

## A Nobel Prize for Lying

By STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Rigoberta Menchú, 1992 Nobel Laureate for Peace and a world-famous advocate for the rights of Central American Indians, has been exposed as a liar in her 1983 book, "I, Rigoberta Menchú."

Since its publication, Ms. Menchú's "autobiography" has been accorded such acclaim that it appears in the literature, political science and anthropology curricula of many U.S. universities. Ms. Menchú's story has also inspired at least four children's books, in which she is presented as a role model.

The hoax was laid bare by David Stoll, an anthropologist and expert on Mayan Indian culture.

In a new book, "Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans," Mr. Stoll shows that while Ms. Menchú described herself as a child agricultural laborer who couldn't speak or write Spanish until adulthood, she actually attended two private Catholic boarding schools.

Whereas she claimed her family had been dispossessed from its land by white oppressors, the property was actually lost in a quarrel with her father's Indian in-laws. A younger brother who died of starvation was imaginary, as was the burning alive of another brother at the hands of the Guatemalan military.

Mr. Stoll's book has received wide attention, including front-page coverage in the New York Times. Yet the fakery involved in Ms. Menchú's book is, for some, old news. In "Illiberal Education," published in 1991, Dinesh D'Souza argued that the vocabulary of the volume was not that of Ms. Menchú herself, but rather represented the feminist and ultraleftist fantasies of her ghostwriter, Elisabeth Bur-

gos-Debray. Ms. Debray is the ex-wife of Régis Debray, groupie of Che Guevara and one of France's most notorious left-wing intellectual tourist.

Still, it took most of the world seven years to learn the truth, and even with the imposture out in the open (Ms. Menchú herself has not disputed Mr. Stoll's allegations, except to tag her critics as "racist"), some of her advocates are anxious to give her a break. Her promoters view her tale as a morality play about the genocide of indigenous peoples at the hands of white invaders. They take the position that the "higher truths" they believe in are ultimately more important than the

negotiations, even after she had received her peace prize (which she celebrated as a house guest of former Sandinista secret-police boss Tomas Borge).

To be sure, Ms. Menchú's is not the only recent case of the counterfeiting of memoirs. A similar controversy recently erupted about an alleged memoir of the Holocaust, "Fragments," by Benjamin Wilkomirski. Like Ms. Menchú, Mr. Wilkomirski reputedly fabricated details of his life, turning himself from the illegitimate child of a Swiss Protestant woman into a Jewish native of Latvia, and claiming to have witnessed various atrocities.

But such other cases lack the most troubling feature of Ms. Menchú's misadventure: the deliberate use of lies to advance the agenda of the militant left. The worst aspect of such deception is that it obscures the real history of societies like Guatemala. The transformation of a squalid dispute between family members over a parcel of land into a drama of indigenous victims and evil invaders involves much more than the benign recycling of apocrypha into slogans. Instead, it feeds dangerous illusions and creates easy pretexts for violence.

Of course, the aspect of the Menchú controversy most relevant for Americans is the continued use of her book in schools. Exposed as chicanery, will it now be withdrawn from required reading lists? Probably not. Seated comfortably as they are, on U.S. university campuses and the boards of Scandinavian academies, Ms. Menchú's acolytes aren't likely to hold themselves accountable for their complicity in her deceit.

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*Rigoberta Menchú has been exposed as a liar. But her supporters take the position that "higher truths" are more important than mere facts.*

facts. In an editorial on Thursday, the New York Times explained that Ms. Menchú's lies were ultimately of small account next to the "criminal oppression of indigenous peoples in Guatemala." Geir Lundestad of the Norwegian Nobel committee also dismissed the story, stating that "all autobiographies embellish to a greater or lesser extent."

Yet the hypocrisy of Ms. Menchú's liberal apologists goes far beyond a willingness to overlook her mendacity. They also overlook the substance of her politics. Miss Menchú was a functioning leader of the URNG, the Marxist guerrilla movement that wreaked havoc on Guatemala for decades. Insisting on a policy of unconditional victory, she declined to enter peace