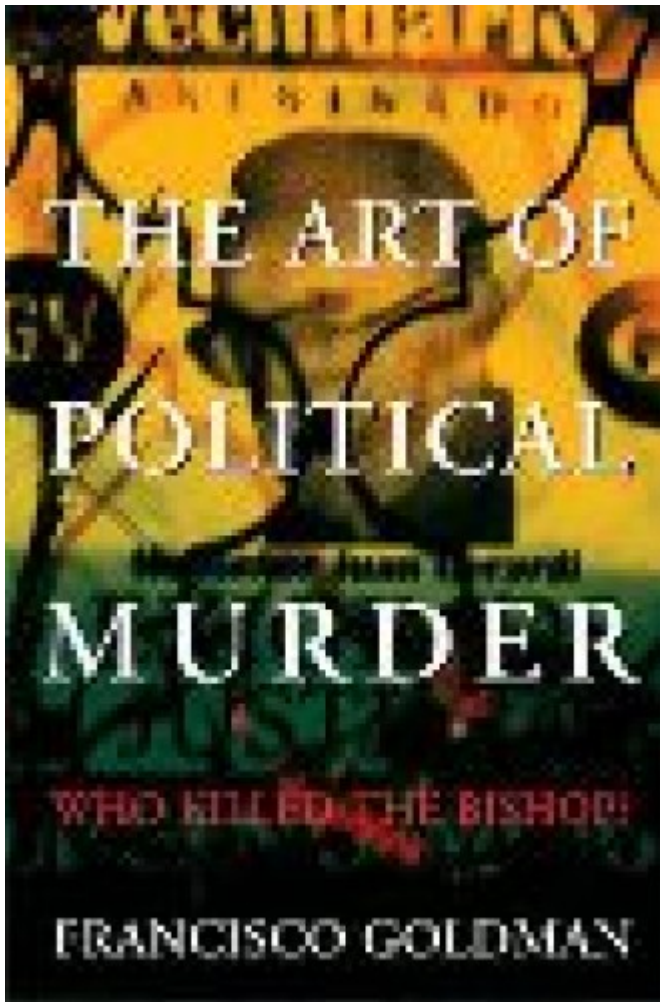


The Art of Political Murder

reviewed by [Paul Jeffrey](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?

Francisco Goldman
Grove

Late one night in April 1998, just two days after Guatemalan bishop Juan Gerardi released a report about who was responsible for what during his country's recently

terminated civil war, someone smashed in Bishop Gerardi's head. The crime launched a dizzying whodunit drama that successfully diverted attention from the report's damning contents.

The cast of characters that emerged from the investigation of the killing included beady-eyed soldiers; a troubled priest; the priest's aging dog, on whom some wanted to pin the killing; the indigents who were recruited as spies; the crazed Spanish scientist who tried to steal a thumb from the bishop's cadaver; and a secret homosexual club for top government officials. During the investigation, threats were made against judges and witnesses were killed.

A drama this farfetched seems best suited for treatment by a Latin American novelist: Francisco Goldman, a Guatemalan-American writer, has done us all a favor by repeatedly returning to his grandmother's country from his home in New York to doggedly tease out the nuances of a case that reveals the challenges faced by a country long run by war criminals.

Bishop Gerardi believed that the key to healing the trauma of Guatemala's 36-year civil war lay in opening the wounds of the country's past. Only then could true healing take place, he repeatedly argued. So when peace negotiations between the government and guerrillas led to the establishment a United Nations-supervised truth commission that was hobbled by an intentionally weak mandate, Gerardi convinced his fellow bishops to have the church step into the breach. His nationwide Recovery of Historical Memory Project gave thousands of survivors of the war an opportunity to testify about what they had experienced. It was often the first time that widows, for example, could tell about watching soldiers drag away their husbands in the middle of the night.

Bishop Gerardi's report—"Guatemala: Never Again!"—systematized people's testimonies and went on to analyze the apparatus of terror that had produced more than 200,000 victims. Not surprisingly, those whom the report blamed for the violence were not pleased. Killing Gerardi provided them with sweet revenge, and whether the murderers intended it or not, the crime provided a convenient distraction from the project's findings. Following the discovery of the bishop's bloody body on the floor of his garage just three blocks from the National Palace in downtown Guatemala City, people quit talking about the church report and started talking about who killed the bishop.

As the investigation of the murder got under way, Goldman traveled to Central America to follow the case on his own. In his first novel, *The Long Night of White Chickens*, he provided a riveting look at how terror as Guatemalan state policy affects ordinary people. In *The Art of Political Murder*, he looks at extraordinary people such as Gerardi and some of his young protégés, especially the staff of the archdiocesan human rights office that Gerardi founded in Guatemala City.

Central to Goldman's narrative is the dogged courage of the Untouchables, a group of young investigators from that office. Inspired by the bishop and deeply marked by his killing, these young men worked day and night for years to uncover what really happened that night. Although some details still remain unclear, the Untouchables found critical evidence that a series of government prosecutors—hobbled at first by political disinterest and then by intimidation and budget cuts—couldn't turn up. The church team played such a key role in the case that it was named a co-plaintiff in the trial of Gerardi's killers, often working as part of an effective tag team with the government prosecutor.

The church's interest in justice was complicated, however, by the involvement of a priest who shared the parish house with Gerardi and who eventually was found guilty, along with three military officers, of participation in the crime. The first government prosecutor had focused entirely on the priest as the culprit. When the Untouchables began to produce strong evidence of military involvement, a representative of President Álvaro Arzú approached church leaders with a deal: the state would drop proceedings against the priest if the church would back off from investigating military culpability. The church, to its credit, declined.

Goldman's marvelous telling of the Untouchables' story is possible because he often tagged along with them as they chased down leads. Although their courage and perseverance are remarkable, Goldman thankfully presents them as real people who have families, get into disagreements and make missteps.

To fill in the holes that remained despite his unparalleled access, Goldman often set off on his own. He tried to find the parish pet, Baloo, after the dog was impounded by the government in a veterinary hospital, accused of following orders in German to kill the prelate. Goldman tracked down witnesses and exiled prosecutors living abroad in witness protection programs. And he began to get a gut feeling for the case when he received a telephoned threat from one of the implicated military officials about whom Goldman had been asking too many questions. The static on

the line prevented Goldman from completely understanding the caller's words, so—ever the journalist—he called back to make sure he got the threat straight.

As the story unfolds over almost ten years (the conviction of the priest and three military officials was finally confirmed by the Guatemalan courts last year), Goldman weaves in what the crime and cover-up mean for Guatemala. He teases out the subtly racist way the lighter-skinned killers discredited the testimony of indigenous witnesses. He details what the Untouchables discovered about several other high-ranking military officials who were labeled unindicted co-conspirators by the trial judges in 2001, but whom the government has yet to begin seriously investigating. He tells about the training that the killers received at the U.S. government's infamous School of the Americas and other venues. And although he could have placed the murder in the larger context of repression of the church (the military killed 20 priests and countless lay activists during the course of the war), Goldman does detail how the government kept the meddlesome bishop under surveillance for years.

Guatemala is a beautiful land where the impunity that made possible the violence of the war did not stop with the 1996 peace accords. Indeed, that impunity remains a key element in keeping Guatemala a haven for drug lords, money launderers and human traffickers and for their political accomplices. By bringing to trial and convicting Bishop Gerardi's killers, a group of brave Guatemalans has opened the possibility of larger justice and thus shone a light into the darkness of Guatemala's suffering.