

THE NEW YORKER

- [Subscribe](#)
- [home](#)
- [New Yorker magazine articles](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Audio & Video](#)
- [Reviews of New York events: Goings on About Town](#)
- [New Yorker Cartoons](#)
- [New Yorker Topics](#)
- [Complete New Yorker Archives and Digital Edition](#)
- [reporting](#)
- [talk](#)
- [fiction](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Search](#)
- [Services](#)
- [Festival](#)
- [Festival](#)
- [Contact](#)

-
- [Table of Contents](#)
 - [Profiles](#)
 - [Humor](#)
 - [News Desk](#)
 - [Culture](#)
 - [Fiction](#)
 - [Apps](#)
 - [2012 Election](#)
 - [Qaddafi](#)
 - [Wall Street](#)
 - [Steve Jobs](#)

- [Table of Contents](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [The Talk of the Town](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Ask the Author](#)

- [News Desk](#)
- [Book Bench](#)
- [Close Read](#)
- [Photo Booth](#)
- [Hertzberg](#)
- [Osnos](#)
- [Brody](#)
- [Cassidy](#)
- [Frere-Jones](#)
- [Sporting Scene](#)
- [Back Issues](#)

- [Fiction Podcast](#)
- [TNY Shorts](#)
- [Peter Schjeldahl on Art](#)
- [DVD of the Week](#)
- [New Yorker Out Loud](#)

- The Political Scene Podcast
- Audio Edition

- The Theatre
- Night Life
- Art
- Dance
- Classical Music
- Movies
- Readings and Talks
- Above and Beyond
- New Yorker Festival

- Shouts & Murmurs
- Animated Cartoons
- Roz Chast
- From the Desk of Robert Mankoff
- The Cartoon Bank

- Politics
- Business
- Culture
- Health
- Books
- Movies
- Fiction
- Poetry

- Table of Contents
- Apps
- Complete Archive
- Covers
- Back Issues
- Contributors
- THE NEW YORKER OUT LOUD
- The New Yorker Store

- POLITICS
- PROFILES
- THE TALK OF THE TOWN
- COMMENT
- Table of Contents
- The Financial Page
- News Desk
- The Political Scene

- Comment
- The Financial Page
- Hendrik Hertzberg
- Close Read
- News Desk
- Politics
- Profiles
- Contributors

- The Book Bench
- The Fiction Podcast
- Fiction Q. & A.
- Culture
- Contributors
- Susan Orlean

- Profiles
- Books
- Movies
- Art
- Music
- The Book Bench
- Photo Booth
- Peter Schjeldahl on Art
- Tables for Two
- Table of Contents

- Profiles
- Humor
- News Desk
- Culture
- Fiction
- Table of Contents
- Apps
- Digital Revolution
- 2012 Election
- AFTER 9/11

- Home

- THE NEW YORKER FESTIVAL
- Friday Schedule
- Saturday Schedule
- Sunday Schedule
- **Tickets**
- Book Signings
- Blog
- App
- Twitter

- The New Yorker Festival

- Home

- The New Yorker
- Reporting & Essays

A REPORTER AT LARGE

A MURDER FORETOLD

Unravelling the ultimate political conspiracy.

by David Grann

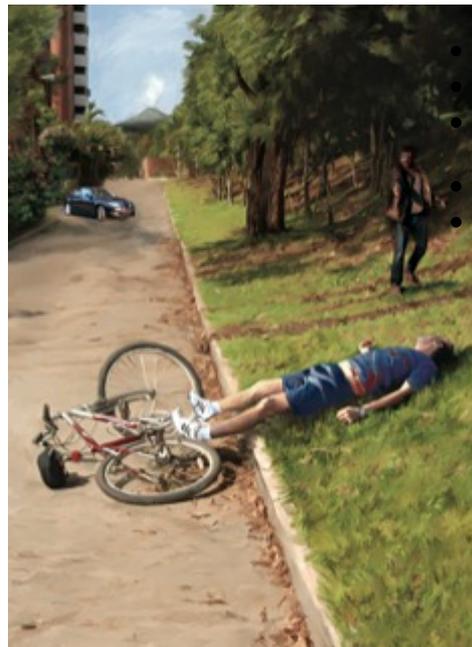
APRIL 4, 2011

Rodrigo Rosenberg knew that he was about to die. It wasn't because he was approaching old age—he was only forty-eight. Nor had he been diagnosed with a fatal illness; an avid bike rider, he was in perfect health. Rather, Rosenberg, a highly respected corporate attorney in Guatemala, was certain that he was going to be assassinated.

Before he began, in the spring of 2009, to prophesy his own murder, there was little to suggest that he might meet a violent end. Rosenberg, who had four children, was an affectionate father. The head of his own flourishing practice, he had a reputation as an indefatigable and charismatic lawyer who had a gift for leading other people where he wanted them to go. He was lithe and handsome, though his shiny black hair had fallen out on top, leaving an immaculate ring on the sides. Words were his way of ordering the jostle of life. He spoke in eloquent bursts, using his voice like an instrument, his hands and eyebrows rising and falling to accentuate each note. (It didn't matter if he was advocating the virtues of the Guatemalan constitution or of his favorite band, Santana.) Ferociously intelligent, he had earned master's degrees in law from both Harvard University and Cambridge University.

Rosenberg had been born into Guatemala's oligarchy—a term that still applies to the semi-feudal Central American nation, where more than half of its fourteen million people, many of them Mayan, live in severe poverty. His mother had inherited a small fortune, and his father had acquired several businesses, including a popular chain of cinemas. (As a boy, Rosenberg had spent hours in the plush seats, entranced by the latest American films.) Rosenberg was accustomed to privilege. A car enthusiast, he drove a Mercedes and made an annual pilgrimage to Indianapolis to watch Formula 1 races. He had been married twice but was now single, living in an elegant high-rise overlooking Guatemala City.

Though his wealth allowed him a desultory life, he was “driven and motivated by his goals,” as a relative put it. When he began his studies at Cambridge, he had spoken almost no English, so Rosenberg informed his professors that he had recently undergone surgery on his vocal cords, and could not yet talk in class; in the meantime, he bought a television and watched it each night with closed-captioning until, after three months, he spoke with confidence.



- [Tweet](#)
- [Print](#)
- [E-Mail](#)

“Guatemala is a good place to commit a murder, because you will almost certainly get away with it,” a U.N. official has said.

He was not a religious man, but he maintained a stark sense of good and evil, castigating others, as well as himself, for transgressions. When he was a child, his father had abandoned the family, a betrayal that Rosenberg had never forgiven; he even refused to accept an inheritance that his father had left him. One of Rosenberg's closest friends noted that, if he thought you had crossed him, he could be brutal: "He was always very honest—sometimes, perhaps, too honest. He would say things that are true, but sometimes things that are true that you shouldn't mention." Though Guatemala's judicial system was notoriously corrupt, Rosenberg was drawn to the clarity of the law, to its unflinching judgment. He argued, successfully, before the Constitutional Court, Guatemala's equivalent of the U.S. Supreme Court, and in 1998 he became the vice-dean of a prominent law school. At the same time, he served as counsel for some of Guatemala's most powerful élites—its coffee barons and corporate executives and government officials.



And, according to Rosenberg, it was a case involving one of these clients, Khalil Musa, that had placed his life in jeopardy. A Lebanese immigrant, Musa had risen from poverty to great wealth, manufacturing textiles and producing coffee. Stern, traditional, and hardworking, he liked to recite the inspirational poetry of Khalil Gibran, and was admired as one of the few magnates in Guatemala who refused to plunder the state or make payoffs for favorable deals. At seventy-six, he suffered from vertigo, and he increasingly relied on the younger of his two daughters, Marjorie, to help

him manage his business. Marjorie, who was forty-two, was married with two children, and she had an easy ebullience that infused her simple features with beauty. She had mastered the intricacies of finishing fabrics, and she had always been—as her sister, Aziza, acknowledges, without rancor—their father's favorite.

Musa lived in an affluent neighborhood of Guatemala City, and Marjorie often drove him from their factory, on the outskirts of the capital, home for lunch. On April 14, 2009, they had set out on such a routine trip. The rainy season was a few weeks away, and so clouds had not obscured the steep volcanic cones that tower over the city, periodically showering the streets with ash. When Marjorie stopped at a red light, just outside the factory, a man got out of a car behind her and approached the Musas' vehicle from the passenger side, as if to ask a question. He then aimed a 9-mm. pistol at Musa, and opened fire—a blur of smoke and light. The gunman sprinted to a motorcycle, where a driver was waiting for him, and hopped

on the back seat. They sped away. The stoplight in front of the Musas' car turned green, then red, and then green again, but the car remained in place, the engine still rumbling. One of the tinted windows on the passenger side had shattered, revealing father and daughter lying in one another's blood. They had both been shot in the chest. The police arrived within minutes, but by then they were dead.

Rosenberg had frequently expressed despair over the violence that consumed Guatemala. In 2007, a joint study by the United Nations and the World Bank ranked it as the third most murderous country. Between 2000 and 2009, the number of killings rose steadily, ultimately reaching sixty-four hundred. The murder rate was nearly four times higher than Mexico's. In 2009, fewer civilians were reported killed in the war zone of Iraq than were shot, stabbed, or beaten to death in Guatemala.

The violence can be traced to a civil war between the state and leftist rebels, a three-decade struggle that, from 1960 to 1996, was the dirtiest of Latin America's dirty wars. More than two hundred thousand people were killed or "disappeared." According to a U.N.-sponsored commission, at least ninety per cent of the killings were carried out by the state's military forces or by paramilitary death squads with names like Eye for an Eye. One witness said, "What we have seen has been terrible: burned corpses; women impaled and buried, as if they were animals ready for the spit, all doubled up; and children massacred and carved up with machetes." The state's counter-insurgency strategy, known as "drain the sea to kill the fish," culminated in what the commission deemed acts of genocide.

In 1996, the government reached a peace accord with the rebels, and it was supposed to mark a new era of democracy and rule of law. But amnesty was granted for even the worst crimes, leaving no one accountable. (Critics called the policy "the piñata of self-forgiveness.") In 1998, the Guatemalan Archdiocese's Office of Human Rights, led by Bishop Juan Gerardi, released a four-volume report, "Guatemala: Never Again," which documented hundreds of crimes against humanity, identifying some perpetrators by name. Two days later, Gerardi was bludgeoned to death, a murder that was eventually revealed to be part of a conspiracy involving military officers.

After the peace accord, the state's security apparatus—death squads, intelligence units, police officers, military counter-insurgency forces—did not disappear but, rather, mutated into criminal organizations. Amounting to a parallel state, these illicit networks engage in arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion, human smuggling, black-market adoptions, and kidnapping for ransom. The networks also control an exploding drug trade. Latin America's cartels, squeezed by the governments of Colombia and Mexico, have found an ideal sanctuary in Guatemala, and most of the cocaine entering America now passes through the country. Criminal networks have infiltrated virtually every government and law-enforcement agency, and more than half the country is no longer believed to be under

the control of any government at all. Citizens, deprived of justice, often form lynch mobs, or they resolve disputes, even trivial ones, by hiring assassins.

Some authorities have revived the darkest counter-insurgency tactics, rounding up undesirables and executing them. Incredibly, the death rate in Guatemala is now higher than it was for much of the civil war. And there is almost absolute impunity: ninety-seven per cent of homicides remain unsolved, the killers free to kill again. In 2007, a U.N. official declared, “Guatemala is a good place to commit a murder, because you will almost certainly get away with it.”

After Rosenberg heard that the Musas had been shot, he rushed to the scene. Luis Mendizábal, a longtime friend and client of Rosenberg’s, told me, “I asked him to come and pick me up, so we could go to the place together. He said, ‘No, no, no. I’m not going to lose any time. I’m going directly.’ So he went. He couldn’t believe it. Then he came back over here, and cried, easily, for two hours.” His oldest son, Eduardo, who was twenty-four, told me that it was only the second time he had seen his father break down, the first being when Rosenberg revealed that he was separating from Eduardo’s mother. He seemed “completely destroyed” by the Musas’ deaths, Eduardo recalled.

Though the crime was horrific, Rosenberg’s deeply emotional reaction was surprising. Musa was not a big client or someone he knew that well. Then Rosenberg told his son a secret: for more than a year, he and Marjorie had been having an affair.

They had planned to marry, but had not wanted to disclose their relationship until Marjorie got a divorce. Almost every day, they had exchanged text messages. On March 3, 2009, five weeks before the shooting, Marjorie wrote to Rosenberg, “I love you like I’ve never loved before. And, yes, I will marry you.” A few days later, she said, “Good night my love, my prince, my whole life. You don’t know how much I love you, how much I adore you, and how much I need you. You are so tender with me. And you’re the sweetest man I know.” She added, “I’m dying to live the rest of my life at your side.” He called her “my Marjorie de Rosenberg” and told her that she gave him “the strength to be a better man” and that they were “living an incredible love story.” Hours before she was killed, he ended a message with the words “Your prince forever.”

In tears, Rosenberg told his son, “They killed her! They killed her!” He told Mendizábal the same thing, repeating the words over and over.

The shootings unnerved the most powerful members of Guatemalan society. Khalil Musa knew Guatemala’s President, Álvaro Colom, who had also worked in the textile industry; Marjorie was a good friend of Gustavo Alejos, who was Colom’s private secretary, and whose brother was the head of Congress. An adviser to President Colom told me, “If the Musas could be killed, there was a sense that anyone could be.”

Thousands of people showed up for the Musas’ funeral, Alejos among them. Rosenberg,

concerned that his affair with Marjorie might cause a scandal, stood outside the chapel, watching from a distance. A few days later, Rosenberg received a call from a jeweller, who informed him that Marjorie had ordered a gift for him before her death—a wedding ring. “This is the message she sent me,” he told Mendizábal.

That week, business leaders held a press conference, declaring that the assassinations were another sign of Guatemalans’ “helplessness” and demanding that authorities fully investigate the crimes. Rosenberg, who had the conservative outlook shared by most Guatemalan élites, had long yearned for *un estado de derecho*—a state based on the rule of law. In 2005, he had joined an effort to extradite from Mexico a former President of Guatemala who was accused of embezzling millions of dollars while in office. A close friend of Rosenberg’s said that the failures of Guatemala’s judicial system “ate at Rosenberg’s guts.”

Rosenberg warned family and friends that the Musa murders would never be properly investigated. The criminal networks would either block the investigation or destroy the evidence, and if a probe somehow proceeded they would frame a scapegoat; finally, if all else failed, the gangsters would threaten to kill members of the judiciary system, who would bury the case. The Musas’ deaths, he predicted, would become just another statistic. Nevertheless, Rosenberg could not let the matter go: Why, he asked, had an honorable man like Musa been “put down like a dog”? And what had Marjorie, an exemplary daughter, done to deserve this?

Mendizábal, the longtime friend, says that after the funeral Rosenberg asked him for help, vowing to “go all the way to find out who killed the Musas.” Mendizábal was the one person Rosenberg knew who could help him take on the parallel powers that dominated Guatemala. A genteel-looking grandfather, with a silver mustache and birdlike eyes, he was known for making business deals, sometimes with the government, and he owned a clothing shop, in Guatemala City, that catered to a wealthy male clientele. But Mendizábal was no mere entrepreneur. It was whispered that, as in a John le Carré novel, the boutique also served as a meeting place for military-intelligence officers, coup plotters, and death-squad leaders.

Mendizábal was Guatemala’s most notorious spy. Relying on an extensive network of *orejas*, or “ears,” he regularly compiled intelligence dossiers, vacuuming up even the most vaporous rumors and searching for patterns in the chaos of information. A former high-ranking U.N. official, who spent years investigating crimes in the country, told me, “Mendizábal has probably records on everyone in Guatemala. He knows everything: who is the lover of whom, who has money in the Cayman Islands, who has committed a murder. *Everything*.” Such information placed Mendizábal in great demand, and he had served as an adviser to several Guatemalan Presidents, including, for a while, Colom. Mendizábal

presented himself as a fanatical anti-Communist, but his ideology, apparently, was flexible when it came to business: according to the newspaper *El Periódico*, he had once been caught smuggling weapons to Communist guerrillas in El Salvador. Mendizábal told me that he had never played both sides of Central America's civil conflicts, but he seemed to embrace a Machiavellian persona: "The one who has the knowledge has the power. That's why some people are afraid of the stuff that I do."

Mendizábal agreed to help Rosenberg, and they began investigating the case. Shortly after Marjorie's funeral, Rosenberg obtained a copy of a security video that documented the scene outside the Musas' textile factory on the day of the murders. Mendizábal, who watched it with him on a computer at the clothing shop, said that Rosenberg played the video over and over, searching for clues. Unlike the escapist movies that Rosenberg had seen at his father's cinemas, the grainy black-and-white images had the blunt force of unscripted narrative. They showed a truck parked in front of the Musas' factory. The driver kept getting in and out of his vehicle, peering down the road. Mendizábal told Rosenberg that the man was clearly acting as a lookout.

Rosenberg stared helplessly at the implacable sequence that came next. A silhouette appeared in the corner of the screen: Marjorie, getting into her car. Rosenberg touched the television screen—she was there but not there. As Marjorie drove onto the street, with her father at her side, the car with the assassin raced up behind them, followed by the driver on the motorcycle. (The hit men were obeying a new law banning two people from travelling on a motorcycle—a law that was supposed to curb assassinations, since so many were carried out by hit men riding on back seats.) Rosenberg braced himself. After a flash, Marjorie vanished from the frame.

The hit squad had displayed military precision, raising the prospect that the crime was carried out by the state's security apparatus. The ballistics report indicated that Khalil Musa was hardly a random victim. He had been shot nine times. The bullet that killed Marjorie was a stray—it had apparently passed through Musa's body before piercing hers.

In Guatemala, impunity has created a bewildering swirl of competing stories and rumors, allowing powerful interests not only to cloak history but also to fabricate it. As Francisco Goldman describes in his incisive 2007 book, "The Art of Political Murder," about the assassination of Bishop Gerardi, the military and its intelligence operators concocted evidence and witnesses to generate endless hypotheses—it was a robbery, it was a crime of passion—in order to conceal the simple truth that they had murdered him. "So much would be made to *seem to connect*," Goldman writes.

Guatemalans often cite the proverb "In a country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." Fighting his way through the political fog, Rosenberg searched for a motive, stubbornly insisting that, if two people were assassinated, then somebody had a reason to kill them. In

notes he kept about the case, he reported that authorities had initially suggested the shootings stemmed from a dispute over a fired factory worker. But, by all accounts, Musa had treated his workers well. Were the police and authorities trying to cover something up, spinning another web of disinformation?

Finally, a lead emerged. Mendizábal advised Rosenberg to look into the murky business surrounding two government positions for which Khalil Musa had been nominated in the months before his assassination. The nominations were for seats on the boards of directors of two institutions with strong ties to the state—most notably, the Rural Development Bank, known as Banrural. President Colom has called Banrural “our Administration’s financial arm,” and has relied on it to fund major social-welfare programs for the poor. These programs were administered by Guatemala’s First Lady, Sandra de Colom, a powerful politician who is often compared to Eva Perón, and who aspires to succeed her husband.

Before Musa died, he had talked to Rosenberg about whether to accept the positions. Rosenberg considered entering Guatemalan politics a folly. With friends from law school, he had once started a conservative political party, but he had quit after it joined forces with traditional corrupt hands. Rosenberg told Musa, “Truthfully, I don’t think it’s a good idea.” Musa, hoping to help the country, accepted the offers anyway.

But the nominations, mysteriously, had never gone through. Rosenberg learned from Mendizábal that there had been a fierce struggle over control of the two boards, which, together, manage enormous financial resources. According to Mendizábal, Musa’s uncompromising ethics posed a threat to parties with stakes in these institutions. Indeed, Marjorie’s sister, Aziza, told Rosenberg that, after her father was offered the nominations, he had attended a lunch where officials connected to the institutions discouraged Musa from taking the posts, and even insulted him. Afterward, Aziza recalled, her father sent letters to some of these officials, saying, “You won’t tell me what to do.” Musa soon received threatening text messages and calls, including one noting that the farm of a meddling government official had been torched.

Rosenberg eventually ferreted out from Musa’s papers several documents concerning the appointments. One was a copy of a letter Musa had sent to the head of a group of small coffee growers that had a stake in the direction of Banrural. Musa said that he would not tolerate messages embedded with “double meanings,” adding, “I protect myself from my enemies.”

Aziza said of her father, “He always says the truth and I think that is why he was murdered.”

As Rosenberg dug deeper into the subterranean world of Guatemalan politics, he told friends that he had begun receiving threats himself. One day, Mendizábal says, Rosenberg gave him a phone number to write down—it was the number that showed up on his caller

I.D. when he received the threats.

Rosenberg told friends that his apartment was under surveillance, and that he was being followed. “Whenever he got into the car, he was looking over his shoulder,” his son Eduardo recalled. From his apartment window, Rosenberg could look across the street and see an office where Gustavo Alejos, President Colom’s private secretary, often worked. Rosenberg told Mendizábal that Alejos had called him and warned him to stop investigating the Musas’ murders, or else the same thing might happen to him. Speaking to Musa’s business manager, Rosenberg said of the powerful people he was investigating, “They are going to kill me.” He had a will drawn up.

Mendizábal says that on Friday, May 8, 2009, he advised Rosenberg to leave the country. Rosenberg promised that he would, but not yet. He felt that he was on the verge of identifying who had ordered the hit on the Musas, and was collecting irrefutable proof, which he intended to present at the International Criminal Court. On Saturday evening, Rosenberg called Marjorie’s sister and told her that he planned to go for a bicycle ride the next morning, to clear his mind. On Sunday, just after 8 A.M., he pedalled away from his apartment building, listening to his iPod. After a few hundred yards, Rosenberg turned onto a service road. A gunman approached quickly, running across a grassy median toward him. No one saw the assassin as he pointed a 9-mm. pistol at Rosenberg’s head and repeatedly pulled the trigger.

Not long afterward, Rosenberg’s chauffeur was on his way to Rosenberg’s apartment when he saw his boss lying on the ground, surrounded by paramedics and police officers. He phoned Eduardo Rosenberg. “He told me I had to go near my dad’s house, about a block away,” Eduardo recalled. “He didn’t want to say what had happened. He just told me that I had to go there. So I hung up the phone. I started panicking, trying to get dressed. I picked up the phone again and called the driver. And I demanded to know what had happened. He still didn’t want to say. So I asked him, ‘Is my dad dead?’ He said, ‘Yes.’”

On Monday morning, May 11th, President Colom went to work in his main office, a secure, windowless room on the second floor of the Presidential House. Underneath the building, a tunnel led to the National Palace. Both buildings had been commissioned by Jorge Ubico, a caudillo who ruled the country during the nineteen-thirties and early forties; he had seen himself as the reincarnation of Napoleon, and the monumental stone architecture reflected his megalomania. (A motif of five archways—a tribute to the five letters of Ubico’s surname—ran throughout the building.) As Colom shuttled between his office and the palace, he faced reminders of the country’s violent history: the executive office where a President was ousted in a coup; the dining room where a military dictator had been assassinated by a security guard, who then turned the gun on himself.

Colom, who was fifty-seven, was unusually reticent for a politician. Tall and severely

thin, with bent shoulders, receding gray hair, and owlsh glasses, he looked like a seminarian, which he had studied to be before turning to politics. A congenital lip deformity caused him to speak in a nasal, almost unintelligible whisper. He had experienced a number of tragedies: his first wife was killed in a car accident, and in 1979 his uncle, a popular progressive politician, joined Guatemala's pantheon of martyrs when the military, after chasing him through the capital on motorcycles and in a helicopter, assassinated him.

In 2007, Colom, representing a social-democratic coalition, won the Presidency—the first time in five decades that a left-of-center leader had ruled Guatemala. The election was one of the bloodiest in the country's history: more than fifty local candidates and party activists were murdered, and Colom's campaign manager was nearly killed by three grenades thrown at his motorcade. Colom defeated Otto Pérez Molina, a conservative former general who had once overseen military intelligence. In the eighties, he had taught at the School of the Kaibiles, which produced an élite force of commandos whose training included slaughtering animals and drinking their blood, and whose motto was “A Kaibil is a killing machine.”

Colom declared that the country must not return to a “past of darkness,” and he vowed to end the violence and the corruption. Yet, even if he was well intentioned, he was too weak to control the parallel state. A former U.N. official recalled asking Colom why he had given a ministry post to someone who was widely known to be corrupt. Colom replied, “He was not my choice.” Since Colom took power, two of his interior ministers have been indicted for corruption (a third died in a mysterious helicopter crash), and four consecutive heads of the national police have been dismissed, indicted, or jailed for alleged malfeasance. At the same time, Colom has been subject to a *campaña negra*—“black campaign”—conducted by many in the conservative oligarchy and in the political opposition. One day, President Colom and the First Lady discovered that the palace and their offices had been infiltrated with spy cameras.

Earlier that Monday, Rosenberg's funeral had been held, at the same cemetery where Marjorie was buried. Colom was in a meeting when he was interrupted by Gustavo Alejos, his private secretary. Alejos had received a call from a friend alerting him that something surreal had just happened at the funeral—something with implications for the entire government. Alejos called his cousin, a government minister who had been one of Rosenberg's closest friends. The cousin, who had attended the ceremony, reported that Eduardo Rosenberg had given a eulogy and played a recording of “El Salvador Blues,” by Santana. Then Luis Mendizábal had stood up and addressed the hundreds of mourners: “Everybody here loved Rodrigo Rosenberg, and all of you are wondering why someone like Rodrigo, who couldn't hurt anyone, was killed.” He paused, then said, “Well, Rodrigo left me with the answer.” He explained that Rosenberg had given him a video, with instructions

to release it only if he was murdered. Mendizábal offered a CD to anyone who was interested.

Mendizábal, who says he looked at the video only after Rosenberg's death, knew that his actions would unleash "big trouble," as he put it. But the previous day, as rain fell, he had visited the site where Rosenberg was shot. "I started thinking, What am I going to do? Keep silent?" Mendizábal recalled. While praying, he had seen on the ground a discarded metal plate inscribed with the word "ON." "I realized then what I was supposed to do," he said.

Alejos's cousin had taken one of Mendizábal's CDs, and Alejos told him to come straight to the President's office. By then, members of Colom's inner circle had heard about the video, and they, too, rushed to the President's office. Vice-President José Rafael Espada, who was a former cardiothoracic surgeon, also joined them. The cousin arrived, and the group gathered around Colom's computer to watch the video.

Suddenly, Rodrigo Rosenberg was staring at them, sitting alone, with a microphone, in front of a spare table. He was dressed in a navy-blue suit, a starched white shirt, and a pale-blue tie—the kind of muted, formal ensemble that he had worn ever since his father had deserted the family, leaving him the head of the household. On his wedding finger was the ring that Marjorie had ordered for him.

"Good afternoon," Rosenberg said. "My name is Rodrigo Rosenberg Marzano and, alas, if you are hearing or seeing this message it means that I've been murdered by President Álvaro Colom, with the help of Gustavo Alejos." Rosenberg went on, "The reason I'm dead, and you're therefore watching this message, is only and exclusively because during my final moments I was the lawyer to Mr. Khalil Musa and his daughter Marjorie Musa, who, in cowardly fashion, were assassinated by President Álvaro Colom, with the consent of his wife, Sandra de Colom, and with the help of . . . Gustavo Alejos."

Rosenberg said that he had "direct knowledge" of a conspiracy. He alleged that the President, the First Lady, members of the Colom Administration, and their business cronies were using Banrural to embezzle and launder money. (In a document summarizing his charges, which he had given to Mendizábal along with the recording, Rosenberg wrote, "Musa did not suspect that illegal, million-dollar business transactions were taking place daily in Banrural. These transactions range from money laundering to the channelling of public funds to nonexistent programs belonging to the President's wife, Sandra de Colom, as well as the funding of shell companies used by drug traffickers.") Because Musa would not have tolerated such corruption, Rosenberg said, he became a threat when he was nominated to Banrural's board. At that point, Rosenberg said, the President, the First Lady, Alejos, and others conspired to kill him.

Initially, Rosenberg spoke slowly and stiffly, but then his hands began to rise and fall, along with his eyebrows, the power of his voice growing—a voice from the grave. "I don't

have a hero complex,” he said. “I don’t have any desire to die. I have four divine children, the best brother life could have given me, marvellous friends.” He continued, “The last thing I wanted was to deliver this message. . . . But I hope my death helps get the country started down a new path.” He urged Vice-President Espada—whom he described as “not a thief or an assassin”—to assume the Presidency and insure that the guilty parties wound up in jail. “This is not about seeking revenge, which only makes us like them,” Rosenberg said. “It is about justice.” He predicted that the Guatemalan government would try to cover up the truth, by smearing the Musas and inventing plots. “But the only reality that counts is this: if you saw and heard this message, it is because I was killed by Álvaro Colom and Sandra de Colom, with the help of Gustavo Alejos.” He concluded, “Guatemalans, the time has come. *Please*—it is time. Good afternoon.”

The video, which lasted about eighteen minutes, appeared to have been made cheaply. A blue sheet had been hung behind Rosenberg, to deflect glare, and there was a dull hum in the background, perhaps from cars on a nearby street. As with a hostage video, the eerie, amateurish quality of the production lent authenticity to Rosenberg’s claim: he had been rubbed out.

When the video ended, President Colom and his staff were unable to speak. One aide later told me that he felt as if they had been transported into another world—a world of movie thrillers. Finally, Colom muttered that his enemies were trying to destroy his Presidency. “They want us out of here,” he said.

No one in the room asked the President or Alejos if the allegations were true. An official who is close to Colom told me he could not believe that the President had been involved in ordering a murder. But, given the history of Guatemala, the official said, it was possible that others in the Administration had done so: “You never know.”

The room was filled with unacknowledged tensions and questions: Why had Rosenberg called for Vice-President Espada to take the reins of the country? Was Espada involved with Rosenberg, trying to orchestrate a new kind of coup? President Colom told me that the video “put the Vice-President in a compromising position.” The palace was at war with itself.

According to a member of the government, Alejos acted as if he were “going to be arrested.” He called his wife and told her that she and their son had to leave the country. He then offered his resignation to the President, but Colom told him, “We’ll get through this.”

The video was almost instantly uploaded to YouTube, and it was broadcast on national television. The Presidential spokesman’s cell phone began ringing: reporters were demanding a response from Colom. “Honestly, for a few hours, we didn’t know what to say,” the spokesman told me. The President, Alejos, and the aides frantically tried to come up with a statement. Finally, they hashed out a few words. The President didn’t think that he should deliver them himself—better to maintain a dignified distance. And so two aides went

out and stood before a pack of reporters, categorically rejecting the accusations.

The brief statement only fuelled the uproar: Why wasn't the President himself responding? Why was he in hiding? In a panic, Colom's chief of staff called Roberto Izurieta, a political consultant in Washington, D.C. Izurieta taught crisis management at George Washington University, but he was better known as the James Carville of Latin America—a strategist who had helped elect Presidents across the region, including Colom. Izurieta based much of his tactical thinking on Sun Tzu's "Art of War."

The chief of staff e-mailed Izurieta a link to the video. Izurieta later wrote, in an unpublished report, "After more than twenty years in politics, I can't recall anything that made such a powerful impression on me." He called back Colom's chief of staff and said, "I'm catching the next flight to Guatemala."

Early the next morning, several reporters discovered Guatemala's Attorney General—who was supposed to be heading up an impartial investigation into Rosenberg's assassination—slipping out of a meeting with Colom. A former Presidential candidate said on the radio, "What justice is there going to be if the Attorney General meets together in the private office of the President?"

Meanwhile, the Rosenberg video was entering the public consciousness, multiplying and regenerating like a spirochete. Within days, hundreds of thousands of people had watched it online—so many that servers crashed. A political analyst remarked that Rosenberg's testimony was being translated into more languages than the works of Guatemala's most famous poets and novelists. The video, known by the simple tag YouTube Murder, created what one of the country's largest newspapers called "the greatest political crisis" in the history of Guatemalan democracy.

By Tuesday morning, protesters were streaming into Guatemala City's Central Plaza, dressed in white, a symbol of political purity, and screaming outside the National Palace, "*Asesino! Asesino!*"

Izurieta, the consultant, arrived at the airport that afternoon and headed to the palace. As he approached, he could see the swarm of white-clad protesters in the plaza—the *tsunami blanco*, as the press dubbed it. Izurieta told his driver to stop the car, and got out. "I wanted to feel the protests, to see the people's faces, to get the sense of the intensity," he recalled. He knew that there was a moment when a political crisis became unmanageable; at that point, he, too, would be merely a spectator to history.

In the palace, Izurieta set up a war room in the President's office. Sun Tzu warns that, to prevail, one has to "know thy self," and if Izurieta was going to help the President he had to learn all the palace secrets. Late in the day, he found Colom secluded in a room with Guatemala's Archbishop, murmuring words that Izurieta could not make out, as if he were in confession. No one dared to disturb the President, but Izurieta finally had to interrupt: Colom

was scheduled to give a live interview on CNN.

Colom spoke by satellite from the old executive office in the palace. He wore a blue suit and tie, and sat in a large wooden chair, staring directly into the camera—a pose that, to Izurieta's dismay, mirrored Rosenberg delivering his posthumous *J'accuse*. The President claimed that the video was part of a “plot to destabilize the government.” Blinking nervously, he looked pale and scared. An aide conceded to me, “Everyone thought he was lying.” Not long afterward, the director of *El Periódico* wrote, “I can't help but express the repugnance I felt during the declarations of President Álvaro Colom. . . . The only thing missing now is for the President and his henchmen to say that it was Rodrigo himself who immolated himself, kamikaze style, in order to discredit the government and that he himself paid the assassins to murder him.”

The President's chief political rival, the former general Otto Pérez Molina, demanded that Colom step down. But the President insisted that he would forsake his position only if “they kill me.” In an interview on Al Jazeera, Colom warned Guatemalans to “be careful of crossing the line,” and added, “Accusing a President of murder publicly could be sedition.”

A young Guatemalan, furious with the government, sent out a message on Twitter that said, “The first concrete action should be to take cash out of Banrural and bankrupt the bank of the corrupt.” Soon afterward, authorities, fearing a run on the bank, stormed his apartment and detained him. Twitter provided a stream of data from a new democratic class of informants and *orejas*, creating a narrative of unpunctuated fragments from sources known and unknown, verified and unverified. There was chatter that Mendizábal feared for his life, and that the Musas' house had been broken into.

Each day, the demonstrations grew, mobilized by messages on Facebook and Twitter. The place where Rosenberg was killed became a shrine, with a large wooden cross and signs reading “You didn't die in vain!” Protesters erected a movie screen and broadcast Rosenberg's final testimony, so that his body and voice floated over the crowd. The video looped over and over, in an eternal present tense. A columnist said that Rosenberg had become “the voice of millions of Guatemalans.”

In the war room, Izurieta told President Colom, “We don't have much time.” Aides bused in Colom supporters to the Central Plaza and filmed them, distributing the footage to television stations. (It was “pure propaganda,” the spokesman said.) But Colom wasn't just losing a media battle; the government was on the verge of collapse.

The U.S. Ambassador, Stephen McFarland, paid an urgent visit to the palace. During the Cold War, America had frequently supported Guatemala's brutal security apparatus. In the nineteen-fifties, the C.I.A. had contemplated an assassination campaign against left-wing Guatemalan targets and disseminated a treatise on the art of political murder: “The subject may be stunned or drugged and then placed in the car, but this is only reliable when the car

can be run off a high cliff or into deep water without observation.” In 1999, President Bill Clinton, speaking of such policies, said that the U.S. “must not repeat that mistake.”

McFarland stressed to President Colom that there was only one way out of the crisis: to turn over the investigation of the Rosenberg case to a U.N.-backed organization called the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG. Created in the fall of 2007, CICIG is a pathbreaking political experiment. Unlike many truth commissions or human-rights bodies, it does not investigate war crimes of the past, or merely monitor abuses. Rather, it aggressively fights against systemic violence and corruption, acting like blasts of radiation on a cancerous organism. Composed of several dozen judges, prosecutors, and law-enforcement officers from around the world, CICIG works within Guatemala’s legal system to prosecute members of organized crime and dismantle clandestine networks embedded in the state. Rosenberg’s brother, Eduardo Rodas, told the press that CICIG was “our only hope for achieving justice.”

On May 12th, two days after Rosenberg was murdered, President Colom agreed to refer the case to CICIG. Not only did the fate of the Rosenberg case and the Colom Presidency depend on this international team of investigators, which was led by a former Spanish prosecutor and judge named Carlos Castresana; so did the fate of Guatemala’s democracy. As *The Economist* put it, “Whether or not Mr. Rosenberg’s killers are brought to justice will show whether or not Guatemala is indeed a failed state.”

Judge Castresana felt like a prisoner in Guatemala. On May 12th, as the country was erupting, the fifty-one-year-old investigator was isolated inside CICIG’s compound—a walled-off villa, in the capital, that had once served as a headquarters for the U.S. Marines. Owing to security concerns, Castresana was not allowed to venture out alone for his habitual cigarette, or to explore the neighboring streets, with their haunting names—Street of Purgatory, Street of Sorrows, Street of Oblivion. He travelled in a caravan of armor-plated vehicles, and was trailed by bodyguards who were recruited from outside the country, in order to reduce the chance that they were sleeper agents. When Castresana first arrived in Guatemala to head CICIG, leaving behind his wife and two young children, he had rented an apartment downtown, but his head of security, a veteran of Spain’s Guardia Civil, warned Castresana that he had been targeted for assassination, and so he moved into a room above his office. Castresana sometimes felt like a “fake”: he was investigating the politics of a place that he had barely seen. He told me, “I have no life.”

A bold and, at times, vainglorious man, Castresana treated boredom as if it were a contagion. In 1998, he was working as a special prosecutor against corruption in Madrid when, in a bout of restlessness, he drafted an indictment against General Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean strongman, for the murder of thousands of his countrymen, which, to the astonishment of the world, led to Pinochet’s arrest, in England. Though Pinochet was

eventually released, it marked the first time in history that a onetime head of state had been detained on the principle of universal jurisdiction. In 2007, Castresana, after serving in a U.N. mission investigating the unsolved murders of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, came to Guatemala—like a “parachutist,” as he puts it. A letter to the editor in *El Periódico* said, “Welcome, Mr. Castresana, your presence in the country is proof that our institutions simply don’t work.”

Castresana, who had the look of an aging student radical, with wavy brown hair and glasses with small round lenses, was not a typical diplomat. One of his friends, with a mixture of admiration and despair, describes him as a “loose cannon.” Castresana often compared the criminals he investigated to characters from literature, and he seemed to conceive of himself as an Arthurian knight swept up in one heroic battle after another. He spoke incessantly about a “code of honor,” and often clashed with his counterparts at the U.N. He told a former Guatemalan Foreign Minister, “I don’t plan to be another U.N. bureaucrat.”

In 2008, in its first big case, CICIG charged a chief homicide prosecutor with obstructing justice and tampering with evidence. “We thought, as proud international investigators, we were very good at what we did,” Castresana recalled. “But, when you come to a country with such extended levels of corruption, it doesn’t matter if you have built a good case. So when we brought the case against the prosecutor it was a complete failure. He came triumphantly to the court and he was released.” Castresana realized that he could not bring criminals to justice before he had removed at least some of the most corrupt officials. As Castresana later told the press, “Guatemala’s institutions must be purged from the inside—they need an exorcism.”

Castresana seized upon a rule in CICIG’S charter that permitted the organization to petition local officials to punish unethical officials. Through this process, his team began to remove more than fifteen hundred corrupt police officers, including fifty police commissioners and the deputy director of the national police. CICIG also “invited” nearly a dozen prominent prosecutors to leave their posts, and had a magistrate in Guatemala City banished to the hinterlands. “My team told me not to—that I would put everyone in the judiciary against us,” Castresana recalled. “I said, ‘No, all the judiciary is already against us. If the judges know that they can say no to CICIG, then it is our death.’” In the summer of 2008, he even asked President Colom to fire his Attorney General, whom CICIG accused of impeding justice. Though Colom found Castresana “very demanding,” according to a U.S. diplomatic cable obtained by Wikileaks, he granted the request.

Part prosecutor, part politician, part lobbyist, Castresana also pushed through Congress several laws strengthening the judicial system. They included establishing a viable witness-protection program, setting up a framework for legal wiretapping, and making it possible for

prosecutors to arrange plea bargains for suspects who provide evidence against a criminal network.

A former deputy minister told me that Castresana had become like General Douglas MacArthur in Japan, after the Second World War. A columnist later said that Castresana was treated as “the voice of God.” Nevertheless, CICIG had been fully operational for barely a year when Rosenberg was killed, and the case threatened some of the country’s most untouchable figures. A newspaper columnist observed, “The odds that the investigation will be successful . . . are slim to none. Like the Battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon was defeated, Castresana faces the prospect, in Guatemala, of the first great failure of his international career.”

Castresana told a reporter that the Rosenberg case was “like a John Grisham novel, but it’s real.” Before formally launching an investigation, he went to visit President Colom. With his security detail, Castresana passed by the protesters in the Central Plaza, and slipped through a side entrance into the palace. Despite its grandeur, the building had a ghostly quality, with its dark, musty rooms, creaking doors, and gossamer curtains that fluttered aimlessly. Castresana found Colom in his office, his bony wrists and neck poking out of his suit.

Castresana told the President, “To take the case, I need complete independence.” Colom, who spoke so softly that Castresana had to lean forward to hear him, promised not to interfere. But Castresana could not know if he was sincere or if the First Lady, Sandra de Colom, would abide by the President’s wishes. In the palace, the First Lady was nicknamed “the bulldozer,” for the way that she flattened aides and even the President. A leading human-rights official told the St. Petersburg *Times* that Sandra de Colom was considered “malignant and malevolent,” and “the head of a parallel power.” (To circumvent the Constitution, which bars the relatives of a President from succeeding him, the Coloms recently filed for divorce, in the hope that she can run in an election, in September.)

That same day, Castresana met with Rosenberg’s son Eduardo. He looked like a younger, more dashing version of his father. He had graduated first in his class from law school, and since the killings he had become a partner at Rosenberg’s law firm, moving into his father’s old office. Castresana vowed to him, “I give you my word that, if we have to, we will bring down the President and impeach him.”

Back at his office at CICIG, Castresana gathered a dozen or so of his top investigators. He suspected that there was at least one mole inside CICIG, and worried about leaks; his office was swept each morning and night for bugs, and he used a white-noise machine when discussing delicate matters. He told his agents, “This is the most important case of this commission.”

A linguistic expert from the National Institute of Forensic Sciences, in Guatemala City,

was asked to authenticate the Rosenberg video, analyzing every sound and slur. In a report, the expert said that she could not determine whether Rosenberg had made the video under external pressure (as President Colom had suggested). But the expert concluded that Rosenberg appeared “sincere” and “rational.”

A team of CICIG agents scoured the Rosenberg crime scene for clues. Curiously, Rosenberg’s body had fallen backward, onto the curb, and his bicycle had fallen away from him, onto the road. Near the body, in the dirt beside the road, was a series of deep gashes; they appeared to have been made by the tires of a car.

One day, while CICIG agents were canvassing the neighborhood, they detected an unmarked vehicle following their car; a passenger was taking photographs of them. Weeks later, agents were meeting with a potential witness, in the lobby of a hotel outside Guatemala City, when swarms of police officers suddenly descended, trying to seize the witness. Fearing that the witness might be tortured and “disappeared,” CICIG agents fled with him into one of the hotel’s rooms. As they prepared for a gun battle, a CICIG agent shouted to the police, “You will have to kill us all!” Meanwhile, Castresana phoned the head of the national police and Vice-President Espada, commanding them to order the police to back off. The police eventually withdrew, and CICIG was able to process the witness. After all that, the man had no reliable information—but somebody had clearly been terrified that he did.

Castresana and his team, still lacking a key witness, confiscated all the relevant security tapes from buildings near the crime scene. Images caught on multiple cameras revealed that the moment Rosenberg left on his bicycle, at 8:05 A.M., a coffin-black sports car with tinted windows and a racing spoiler began shadowing him. The fact that the hit men were in position from the start of the bicycle ride—an activity that was not a regular part of Rosenberg’s Sunday routine—suggested that a person with inside knowledge had tipped them off. The vehicle’s license plate was not visible, but the car was a Mazda 6, and there were only fifty such models registered in Guatemala. And the one at the crime scene, digital enhancements revealed, had, in addition to the spoiler, distinctive red-rimmed tires and a sticker on the lid of the gas tank. After an intensive three-week search, investigators identified the car as belonging to a thirty-three-year-old man named Willian Gilberto Santos Divas, who lived outside Guatemala City. Records showed that, on the morning Rosenberg was killed, Santos’s cell phone was making and receiving a flurry of calls—all in the area of the shooting. “*He was there,*” Castresana said.

One other detail in Santos’s file caught Castresana’s attention. Santos was a former member of the national police force. Castresana was certain that CICIG had found the first sign of a conspiracy.

In President Colom’s war room, Roberto Izurieta, the strategist, believed that he, too, had found threads of what one member of the government called a “finely woven conspiracy.”

Izurieta had always thought that Colom could not be behind the murders of the Musas and Rosenberg, and that the killings had to be part of a plot to bring down the government. The idea was outlandish only to the innocent. As Don DeLillo has written, “A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It’s the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act.” Izurieta, who had lost ten pounds since the crisis began—and who had violated his ban on caffeine, which made him, by his own admission, “electric”—thought that the conspirators were finally being pulled from the shadows of Guatemalan politics.

The investigators had found, for example, someone who had admitted shooting the video of Rosenberg’s testimony. His name was Mario David García. A squat man with a crisp mustache, he was an ultra-right-wing journalist and a former Presidential candidate who was thought to have participated in multiple plots against the state. In the late eighties, the government accused him of being part of a cabal, known as the Officers of the Mountain, which orchestrated two failed coups. García understood the power of images: he had been the producer of a television show that had fanned the cabal’s rebellion. Another figure accused of orchestrating the coups was none other than Luis Mendizábal. Both men denied being part of the plots.

Izurieta wondered if it could be just a coincidence that García and Mendizábal—with their “impressive dossiers of conspiratorial services,” as one reporter put it—had been involved in the manufacturing and distribution of Rosenberg’s video. García was now the host of a political radio show, “Straight Talk,” and after Rosenberg’s death he repeatedly attacked the government, stoking the unrest. As for Mendizábal, Izurieta and other members of the government suspected that he had a vendetta against President Colom, who had hired him to be a security adviser in 2007, only to fire him. What’s more, according to CICIG Mendizábal had lost a bid for a lucrative government contract to produce national I.D. cards. Mendizábal denies having any such business interest, but Castresana told me that Mendizábal had a “motive for revenge.”

Could García and Mendizábal have manipulated and then killed Rosenberg in order to unleash his video and topple the government? After all, Mendizábal was not only a specialist in gathering information; he was also a master in the art of disinformation. In the late nineties, he had been a member of a clandestine intelligence unit called La Oficinita—The Little Office. (It was named for the space above Mendizábal’s clothing boutique.) Mendizábal insisted to me that La Oficinita helped solve kidnappings and murders. But, according to human-rights observers, government officials, and the press, its purpose was to deceive the public—using fake evidence and theatrical witnesses in order to cover up the

military's crimes.

Izurieta knew that intelligence operators had previously deployed disinformation to topple a democratically elected government in Guatemala. In 1954, C.I.A. operatives had teamed with the new “scientists” of advertising to overthrow President Jacobo Árbenz—Guatemala's last left-wing leader until Colom—by creating the illusion of a domestic uprising. Operatives set up a radio station, the Voice of Liberation, which was supposedly broadcast from a rebel camp “deep in the jungle” but, in fact, was transmitted from Miami and often broadcast from the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City. The station caused national hysteria by reporting fake news of the government poisoning the water supply and of phantom troops marching on the capital. One operative referred to the scheme as “the big lie.”

In May, 2009, Mendizábal and García, who were being pressed by the media, acknowledged their roles in producing the Rosenberg video. The Archdiocese's Office of Human Rights, citing their histories, warned that there might be a sinister force at work. It noted that Rosenberg's assassination had the hallmarks of “fictitious scenarios” from Guatemala's past.

If there was a plot to topple the government, the next question was who was the main beneficiary—and hence the prime mover behind it. One person seemed to have the most to gain. It was Colom's longtime political rival Otto Pérez Molina—the notorious former general and head of military intelligence who, after the video was distributed, had demanded that Colom resign. Pérez Molina, who appeared on García's radio program to denounce Colom, had previously declared that he was running again for President.

Scattered dots seemed to form a picture, like a constellation in the sky. Then, less than a month after Rosenberg's death, President Colom's Minister of the Interior, who was a confidant of the First Lady, informed Castresana that he had found what amounted to a smoking gun—a witness who would reveal the entire conspiracy.

Castresana dispatched a team of investigators. At the Interior Minister's suggestion, the investigators flew on the First Lady's helicopter to a soccer field in San Luis, a town near the Mexican border, where the witness was waiting for them. According to a summary of his account, which he later provided to the newspaper *El Quetzalteco*, the witness stated that a street gang named Pythagoras had been hired to kill Rosenberg, at a price of a hundred and eighty thousand dollars. The witness, who expressed fear for his life, said that he was close to the gang's ruthless leader. “I do not want to continue to kill people,” he said. Then he revealed a bombshell—or, as he put it, “This will explode, because there are politicians involved.”

The witness said that the gang received the first installment of its fee from Roxana Baldetti, a member of Congress who is running as Otto Pérez Molina's Vice-Presidential

candidate. The witness said that he had saved text messages that he had exchanged with a member of Pérez Molina's party, who had offered him a car and money to remain silent. Castresana, speaking of the witness, recalled, "With this testimony, we could have arrested the leader of the political opposition and put him in jail."

Castresana had asked President Colom's Interior Minister to make sure that nobody from the media was at the stadium, fearing that the identities of CICIG agents might be exposed. (At one point, a clerk handling evidence in the Rosenberg case was gunned down in Guatemala City.) But a pack of reporters suddenly appeared, and the news soon broke around the country that Otto Pérez Molina and Roxana Baldetti were the alleged masterminds of Rosenberg's murder. "PROOF DELIVERED," the banner headline in one newspaper read.

But, when Castresana and members of CICIG tried to confirm elements of the witness's story, they were stymied. They checked the security cameras in the hotel parking lot where the witness claimed that the payoff from Baldetti had taken place—nothing of the sort was on tape. Other evidence that the witness provided was fabricated. Even his name was an alias. The whole meeting was an elaborately staged act of misdirection. The witness later confessed, "I received a call from a member of the government saying, 'I have a job for you,' and he offered me money . . . to give false evidence." The witness alleged that Colom's spokesman and the First Lady were part of the scheme.

The government denied the allegations. But Castresana was furious. He believed that the government was also behind the unmarked cars following his agents and the attempt to seize the potential witness at the hotel. Perhaps members of the Colom Administration were trying to cover up their crimes. Or, perhaps, after so many years of judicial disarray, they thought that, if they were being framed, the only way out was to frame someone else.

Castresana sent a formal complaint to the Colom Administration, and forwarded copies to the U.N. It was only then, Castresana told me, that the government stopped meddling.

“Botar un palo grande,” the voice said. “Knock over a big stick.”

A Chilean agent of CICIG was sitting in a small, stuffy room, nearly three months after Rosenberg's death, eavesdropping on Willian Santos, the owner of the black Mazda. The Rosenberg case marked the first time in the history of Guatemala that wiretapping was being conducted by a legal entity, rather than by secret military intelligence or some other unauthorized body.

For weeks, CICIG had been monitoring Santos's conversations and tracking his movements. Castresana and his team had mapped out, with flowcharts and photographs, at least part of the criminal network to which Santos belonged. So far, investigators had identified ten members of the gang. Nearly all of them were current or former police officers; one was a veteran of the military. Their conversations confirmed that the men had

become professional killers. The question was who had hired them to assassinate Rosenberg.

CICIG agents had intercepted more than ten thousand of the gang's fugitive conversations. But, even in an age of listening devices and satellite surveillance and Wayback Machines, much of history remains beyond confirmation, out of earshot, buried with the corpses. One of the leaders of the gang was recorded saying that he wanted to hear "zero comments" about the Rosenberg "job," because there were extremely powerful people who didn't want anyone "running off their mouths."

As the Chilean agent listened to Santos, she wondered what he had meant by "knock over a big stick." The gang had developed its own coded language: "greens" meant money; "to lift" was to kidnap a person; and "shooting up a car" was an assassination. The more the Chilean agent listened to the conversation, the more she realized that to knock over a big stick was to kill someone important.

Though Castresana was careful not to blow CICIG's undercover operation, he interceded repeatedly to foil the gang's plans. When he learned that the gang was about to rob a bank, he made sure that extra police were stationed out in front, and he tipped off a Korean businessman after discovering that the gang had plans to "lift" him. By September, the gang had begun to suspect it had a mole. As a hit man said on the wire, someone was "letting out the soup." The leaders assumed that the culprit was the military veteran, since he didn't come from their group of policemen.

On September 8th, CICIG picked up another conversation between two gang leaders. "We have a problem," one of them said of the military veteran. "He's going around talking about Rosenberg." There was a long silence. "I'm not going to freak out but I want to cut that son of a bitch down already." The man explained that he was just waiting for "the green light."

Castresana felt that he could no longer wait. At dawn on September 11th, four months after Rosenberg was assassinated, three hundred CICIG agents, prosecutors, police, and soldiers swept into more than a dozen locations across Guatemala, apprehending the ten suspected hit men. By inspecting call logs from the suspects' seized cell phones, CICIG identified an intermediary who had been in contact with the gang on the day of Rosenberg's assassination. The intermediary, a man named Jesús Manuel Cardona Medina, was brought in for questioning. As Castresana knew, every secret is embedded with the possibility of betrayal, and after sustained interrogation Cardona Medina turned on his co-conspirators, cooperating with CICIG in exchange for a reduced sentence and placement in Guatemala's witness-protection program. Two other gang members also flipped.

According to the hit men, the gang had been hired by Francisco and Estuardo Valdés Paiz, two brothers who owned one of Guatemala's largest pharmaceutical companies. Surprisingly, the brothers were related to Rosenberg—they were cousins of his first wife. The Valdés Paiz brothers had contacted the gang and agreed to pay forty thousand dollars for

the hit. The target was described to the hit men simply as an “extortionist,” and Cardona Medina was given a cell phone for communicating with a mysterious inside man, who provided minute details about what the extortionist looked like. The inside man also indicated the ideal place to shoot Rosenberg, which is why there were tire marks at the scene of the crime: the previous night, the hit men had marked the spot.

A hidden design was finally emerging. But why would the Valdés Paiz brothers—who, by all accounts, loved Rosenberg—want him dead? What did their actions have to do with Rosenberg’s video and his allegations? And who was the inside man? Susanne Jonas, a scholar who spent years studying the country, once wrote, “Guatemala mocks me: ‘Just as you think you understand, we’ll show you that you understand nothing at all.’”

In addition to investigating the hit men, Castresana and his team reconstructed Rosenberg’s final months as best they could, trying to pinpoint who might want him dead. As CICIG agents were exploring the question of motive, the investigation took, as Castresana put it, a series of “stupefying turns.”

Investigators had obtained from Mendizábal the telephone number from which Rosenberg had reported receiving threats. Phone records confirmed that Rosenberg had answered a series of calls from this number. The calls, which originated from a cell phone, began on May 5th and ended on May 10th, the day Rosenberg was killed. During that period, the calls were made almost every day and were usually relatively short—just enough time, it seemed, to convey a threat.

Records also indicated that this cell phone had communicated with only one other telephone—the one that Cardona Medina had reported receiving from the Valdés Paiz brothers. And so whoever had made the threats to Rosenberg appeared to be the same mysterious inside man who had given instructions to the killers. The inside man had communicated with Cardona Medina for the last time at 8 A.M. on May 10th—to alert the executioners that Rosenberg was on his way.

Castresana and his colleagues tried to trace the cell phone to its owner. It had been bought with cash, in order to insure anonymity. But a sales-tax form for the phone contained a faded signature—that of Rosenberg’s driver. Castresana believed that they had found the inside man.

Investigators brought the driver in for questioning. He did not deny that he had purchased the phone, but he swore that Rosenberg had instructed him to buy it, along with another cell phone. The driver said that he was told to pay in cash and not to identify himself in paperwork; he had accidentally put his name on the sales-tax form.

Castresana suspected that the driver was lying. But Rosenberg’s secretary at the law firm confirmed that on the day the driver bought the phones he had turned in a receipt for reimbursement. If he was a conspirator, it seemed inconceivable that he would have done so.

The driver said that Rosenberg had kept one of the phones, and had instructed him to deliver the second one to Francisco Valdés Paiz. Records showed that this cell phone was the same one that Cardona Medina had received. Suddenly, the disparate lines of the investigation were converging toward one conclusion: Rosenberg had purchased the phones used by his own killers. CICIG investigators then made an even more startling discovery. Telecommunications experts determined that the purportedly threatening phone calls had all originated from one place: inside Rosenberg's own apartment. Castresana thought, *Rosenberg had been making threats to himself.*

Any lingering doubts about who was behind the killing dissolved once Castresana and his team discovered that Rosenberg, just before his death, had issued a check for forty thousand dollars—the amount owed to the hit men—and had asked his secretary to deliver it to the Valdés Paiz brothers. Rosenberg had drawn the money from the Panamanian account of a client, in order to conceal his hand in the scheme. As inconceivable as it seemed, Castresana and his team were now certain that Rosenberg—not the President, not the First Lady, not Gustavo Alejos, or anyone else—was the author of his own assassination.

Castresana believed that Rosenberg would have pulled off “the perfect crime”—his secret plot permanently lost to history—had the driver not signed the sales-tax form. But, thanks to this mistake, CICIG unravelled the rest of the mystery. Castresana and his agents determined that Rosenberg had enlisted the Valdés Paiz brothers to help him find a band of hit men. Rosenberg told the brothers only that the target was a man who had been extorting and threatening him. Cardona Medina testified that, by the time he went to collect the assassination fee, Francisco Valdés Paiz had learned the truth, and was distraught, crying that the hit men had just killed his cousin.

Rosenberg had been careful in planting false clues that would confound investigators. Not only had he repeatedly called his own home number from the cell phone, creating the appearance of continuous threats; he had also called the hit men on the morning of his death, informing them that the target was leaving his house. This explained why a man purportedly threatened with death had ventured out alone, on a bicycle, in one of the most murderous cities in the world. It also explained why the inside man had known exactly where the target would be—the day before the shooting. And it explained why Rosenberg's bicycle and his body were found in such peculiar positions at the crime scene: as the hit man who pulled the trigger confessed, Rosenberg had got off his bicycle at the designated spot and was sitting on the curb, waiting for his assassin, when the hit man shot him three times in the head, once in the neck, and once in the chest. Castresana says of Rosenberg, “He set himself off like a suicide bomber.”

As Castresana looked deeper into Rosenberg's life, he began to see a tormented soul—“someone like Raskolnikov.” After the death of the woman he loved, Rosenberg

wrote to a friend that he felt as if he were “disintegrating, little by little.” He initially tried to do what he had always done: find justice through the law. Based on the intelligence he had gathered—primarily from the legendary spy Mendizábal but also from other sources—he was convinced that the government had killed Marjorie and her father. But, as a lawyer, Rosenberg knew that this intelligence was not strong enough to stand up in court. And Mendizábal warned Rosenberg that it would be futile to fight the President, the First Lady, and Alejos. In a country where crimes were virtually never punished, Castresana says, Rosenberg felt powerless. In a meeting at his law firm, Rosenberg complained, “There is no justice in Guatemala.” And so, Castresana theorized, Rosenberg had set his plot in motion.

In hindsight, Rosenberg’s actions in his final days made it evident that he was not trying to evade death but, rather, was preparing for it. He had his will drawn up; he bought two adjoining plots in a cemetery, one for himself and one for Marjorie; he gave away family heirlooms. He had then constructed a counterfeit reality, believing, however perversely, that it was the only way that the guilty parties would ever go to jail. And he employed the very methods—hit men, misdirection, stagecraft—that, in the past, had been the province of corrupt states and intelligence outfits. Rodrigo Rosenberg had democratized the art of political murder.

After solving the mystery of Rosenberg’s assassination, Castresana was overcome with panic, instead of relief. He thought that the plot was so incredible—perhaps the most bizarre in the annals of political conspiracy—that everyone would think that he was weaving yet another fraudulent narrative, in order to protect the government. For days, he could not sleep, and paced endlessly around the compound. “It will be my professional grave,” he muttered to himself. “But we cannot change the reality.”

In December, CICIG issued arrest warrants for the Valdés Paiz brothers. They went into hiding, and were not apprehended for several months. The ten members of the hit squad were eventually convicted. The Valdés Paiz brothers initially acknowledged their involvement in the plot, according to authorities, but they now maintain their innocence. Their case is still pending.

Castresana prepared to share his findings in a televised national address on January 12, 2010. The day before the broadcast, he met with Rosenberg’s son Eduardo. Many members of Rosenberg’s family could not accept what had happened: the truth, for all its power, is merciless. But Eduardo seemed ready to confront reality. He later told me that he had been forced to face “a lot of dark truths.” In the meeting with Castresana, he made one request: if Castresana believed that his father had been trying, even if mistakenly, to help his country, then he should say so at the press conference.

During his address, Castresana, to the surprise of many viewers, said of Rosenberg, “He was an honorable person.” He added, “He wanted to open up a Pandora’s box that would

change the country.”

In the palace, President Colom, the First Lady, Gustavo Alejos, and Roberto Izurieta watched the address on television. Just before the broadcast, Izurieta met with Colom to prepare an official response. Izurieta asked the President, “So who did it?”

Colom said, “You’re not going to believe it, but I don’t know.”

As Castresana built toward his shocking conclusions—which he described as “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”—the President held hands with the First Lady. Alejos, who told me that the investigation had “cleared my name for my family and my children,” began to cry. Izurieta whispered to himself, “Oh, my God.”

Though President Colom and others who had been in the war room trusted Castresana’s conclusion that Rosenberg had plotted his own death, many of them still privately believed that there remained another shrouded part of the story—a conspiracy within a conspiracy. They felt that Rosenberg alone could not have pulled off such an intricate deception, and that he must have been abetted by García, the talk-show host, and Mendizábal, the spy, both of whom had reasons for wanting to bring down the government.

Castresana told me he believed that García and Mendizábal had tried to exploit the mysterious circumstances of Rosenberg’s death. “I don’t know if they were aware of the intention of Rosenberg” to kill himself, he said. “But they were preparing some kind of coup.” CICIG’s investigation eventually found a witness who said that García had met with Rosenberg, and encouraged him in his plans to commit suicide and release the video, saying, “Do it for your country.” Castresana told me that García likely helped “induce” Rosenberg’s suicidal act.

The conspiracy-within-a-conspiracy may have reached the highest levels of the government. Mendizábal told me that, in the days leading up to Rosenberg’s death, he had detected, in his intelligence dossiers, growing divisions between President Colom and Vice-President Espada. “This is where I say that my reports are helping me quite a lot,” Mendizábal explained. “I’m beginning to see that the Vice-President and the President are having a lot of friction, because the Vice-President would like to be President.” A friend of Mendizábal’s told CICIG that, about a week before the assassination, he had met with the Vice-President to inform him about Rosenberg’s investigation into the Musa killings, which had the power to topple Colom’s Presidency. Mendizábal told me that the friend had asked the Vice-President, “ ‘Do you think you are in a position to take over?’ And his answer was yes.”

Vice-President Espada has emphatically denied that such a meeting ever occurred, saying that he had no “direct or indirect contact” with Rosenberg or anyone close to him before the murder. García, for his part, has called allegations that he was complicit in Rosenberg’s plot “absurd, baseless, and reprehensible.” Mendizábal’s statements have been more calibrated.

He told a reporter, “I was not the instigator. I did what I had to do, and I have no regrets.” He showed me the metal plate, inscribed with “ON,” that he had found by the Rosenberg crime scene. He turned it upside down, so that it said “NO.” “There are always two ways to interpret anything,” he said.

Mendizábal had already begun to construct a counter-scenario to subvert CICIG’s theory of Rosenberg’s death. He said that Rosenberg had not set out that morning to kill himself; rather, he was attempting to collect information on who murdered the Musas—evidence that Rosenberg must have paid forty thousand dollars to obtain. When the Musas’ killers learned of his plans, he was double-crossed and killed. As Mendizábal spoke to me with conviction, taking some of the verifiable facts and rearranging them, I began to picture Rosenberg on his bicycle, innocently pedalling through the city, hoping to obtain the final piece of his puzzle. The most effective counterfeit realities are those which provide what only conspirators seem to have: a perfectly coherent plot.

This time, though, the truth was more powerful than fiction. After Castresana’s meticulous presentation, the director of *El Periódico*, who had once written how absurd it would be to imagine that Rosenberg “immolated himself, kamikaze style,” called CICIG’s research “masterly,” and said, “I can only humbly surrender to the evidence.” U.S. Ambassador McFarland told me that the CICIG probe helped preserve “Guatemala’s stability and democracy,” and demonstrated that it was possible to “get to the bottom of things.” People beseeched Castresana, who was hailed as Guatemala’s Eliot Ness, to run for President.

Still, an essential part of the Rosenberg case remained a mystery: Who killed the Musas? Castresana asked for the public to be patient. After Rosenberg’s murder, CICIG had arrived on the crime scene immediately. But nearly a month had elapsed before CICIG had taken on the Musa case—an eternity in homicide investigations, especially in a country where evidence is not properly collected. “We were lost,” Castresana said.

At one point, CICIG agents raided the offices of an organization connected to Banrural. As they were carting away documents and hard drives, an investigator overheard a local prosecutor on the phone, leaking what was being taken. Castresana and his agents were still moving in a sea of saboteurs.

If CICIG concluded that the President, the First Lady, and Alejos had, in fact, killed Khalil and Marjorie Musa, then the government could collapse. Though the most prevalent view was that the government was responsible, in the absence of definitive evidence new theories multiplied. One hypothesis, which was given quiet support by Gustavo Alejos and others in the Colom Administration, was that Musa had objected to Marjorie’s getting a divorce and marrying Rosenberg, and so Rosenberg had hired hit men to kill him. After Marjorie was accidentally murdered, Rosenberg had arranged his own assassination, partly out

of despair and partly to cover his own tracks.

While Castresana vowed to solve the case, the entrenched forces in Guatemala launched an all-out effort to destroy CICIG. Military intelligence had once maintained a “love office,” devoted to exposing its enemies’ private lives. In the factory owned by the Valdés Paiz brothers, CICIG agents discovered a document that hinted at a similar attack on Castresana, asking, “Does he have a girlfriend?” Stories began to appear in the media reporting that Castresana had been having affairs with several women, including his assistant. García, who filmed the Rosenberg video, devoted his radio programs to what he called Castresana’s “double life.”

Castresana denied the affairs, and said to me, of his assistant, “There were elements in the lie that made it seem true—she was my assistant, she was a beautiful young woman, and we were close.” Other reports in the Guatemalan press suggested, falsely, that Castresana was under investigation at the U.N. for ethical misconduct. Anita Isaacs, a political scientist and an expert on Guatemala, who knows Castresana, told me that the networks traditionally relied on three ways to remove an enemy: “The first is to bribe you—but they could not bribe Castresana. The second is to kill you—but they could not kill Castresana. Finally, if all else fails, they destroy your reputation. And that is what they did to Castresana.”

Not all public criticisms of Castresana and CICIG were part of a *campaña negra*. Some Guatemalans and U.N. officials thought that Castresana was too authoritarian, and that he often pursued targets unfairly in the press. Even some former CICIG agents criticized his methods.

As the attacks mounted against Castresana, he became increasingly paranoid, and appeared to conflate legitimate critiques with dirty reprisals. He accused a highly regarded Spanish CICIG agent of being a spy. And he alleged that one of Guatemala’s most respected journalists was part of a criminal network. “He was seeing conspiracies everywhere,” Francisco Goldman, the author of “The Art of Political Murder,” told me. “I think he started to go mad.”

Under duress, Castresana escalated his long-standing feuds with colleagues at the U.N. “Basically, they are telling me I’m like Kurtz—some kind of crazy man in the middle of the wilderness,” he said. During one confrontation, an official reminded him that CICIG was not, technically, a U.N. body. Castresana replied, “I am the soul of the U.N.”

In May, 2010, President Colom chose a new Attorney General, who, according to CICIG, promptly fired honest prosecutors, seized control over agents’ wiretap operations, and shelved sensitive cases. Castresana felt that he no longer had the backing he needed from the Guatemalan government or the U.N. On June 7th, after running the commission for two and a half years, he abruptly resigned.

At a press conference announcing his decision, Castresana, in a final salvo, denounced

Colom's new Attorney General for alleged ties to "parallel powers," including organized crime. Within a week, the Attorney General had been ousted. A newspaper declared that Castresana, like Rosenberg, had learned that, in Guatemala, the only way to fight impunity was to "blow himself up."

While CICIG has continued its operations under the command of Castresana's successor, Francisco Dall'Anese—a respected former Attorney General from Costa Rica—Castresana returned to Spain, where he resumed his job as a prosecutor. Even after his resignation, the attacks against him and CICIG persisted. One day, four decapitated heads were placed at prominent locations around Guatemala City, including in front of the Congress; the *Guatemala Times* called it a clear warning from "the dark forces" that "felt empowered after Dr. Castresana resigned." Castresana told me, "The wolves have smelled blood, and they will not stop until they get the commission destroyed."

Last November, Castresana passed through New York, and I met him at a restaurant. He seemed diminished without his security retinue. He said of the attacks on his reputation, "They have hurt my image forever." He and his wife were divorcing, and he had not been able to see his children. "I have nothing," he said. "I lost my family while in Guatemala. It almost took my life."

Dall'Anese told me, "One day, Guatemala will recognize what he accomplished."

Not long ago, Castresana contacted me again, and for the first time in a while he sounded enthused. There had been a break in the Musa case. He explained that, before he left CICIG, investigators had found partial confirmation of what Rosenberg had alleged about improprieties at Banrural and other institutions. "We discovered some evidence of money laundering, fraud, and embezzlement," he said. Moreover, as Rosenberg had believed, there had been an intense fight over control of Banrural's board of directors, and an effort to block Musa's appointment. But Rosenberg had overlooked a key detail: after receiving threats, Musa had informed the government that he was not taking the posts. By the time of his death, the hidden dispute over Banrural had been resolved, and there appeared to be no motive for killing him.

Castresana told me that CICIG, using surveillance tapes and wiretaps, had recently identified the alleged hit men who killed Musa. After they were interrogated, several of them confessed, and the baroque narrative took its final twist. It turned out that Musa, despite his impeccable reputation, had been buying contraband for his textile factory from a criminal network. When Musa got into a dispute with the gang, and refused to pay for the contraband, he was assassinated. The Musa family has refused to accept the prospect that its patriarch was corrupt, and took out a full-page ad in a newspaper denying the allegations. But twelve men have been arrested for the murder of the Musas, and the trial is expected to begin later this year.

It seemed as if everyone had a secret. Musa concealed his dirty business practices. Rosenberg and Marjorie hid their affair. Rosenberg misled the world about his death. The Guatemalan government purportedly covered up its own corruption. The proliferation of counterfeit realities underscored the difficulty of ascertaining the truth in a country where there are so few arbiters of it. Even Rosenberg—who, in the land of the blind, had seemed like a one-eyed king—had been wrong about who killed the Musas, triggering a series of tragic events that nearly rewrote a nation’s history, based on a lie.

The shrine that was set up at the street corner where Rodrigo Rosenberg died is now deserted. Pilgrims no longer come to leave notes or flowers. When I visited the shrine, the wooden cross was tilted and defaced. Beside it, half buried in dirt, was a discarded banner. Scraping away the mud, I could see the fragment of a story: “Rodrigo Rosenberg, National Hero.” ♦

ILLUSTRATION: BACHELOT CARON

To get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe Now**