



ENTREMUNDOS

Losing Battles, Winning Wars

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On May 10th, a domestic court ruled that a former head-of-state was guilty of genocide for the first time in human history. We don't yet know if that conviction will stick; Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt doesn't do anything half-heartedly, and his legal team's persistence may just succeed in keeping him out of jail.

But even if the battle is lost, the war is being won.

Starting with the post-World War II Nuremberg trials and continuing through tribunals in Europe, Africa and Asia, men who spent their lives silencing millions have suddenly been forced to listen to the very people they tried to eliminate.

“Tried” being the key word. No 20th century genocide succeeded. And the world today has the honor of witnessing people groups pushed to extinction – Armenians, Jews, Tutsis, Mayans – give their side of the story.

If this trial is ever adapted into a movie, Montt himself won't be the face of it. He has never been more than a supporting character in a larger drama. Instead, the Mayan men and women who participated in the trial are our heroes in the classical sense of the word, those who journeyed through hell and lived to tell about it.

Montt doesn't even deserve to be named a principle villain. In the 1980's, he helped stoke domestic racism and international paranoia to serve his political needs, bringing out the worst in his soldiers and his allies. He didn't invent hatred and fear; he was just effective at promoting it.

Today as a defendant he is still a supporting character, sitting silent like an actor without any lines. Yet now he brings out the best in those who survived his presidency. It takes extraordinary courage to witness, and to witness on this large a stage, but those that have gone public with their stories are re-writing history.

Judges can overturn convictions and erase testimony from transcripts. But they can't erase the stories themselves. Some of these stories have been recorded before, but it's entirely different when we can see Mayan faces in newspapers and on T.V. Montt's trial has given these survivors a grand stage from which to speak, and they are taking full advantage. This trial may permanently shift how Guatemala views its past, akin to how Adolf Eichmann's trial for Nazi crimes in the 1960's led Jews and non-Jews alike to rethink the Holocaust.

In medieval literature, heroes would return from the depths of what was called the Inmost Cave, with an elixir that could help save the village they left. These Mayans have descended into that same cave and returned with warnings about what human beings are capable of. Their stories

cannot resurrect the dead. But the memories of those lost now have a new life, living on in the thousands that have listened. And the world is better – and forever changed – because of it.