

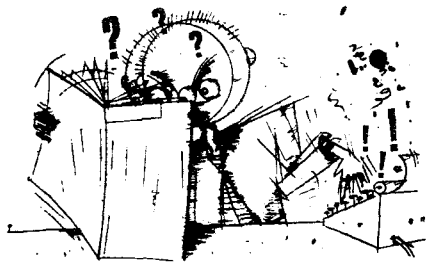
LETTERS

RU 486

I AM ALWAYS PLEASED WHEN IN THESE TIMES covers controversy pertinent to women's health issues (ITT, Dec. 21, 1988). However, I would like to see more of us who are longtime activists in the women's health movement publicly question whether the anti-woman groups should define the terms of debate over the uses of RU 486—the so-called "abortion pill"—especially at a time when legal surgical abortion is so seriously threatened.

We're being stamped into defending the marketing of an abortifacient without discussing its real benefits and risks. When studies on the benefits of a medication are conducted by its commercial developers, we shouldn't be so willing to accept their claims. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reviews these studies, but only rarely does it conduct its own independent study of a commercial developer's drug or device.

The FDA does not guarantee safety, only relative safety; that is, they weigh the benefit-to-risk ratio. There's a long and painful history to various drugs and devices marketed specifically to women in the last 20 years: high-dose estrogen birth control pills, estrogen-replacement therapy, DES, Depo-Provera, some IUDs and Silastic breast implants. Most were FDA-approved for a specific use, others were prescribed by physicians for other than FDA-approved uses. But all have caused illness, impairment or death in a significant number of the world's women.



When we are told that RU 486 is 85 percent effective used alone and 95 percent effective used with prostaglandin, those figures represent effectiveness under controlled conditions. What will be the actual effectiveness if and when women have access to the drug? Estimating exactly when to take this drug following a missed menstrual period is not going to be easy.

Our fascination for the quick solution in pill form is disturbing and potentially

dangerous. The struggle to obtain legal, safe surgical abortion has been the cornerstone of the current women's liberation movement. The rush to privatize abortion may mean reproductive freedom will cease to be a political debate, which it must remain.

Sharon Lieberman
Evanston, IL

to find an escape in the oblivion of alcohol and narcotics.

Legalizing narcotics in the present psychological mood of our country would have the benefit of reducing the crime that the need for narcotics breeds, but it would also remove one of the barriers to much wider use of narcotics by children as well as by adults. There would still be plenty of profits in the merchandising of narcotics to help spread the narcotics habit. Small laboratories making artificial narcotics would proliferate.

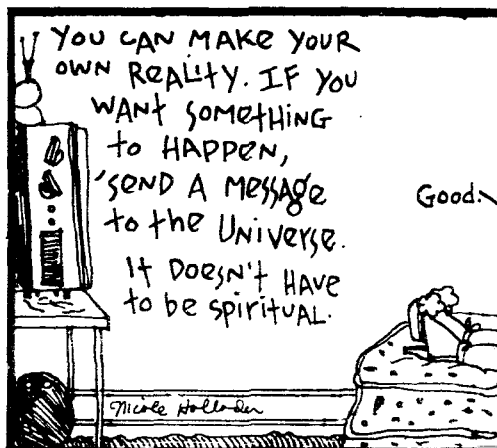
The Chinese, who have been ahead of the rest of the world in many steps of progress over the centuries, concluded long ago that the only sound policy on narcotics was to stamp them out. We should be smart enough not to have to repeat the mistakes they went through to reach that conclusion.

Frederick S. Lightfoot
Greenport, NY

The Chinese way

THE ARTICLE BY STEPHEN ZUNES ON THE NEED to get to the root of the narcotics plague (ITT, Dec. 14, 1988) is the first one I have seen which faces the problem squarely. The "war on drugs" needs to be fought vigorously, but it cannot make permanent headway unless a sense of political and economic power restores hope to the general public and thereby reduces the need

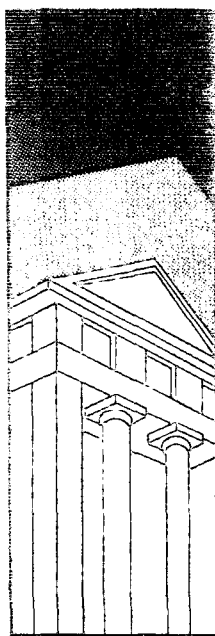
SYLVIA



by Nicole Hollander



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By Jon Reed

THOUSANDS OF GUATEMALA CITY RESIDENTS, smiling and applauding, crowded the sidewalks and leaned out shouting from windows and balconies this past spring, as masked student demonstrators from the University of San Carlos paraded in the bright sunshine through a working-class barrio in the central city. A short distance away, behind a wooden police barricade, heavily armed, camouflage-clad soldiers looked on impassively while a police radio squawked in the background.

Carrying handmade placards and banners ("The People Are Angry," "The Rulers Are Criminals"), dressed in Mardi Gras-type costumes—ranging from police and military uniforms to suit-and-tie bureaucrats to bloody cadavers in white sheets—the thousand-strong column moved through the streets chanting defiantly "Down with the military assassins," and "The people united will never be defeated."

Did this demonstration mean there's democracy in Guatemala? One of the demonstrators, a young man dressed as a priest sporting well-worn tennis shoes, a false mustache and a baseball cap pulled down over his sunglasses shook his head vigorously. "There is no democracy in my country," he said, smiling at my question. "Today we can protest because it is *La Heulga de Dolores*," he added. Wearing disguises and staying together in a crowd, we can denounce the army. Tomorrow, who knows?"

Campus killings: Later that same evening, gunmen in civilian clothes fired on the

Despite terror, Guatemalan students protest openly

demonstration, seriously wounding two students. Government security forces, according to numerous eyewitnesses, made no attempt to detain the gunmen as they fled in a vehicle without license plates. The following day the AEU (Association of University Students) headquarters at San Carlos was put under surveillance. Bomb threats were called in to the AEU office. A white panel truck with polarized windows chased, then tried to run down, an AEU member as he walked off the campus. A similar white panel truck, according to the daily newspaper *La Hora*, had been involved in no less than 15 abductions and murders. When *El Panel de la Muerte*, the death truck, as it came to be known at the university, was finally pulled over, it was being driven by six treasury police officials, in effect a government-sanctioned death squad. A Guatemalan judge in the case, after being kidnapped (along with a lawyer colleague who was murdered), later dropped the charges against the six treasury police who, according to the national press, were under the overall supervision of Christian Democratic President Vinicio Cerezo's own former personal bodyguard, Oscar Diaz.

"We must not forget," said a human rights activist in the capital recently, "that this nightmare is happening in a country that

Reagan and Bush have lauded for its 'return to democracy,'" a country annually receiving \$150 million in aid from the U.S. government, and even more money and arms from Western Europe, Israel, Taiwan and South Africa.

At least seven University of San Carlos student activists have been kidnapped and murdered during the past school year. Not far from the AEU office, a wall mural commemorates Oliverio Casteneda (murdered in 1978), as well as the hundreds of student martyrs of the '80s: "You can massacre our leaders, but as long as the people exist, there will be revolutionaries," says the mural. Since the fall of 1987, an average of 100 civilians per month have disappeared or have been assassinated by right-wing death squads. "There are no political prisoners held by the government," according to Cerezo. The reason for this is simple, according to human rights organizations that have visited the country: the military and government security forces torture and murder every "suspect" that they take into custody.

Going public: The AEU only recently has taken the dangerous step of organizing openly, marching in the streets and displaying its banners in massive trade union and *campesino* demonstrations in Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango. The AEU has publicly joined the UASP (Union of Labor and Popular Action) federation, a broad nationwide coalition of peace and social justice forces—encompassing just about the entire aboveground opposition in Guatemala. Since January 1988, the UASP has organized mass street protests and strikes, forcing the Cerezo government to negotiate with the popular movement.

In spite of the continuing reign of terror, the student movement is advancing and getting stronger. In early July of 1988, the AEU helped Guatemalan high school students launch a successful student strike in four of the country's departments or states. On July 6, thousands of frustrated high school students built street barricades outside their schools and fought running, pitched battles with riot police to demand that the government provide badly needed educational funds. In retaliation, police opened fire on the student strikers. On August 4, 40,000 protestors marched on the National Palace in Guatemala City. After five students were arrested by the National Police, irate demonstrators burned the main door of the legislative assembly building, built barricades in the streets, destroyed a city bus and blocked traffic in the center of the city. The protests ended with the freeing of the five students that afternoon. On August 8, further demonstrations in Guatemala City and six provincial capitals brought out 100,000 people.

When Indian exile leader Rigoberta Menchu returned to the country for a week on April 18, 1988, and was promptly arrested at the airport, thousands of students mobilized within hours. A mass street rally was held in front of the courthouse where Menchu was being held. Swelling international protest forced the government to re-

lease Menchu, prompting military officers, furious over her release and the activities of the "subversive UASP," to attempt a military coup two weeks later. In response to the attempted coup, the U.S. Congress increased military aid to Guatemala—a paradoxical move, considering the army's bloody human rights record.

Student concerns: The AEU is not only working on national issues like human rights and economic justice, several of its leaders said in an interview given this summer to *Report on Guatemala*, but also on student concerns like lower tuition and better university facilities. By North American standards, most of Guatemala's 60,000 university students are incredibly poor, with average combined family incomes of \$120 per month. Classes are overcrowded, textbooks are scarce and expensive and facilities and equipment are overextended. Most students have to work at minimum wage jobs—20 cents an hour—while they try to study. After graduation, any type of decent job is very hard to obtain "unless," as one liberal arts graduate in Antigua said, "you are willing to work for the military or the death squads."

There are government spies, or *orejas*—"ears"—planted throughout the campus, including infiltrators inside the AEU. For a student to stand up and demand rights or to support the rights of others is to risk his or her life. As in neighboring El Salvador, there are no groupies or hangers-on in the ranks of the student movement. The current struggles of the AEU are a direct threat to the establishment. Their alliance with Indians, human rights groups, embattled trade unionists, *campesinos*, liberation-theology Christians and poverty-stricken barrio dwellers is the nightmare of the Guatemalan military and the CIA.

Government terror: On July 22, 1988, a group of 12 heavily armed men, believed to be members of the security forces, forced their way into the house of Oscar Monterroso, a law student at the University of San Carlos and a leader of the AEU. Monterroso, along with a USAC agronomy student, Adrian Guerra Roca, was in the house at the time of the attack. Monterroso managed to escape and subsequently denounced the death squad that shot Roca and then dragged him away to an unknown location. Five days later Roca's mutilated body was found by a roadside outside the town of Palencia with seven bullet wounds.

In spite of dangers, the AEU continues to organize. The group has several ambitious undertakings in the planning stage, including a health clinic and a housing assistance center for the poor, but lacks necessary funds for the projects. Recently, the AEU asked foreign solidarity groups to help them raise money. They also hope to start a radio station and an audio-visual center to facilitate political education. On October 14 the AEU called on students to support 500 staff members at San Carlos University who went on strike and occupied the main university's building as part of a protest action against the university's realignment of pay scales.

For further information on Guatemala solidarity efforts contact NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala, 1314-14th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005).

Jon Reed recently traveled to Guatemala.

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