General Ríos Montt had on many occasions openly antagonized and defied Pope John Paul II. For example, Ríos Montt made it a point, on the eve of the pope’s first visit to Guatemala, in 1983, to ignore papal pleas for clemency and execute several “subversives” who had been sentenced in special military tribunals that didn’t include defense attorneys. In a sorely needed gesture to the Church, General Mejía Victores reluctantly allowed Archbishop Penados to summon his old friend Gerardi back from exile.

ODHA, which Archbishop Penados established in 1989, with Bishop Gerardi as its head, was the first grassroots human rights organization in Guatemala capable of operating on a national scale. Many Guatemalans trusted the Church as they did no other institution—although others, of course, despised it. In any case, the Church was the only organization that could overcome the cultural limitations of the United Nations truth commission, which was why Bishop Gerardi conceived the REMHI project. Guatemala’s modern Maya speak twenty-three indigenous languages and dialects, and many do not speak Spanish as a second language. Many of the Maya communities were in military zones where a climate of repression still prevailed long after the fighting had stopped. Tens of thousands of Maya who abandoned their homes during the years of terror, fleeing into remote mountains and forests, had for years been living in semiclandestine communities—“resistance communities”—inside the country and over the border in Mexico, and also in refugee camps. Bishop Gerardi understood that most Maya villagers wouldn’t feel secure cooperating with UN investigators, many of whom were foreigners, unless the Catholic Church could first help dispel deeply ingrained inhibitions and fears against speaking out.

The REMHI report—whatever its flaws as strict social science—was by far the most extensive investigation of the war’s toll on the civilian population that had ever been attempted. Guatemala:
Never Again identified by name a quarter of the war's estimated civilian dead (the 50,000-plus names fill the fourth volume) and documented 410 massacres, which are defined as attempts to destroy and murder entire communities. Most of the massacres occurred between 1981 and 1983, but some took place as late as 1995. There were also over 1,500 violent killings of three or more civilians at one time. The report compiled estimates of the numbers of refugees created by the war, of widows and orphans, of victims of rape and torture, and of the disappeared. It drew on the testimony of victims, survivors, and combatants from both sides of the conflict, as well as on declassified U.S. government documents. The report also included an examination of its own methods of collecting information, reflecting on such challenges and pitfalls as the unreliability of memory and the passage of time. It analyzed the war's historical background, its impact on communities, its strategies and mechanisms. One chapter cast some light on the most feared and mysterious of the state's entities, Military Intelligence, usually referred to as G-2. (The terminology was adopted from the U.S. Army's classification system: G-1, Personnel; G-2, Intelligence; G-3, Logistics; etc.) The report described the structure and functions of its various units, one of which was devoted to sexual spying (gathering information on cheating husbands or employing prostitute-spies to compromise opponents). Where it had the evidence to do so, Guatemala: Never Again identified military units responsible for crimes, and in numerous cases named individuals. The report concluded that the Guatemalan Army and associated paramilitary units, such as the rural civil patrols, were responsible for 80 percent of the killings of civilians, and that the guerrillas had committed a little less than 5 percent of those crimes.

The authors of the REMHDI report attempted to describe and illustrate the logic behind what they called "the inexplicable." But numbing numerical estimates, analysis of tactics and causes, and even journalistic reconstructions of specific massacres could "explain" only so much. Bishop Gerardi, as he'd once told Edgar Gutiérrez, had wanted a report that would "enter readers through their pores" and move them. Thus there were hundreds and hundreds of pages of direct testimony distributed throughout the text:

The señora was pregnant. With a knife they cut open her belly to pull out her little baby boy. And they killed them both. And the muchachitas [little girls] playing in the trees near the house, they cut off their little heads with machetes. Case 0976, Santa María Tzejá, Quiché, 1980.

They killed them with machetes, they killed them by strangling and with bullets. They picked up the children by their legs and smashed them against a tree, and the tree they smashed the children against, that tree died, because of so many children smashed against that tree so many times, well the tree died. Case 3336 Rio Negro, Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, 1982.

On the 19th of March 1981 the Army came to the village of Chel, and took from the church the 95 people praying there, and they took them down to the river at the edge of the village, and there they massacred them with knives and bullets. The rest of the people were frightened and they fled into the mountains where they were pursued by helicopters. The responsible ones were the Army and the civil patrols. Case 4761, Chel, Chajul, Quiché.

When I looked, they were calling the people to come together and they were ordering them into a church that is there and I stayed hidden where I was, watching everything that was happening, until I saw that no one was left outside, men, women, old people, children, they put them in the church. When I looked, they were closing the doors and then they poured gasoline around and then they set it on
fire. That's the testimony I’ve come to give. Case 977, Santa María Tzéjá, Quiché. 1982.

I don't know if it was a captain or a lieutenant who arrived with the soldiers and said, “We're going to finish off this village because this village is with the guerrillas.” By one in the afternoon they'd finished killing everyone and only the women and children were left. And then the lieutenant said, “We better kill the women and children so that no one will be left.”

They killed the women and children with bombs [grenades], because there were so many children; and as they had pretty young women in that town, well then the soldiers separated out those women. They formed into three groups, and got to work killing those poor people, but the soldiers had their way with the young ones, it was the lieutenant who started fucking around with the poor muchachas [young women]. The two-year-olds were all pressed together into a tight ball, and they were set on fire all pressed together, into a ball, all the children were burned. Case 6070 Petanac, Huehuetenango, 1982.

Josefa [Acabal] was talking with Eulalia [Hernández] when the soldiers came and surrounded the house. They cut up the señoras with knives, they killed them, five people in all. When the corpses were on the ground they started burning the house, they threw the corpses on the fire. Case 4912, Xix Hamlet, Chajul, Quiché, 1983.

The burning fat runs outside, look, how the fat of the poor women runs. It looks like when it rains and the water runs in the gutters. The fat runs like that, pure water. And what's that? I thought as I went in, and pure fat was coming out of those poor women, pure water comes out. Case 6070, Petanac, Huehuetenango, 1982.

A reader might emerge from those pages ready to believe the Guatemalan Army guilty of any crime it might ever be accused of. That would later pose a problem for those who had to investigate and prosecute the case of Bishop Gerardi's murder. They would have to resist drawing prejudicial conclusions emotionally rooted in the savagery of the recent past.

In 1998, when the REMHI report appeared, no Guatemalan military officer had ever been convicted or imprisoned for a crime related to human rights, although a few cases had resulted in convictions against low-level soldiers and members of militias. Some major cases had been stalled in the courts for years, and the amnesty decreed by the peace accords was meant to prevent any more such cases from going forward. But under international law there were conditions in which the amnesty might one day be breached or partially overturned, and Guatemala: Never Again, it would later seem obvious, helped to make those conditions seem within reach. Bishop Gerardi had let it be known that evidence collected by REMHI would be made available to people who might later seek justice against either the military or the guerrillas, should circumstances permit.

So the REMHI report introduced unpredictable and unforeseen dynamics into Guatemala's postwar climate. It loudly initiated a public conversation—responsible for 80 percent of the war's crimes!—that the Guatemalan Army and its allies had not expected to have to tolerate, certainly not within the country. By anticipating the looming, more authoritative report sponsored by the UN, and by breaking taboos against speaking out and assigning blame, REMHI posed a direct challenge to the amnesty and to the Army's uncontested position at the center of Guatemalan society. There was much at stake in preserving that position. Initially empowered as protectors of the country's oligarchy and of the United States' cold war goals, the Army had become a power unto itself, its officer corps constituting an elite social class that looked after its own interests.

But how could murdering Bishop Gerardi in retaliation for the REMHI report—two days after its publication—have served those interests?
When people in Guatemala said that the murder of Bishop Gerardi was "the perfect crime," they didn't necessarily mean that they didn't think they knew who had done it. Most, at least in 1998, thought the Army had done it. But it was much harder to understand why.

Edgar Gutiérrez told me that it had never even entered his mind that Bishop Gerardi might be killed. "Why would a seventy-five-year-old bishop, on the verge of retiring, become the target of assassins? It made no sense." Only later did he realize what "a complex chess move" the murder had been. Gutiérrez was one of the people who always referred to the murder as "a masterpiece," "a work of diabolical genius."

If one looked at the situation only in the old way—the way that preceded the Peace Accords—then the Guatemalan Army had every reason to want to kill Bishop Gerardi: his murder would be interpreted as a warning, as a clear statement that the Army would not tolerate threats to its position. But for the crime to be "perfect," the Army would have to get away with it officially, and it would have to accomplish much more than just terrorize the Army's traditional opponents in human rights circles and the Church. One step toward that goal would be to disguise it as the consequence of a domestic conflict or a robbery or such. This strategy had often worked in the past: the assassination, in 1994, of the president of the Constitutional Court, Epamónidas González (after he had ruled to extradite an Army lieutenant colonel to the United States to face drug trafficking charges), which was made to look like a carjacking gone awry; the assassination of the newspaper publisher and politician Jorge Carpio Nicolle on a lonely mountain road, seemingly the act of a predatory highway robber; the murder of my former colleague the young, elegant Malaysian-British journalist Anson Ng (who had been reporting for the Economist on the involvement of some Guatemalan generals in the BCCI banking fraud scandal), apparently a robbery or sexual crime in a hotel room; and, of course, the murder of Myrna
Mack Chang in 1990. The EMP had even employed hot dog vendors to stake out Mack's office and study her comings and goings. Whenever people said that Bishop Gerardi's murder couldn't have been a political assassination because it had all the markings of a domestic or common crime, they were displaying their unfamiliarity with how political murders are carried out in Guatemala. But precisely because such methods were familiar, in order to really create a masterpiece and also get away with the crime, the plotters of Bishop Gerardi's murder would have to be much more inventive.

"I don't like this case, it's shuco," gross, dirty, Otto Ardón confided to a courthouse reporter in Guatemala City, and the homophobic content of the remark was obvious to her. It was another little dart, one more strategic salvo. Get it into the press, into the rumor mill, into the public consciousness, and it won't matter when later it turns out not to be true. What people would have been talking about in the meantime was not the content or repercussions of Guatemala: Never Again. They would have been debating, joking, and amusing themselves about the man without a shirt and the carnivalesque "dog-and-priest" show. Would people even notice that the Public Ministry was refusing to conduct any serious investigation of the Army's role in Bishop Gerardi's murder?

What if a crime could be created in which as soon as one false scenario was rebutted, another one was ready to take its place? In the case of Bishop Gerardi, there would always be one more thing like this that could be made to seem as if it must have had something to do with that.

One effect of Bishop Gerardi's murder, whether intended by the murderers or not, was to encourage President Arzú not to pursue many of the Peace Accord reforms that were opposed by the Army and hard-line conservatives. "The president's discourse keeps getting harder and closer to the Army," Edgar Gutiérrez noted. The insistence by human rights activists—and ODHA was not the only such group in the country—on accountability was seen by Arzú as a disruption of the normalization process. The murder of Bishop Gerardi and its aftermath coincided with a ferocious campaign by the government against human rights organizations in general and the Catholic Church in particular. In September, in a speech to graduating military cadets, President Arzú called human rights activists "nearly traitors to the fatherland." It is not only in Guatemala that such language invites and summons violence against its target.