

DEATH ON THE CHEAP:

THE ENIGMATIC LIFE AND PUZZLING
DEATH OF PROFESSOR NICHOLAS
SCHROCK

BY JAKE MORGAN STRICKLER



This is for my family, for my friends, and for everybody else who somehow developed the patience, which I have most certainly tried, to let my obsessions run their course once my jaws have snapped shut on them. This is for my fellow *Das Tor* editors and writers who picked up my slack while I've spent months mentally stuck in Mexico in the 1980s. This is for Michael Moffett and our school's archivist, Shannon Walker, without whom none of this would have been possible. This is for the faculty, alumni, and fellow students who have offered incredible words of encouragement after reading the initial installments. This is for my fifth-grade teacher, Kurt Helfrich, who instilled a reverence for Truth, Justice, and the American Way in me at a young and tender age. This is for everybody who has ever passed through the hallowed halls of this institution and made it one of the most relentlessly fascinating places I have ever encountered.

Most importantly, this is for Ruth Schrock, Marshall Geer, Berger Erickson, and Nelda Crowell, whose tireless fight for justice, I like to think, has allowed Nick to find the peace in death that the circumstances of his murder should have precluded. Without their efforts, Nick would be a forgotten statistic, and you wouldn't be reading this. Nick's memory lives on and will continue to because of them. I hope to meet them all in Heaven, if not in the earthly realm beforehand.

***Death on the Cheap* originally appeared in a serialized format in *Das Tor*, the Thunderbird student newspaper (www.dastornews.com). This issuance of all four installments has been altered in certain spots for narrative coherence, and according to reflection on certain elements of the story in which the certainty of my assessment of the facts of the case fluctuated.**

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Jake Strickler is sort of from Denver, Colorado, and grew up there as well as in Australia, Saudi Arabia, Africa, and Las Vegas. Vegas was probably the strangest of those. His wide-ranging interests include 20th Century American history; global business and politics; any and all forms of crime; the international development of jazz, blues, and rock & roll; the life and presidency of Richard Milhous Nixon; and hoarding stacks of books that he intends to read one day. He holds degrees in Film History and Journalism from the University of Colorado, and a Master's of Arts in Global Affairs and Management from Thunderbird School of Global Management in Phoenix, Arizona. This is the first group of murders he's really taken a stab at although he has a pretty good theory about who whacked Jimmy Hoffa.

MEXICO

"Times of Crisis"



Despite economic growth, a history of political stability and a vast wealth in oil resources, Mexico is on the brink of economic chaos and social unrest.

Inflation, unemployment and corruption are increasing. Private enterprises are failing. Staggering inequalities between peasants and

landowners lead to frequent confrontations. And there are widespread fears that the flames of Central America will spread to Mexican soil.

Join correspondent Bill Reiser for a closer look at the internal turmoil afflicting our country's neighbor to the south.

ABC NEWS **CLOCKUP** "Times of Crisis"

Sunday, July 25th 8:00PM Eastern **7:00PM** Central

bined; and it is close to the United States – **it is our soft underbelly** [emphasis mine].

The nations of Latin America won their freedom largely as a result of our example. They were able to keep that freedom during their early years because of the protective mantle the Monroe Doctrine spread over them. By allowing a Soviet client state in the Americas – Cuba – we seem to them to have abandoned that doctrine.”



By this point, the Monroe Doctrine had been used to justify actions ranging from the Spanish-American War (which turned Cuba into an economic American pseudo-colony for half a century), the C.I.A.-induced coup of Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, the Bay of Pigs debacle and subsequent attempts on the life of Fidel Castro (more than 600 by Castro’s count), the Brazilian *Golpe de 64*, U.S. support for the violent overthrow of Chile’s Salvador Allende, and the recognition of the resultant dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1974, under whose 20-plus-year-reign of terror, over 3,000 were murdered or “disappeared” (according to the Chilean government; other organizations put the figure much higher) and tens of thousands more imprisoned and tortured. And then there was Ronald Reagan, who strode into office with a doctrine of his own after a landslide electoral victory against Jimmy Carter and fellow peace-nik Walter Mondale. ♦

From Containment to Roll-back

The Regan Doctrine put an end to the stated U.S. policy of “containing” Soviet influence in place and instead focused on “rolling it back” to whence it came. This was to be accomplished by secret, plausibly deniable, and incredibly violent means, something that would have to be the case due to the actions of Reagan’s two predecessors: Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Following the country-wide hangover induced by the military binges of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, Ford and Carter sought to make transparency and human rights the centerpieces of their administrations.

In 1974, the Hughes-Ryan amendment was passed, which required the C.I.A. to inform at least eight congressional committees of its covert actions; two years later a dedicated oversight committee would be created. Executive Order 11905 was signed by Gerald Ford in 1976, which prohibited the assassinations of foreign leaders *during peacetime*. That same year, a handful of congressional Democrats including New York’s Ed Koch sought to halt U.S. aid to Latin American dictatorships, specifically Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. In Chile, Pinochet’s secret police presented the President with plans to assassinate Koch in the U.S. Earlier that year, Pinochet’s men had killed Orlando Letelier, a former Allende official and critic of the Pinochet regime, with a car bomb in Washington D.C.’s DuPont Circle, also known as “Embassy Row,” about a mile from the White House. A C.I.A. document declassified in 2015, nine years after Pinochet’s death, states that “Contreras [one the plot’s organizers] told a confidant he authorized the assassination of Letelier on orders from Pinochet.”

As Greg Grandin, author of the National Book Award finalist *Forlandia*, writes in his 2006 *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, “As with the New Left, the Vietnam War radicalized the New Right.” In Reagan’s America, the crew-cuts were the new radicals. Due to the restrictions passed by the last two administra-

on a broad swath of the hemisphere. And for those movements that refused to die off of their own accord, like Nicaragua's Contras, the administration used back channels to fund repressive dictatorships and brutal right-wing death squads aimed at getting the job done regardless.

In President Portillo's successor, Miguel de la Madrid, Reagan would find a *true* companion in reforming Mexico along these guidelines. The question is: were the reforms good for the country, or did they end up only worsening pre-existing conditions? Were they good for the gander? Or were they good for maybe somewhere around the top 1% of geese? One thing's for sure: Mexico wouldn't be giving any aid to those pesky little communist guerillas south of its border with Portillo out of the picture.



**Attendees of the 1981 North-South Summit.
Note Reagan and Margaret Thatcher at left.**

The socioeconomic conditions created by these policies – increased economic inequality, the dismantling of social safety nets, the cutting of spending on social services (**such as policing**) – also necessarily resulted in an environment ripe for the kind of crimes like the one that took Nick Schrock's life. Prevalence of corruption, bribery, and murder for economic gain are all signs of a society where something isn't going quite right. Mexico's USD \$2.2 trillion economy makes it the 12th largest in the world, according to the CIA World Factbook. Yet Mexico's per-capita GDP is a third of that in the U.S., bringing the country in at 91st in global rankings. The wealth, it would be fair to say, is obviously not being spread equitably. Ironical-

ly, this is the kind of thing that Nick would have loved to have debated vigorously.



That's more like it: admitting a problem is the first step to recovery

These numbers, by the way, are from 2016. If we were to compare them to the same rankings from 1982, we might have some evidence to make certain arguments in response to these questions. Or, we could just take a look at the all-out drug warfare taking place in broad swaths of Mexico today. The face stitched to the soccer ball, I think, makes for a more compelling argument than an economic analysis does. But that's a question for another time. This is a crime story, after all. ♦

Bringin' it all Back Home: The Trial of the San Ignacio 7

The investigation proceeded at an aching slow

judge Samuel Lopez Calderon, "it is justified to decree a resolution of DISMISSAL [emphasis original] in this criminal case, in favor of [the accused]...without the need to go into the study and analysis of the evidence making up this proceeding, since it is obviously inadmissible, so that IMMEDIATE and ABSOLUTE RELEASE of the accused...is ordered."



Regarding the charges of robbery and dereliction of duty, the men's testimony is offered. Trevino's is a rambling and un-punctuated jumble:

"A Datsun van (*camioneta*) had been found with the trunk open, with many things strewn about the new van, so that I ordered the representative from Coyotitan [an individual who appears in no other case literature I've been able to locate] to go to the place where the van was while I was arriving at the place of the events...and on going up toward the road that leads to the microwave tower,

I was able to realize... perfectly that there were books, bags, articles such as a sleeping bag, empty suitcases, a lot of medications, a semi-destroyed case apparently of a musical instrument, several broken bottles of wine and a cup and a vase of crystal, some pieces of iron that looked like orthopedic instruments since they had frames that looked like aluminum, there was a suitcase with several zippers, a large olive green suitcase...a bag containing herbal medicines, a pair of shoes, new galoshes, coffee color, with a shoe block like a plastic foot... once finished I found tracks towards the mountain...I and Ismael [Garcia Olivas; another of the accused] set about to follow the tracks...from there we returned to where the van was with the things and he told the boys to set about throwing things in the van...and since I liked the suitcases, one of them having several zippers, a blue-colored bag with several zippers, a vest, a suitcase of cloth and with handles, and the blue tourist bag with aluminum piping, a shovel, having told the boys accompanying me to put those things in the back of the van because they were the things I was going to keep and for them to take what they wanted and then I told Ismael to take a coffee-colored [illegible] and he took it and also put it in the van, and also I told him on seeing him with the bottle of cream in his hands to keep it..."

On and on it goes. Pages and pages of almost fetishistic description of the divvying up of the bounty. One passage from the testimony of Trevino's wife describes her husband arriving home from the day's events excited to show off the toothbrush and tube of toothpaste which he'd left the scene with. Based on this testimony describing how the town of San Ignacio had eagerly divvied up Shrock's belongings at the insistence of the police, the men were found guilty on charges of robbery and dereliction of duty. The punishments were mild: jail sentences that amounted to time served and fines averaging about

tion that maybe nobody who wasn't there to be a part of it will ever truly understand.

I don't have a satisfying end to this story, and there won't ever be one. We know how it's turned out for the country of Mexico; descent into chaos. The legacy of the Reagan Doctrine is closely guarded by most conservatives, who continue to view the man's presidency with fanatical reverence. Like the Schrock case, things like "Iran-Contra" are ancient history. Their consequences reverberate throughout our daily lives, yet we generally lack the sensory instruments to detect them and see the ways in which they interact with one another.

Marty Geer contacted me after one of these installments was published to let me know that he's still alive. Ruth, he said, was in the same condition when they last spoke. He didn't indicate when that was, and didn't respond to my email offering the world for thirty minutes of his time. I don't blame him.

And then there's Nick. Nick Schrock is sleeping the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how he died, where he fell, or the events that followed. He's never been bothered by things like that. Oil and water, wind and air; it's all the same to him. ♦

The End.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The vast majority of the information in this piece came from the box that Nelda Crowell kept in the school archives. It contains newspaper clippings, Telexes, correspondence, handwritten notes, and other ephemera.

Some of these documents have authors and dates clearly attached to them; some don't. Where I do have this information, I have provided it in the text. Where I do not, and have referenced specifically, I have provided a reasonable guess of its origin and timeframe based on the information contained within. This has also been noted within the text.

I never would have been granted access to any of this information without the unbelievably generous help of the school's current archivist, Shannon Walker. Shannon, I will never be able to thank you enough.

Four long documents in particular have been of enormous help in establishing the timeline and basic facts of this story:

- Sellers, Jeff M. "Death in Mexico." *Arizona*. October 24, 1982
- AGSIM's "Unofficial Summary of the Disappearance of Nicholas W. Shrock On or After May 30, 1982." Compiled by the Office of Academic Affairs. July 16, 1982
- The United States Department of State's "Chronology of Events." Released December 9, 1982.
- The Library of Congress Translation of the Transcript and Other Documents Pertaining to the Trial of the San Ignacio 7. Undated.

In addition to these sources, a number of books have proved to be incredibly invaluable for context and historical information. The authors of some of these books have risked life and limb in obtaining this information. I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude as well.

On US-Mexico Relations:

- Grandin, Greg. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, The United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan Books. 2006.
- Schoultz, Lars. *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP. 2001.
- Smith, Peter H. *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World*. New York: Oxford UP. 2008.
- Weintraub, Sidney. *Unequal Partners: The United States and Mexico*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2010.
- Wiarda, Howard J. *American Foreign Policy Toward Latin America in the 80s and 90s: Issues and Controversies from Reagan to Bush*. New York: New York UP. 1992.

On the Development and Operations of the Narcotics Trade in Mexico:

- Boulosa, Carmen and Mike Wallace. *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War."* NY and London: OR Books. 2015
- Corchado, Alfredo. *Midnight in Mexico: A Reporter's Journey Through a Country's Descent into Darkness*. New York: Penguin Press. 2013.
- Grillo, Ioan. *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal*

Insurgency. New York: Bloomsbury Press. 2011.

- Hernandez, Anabel. *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and Their Godfathers*. Updated edition. London: Verso. 2014.

All vintage Mexican pulp art included herein, including the covers, was completed by mostly unknown artists, and comes from the personal collections of Bobbette Axelrod and Ted Frankel, as documented in the following book:

- *Mexican Pulp Art*. Intr. Maria Cristina Tavera. Los Angeles: Feral House. 2007

