

Roots of Central American Migration

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The question that so many people raise is WHY? Why do so many people risk everything they have, including their very lives to come to this country? It is true that people want a better life than what is possible in their home countries, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador. But why are the people so bereft of opportunities? This is where we need to look at history.

Back in the 1950s, the United Fruit Company went to Honduras to plant bananas. They cut a deal with the government in Tegucigalpa and ended up with some of the most fertile land in the country, ideal for their banana plantations. They hired peasants, from whom they had swindled their land, to do the labor for them. They installed a railroad to get the product from the field to the port to be shipped to the U.S. The labor conditions were worse than horrible, and when one of the workers died of malaria, his family was evicted from company housing, and another person was hired.

The United Fruit Company was not satisfied with their crops in Honduras, they wanted more. So, they went to Guatemala to do the same. In Guatemala, the freely, democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, said no. Not willing to take no for an answer, however, the banana company appealed to one of their stock holders who had substantial influence in Washington—John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State under President Eisenhower. He was quoted as saying “*we have a communist in Guatemala and we need to take him out.*” And take him out they did. Arbenz was able to escape to Mexico, but that event unleashed a thirty-six-year civil war in Guatemala, in which thousands upon thousands of indigenous people were slaughtered.

Some years

later, Bishop Álvaro Ramazzini, of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, stated before a U.S. Congressional sub-committee, that the Guatemalan farmer can compete with the U.S. farmer, but cannot compete with the U.S. Treasury, which gives huge subsidies to the farmers here, who in turn dump their grain on the Central American markets. One such farmer in Michoacán, Mexico told me that it is cheaper for him to buy corn imported from the

United States than to grow it himself. Granted, that was in Mexico, but the same is true of Central America.

The experience of El Salvador is different, but no less cruel. Unrest due to lack of opportunity and disparity of wealth had been simmering for some time, then, on March 24, 1980, Archbishop Romero, who constantly spoke out in support of the dignity of the poor, was gunned down by a military death squad. A murder that, to this day, has not been resolved. This act was like the straw that broke the camel’s back, and an all-out civil war, supported by the

U.S. government ensued, lasting twelve years, leaving seventy-five thousand dead.

What happens then, is that all these generations later, young people from south of the border are coming north, in the hopes of finding work to sustain their families, and lest it be left out of the equation, to escape the violence of the gangs (another topic to be discussed separately) that run rampant in all of the cities of what is known as the Northern Triangle of Central America—Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador. I speak here with authority, having lived in our Franciscan missions in Honduras and El Salvador for a number of

years. One of my good friends was gunned down



The Northern Triangle of Central America includes Honduras, Guatemala & San Salvador.



The United Fruit Company was not satisfied with their crops in Honduras, they wanted more. So, they went to Guatemala with their oppressive labor practices and horrible living conditions setting the stage for what is today.

in broad daylight in El Salvador. Two weeks later I was kidnapped at gun-point, and all my confrères in El Salvador have been assaulted, sometimes on the street, sometimes on the bus.

Contrary to public belief, those coming north are not thieves, drug dealers, rapists, murderers etc. But the common refrain we hear from politicians is that they take our jobs, (such as roofing work under the brutal San Antonio sun during the months of June, July and August or crawling under a house to dig a post hole to level it) they don't pay taxes and that they all take advantage of our welfare programs. Of course, this is not true, but it does instill fear in people and garner votes.

The only way we can convince people of the truth is to invite them to come and get to know some of the people who are "taking our jobs." They will discover that they are just like us, with the same love for their families and the same desire to make a contribution to society as anyone else.

So, as I repeat, it is good that legislators are taking a serious look at the current situation at our southern border, but until we have the courage to take a serious look at our complicity in that situation, Republicans and Democrats will continue to fight like cats and dogs and nothing will get better.

BIO: Fr. Ley was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana where he received his formal education in the Catholic schools. He joined the Franciscans in 1978 and completed theological studies at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, TX. He has served missions in Honduras and El Salvador and is currently Director of Posada Guadalupe in San Antonio.



Mural of Archbishop Romero by San Francisco Bay artist, Juana Alicia: Acrylic mural on wooden garage door, Balmy Alley, 1996. Text left: "Una ley inmoral, nadie tiene que cumplirla." and on right, "No one should comply with an immoral law" — Monseñor Oscar Romero

Imagine a Culture of Peace

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diseases that kill thousands of Americans every year. Efforts in some parts of the world to drastically and rapidly change human behavior—to suspend daily routines by social distancing, wearing masks, and staying at home to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus—show what can be done when lives are at stake.

We have seen some hope for change as the mass protests following the execution of George Floyd overcame aggressive police and soldiers and seemed to garner the support of the nation ultimately leading to the conviction of Derek Chauvin. What a great model for action if the American people should ever become outraged by U.S. mass murder and violence abroad. It might be a natural progression considering that Black and Brown people are disproportionately affected by war and militarization.

Hopefully someday U.S. wars will be deemed a non-essential activity as Congress cuts funding for the military. We must eliminate war, healthcare disparities, systemic racism, aggressive policing, poverty, climate change, and pandemics. These are the things that are terrorizing Americans.

This article is excerpted from Michael Knox's book, *Ending U.S Wars by Honoring Americans Who Work for Peace*.

BIO: Michael D. Knox, PhD is founder & chair of the US Peace Memorial Foundation & Distinguished Professor Emeritus of the University of So. Florida. www.uspeacememorial.org/Knox.htm

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by Honoring Americans Who Work for Peace

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