianity, is neither the enemy nor the antidote. Rather, religion is a social fact deeply bound to the practice and to the construction of security, to the very idea of what means to be secure.⁷

Mateo's life, assembled across these sites and braided between these chapters, evidences this entanglement in ways that foreground the fact that soft security is not so soft. Mateo knows this all too well. No matter how earnest the intervention, no matter how clever the effort, the outcomes often proved tragic. People died—spectacularly, in radically undignified ways. Death, dismemberment, and disappearance pierce every one of these chapters. “The programs are just fucked up,” Mateo admitted, “They aren't organized. Nothing is nice and tight. So a lot of people die.” But to conclude that these are mere misfires is to absolutely miss the point. Efficacy is not the issue. Productiveness is. For the practice of soft security, especially when hitched to Christian coordinates, targets the heart and the mind; it works on the soul, doing so in ways that distinguish between the lost and the found, the sinner and the saved, the worthy and the unworthy.⁸ These moral distinctions have material effects. They set the conditions for visibility, segregation, and captivity—for who is seen (and who is not), who belongs (and who does not), who is free (and who gets tied up). Soft security can be brutal, the book argues, and Christianity makes it so.

The Christianity of interest here is neither a stable tradition nor a singular sect. It is an aspiration.⁹ At the center of most every effort at prevention sits not Pentecostalism or Presbyterianism, but a piety built of sin and hope.¹⁰ Make good with God, this piety insists, by turning inward, assessing your soul, and righting yourself with the Lord. “God was knocking at my door,” Mateo confessed at the church that night, “God wanted to come inside. God wanted to raise me up.” Bot

an obligation and an inspiration, evoking the cross as well as the empty tomb. Christian piety sits at the center of soft security. It demands from its person commitment, at times a compulsion, to improve, to be better—to turn it around. In doing so, this piety renders Christianity ubiquitous and undifferentiated, a Christianity best described as undenominated.¹¹ This is what this book moves beyond church histories and denominational ethnographies to see what the promise of piety makes possible.¹² In postwar Guatemala, with ruthless levels of social suffering, the promise of piety makes the solution to gang violence intuitive: secure the soul.

To appreciate this imperative requires some more detailed remarks on prevention and piety. The rest of this introduction does the rest of this work. I also frames Mateo's life history, which makes up the text between each numbered chapter. Edited for length and style, Mateo's life history evidences the social worlds that exist between each of these chapters as well as the cultural forces that bind them together. Yet Mateo's life history should be taken neither as mere evidence nor simple texture. Given his confessional logic and Christian techniques of self-transformation, his ambivalent relationship to being lost and having to be found, Mateo makes piety the perfect problem through which to see the politics of postwar security anew. Few life histories supply such a powerful demonstration of the violence and banality of transnational cultures, linking relatively mundane ministerial efforts to contemporary threads of religion and globalization; the politics of frontiers, borders, and boundaries; and deportation and democratization as lived practice. A patterned entity, embodying a story that is more than his own, Mateo is not incidental to some larger theoretical claim. In this book, for this analysis, amid a deeply interrelated set of ethnographies, Mateo is the thesis. He is the argument.¹³

• • •

A Soviet beachhead. This is what Guatemala would become, intelligence reports insisted, if the United States did not intervene.¹⁴ In the early 1950s, the Truman administration watched as Guatemala transitioned from a military dictatorship to a democratically elected government. President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán posed no obvious threat. His policies, in many ways, extended those of his predecessor. Yet Decree 900 raised concerns. This new piece of legislation, passed by the

Guatemalan Congress in 1952, redistributed unused land to peasants, in an effort to shift the economy from feudalism to capitalism. But the practice smacked of communism, at least to the United Fruit Company. This U.S. multinational corporation owned 42 percent of the arable land in Guatemala, some of it vulnerable to Decree 900. Two stockholders took charge. They petitioned the president of the United States to intervene. Brothers in arms as well as actual brothers, they were Allen Welsh Dulles, the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and John Foster Dulles, the U.S. secretary of state. They made their case well.¹⁵

In June 1954, under the Eisenhower administration, the CIA orchestrated a coup d'état against President Árbenz. It would become an infamous affair, with U.S.-trained revolutionaries on the ground and New York City advertising agencies in the air. Both managed a message: President Árbenz was a communist. Sigmund Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, authored the propaganda.¹⁶ The results were disastrous.

The Guatemalan government became increasingly militarized until large-scale massacres, scorched-earth tactics, and massive numbers of disappearances and displacements riddled the country with what would later be understood as acts of genocide. At the helm of it all was Efraín Ríos Montt, a military dictator and Pentecostal Christian. He delivered weekly radio addresses known as "sermons" and developed close ties to the United States' growing Moral Majority.¹⁷ Dressed in battle fatigues and answering to the title of El General, Ríos Montt became Guatemala's quintessential Christian soldier. Yet, the net effect of his campaign, over the entire war, proved genocidal: 200,000 dead, 50,000 disappeared, and a million displaced.¹⁸

Many of the displaced marched north. They were not alone. El Salvador's civil war (1980-92), also backed by the U.S. government, coincided with Guatemala's pushing tens of thousands of Central Americans to Los Angeles's poorer neighborhoods.¹⁹ Once there, for reasons of belonging and security, the children of these refugees formed gangs to defend themselves against the city's already well-established Asian, African American, and Mexican gangs. Initially modest in reach, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 became transnational criminal organizations in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.²⁰ With a torching cityscape and a surging Moral Majority, increasingly strict antigang laws meant tougher prosecution, expanding the legal grounds for deportation to include such

minor offenses as shoplifting.^{[21](#)}

The tenor of it all was brash. Just months after the Los Angeles riot, presidential hopeful Patrick Buchanan spoke at the 1992 Republican National Convention. He crowed to a national television audience, “There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America.” His speech was reactionary, filled with homophobic and racist statements as well as Manichaeian division between us and them. It ended with an image from the Los Angeles riots: “The troopers [of the Eighteenth Cavalry] came up the street,” he said, “M-16s at the ready. And the mob threatened and cursed, but the mob retreated because it had met the one thing that could stop it: force, rooted in justice, and backed by moral courage.” Citing scripture (John 15:13, to be exact), Buchanan then set a tone for U.S. immigration policy that would last for decades. He announced, in militant Christian idiom, “[Just] as those [troopers] took back the streets of Los Angeles, block by block, my friends, we must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country.”^{[22](#)} This is a war for the soul of America, Buchanan insisted, rooted in force, justice, and moral courage.



FIGURE 3. Los desaparecidos. Photo by Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela.

The U.S. government led with force. The number of Central Americans deported annually tripled in less than a decade, rising from just over 8,000 in 1996 to well over 24,000 in 2004.²³ Following the events of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government began to confront MS-13 and Barrio 18 under the auspices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a new division of the Department of Homeland Security. In 2007, by routinely alleging unsubstantiated associations between these gangs and al-Qaeda, by stretching the War on Terror to its rhetorical limits, the U.S. government deported some 74,000 Central Americans to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In 2010, the United States successfully repatriated more than 31,000 Guatemalans, with 31.3 percent deported on criminal grounds.²⁴ Our goal, explained Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, is to “return every single illegal entrant, no exceptions.”²⁵ And when U.S. presidencies changed, U.S. policies did not. President Barack Obama issued more deportations in his first year in office than did President George W. Bush in his last year in office.²⁶

The immigration laws that deported these Central Americans also banned U.S. officials from disclosing the criminal backgrounds of the deportees to their home countries. With a typical lack of coordination between the United States and Central American governments, hundreds of men, women, and children (but mostly men) stepped off of repatriation flights, walked onto tarmacs, and then hopped onto city buses—every day. No questions asked. Challenging already strained police, prison, and judicial systems, these deportees met minimum life chances, a complete lack of social services, and a glut of weapons left over from the region's civil wars. And, as men and women born in Central America but oftentimes raised in the United States, the youngest of these deportees did not speak Spanish fluently; they had no close family ties and no viable life chances but gang life.

These factors generated the ideal conditions for gang expansion. By 2006, with homicide rates that outpace even those of Guatemala's genocidal civil war, Central American gangs began to boast more than 100,000 members throughout the Americas—a population that continues to grow alongside a heaving drug trade.²⁷ In 2011, as much as 90 percent of the cocaine shipped from the Andes to the United States flowed through Guatemala.²⁸ For this reason, and for many more, members of Central American gangs have been spotted as far south as Argentina and as far north as Alaska.²⁹ In the end, a myriad of mistakes and misjudgments radically expanded the conditions of postwar violence, outpacing initial concerns of a Soviet beachhead. These gangs had gone global.

Central American governments answered with force, mobilizing paramilitary death squads and pushing prison systems past 300 percent of capacity.³⁰ El Salvador, in July 2003, rolled out its Mano Dura (Strong Fist) policy and then months later, implemented more aggressive legislation named Super Mano Dura.³¹ Honduras followed suit. Directly derived from Mayor Rudolf Giuliani's Zero Tolerance approach in New York City, the Honduran government launched Cero Tolerancia in August 2003. In January 2004, Guatemala enacted Plan Escoba (Operation Street Sweep), effectively militarizing the country's police force, with off-duty police officers authorized to hunt down suspected gang members. The strong fist got even stronger.³²

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