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WHAT THE EXTREME RIGHT AND
THE EXTREME LEFT ROBBED US OF IN THE PAST

I despise authoritarianism and everything it entails: an insult to intelligence, abuse, arrogance, and unilateralism. Those who are arrogant, those who yell, those who believe they are superior to others, deserve my disdain.

In Guatemala, we were subjected to arrogance, in the flesh, every day, from the arrogance of the Army's High Command to that of the guerrilla leaders. I had to attend the wakes and funerals of friends recently graduated as second lieutenants from the Military Academy who were killed in ambushes or fighting in the mountains against the communist subversives; as well as mourn fellow journalists who were kidnapped, disappeared, and tortured. A female classmate from the Mariano Galvez University was murdered in the Reloj de Flores, in zone 9. One of the cases that had the deepest impact on me was the murder of Professor Fito Mijangos, whom I had met in person, in his wheelchair, on 5th Avenue and 9th Street, in zone 1. That case shocked me to the core and outraged me.

Adolfo Mijangos López was a beacon of light. He was a university professor who had studied in Paris and served as a democratic deputy. He was murdered for writing an academic report for the University of San Carlos (Usac), arguing against a 40-year concession to exploit nickel in Izabal.

I was equally outraged by the murders of Alberto Fuentes Mohr and Manuel Colom Argueta, whom I had also met. Those assassinations, the senseless death of a formidable generation, affected me deeply and exacerbated my aversion to dictatorships.

The guerrillas, on the other hand, had engaged in acts of terrorism since the sixties, launching a wave of assassinations of right-wing political leaders, kidnappings, and killings of businessmen, as well as destroying infrastructure. Both the subversives and the military repression forfeited our future and that's why today we continue to struggle not to make decisions that will take us back to the past.

As well as the human toll, we suffered major setbacks in terms of business.

After launching a chocolate factory venture, suffering a warehouse fire and launching a bicycle factory, my dad wanted to start a farm on the southern coast. In order to do so, he took out a loan from the National Mortgage Credit Bank (CHN), and he mortgaged his house in the Santa Elisa neighborhood as well as his factory and bicycle shop, which would allow him to pay for the farm, raise cattle and sow some plantations. My father began to pay off the debt for two years, but following Decree 900, passed under the Jacobo Árbenz administration, the farm was taken over by occupiers, and my dad was no longer able to produce anything. Then, the CHN began to foreclose on the mortgages, which meant he risked losing his house and bicycle business, as well as the farm itself. The property was later used for one of the first land distributions that took place under the agrarian reform.

That turned my dad against Árbenz and he became an anti-communist. Therefore, after the Liberation overthrew the Revolutionary Government in 1954 and Castillo Armas came to power, in 1956, the new government sent him to Montreal, Canada, and later to New York, where he served as consul. In 1959, Ydígoras Fuentes appointed him Presidential Secretary of Information and director of the official gazette, the *Diario de Centro América*. He later served as Guatemalan ambassador to Switzerland, in 1962. In March 1963, Minister of Defense En-

rique Peralta Azurdia, staged a coup d'état, Ydígoras was ousted, and my father founded his own newspaper.

It was a weekly anti-communist newspaper called *¡Alerta!* I had started out as an intern at the *Diario de Centro América's* workshops and went on to work as assistant proofreader. After that, I worked as a reporter and subscription salesman for *¡Alerta!* at the age of 18, and was paid on commission. I used to accompany Mr. Regino Díaz Robainas, one of my dad's collaborators, to visit advertisers and advertising agencies. That's how I got to know Guatemala's most prominent businessmen, who met us in their offices and bought advertising space from us: the brothers Estuardo and Enrique Novella, Luis Canella, Antonio Guirola Batres, Carlos and Federico Köng Ossaye, Carlos Paiz Ayala, Julio Lowenthal Foncea, Antonio Gándara, Manuel Ayau, known as "el Muso" and many others.

The Novella brothers' administrative offices were located on the corner of 5th Avenue and 9th Street, in zone 1. However, they both spent a lot of time at the La Pedrera factory, especially Estuardo. When I requested a meeting with them, in order to offer them advertising space, they would always see me in their offices on the second floor.

I had met Mr. Luis Canella Gutiérrez years earlier when I lived with my parents in an apartment in the El Cielito building and he had his car, motorcycle and spare parts store in the same building, on 8th Avenue and 18th Street, in zone 1. I used to visit him there, once a month, to renew the advertising agreement. Luis' father, Avelino, a very kind Spaniard, used to work at the back, in a small office, and he took the time to talk to me while I waited for his son to arrive. Luis Canella was kidnapped and killed by terrorist guerrillas in 1977.

Mr. Antonio Guirola Batres, a large, sturdy man, was the manager of Continental Motores, S.A., the Volkswagen representation in Guatemala. As he was one of *¡Alerta's!* most important advertisers, I wasn't entrusted with selling him advertising space (the commission would have been huge), and my father would make those sales directly, instead. When the newspaper went bankrupt and my father died, Antonio offered me the as-

sistant manager position in his company, and I worked there for several months until I became independent and opened my own law firm.

Carlos and Federico Köng Ossaye were big and red-faced. Köng is a surname of Alsatian origin. They owned the La Luz soap factory in Mixco as well as a distribution company in zone 4, and they had just started to diversify their business portfolio. They were always very kind and never stopped advertising in *¡Alerta!*

Regarding Carlos Paiz Ayala and his wife, Graciela, I can say that I met them at the El Monito store, on 5th Avenue, in zone 1, back in the days when they were opening the first Paiz supermarket, on the corner of 9th Street and 8th Avenue, in zone 1. Carlos was always smiling, with the positive outlook characteristic of people from Zacapa. Not always, but sometimes, he would buy advertising space from me.

Antonio Gándara García, owner of Almacén La Flecha, was married to Mrs. Mausi Merkle, a German woman. They were a very close and hardworking couple. They had three children, who were just as industrious and driven. The store, which was more like a warehouse and distributed all kinds of products, was located on 7th Avenue between 19th and 20th Streets, in zone 1. Antonio, known as “Don Tono”, served as Guatemala’s ambassador to Japan in the seventies, and he and his family were very kind to us and regularly purchased advertising space.

Julio Lowenthal Fonca, who was short, and was an architect and administrator, worked as the manager of CIDEA, the importer of American cars. He was very involved in political, social and educational issues. Although my dad also handled his ad sales, I used to accompany him to meetings with Julio, a highly educated man. Julio’s son was kidnapped by the guerrillas and died after they tortured him.

Manuel Ayau, known as “Muso”, was a great educational leader and a true visionary who was always concerned about the country’s development. He would buy a small advertising space for his company, Fabrigas, on a weekly basis. I always had great respect and affection for him and his wife Olguita. When

Mr. Manuel Ayau was put forward as vice-presidential candidate in the 1990 elections, I had the honor of introducing him at the party assembly.

It was odd being a reporter in my father's weekly newspaper, but thanks to that experience I learnt two lessons: the commercial side of the role allowed me to meet the great businessmen who have built this country. And my role as a journalist for *¡Alerta!* opened my eyes to the huge excesses and destruction that the far left and the far right can wreak in Guatemala. In August 1975, the newspaper went bankrupt, and my father didn't take that setback well. A month later, he suffered two heart attacks and did not survive the second.

In January 1976, a friend who belonged to the National Liberation Movement (MLN) invited me to join a faction made up of professionals, the more moderate wing. He told me they were building a new, different movement, led by Alejandro Maldonado Aguirre, who would be elected president four decades later.

I had the pleasure of meeting Alejandro Maldonado in 1971, when he served as Minister of Education under President Carlos Arana, and I was a reporter. What impressed me the day I met him in a school that the president was due to inaugurate, was that he, Alejandro, being minister, was sweeping the floor with a broom to make everything look more respectable.

I didn't see him again until five years later, when I was invited to join his political party. A month after I joined, the country was hit by the devastating earthquake of February 4, 1976, which left 23,000 people dead. Everyone helped in any way they could. I would go to the aviation club to pack supplies and food to be sent to the highlands. Since then, I wanted to serve my country, and I found that politics offered me the means to do so.

That was the moment we decided to publicly announce a different political party, led by Alejandro Maldonado and supported by a group of young people. That displeased the MLN's most radical wing. For many, leaving the past behind and daring to forge a better future is inconceivable.

During a reception held in a house in zone 2, party leader Mario Sandoval Alarcón, accompanied by his henchmen, took me to a corner of the garden, where they pushed me, thumped me in the chest, and rebuked me for participating in this new movement, warning me I had no idea what would happen to me if I left the MLN. But I've never allowed anyone to intimidate me, so I decided to leave the MLN and found the National Renewal Party (PNR).

It was a center-right party that was no longer tied to the MLN's past.

How could we promote a new political party? The military dictatorship did not allow us to transition from a committee into party. It had blocked every single democratic group. In those days, the Electoral Law authorized the creation of new political parties following the order in which they had submitted their applications. If the government bribed the first committee on the waiting list to abandon the process to become a party, the registration process of all the parties that followed on the list was stalled. However, after breaking many barriers, we managed to overcome this legal hurdle imposed by the dictatorship.

Those days were not easy, but our only choice was participation. We had two alternatives: 1) waging a political struggle or, 2) leaving the country in the hands of military dictatorships or allowing it to fall under the control of Marxist subversive movements supported by the Soviet Union.

We needed a third way, a democratic, center-right one.

A path that valued liberalism, private property, individual freedom, all those basic principles of democracy, which were being tarnished by those who claimed to embody them: the military dictatorships and their satellite parties, which gave the far left the perfect excuse to justify their attacks on Guatemalan institutions.

They were abusing the principles of individual freedom and democracy. And this is exactly what is happening now, 40 years later, when we have criminals and corrupt individuals purporting to belong to the right, in order to justify their excesses.

And no, we cannot conclude that because there are corrupt people who claim to be right-wing, we have no choice but to turn to the far left in search of alternatives. We can find corruption on both the right and the left side of the political spectrum.

We have to examine specific facts. Looking back on the past 75 years, which countries have made the greatest progress? Which economic systems do they have? Those that have embraced the principles of democracy, individual freedom, private property, and solidarity.

MY EXPERIENCE IN VIETNAM

The countries that have insisted on upholding communist principles, of the extreme socialist kind, have not succeeded. They have failed, as the Cuban and Venezuelan cases illustrate, in our continent. On the other hand, the communist countries that abandoned Marxist economic models, such as Vietnam, have managed to make progress.

I had the opportunity to visit Vietnam, which is now a quasi-capitalist country, when I worked as Under-Secretary General of the UN. Vietnam, like 138 other countries in the world, including Guatemala, contributes units and troops to UN peacekeeping missions. The first time I visited the country, as I rode through the streets of its capital, Hanoi, in a black, government limousine, I was accompanied by a general who was regarded as a war hero in what the Vietnamese call the “American War”. The gentleman was covered in medals all the way down to his pants. Our interpreter, a young bilingual officer, was also there. Suddenly, we passed a huge square and in the middle of it I recognized a landmark I had seen in photographs: the great mausoleum of Ho Chi Min, the historical leader who had fought against the Japanese invasion, defeated the French, and fought against the Americans. It was he who developed the military concept that defeated the colonial forc-

es and forged the Vietnamese national identity, very much imbued with Marxist principles.

Whenever you visit a communist country, it is traditional to lay a wreath at the mausoleum of the “Founder of the Fatherland”. But I noticed that my itinerary didn’t include a visit to lay a wreath at Ho Chi Min’s mausoleum. I said to the general, through my interpreter: “Look, there’s the mausoleum! Aren’t we going to visit it?” I didn’t expect him to answer, pointing forward: “And what for? That represents the past and we’re looking to the future.”

Which country is currently Vietnam’s number one private investor in factories, the biggest job creator, the country from where most tourists visiting Vietnam come from, the main provider of military aid to the Vietnamese air force and navy? The U.S. And which country is the main strategic ally of the U.S. in Southeast Asia, after the problems with the Philippines: Vietnam.

And that’s considering the U.S. also suffered. I always advise people visiting Washington D.C. to visit the Vietnam War Memorial, where the names of the 65,000 young Americans who died in the Vietnam War are engraved in black marble. Whenever I visit that memorial, I can’t help but mourn the 65,000 young Americans and 1 million Vietnamese who died in that senseless war.

But both countries were able to put that war behind them and are making efforts to overcome its aftermath.

For some years now, Vietnam has abandoned the collectivist, Marxist economic system and currently guarantees investment and private property. Vietnam is an emporium. Not even in London have I seen as many Rolls Royces as in Hanoi. Capitalism enabled Vietnam to overcome poverty. Yes, the country is ruled by a communist party, but it has an essentially capitalist economy. It’s like what Deng Xiaoping achieved in China.

Now let’s compare Vietnam with Venezuela, which was the richest country in America, with the largest oil reserves in the world, but doesn’t even have toilet paper or toothbrushes, today.

The minimum wage in Venezuela is 50 cents a month. It's painful to witness the exodus of some 4 million Venezuelans, who are now dispersed throughout the Americas, Venezuelans who have trekked through the Brazilian jungle and have walked across the mountains of Colombia. Hundreds of thousands have fled to Trinidad and Tobago on rafts. Notwithstanding the fact that an economic system, the "21st century socialism" of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro, destroyed Venezuela, some people, in Guatemala, still yearn for that.

Now let's compare Venezuela with Vietnam, China and several African countries. There is no doubt that capitalism is the system that can generate work, employment, and economic development. On the other hand, collectivist economies with five-year plans, have proven to be a disaster.

We mustn't lose sight of the fact that dictatorships don't generate prosperity, as we've already been ruled by a number of dictatorships led by powerful, bloodthirsty generals, who did not lead the country to progress. The key to success is freedom, capitalism with solidarity, as well as institution-building, as Robinson and Acemoglu argued in their famous book, *Why Nations Fail*, which cites Guatemala as a negative case in point.

Guatemala has lagged behind in that sense, since we haven't had institutions that oversee the citizenry with participatory democracy, nor a free-market capitalist economy. What we have are monopolies, oligopolies, "extractivist" public and private institutions, and we lack a truly free market.

We must reposition the center and the center-right. We cannot allow the left, alone, to raise its voice, and to claim and appropriate the values of solidarity and human rights. Historically, it was the centrists who promoted human rights, which were created by Western democracies in the face of communism and Marxism, as well as the Nazi ideology and fascism. Yes, Fidel Castro was right when he said that "human rights were invented by the right".

The fact that we are outraged by children dying of hunger, that we advocate for public healthcare, public education, basic services, and social security, the fact that we fight against cor-

ruption and racism, does not make us communists. These are issues that concern us as moderates, as the center-right. These are not globalist Marxist issues, as the far-right claims, in an attempt to scare us and to disguise its selfish, outmoded and corrupt ideology.

We must wrest from the grasp of the left, the values and principles that we, the center and center-right democrats have created throughout the world, and that we have abandoned in Guatemala. These are universal principles that humanity, as a whole, should share.

Speaking of the right, in Guatemala, it conjures up the image of military henchmen and corrupt politicians, but that is a very distorted picture. There are moderates and there's a very broad center-right. We, by far, outnumber the two extremes. The left does not represent a solution to the problems of human and economic development, nor to the fundamental issue of personal freedom. Any limit to freedom is an attack, and, throughout my life, that has been one my guiding principles.

We need to move Guatemala away from extremes, from both the far right and the far left. It's a matter of choosing between the past and the future, this is not a choice between an obsolete right and an obsolete left, it's not a matter of indigenous versus non-indigenous Guatemalans, nor a struggle of the rich versus the poor.

Everyone loses out as a result of division, polarization, and radicalism. Those who proclaim themselves the winners turn out to be the losers. We must learn from History, not to seek revenge but to avoid falling into the extremes that have already done our country so much harm.

And for those for whom recent History is not enough, let us turn to the Holy Scripture: "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and no city or house divided against itself shall stand" (Matthew 12:25).

WALKING IN ANOTHER'S SHOES

The notion that “if you’re not with me, you’re against me” is a trap, it leaves no room for dialogue, for mutual understanding. Thousands of times, throughout my life and across the world, I have witnessed how bitter enemies, whose feuds go back generations, can sit down, get to know each other, look each other in the eye and understand that we are all human and that we all experience love and suffering in exactly the same way, as long as they have true leaders. This kind of thinking is possible when you look to the future and not to the past.

We have already suffered the consequences of a 36-year-long war that sowed the seeds of senseless enmities and mistrust. Thinking in terms of irreconcilable enemies is not what Guatemala needs.

One of my great heroes is Nelson Mandela. He spent 27 years imprisoned by the apartheid regime in South Africa. Shortly after his release he was elected president, forming a government of national unity, precisely with those who had persecuted him. The film *Invictus* shows how Mandela did not succumb to radicalism, despite his sympathizers’ calls for revenge.

For the past 45 years, I have worked to build a third way, a moderate alternative. That is why I supported Jorge Carpio when he founded the National Center Union party. I endorsed the alliance when I belonged to the PNR and when it fell apart, I continued to support him. Jorge Carpio was assassinated by paramilitary forces, on the road to Chichicastenango, as a result of those moderate ideals, which opposed the two extremes, as those of us in the center ground pose the greatest threat to the far right and the far left. But we will return to that later.

