



Phoo, Menchú

by Stephen Schwartz

The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Guatemalan revolutionary advocate Rigoberta Menchú is a multiple score for political correctness, serving not only the obvious aims of Columbus-bashers and unemployed Sandinista groupies, but also those of certain highly placed European meddlers in Latin American affairs.

Menchú has been presented to the world as a human-rights activist, and the Norwegians have chosen to honor her as a symbol of "peace and reconciliation." In reality, she is a major figure in the campaign to impose on the elected, civilian government of Guatemala a political arrangement with the Communist guerrillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). Rather than representing peace and reconciliation, Menchú stands for continued guerrilla struggle.

In effect, the Nobel committee has put itself on the side of the declining revolutionary left in Central America. Excited at the possibility of imposing a leftist outcome on the political development of a small and faraway country, the Norwegians wish to keep the momentum going, by granting their token indigenous American the most powerful form of moral support available to them. Indeed, last March, Oslo was the site for the first contacts between the legal government of Guatemala and the guerrillas, according to the Mexican news agency Notimex.

Menchú, to emphasize, does not support peace; she supports leftist violence. She does not even *accept* nonviolence as a means of protest. Some media noted, delicately, in the aftermath of her award, that she denies being an actual guerrilla, "but is uncritical of the rebels." As the *New York Times* put it, Menchú has "endorsed

insurrection . . . but says she has never belonged to any of the country's guerrilla groups."

In reality, although Menchú herself is unwilling openly to declare herself a Marxist, the narrative she dictated to ghostwriter Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*—which has become an element of the politically correct canon on campuses around the English-speaking world—reveals an immense pride in her contribution to "the revolution." (Burgos-Debray, not surprisingly, is the ex-wife of Régis Debray, onetime Che Guevara groupie and hagiographer, and fashionable gadfly of the French Socialist government.)

In a manner reminiscent of Mao, Menchú divides Guatemalan women into four classes: "working-class women, peasant women, poor *ladino* women, and bourgeois women." Is this really the outlook of a typical Guatemalan Indian? Elsewhere, she embraces revolutionary sabotage, acclaiming the action of those who destroy sugar-harvesting machines:

Our idea is to put into practice the methods initiated by the masses when they evolved their "people's weapons": to be able to make Molotov cocktails.

I, Rigoberta Menchú is so transparent a work of propaganda for armed revolution, it is amazing that so few in the media commented on it following the award. Dinesh D'Souza, in *Illiberal Education* (1991), argued that vocabulary employed in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is not her own but a projection of the feminist and ultra-radical views held by the transcriber Burgos-Debray. Even C. Vann Woodward, like Régis Debray once a high priest of the left, scoffed at the idea that a transcription of an oral biography by an "unlettered woman"—to use Woodward's phrase—

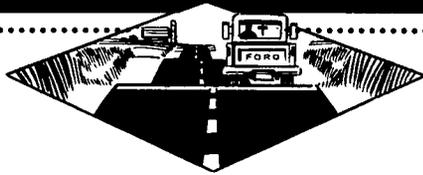
should be received as a modern classic.

Burgos-Debray—a Venezuelan anthropologist who now directs the Institut Français in Seville, a haven for revisionist studies of the Columbus expedition—may be responsible for the strident intrusion of such First World feminist concerns as the repudiation of marriage, a real rarity among Central American women, Indian or not. That *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a propaganda product created by Burgos-Debray for Menchú to sign is unarguable.

In an interview in Mexico last July, Menchú insisted on placing all blame for the slow progress of government-URNG peace talks on "the government's hard-line stance." She also called for U.N. intervention, supported by diplomatic pressure, to force the elected government to accept the militarist-left URNG as an equal partner in negotiations. This demand conforms exactly to the guerrillas' line: URNG spokesman Hector Nuila says that "as long as it is not acknowledged that there is conflict in Guatemala, it will be impossible to find a negotiated solution to the situation in that country." The same spokesman said his organization would intensify its activities to force the government and the armed forces to negotiate.

Thus, the goal of the campaign by Menchú and her supporters is to legitimize an armed extremist minority acting against a legal, civilian government by transforming that terrorist effort into a "Guatemalan civil war." Menchú's cause is not that of peace and reconciliation, but of murder and subversion, as the Nordic snobs responsible for this ridiculous award know full well. Perhaps promoting violence in a distant country of which they know nothing will console them after the failure of radical ideas in their own part of the world. □

Stephen Schwartz is author of A Strange Silence (ICS Press), an account of the election of Violeta Chamorro in 1990.



Warren Remembrance

by Roger Fontaine and Peter Hannaford

At 2 o'clock on the afternoon of June 20, 1923, President Warren Gamaliel Harding, his wife, and a traveling party of sixty-three guests, officials, aides, and reporters boarded the train that would take them across the continent on a "Voyage of Understanding." Harding saw the two-month trip as a way to demonstrate his leadership, to give energy to the Republican party, and to mix with ordinary Americans far from his troubles in Washington.

He stood on the rear platform of *The Superb*, his private car, and waved smilingly at the crowd, but his heart must have been heavy. Before leaving the White House, he told his private secretary, Judson Welliver, that he had been betrayed by people he thought were his friends. Despite restlessness within his own party and a group of businessmen promoting Henry Ford for the presidency, Harding told Welliver he would run for a second term in 1924 and would tell the people how his administration had been betrayed. "The people will believe me when they hear that story," he said.

They never heard it from his lips, for forty-three days later Harding died in the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. Hundreds of thousands turned out to pay their respects as the train bearing his body made its way back to Washington, and even more lined the route. Yet today one of those things that everyone knows is that Warren Harding was the worst President in the nation's history.

Roger Fontaine is a Washington-based writer. He was a member of the National Security Council staff during the Reagan Administration. Peter Hannaford is a public affairs consultant, author of *Talking Back to the Media*, and co-author of the forthcoming *Remembering Reagan*.

Why does "everyone know" this to be true? When his record in office—not quite twenty-eight months' worth—is considered calmly, Harding turns out to have been one of our better Presidents. True, already there were men in the Harding Administration (such as Jesse Smith and Charles Forbes) whose betrayal of trust was weighing heavily on Harding when *The Superb* pulled out of Union Station. As we come to the end of this century, however, it should be obvious that all Presidents have this problem and are equally reluctant to confront it.

A trio of hostile journalists was responsible for the myth of a Harding failure. All of them revered Harding's predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, and resented Harding as a vulgar usurper. They saw Big Business, Wall Street, and the military as the crowning ills of free-rein capitalism, and government—lots of it—as the antidote.

As for Harding, their received wisdom came to this: the twenty-ninth President was a small-town pol content to play poker and swill bourbon while the country skated heedlessly into self-indulgence at home and isolationism in foreign affairs.

Harding's reputation began to erode during the Teapot Dome investigation and trials (1923-30), although there is no evidence that Harding was aware of the infamous loan from oilman Edward Doheny to Harding's Interior Secretary Albert Fall.

Soon after Fall was sentenced in 1929, a book appeared that had the effect of blackening Harding's reputation. *The Strange Death of President Harding* purported to be from the diaries of one Gaston Means, a notorious scoundrel who had briefly worked as an investigator for William J. Burns, head of the Bureau of Investigation (predecessor to the FBI). On leaving the bureau, Means engaged in

extortion, fraud, and bootlegging. (This is not to mention the suspicious death of a rich woman he had befriended.) Although he was widely known in Washington as an out-and-out liar, his book hit the best-seller lists with its wild assertions, including the claim that Florence Harding had poisoned her husband.

The picture of a machine-tainted, small-town cards-and-whiskey politico could equally describe Harry S Truman, but Truman had the advantage of living long after leaving office and thus was able to participate in his rehabilitation. But if any President can be said to have grown in office, it was Harding, despite his brief tenure (shorter even than John F. Kennedy's Thousand Days). Harding, alas, had no court historians to gild his presidency.

Now, enter the trio: Frederick Lewis Allen, whose book *Only Yesterday*, first published in 1931, is still in print; Samuel Hopkins Adams, whose initial fame was won by muckraking the patent medicine business (Adams believed in carpet-bombing soft targets); and William Allen White, editor of the *Emporia, Kansas Gazette*. White embodied the liberal notion of what a small-town editor should be like, principally because he embraced the liberal views of the day but put them in the *Gazette* rather than the *New Republic*.

Allen, Adams, and White were not professional historians, but their work went unchallenged until Francis Russell's 1968 biography *The Shadow of Blooming Grove*, by which time the damage had been done. Is it any surprise that there have been few challenges to the legend that years of Republican complacency, insensitivity, and greed (Harding through Hoover) brought on an economic depression that was nearly the ruin of the nation?