

Guatemala 1954

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On May 23, 1997 the CIA released several hundred formerly classified documents pertaining to the United States involvement in the 1954 coup in Guatemala. Although representing only a fraction of the existing government files, these records nonetheless revealed the determination of the CIA to prohibit the spread of communism to the nations of Latin America during the Cold War. Planning for American intervention in Guatemala began in 1952 when the president of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza, solicited U.S. assistance to overthrow the democratically elected (1950) Guatemalan leader, Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. Apprehensive of Arbenz's land reform efforts and the freedom afforded to the communist party under the current regime, President Truman authorized the shipment of weapons and money to anti-Arbenz groups. Within five weeks the operation to topple Arbenz quickly fizzled when representatives loyal to the president uncovered the plot and took steps to solidify their power.

Despite the short duration and negligible results of its first intrusion in Guatemala, the CIA found renewed support for their aggressive course of action in Latin America with the Eisenhower administration. Touting his New Look Doctrine, Eisenhower, hoping to differentiate his foreign policy from the plan to contain communism promoted by Truman, sought to defend American interests abroad with an increase in funds for nuclear weapons and covert operations. Convinced that Arbenz threatened U.S. national security because of his alleged Communist sympathies, Eisenhower approved the first-ever clandestine military action in Latin America. Codenamed PBSUCCESS, the program aimed at not only deposing Arbenz in favor of a U.S.-selected leader, but also looked to send a clear warning to the Soviets that the American government would not tolerate the spread of communism in the Western Hemisphere.

By 1953, the highly secretive PBSUCCESS had become a top priority for CIA officials. Prohibited by Eisenhower from using American troops to accomplish their goals in Guatemala, the CIA established training camps for the opposition army in the bordering nations of Nicaragua and Honduras. To compensate for both the small number of men choosing to involve themselves in the operation and the widespread support for the Arbenz government, the CIA devised a massive propaganda campaign in Guatemala to convince the populace of the invincibility of the forces seeking to take control of the country. Furthermore, CIA agents also conducted an intense psychological battle against the supporters of Arbenz, ranging from phone warnings in the middle of the night to death threats. On June 18, 1954, after approximately one year of preparation, U.S.-backed troops invaded Guatemala with the intention of overthrowing Arbenz. Realizing his army had forsaken him and fearing for his life, Arbenz resigned as president on June 27th and fled to Mexico. The U.S.-chosen leader of the military coup, Carlos Castillo Armas, assumed control of the government, thus ensuring the promotion of American interests in Guatemala.

Shortly following the change of power in Guatemala, CIA Director Allen W. Dulles met with Eisenhower to discuss the details of PBSUCCESS. During the presidential briefing, Dulles and other CIA officials exaggerated the efficiency of the program, claiming only one U.S.-backed soldier perished, when in reality, at least forty-eight men lost their lives in the attack. Consequently, Eisenhower and later American presidents came to rely on covert operations when faced with the threat of communism in Latin America; based on the faulty assumption that the overthrow of Arbenz was quick and bloodless, PBSUCCESS became the model for future CIA actions in the region. However, despite the initial determination that the U.S. intervention in Guatemala served as a triumph over communism, the decision to remove an elected leader by force seemed flawed when members of the army assassinated Castillo Armas only three years after he gained power. The aggressive American foreign policy implemented during the early years of the Cold War in Guatemala, therefore, succeeded in its immediate goal of removing a suspected communist sympathizer, but the unforeseen consequences of PBSUCCESS (four

decades of instability and civil war in Guatemala) remain the ultimate legacy of the initial CIA covert operation in Latin America.

Research by Kathleen Johnson
Volunteer for the Cold War Museum

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From the time of its colonization at the hands of Spanish Conquistadors in the early 1500's, Guatemala has suffered under the oppression of dictator after dictator. These dictators, who ruled only with the support of the military and only in their own interests, created a form of serfdom; by 1944, two (2) percent of the people owned seventy (70) percent of the usable land. In 1944, however, in a democratic election, Jorge Ubico was replaced with Juan Jose Arevalo.

The liberal Arevalo pushed dramatic reforms including Social Security, Health Care, and the creation of a department within the Guatemalan government to look after the affairs of the nation's Mayan (native) population. In 1951 Arevalo was succeeded Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. Guzman, as well as continuing Arevalo's reforms, implemented his own liberal reforms including a radical redistribution of land. This program involved the redistribution of one hundred and sixty thousand (160,000) acres of uncultivated land owned by an American owned firm that was then called United Fruit Company (and is now called Chiquita).

Under previous governments United Fruit had managed to acquire forty-two (42) percent of the nation and had been granted exemption from all taxes and duties on both imports and exports. Though United Fruit was compensated for the land, many people both within the company and with strong ties to the company began to fear that more land would be taken from the company at the hands of the Guzman regime. Some of these people included Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, CIA Director Allen Dulles, the Assistant to the Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs John Moors Cabot, and even the President's personal Secretary who was married to the company's head of Public relations. Together with many other individuals with positions of power within the American government, they were able to convince President Dwight D. Eisenhower that Guzman had to be removed from power.

In 1954, the United States Department of State labeled the Guzman regime as Communist; as such, the United States began equipping and training the Guatemalan military. After Guzman fled to Cuba, Colonel Castillo Armas rose to the presidency. Castillo was presented a list of radical opponents to be dealt with by the American Ambassador; as a result, thousands of Guatemalans were arrested, tortured, and even killed. Castillo disenfranchised illiterate voters, outlawed all political parties, peasant organizations, labor unions, and even burned materials that he deemed "subversive." Armas also repealed the measures taken by both Arevalo and Guzman and returned Guatemala to economic subservience in the hands of the United Fruit Company.

By Daniel L. Gordon
Volunteer for the Cold War Museum