

Cold War Heat Wave in the Western Hemisphere: The Guatemalan Origins of 20th Century American Hubris

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In the western hemisphere, 1954 was a year of ends and beginnings. For the masses of the small Central American state Guatemala, this year marked the premature end of a period of reform and relative prosperity known as the “Ten Years of Spring.” Beginning in 1944 with a popular uprising against the dictatorial Jorge Ubico, the Guatemalan spring allowed for democracy to take root in a region previously characterized by oppression, exploitation, and inequality. Only ten years later, this era saw its end with the 1954 coup d’état of the democratically elected leftist reformer, President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. To the north, in the upper echelons of the United States government and a nascent, increasingly powerful organization called the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 1954 marked something else altogether: the moment at which U.S. covert action became accepted as the most effective tool to contain, suppress, and eliminate anything resembling communist ideology or Soviet influence abroad—particularly in Latin America, the United States’ own “backyard.”

A prominent military leader of the 1944 revolution, Arbenz came to power in 1950 on a wave of popular support with the promise of progressive land reforms. Arbenz emphasized social justice, sympathized with labor unions, and sought to curb the excesses and exploitative powers historically enjoyed by foreign capital within Guatemala—namely,

the monopolistic United Fruit Company.¹ This, in addition to his legalization in 1952 of the *Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (PGT), Guatemala's fledgling communist party, made the CIA wary of Arbenz and his growing intimacy with leaders of the PGT. Ruling out direct intervention, and in large part acting autonomously of the Eisenhower administration, certain members of the CIA crafted operation PBSUCCESS, a covert effort by which the U.S. sought to investigate, undermine, and ultimately overthrow the Arbenz regime.²

Why in Guatemala, and why against Arbenz, did the CIA intervene? What factors gave rise to and facilitated the efficacy of the Agency's covert operations? In spite of its glaring shortcomings and catastrophic long-term consequences for the Guatemalan people, why was PBSUCCESS considered a victory within the ranks of the CIA and U.S. government as well as the general American public? What were the ramifications of this alleged "success" for the future of U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War?

In addition to analyzing the historical sociopolitical dynamics in Guatemala prior to and during the Ten Years of Spring that shaped Arbenz's rise to prominence, this paper is primarily concerned with U.S.-Guatemalan relations, the miscommunications and misconceptions between the two nations that are characteristic of international affairs during the Cold War era, and the CIA's innovations in proxy warfare and covert tactics. Taking a two-pronged approach in analyzing the events culminating in 1954, I first consider Guatemala's Ten Years of Spring from the perspective of Guatemalans themselves. Next, I review that same period of time from the different perspective of the U.S. government. The juxtaposition of these perceptions exposes the discrepancies between the two and, to a significant degree, sheds light on each party's seemingly inscrutable actions.

Finally, I consider the implications of the CIA's intervention in Guatemala on the future. Cold War history demonstrates that the United States often generalized and oversimplified the nature of its enemies as well as their successes; past U.S. accomplishments abroad were assumed transferable to other predicaments that were only nominally similar. By mistaking their chaotic Guatemalan exploits for unconditional success, the U.S. government willingly implemented a decades-long series of covert operations in the western hemisphere that destabilized the region, isolated the U.S., and brought to power many of the infamous Latin American dictatorships of the century's latter half. Thus this paper

¹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 146.

² Richard H. Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," *Political Science Quarterly*, 95.4 (Winter 1980-1981), 629-653.

argues, ultimately, in favor of historical sensitivity that the United States so clearly lacked in its Latin American exploits.

“Ten Years of Spring”: Guatemala Breaks from its Past

The People & The Land

In the context of modern Guatemalan and Latin American history, the revolution of 1944 and the consequent policies that fostered democratization, social equality, and wealth redistribution represented a marked break from the past. Historically characterized by oppression and plagued by socioeconomic inequality, the Guatemala that took shape following the 1944 revolution—particularly in the Arbenz years—was radical only in the sense that it took one bold step forward toward equality after centuries of taking far too many steps back.

Overrun and exploited like most postcolonial Latin American states, Guatemala emerged on the international stage and proved most profitable (albeit for very few landed elites) at the turn of the 20th century when the coffee boom struck; immediately, Central America became a lucrative region for foreign investors.³ In order to maximize gains for wealthy landowners, cheap labor was key. Naturally, the impoverished and already subjugated indigenous peoples of Guatemala were exploited on these thriving coffee plantations, providing low-cost labor on a massive scale. Indeed, as one planter said, “Not the soil but rather the low wages of our laborers are the wealth of the Cobán,” a city at the heart of Guatemala’s central coffee-growing region.⁴ However, Nick Cullather writes, following the collapse of the coffee market in 1930:

ladinos [land-owning persons of mixed European and Native American ancestry] needed a strong leader to prevent restive, unemployed laborers from gaining an upper hand, and they chose a ruthless, efficient provincial governor, Jorge Ubico, to lead the country. Ubico suppressed dissent, legalized the killing of Indians by landlords, enlarged the Army, and organized a personal Gestapo.⁵

Given U.S. and other global economic interests in Guatemala, Ubico’s dictatorship was looked upon favorably in the eyes of foreign investors in

³ Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA’s Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 9.

⁴ Jim Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala, 1944-1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 10.

⁵ Cullather, *Secret History*, 9-10.

that it promoted political stability—at the expense, no doubt, of the laboring masses. The so-called (and ironically titled) “October Revolution” of 1944 was thus a unique turn in Guatemalan history not simply because a stable electoral democracy took root in its wake, but because the reforms initiated by Arévalo, and later Arbenz, set in motion an era of change that altered the Guatemalan people’s very relationship with the land on which they labored.

While Guatemalans enjoyed far more liberties after the October Revolution than those allowed under Ubico, the Arévalo regime was—even from the perspective of the United States—moderate at best.⁶ Arévalo’s 1947 Labor Code, for example, revealed the limited extent to which his administration was willing to initiate radical reforms on behalf of workers. Although the new Labor Code granted “the right to unionize and strike, protected against unfair firings, mandated a forty-eight-hour workweek, regulated the labor of children and women, and set basic health and safety guidelines for the workplace,” it afforded “its most important benefits and protections to industrial laborers or permanent employees on large plantations...[precluding] possible alliances between workers and peasants.”⁷ Until the bolder Arbenz reforms of the early 1950s were implemented, planters under Arévalo still retained much of the autonomy they had enjoyed during Ubico’s reign, thus giving them a free hand over both corrupt municipal governments and their laborers.

Becoming a Reformer: The Enigmatic Jacobo Arbenz

The election of Jacobo Arbenz in 1950 signified a further break from the past—not only from Ubico, but also, in many ways, his disappointingly moderate predecessor and fellow revolutionary, Arévalo. Agrarian reform, writes Arne Westad, was “the centerpiece of [Arbenz’s] administration—in Guatemala, landless peasants constituted more than half of the population, while 91 percent of arable land was controlled by big landowners or, directly or indirectly, by foreign companies.”⁸ While Arbenz’s land reform required complex planning and was slow to gain traction within his government, his goal was simple: expropriate unused portions of large private landholdings to the landless peasantry. Arbenz voiced his progressive intentions in straightforward language before the public, declaring at his inauguration speech:

⁶ Cullater, *Secret History*, 11.

⁷ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 50-51.

⁸ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 146.

All the riches of Guatemala are not as important as the life, the freedom, the dignity, the health and the happiness of the most humble of its people.... But we must distribute these riches so that those who have less—and they are the immense majority—benefit more, while those who have more—and they are so few—also benefit, but to a lesser extent. How could it be otherwise, given the poverty, the poor health, and the lack of education of our people?⁹

Such rhetoric reveals Arbenz to be a reasonable man aware of and sympathetic to those suffering the inequalities plaguing Guatemalan society; he was clearly cognizant of the vast socioeconomic discrepancy between the wealthy few and the impoverished masses. And, perhaps most indicative of his left-leaning philosophy and leadership style, Arbenz explicitly affirmed in the above passage that wealth was secondary to the quality of life of Guatemala's citizens—particularly the poorest among them. His sensitivity to the downtrodden, not to mention his apparent disinterest in personal gain and opportunism, was unheard of within the ranks of Guatemalan leadership prior to the 1944 revolution. Incredibly, Arbenz regarded Guatemala's marginalized indigenous population not as a sub-human or undeserving people, but fellow Guatemalans as worthy of equal treatment and self-determination within a democratic political system as any landowning elite. As Greg Grandin writes, "Such sentiments were not only needed in a country that had suffered decades of graft, dictatorship, and poverty but practically insurgent in a polity that expected little more than manipulation and opportunism from its rulers."¹⁰ Even before agrarian reform became law, Arbenz was revolutionary merely by his perspective, political philosophy, and outlook on society.

Arbenz is an enigmatic figure whose historical significance cannot be overstated. Unlike the radical socialist that the United States portrayed him to be (see below), I argue that Arbenz was a middle-class intellectual and socially conscious young man with aspirations to reform the socioeconomic inequalities plaguing his country. Put simply, to his own detriment, Arbenz was in the wrong place at the wrong time: Arbenz initiated his egalitarian reforms just as the Cold War was beginning to heat up; to his north, the United States was wary of all signs of communist activity—whether real or imagined—such that Arbenz's land reforms and close friendships with members of the communist PGT inevitably bred mistrust among U.S. officials. Records show that there was nothing inherently threatening in Arbenz's intentions to reform Guatemala. Contrary to U.S. assumptions, Arbenz was in fact not in

⁹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 147.

¹⁰ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 53.

direct talks with the Soviets. The U.S. was correct only in that Arbenz indeed sought to perturb the status quo.

Born to a middle-class *ladino* woman and a Swiss-born pharmacist, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán lived comfortably in his youth. Though Arbenz would have preferred to attend university and pursue his academic interests, his father's morphine addiction—and later, his suicide—left the family with little money. Suddenly lacking the means to pursue his education, Arbenz enrolled in the *Escuela Politécnica*, Guatemala's finest military academy, where he excelled academically and quickly ascended the ranks of the Guatemalan military.¹¹

Declassified CIA documents and interviews with his closest friends reveal that Arbenz was a sensitive, intelligent, and meditative young man driven by his sense of morality to realize the reforms he considered necessary for a brighter Guatemalan future. As his wife María Vilanova de Arbenz recalled many years later, having only just met Jacobo Arbenz, she asked him, “‘What would you like to be?’ And very seriously he answered, ‘I would like to be a reformer.’”¹² Indeed, reform would soon become the trademark of Arbenz's presidency. First, however, he would need to find partners with whom to collaborate. In a government brimming with complacent politicians, Arbenz was left with few routes to take.

The Kitchen Cabinet: Arbenz Finds Allies in the PGT

The year following Arbenz's inspiring inaugural speech saw little radical reform in land or public works—not because Arbenz had given up, but because allies, even within his own party, were hard to come by. Governing members of the majority Revolutionary Action Party (PAR), Gleijeses writes, “focused their attention on other matters: their leaders besieged Arbenz in their incessant quest for personal gain, quarreling among themselves for his favour; agrarian reform was not among their preoccupations.”¹³ Even the deputy chief of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, notes Grandin, reported to the State Department that Guatemala's *non*-Communist politicians of the time “were a group of bums of first order; lazy, ambitious, they wanted money, were palace

¹¹ Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1991), 136.

¹² *Ibid.*, 135. For more helpful insights into the personal life of Jacobo Arbenz, see Gleijeses and his interviews with María de Arbenz, PGT confidants like José Manuel Fortuny, and others. For CIA documents on Arbenz, refer to the discussion on Arbenz's mental health below.

¹³ Piero Gleijeses, “The Agrarian Reform of Jacobo Arbenz,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 21.3 (October, 1989), 453-480.

hangers-on.”¹⁴ Contrary to the PAR name, these opportunistic and ideologically mainstream politicians were disappointingly un-revolutionary.

Arbenz was a rarity among politicians of his time in that he was an honest leader determined to keep his promises. Even the CIA, in their early notes on Arbenz, referred to the young Guatemalan as “brilliant” and “cultured.”¹⁵ As Guatemala’s elected leader, Arbenz intended to *act* on his campaign promises of agrarian reform and land redistribution. Far from being an election ploy or a hollow promise, Arbenz, the self-proclaimed “reformer,” indeed sought genuine social reformation. Ironically, for his own government and for the United States, his morality was an issue. Arbenz was not a dictator, nor did he aspire to be one. Rather than force reform upon his government, Arbenz committed himself to working within the bounds of the Guatemalan legal system. Any of his reforms, then, had to first pass through congress—which, to the detriment of his cause, consisted chiefly of self-serving, only nominally “revolutionary” politicians who were unwilling to tamper with Guatemala’s unjust socioeconomic status quo.

On the other hand, those few politicians who *were* genuine revolutionaries also happened to be members of the national communist party, the *Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (PGT), or Guatemalan Party of Labor. Increasingly, Piero Gleijeses writes:

Arbenz appreciated the honesty and the discipline of a small group of friends—the leaders of the clandestine [PGT], men like Alfredo Guerra Borges, Mario Silva Jonama and, above all, José Manuel Fortuny, the party’s Secretary General. These men, who were to become Arbenz’s kitchen cabinet, sought advantage not for themselves, but for their cause; alone among the government’s supporters, they had a programme that was specific, at least by Guatemalan standards. Arbenz was increasingly attracted to this as the best hope for the Guatemalan people and nation, but he had no plan to turn Guatemala into a communist nation. Both he and the party believed that domestic and international constraints rendered such a transformation impossible in the foreseeable future.¹⁶

As we have seen, Arbenz was a fair-minded nationalist who sought above all else the common welfare of the Guatemalan people. Disappointed in his own party’s lack of vision and revolutionary will, however, Arbenz reverted—more or less secretly, ultimately to his own detriment—to

¹⁴ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 52.

¹⁵ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 142.

¹⁶ Gleijeses, “Agrarian Reform,” 455.

collaboration with the PGT in an effort to set in motion his reforms. According to Augusto Charnaud MacDonald, a PAR member and senior politician for the Arbenz administration, “When Arbenz became president, the government parties were fighting among themselves over who got what posts. What help could Arbenz expect from them in his struggle for agrarian reform? Their programme was opportunistic; that of the communist party was honest.”¹⁷

Thus, Arbenz was caught in a sort of ideological tug-of-war. To his right stood the PAR, Arbenz’s own party, with which the anti-communist military was closely allied; although this was the party that led the 1944 revolution, its members in office had become complacent by 1950, preferring the status quo—established under Arévalo’s term—to further reforms. And to the left stood the PGT, a small but vivacious party whose members shared Arbenz’s dreams of true reform and mirrored his will to make them a reality. The position in which he found himself was uncertain and cruelly ironic: Arbenz was not a communist, and yet, upon taking office, the communists represented his best hope to fulfill his dream of social justice.

While the PGT was a relatively new force within Guatemalan politics, its Marxist roots ran much deeper in Guatemala’s history. The country’s first communist party, established in 1922, had been abolished during Ubico’s dictatorship ten years later. Only after ousting Ubico did certain PAR members with Marxist tendencies begin to meet clandestinely to form the PGT—in their own words, “a vanguard party, a party of the proletariat based on Marxism-Leninism”¹⁸—during the presidency of Arévalo, who rejected any outright communist expression.¹⁹ But having forged close relations with the PGT early in his presidency for the abovementioned reasons, Arbenz granted the communist party legal status in 1952, a political move that immediately caught the attention of the U.S. State Department as well as the CIA.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 456. This statement comes from an interview with Charnaud conducted between 1978 and 1988, long after the 1954 coup against Arbenz. Interestingly, Charnaud himself appears to be one of the “opportunistic” politicians of whom he speaks; it is difficult to determine from this excerpt whether Charnaud regrets the PAR’s behavior. In any case, that Charnaud recognizes in hindsight the PAR’s opportunism and the PGT’s sincerity reveals how communists in Guatemala were stigmatized for being labeled “communists,” much like the United States in the age of McCarthyism. As the above passage shows, despite their honesty and good intentions, Guatemalan communists were a marginalized political group of which others were suspicious on superficial grounds.

¹⁸ Cullather, *Secret History*, 14.

¹⁹ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 52.

²⁰ See records from the Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2045.htm>.

Meeting secretly in late 1951, Arbenz and the PGT leaders with whom he had grown close (Fortuny most of all) began mapping out their plans for agrarian reform. The drafted legislation was presented to Arbenz's cabinet by April 1952 and came before Congress soon after. In spite of the PAR's reservations, the Church's criticisms, and the landed elite's disparaging remarks and outcries against such blatant "Bolshevism," Arbenz stood by his reform: in the words of senior administration official Manuel Galich, agrarian reform had become "the heart of [Arbenz's] program, almost an obsession."²¹ On 17 June 1952, after passed in Congress under significant pressure from the president, Arbenz signed into law *Decreto 900*, the agrarian reform legislation—a feat toward which he had been working all his life. Sadly and ironically, it was this sincere achievement, this idealistic view of what a reformed Guatemala might become, that led to Arbenz's fall from power at the hands of the CIA only two years later.

Ten Years of Tension: The U.S. Interpretation

Guatemala's "Ten Years of Spring" looked rather different—and far more sinister—from the northern view. For Washington, Jorge Ubico's demise and Arévalo's modest reforms made the hemisphere increasingly vulnerable to the threats posed by foreign ideologies—namely, international communism. The United States had looked favorably upon Ubico's firm anti-communism and pro-capitalist policies. But as Cold War tensions mounted following World War II, so too did U.S. suspicion toward its revolutionary Central American neighbor where their strongman, Ubico, had suddenly been replaced with the democratically elected Arévalo. While the U.S.'s sensationalized reaction to Arévalo's moderate reforms was minimal compared with the (literal) attacks later launched against Arbenz's agrarian reform, any discussion of American intervention in Guatemala must begin with the origin of conflict: United Fruit.

The United Fruit Company

While the recent scholarship on the Arévalo and Arbenz regimes largely concurs that U.S. government officials' personal economic interests in multinational corporations like the United Fruit Company (UFCO) were *not* the primary motivation for intervention in Guatemala, and that these interests were *secondary* to the larger perceived threat of international communism in the western hemisphere, the historical complexities that led to the CIA-backed coup in 1954 cannot be

²¹ Gleijeses, "Agrarian Reform," 459.

adequately appreciated without first understanding the role that United Fruit historically played in the region and within the U.S. government itself.

In their revealing account, *Bitter Fruit*, Schlesinger and Kinzer make the compelling argument that the U.S. might never have given any thought to Guatemala had it not been for the government's vested economic interests in United Fruit's unperturbed success. "Without United Fruit's troubles," they claim:

It seems probable that the Dulles brothers might not have paid such intense attention to the few Communists in Guatemala, since larger numbers had taken part in political activity on a greater scale during the postwar years in Brazil, Chile, and Costa Rica without causing excessive concern in the U.S. government.²²

Facts verify this argument's basic assertions: the PGT was very small, communist activity flourished throughout Latin America following World War II, and high-ranking U.S. government officials like Allen and John Foster Dulles were directly involved in United Fruit's business.²³ Gleijeses counters this approach, however, arguing instead that the communist parties in all other Latin American countries had been banned by 1948, whereas in early 1950s Guatemala, under Arbenz's protection, the communist PGT *gained* influence.²⁴ Therefore, he concludes, under Arévalo in "the forties, UFCO was, to a great extent, the interpreter of matters Guatemalan. In the fifties, its role had become marginal."²⁵ In

²² Stephen C. Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1982), 106.

²³ See Cullather, *Secret History*; and Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*. On the prominence of communists in the Arbenz administration, Cullather notes, "The PGT contributed little to Arbenz's victory in 1950, but it gained influence under the new regime. Total party membership never exceeded 4,000 in a nation of almost three million, a fact reflected in the party's weakness at the polls. Only four Communists held seats in the 61-member congress, a body dominated by moderates. Arbenz did not appoint any Communists to the Cabinet, and only six or seven held significant sub-Cabinet posts. Those few, however, occupied positions that made them highly visible to United States officials, controlling state radio and newspaper and holding high posts in the agrarian department and the social security administration," 21-22. Gleijeses's argument (see footnote 24) supports this claim that the PGT, while formally very weak, exercised enormous informal power within the government due to its members' intimacy with Arbenz.

²⁴ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 362.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 363.

Gleijeses's view, then, *Bitter Fruit* fails to adequately acknowledge that communist influences *were* in fact present in the Arbenz administration; being aware of this by the time agrarian reform was implemented, UFCO became a secondary priority for the CIA, which assigned primary importance to containing and eliminating the communism that had already taken root.

While Gleijeses's reasoning is sound, it is important that we not lose sight of the role that United Fruit *did* play. Specifically, I argue in the remainder of this section that United Fruit was responsible for sparking U.S. distrust of Guatemala in the first place when it portrayed itself the victim of Arévalo's moderate reforms; that throughout Guatemala's "Ten Years of Spring," United Fruit's alleged victimization at the hands of Arévalo and Arbenz was used to justify covert U.S. behavior in the region; and that Arbenz's ties to the PGT did *not* necessarily indicate a Soviet threat to the western hemisphere.²⁶

Down with Ubico, Down with UFCO?

It is no coincidence that the United Fruit Company had earned the nickname *El Pulpo*—Spanish for "The Octopus"—among Guatemalans: its corporate "tentacles" reached throughout the country, giving it power over every major enterprise—including the railroad, electric utility, the telegraph system, and, of course, tens of thousands of Guatemalan workers and the millions of acres of land on which they labored.²⁷ The product of a corporate merger between a Central American railroad company and the Boston Fruit Company in 1899, UFCO was, by 1945, Guatemala's largest private landowner and employer as well as the world's largest grower and exporter of bananas.²⁸

Predictably, UFCO had become one of Ubico's closest allies: many of United Fruit's "huge banana estates," writes Cullather, had been "a gift from Ubico, who allowed the company a free hand on its property."²⁹ Ubico forcefully maintained an orderly political environment conducive to United Fruit's exploitative practices; wages were depressed, working conditions were poor, and workers' strikes were generally suppressed in the name of stability. Popular American magazines like *Harper's* and *Reader's Digest* championed Ubico during World War II,

²⁶ The American public, government, and CIA had made the assumption that post-revolutionary Guatemalan administrations were in direct talks with or influenced by the USSR. As discussed below, these claims were unsubstantiated and remain so to this day.

²⁷ Cullather, *Secret History*, 10.

²⁸ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 88-90.

²⁹ Cullather, *Secret History*, 10.

portraying him as a strong leader sympathetic to the United States, its freedoms, and its capitalist ideals—he was, they wrote, “the biggest man in Central America.”³⁰ Furthermore, the special treatment Ubico afforded UFCO was exemplary of the historically common rapport between oppressive Latin American dictators and foreign imperial powers—an archetypal, self-perpetuating relationship that had endured in one form or another since colonial times. In this manner, UFCO “executives could determine prices, taxes, and the treatment of workers without interference from the government. The United States Embassy approved and until the regime’s final years gave Ubico unstinting support.”³¹

Ubico’s close relationship with United Fruit begs the following question: when Ubico fell from power at the hands of Guatemalan nationalists in 1944, was UFCO, a U.S.-owned company, inevitably destined to fall with it? United Fruit’s behavior under the Arévalo administration suggests that this was not the case. On the contrary, Ubico relied on UFCO to a far greater extent than the latter on the former: it appears that UFCO was less interested in maintaining Ubico’s reign than preserving its own autonomy from the state; whoever the leader, and so long as he refrained from meddling with corporate affairs, UFCO would be content. So great was its power, UFCO could reasonably expect the Guatemalan state to respect its extralegal sovereignty as a kind of kingdom unto itself—even after the “October Revolution” and the arrival of a democratically elected president, Juan José Arévalo.

In order to fully grasp UFCO’s resistance to reforms, we must consider the degree to which Arévalo (and later, Arbenz) respected Guatemala’s tradition of “servility” to the company, the superpower it represented, and its economic interests.³² As discussed above, Arévalo’s first years in office—though certainly more liberal than those of his predecessors—were relatively moderate. With Cold War tensions rising, writes Grandin, Washington was becoming increasingly wary of Latin America’s surging nationalism: “Arévalo’s moderate support of United Fruit Company labor unions and opposition to Central American and

³⁰ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 21.

³¹ Cullather, *Secret History*, 10.

³² Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 85. Gleijeses also argues that we must consider Arévalo’s government in comparison with its Central American neighbors’ more oppressive governments. While Arévalo was certainly not radical, the freedoms he allowed contrasted sharply with the more dictatorial leadership style of “the other banana republics,” like Honduras. Indeed, it is important to remember that United Fruit owned capital not only in Guatemala, but throughout Central America. For UFCO, the 1944 revolution represented a disturbance in their otherwise smooth-running machine of multinational economic dominance and political coercion.

Caribbean dictators made U.S. officials nervous, but his continued proscription of Communism calmed some of their fears.”³³

However, the implementation of Arévalo's Labor Code in 1947 was the first major sign that, in line with the nationalist philosophy of the 1944 revolution, Arévalo would not allow the status quo of foreign economic dominance to continue wholly unchallenged. According to Cullather, “United Fruit executives regarded any trespass on the prerogatives they enjoyed under Ubico as an assault on free enterprise.”³⁴ It was not the fall of Ubico that threatened United Fruit, then, but rather the new government's unexpected and abrupt pursuit of reforms, regardless of how moderate they actually were. For UFCO, the Labor Code was seen as an attack not only on capitalism, but United Fruit itself. UFCO was particularly condemnatory of a stipulation within the new code that required estates employing five hundred or more workers³⁵ to provide these workers with more rights, protections, and benefits similar to those given industrial laborers.³⁶ Consequently, UFCO launched a concerted effort to overturn the new law. Barraging the State Department with complaints, the corporation argued that the Arévalo administration was “discriminatory” against UFCO for being an American-owned business.³⁷

As early as July 1947, United Fruit began voicing allegations that Arévalo's administration “was subjected to communistic influences emanating from outside Guatemala.”³⁸ Such accusations carried much weight among an American public increasingly concerned over Cold War tensions. These charges signified the beginnings of a greater distrust underlying U.S. relations with Guatemala—an environment akin to the era of McCarthyism in which all critics of the United States were instantly deemed communists or communist sympathizers. While the fall of Ubico therefore did not necessarily portend United Fruit's conflict with the Guatemalan government, the corporation's unfettered activity and success depended on the preservation of the longstanding status quo—that is, minimal state regulation. Arévalo's 1947 Labor Code was the first means by which UFCO's previously unchallenged autonomy was infringed upon, immediately sparking outrage within the upper ranks of

³³ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 76.

³⁴ Cullather, *Secret History*, 15.

³⁵ Apart from those belonging to UFCO, Guatemala housed very few such estates. In this sense, Arévalo's Labor Code did indeed target United Fruit more than other small landowners. But, of course, this does not necessarily mean that Arévalo was discriminating against UFCO for being American-owned, as company executives unconvincingly argued.

³⁶ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 94.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

American ownership. However, as we will see, United Fruit's reaction to Arévalo's moderate reforms represents only a fraction of their contempt toward Arbenz's land redistribution five years later.

Overtaking Reform, Undoing 1944: CIA Covert Operations

In the eyes of the United States, agrarian reform validated the fears that many had long been harboring: that Guatemala's government had fallen prey to communist influence. Increasingly, those in positions of power went so far as to assert that Arbenz and the PGT were acting on behalf of the Soviets themselves. Although historians consider *Decreto 900* a moderate policy of land redistribution, few in 1951 "saw it as anything other than an attack on the wealth and power of Guatemala's propertied elite, and by example, on the social order of the region."³⁹

Concerned that agrarian reform would mobilize the previously idle, oppressed masses and that a communist Guatemala would give the USSR a "foothold" in Latin America, the CIA began exploring new, more efficient tactics to address the threat of communism. A proponent of swift covert action, Eisenhower provided the CIA with the go-ahead to take action against Arbenz on its own terms.

Conflating Iran & Guatemala: The CIA's Inclination to Presume, Simplify, & Generalize

After a failed attempt to oust Arbenz and assassinate his closest communist allies at the end of Truman's presidency in 1952—a poorly organized, short-lived, and utterly embarrassing CIA project known as PBFORTUNE—newly elected President Eisenhower significantly altered the U.S. approach to Cold Warfare:

In the summer of 1953, [Eisenhower] encouraged his advisers to revise their strategies for fighting the Cold War. In a series of discussions, known as the Solarium talks, administration officials explored ways to fulfill Eisenhower's promises to seize the initiative in the global struggle against Communism while restraining the growth of the Federal Budget. The result was NSC 162/2, a policy known to the public as the "New Look." It stressed the need for a cheaper, more effective military striking force that would rely more on mobility, nuclear intimidation, and allied armies. The new policy placed a greater emphasis on covert action. Eisenhower saw clandestine operations as an inexpensive alternative to military intervention. He believed that the Cold War was entering a

³⁹ Cullather, *Secret History*, 33.

period of protracted, low-level conflict. Relying too much on the military would exhaust the economy and leave the United States vulnerable. In his mind, finding creative responses to Communist penetration of peripheral areas like Guatemala posed one of the critical tests of his ability as a leader.⁴⁰

As generally outlined above, this new approach to combating communism seemed the most rational of all possible routes Eisenhower might have taken: having entered office promising to cut federal spending and reduce government regulation, Eisenhower, a moderately conservative Republican, judiciously recognized the economic and political dangers of prolonged warfare abroad. As the rhetoric of NSC 162/2 demonstrates, Eisenhower worked under the assumption that the USSR was not only hostile toward the U.S., but actively seeking to subvert American influence abroad, as well.⁴¹ Because the U.S. military was already stationed across the globe—notably in Iran—Eisenhower could not realistically afford to bog down the United States elsewhere. Covert warfare appeared the logical, cost-efficient way to manage these seemingly inexorable threats; the alternative—stretching thin the U.S. army wherever communism potentially threatened American hegemony—was simply unfeasible.

However, Eisenhower's philosophy is flawed in fundamental ways. First, his "New Look" rested upon too many presumptions; as the Bay of Pigs debacle and the horrific U.S.-backed dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet would later show, Eisenhower's foreign policy as carried out by the CIA was fatally simplistic, short-sighted, and antithetical to America's self-proclaimed values of liberty, justice, and self-determination. NSC 162/2 fails to suggest that covert operations should be modified according to the unique circumstances encountered in each conflict. Nowhere in NSC 162/2 is Soviet communism distinguished from communism in other regions of the world; the stated plan of action accounts for no global diversity, thus assuming universal homogeneity. Interestingly, this is reflective of Washington's superficial ideological outlook at the time. "Officials in the State Department, the CIA, and the Pentagon," Cullather writes, "regarded all Communists as Soviet

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35-37.

⁴¹ For example, one section of NSC 162/2, written under a section titled "Nature of the Soviet Threat," ominously states: "the Soviets will continue to seek to divide and weaken the free world coalition, to absorb or win the allegiance of the presently uncommitted areas of the world, and to isolate the United States, using cold war tactics and the communist apparatus." The full text of NSC 162/2 may be found at <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-162-2.pdf>.

agents.”⁴² If all communists were indeed Soviets, then it would naturally follow that all communists might be contained and eliminated in the same fashion. This simple logic, however, is unsound once put into practice for the simple reason that it fails to consider idiosyncratic features of diverse regions, customs, and peoples.⁴³

Furthermore, multiple times throughout his account, *Secret History*, Cullather alludes to the CIA’s 1953 intervention in Iran—known as TPAJAX, or Operation AJAX—and the many ways this early covert operation shaped PBSUCCESS in Guatemala. The CIA worked closely with Britain to oust Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, a western-educated Iranian nationalist with aspirations to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Operation Ajax marked “the first U.S. attempt at removing a legitimate Third World Government.” Westad writes:

The Iranian coup was in many ways a new departure for U.S. foreign policy in the Third World.... For the first time Washington had organized in detail the overthrow of a foreign government outside its own hemisphere, and—as the CIA postmortem made abundantly clear—the results were to its satisfaction. Not only had Iran been steered away from chaos and a possible Communist takeover, but Washington had also shown its hesitant and uncertain European allies that hard decisions sometimes had to be taken when confronted with Third World crises.⁴⁴

Although the immediate results of AJAX were certainly to Washington’s liking, it was only much later that same decade that the U.S. would grasp the Pandora’s box of instability this coup had opened in the region. In the meantime, however, basking in their apparent victory, AJAX boosted the CIA’s legitimacy in the eyes of its supervisors in the U.S. government: the Iranian coup had “elevated the Agency’s reputation to unprecedented heights” among policymakers, and Eisenhower saw Iran as “proof that covert action could be a potent, flexible weapon in the Cold War”—precisely the line of argument put forth in NSC 162/2. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Dulles and aides to J.C. King, chief of the CIA’s Western Hemisphere Division, were ready to again prove the utility of covert operations in Guatemala.⁴⁵

⁴² Cullather, *Secret History*, 26.

⁴³ See the below discussion on the CIA’s failure to find evidence supporting its claims that Arbenz, the PGT, or both were in direct talks with and received aid from the Soviet Union.

⁴⁴ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 121-123.

⁴⁵ Cullather, *Secret History*, 38-39.

PBSUCCESS was thus set in motion. As in Iran, it was not until after the operation had concluded that the CIA would comprehend the long-term negative impact of their actions. Nonetheless, as shown above, TPAJAX set an optimistic tone for PBSUCCESS in Guatemala in two clear ways: first, Operation AJAX gave the Eisenhower administration confidence in the CIA's ability to smoothly carry out covert objectives of this nature; second, and perhaps more importantly, events in Iran made the CIA more confident in *itself*. A young agency created in the midst of the Cold War, the CIA was under enormous pressure to protect national security but to do so in total silence. It is psychologically plausible that the CIA became far more assured of itself following the "success" in Iran—hence the codename for the new operation, PBSUCCESS. In any case, when AJAX in Iran proved to the Eisenhower administration that the CIA was competent, plans were made to utilize in Guatemala "all of the tactics that had proved useful in previous covert operations," including psychological, economic, diplomatic, and paramilitary actions.⁴⁶

Herein lies the major flaw underlying U.S. interventions in Iran and Guatemala as well as those carried out later in the Cold War: the CIA knew next to nothing about the politics, the histories, or the peoples of the countries in which they clandestinely intervened. Apart from psychoanalyzing Arbenz as best they could from afar,⁴⁷ the CIA operatives conducting PBSUCCESS were ignorant of the young Arbenz's idealism, his deeply ingrained sense of social justice, and his aspirations to reform Guatemala for the betterment of its people. Similarly, there is little evidence to suggest that the CIA made efforts to appreciate the history of the Guatemalan population—particularly the indigenous Maya, marginalized and exploited since colonizers first arrived centuries earlier. In short, the CIA exhibited no historical sensitivity.

⁴⁶ Cullather, *Secret History*, 40.

⁴⁷ See "Clinical Report on Colonel Jacobo Arbenz, President of Guatemala," a classified CIA report filed 12 April 1954, at <http://www.foia.cia.gov>. This report, in addition to others filed during the late 1940s and early '50s, suggests that the CIA paid special attention to the state of Arbenz's mental health. With striking accuracy, this report acknowledges the occurrences in Arbenz's youth that might have brought on his poor mental health. The earlier discussion on Arbenz's youth corroborates these claims. Reports indicate that Arbenz was prone to anxiety, depression, and nervous breakdowns. While these reports are only tangentially relevant, they demonstrate the measures the CIA took to familiarize themselves with their "enemies." Ironically, despite these efforts, the CIA still failed to appreciate the complexities of Arbenz's character, ultimately labeling him a "communist" in a definitive, unambiguous manner. Predictably, American newspapers only magnified this superficiality. (See the below discussion of psychological warfare, propaganda, and the media.)

Rather, the lofty ambitions enshrined in PBSUCCESS simply mirror the overconfidence of the operation's designers: "Despite the lack of hard information on Guatemalan politics and society, planners were sure Guatemalans would respond to stratagems proven in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia."⁴⁸ Blinded by postwar tensions and Cold War paranoia, the formula by which the United States determined its enemies went as follows: anyone who associates himself with communists is necessarily a communist; and anyone who is a communist is necessarily dangerous to the American way of life (that is, its global hegemony), no matter how powerless or far away that communist may be from the United States itself. This is the simplistic narrative that overpowered U.S. foreign policy and captured the imaginations of the American public as operation PBSUCCESS entered into force.

All of this suggests that the CIA—as well as the general American public—was inclined to view communism in an unambiguous, black and white manner. For all the resources available to its operatives, the CIA's inability or unwillingness to investigate and differentiate the idiosyncrasies of Guatemalan communism (as opposed to the oversimplified perception of international Soviet communism) shows the Agency's narrow-mindedness and shortsightedness.

Selling "Red Jacobo": Propaganda in the Age of "Psywar"

PBSUCCESS was a covert supplement to traditional overt diplomatic initiatives. While John Peurifoy—the confrontational, ill-mannered U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala—badgered the Arbenz administration for any revealing information, CIA operatives were laboring in every way to undermine Arbenz's legitimacy—both in Guatemala as well as the United States. Covert operations in Iran, writes Cullather:

Had demonstrated the potency of propaganda—"psychological warfare"—aimed at discrediting an enemy and building support for allies. Like many Americans, U.S. officials placed tremendous faith in the new science of advertising.... In 1951, the Truman administration tripled the budget for propaganda and appointed a Psychological Strategy Board to coordinate activities. The CIA required "psywar" training for new agents, who studied Paul Linebarger's text, *Psychological Warfare*.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Cullather, *Secret History*, 38-39.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 40.

Declassified documents reveal the extent to which the CIA considered Guatemala a testing ground of sorts in which a variety of psywar tactics were utilized and later reapplied in other covert operations throughout the hemisphere—most notably, in Cuba. These tactics included radio propaganda campaigns, deliberate misinformation, records falsification, and the facilitation of civilian terrorism on the ground. According to a budget summary included in a CIA memorandum issued in 1975 and declassified in 2003, \$270,000 of the operation's three million dollar budget was devoted entirely to "psychological warfare and political action."⁵⁰

In order to turn the tide of Guatemalan politics in its favor, the CIA was determined to rouse suspicion and resistance to the Arbenz administration. The Agency's use of radio is particularly revealing in this regard. According to Grandin:

The CIA used techniques borrowed from social psychology, Hollywood, and the advertising industry to erode loyalty and generate resistance. Radio shows incited government officials and soldiers to treason and attempted to convince Guatemalans that a widespread underground resistance movement existed. Claiming to be transmitted from "deep in the jungle" by rebel forces, the broadcasts were in fact taped in Miami and beamed into Guatemala from Nicaragua.⁵¹

Such deception was commonplace in covert operations. Upon researching these radio broadcasts further, it becomes clear that the CIA poured enormous resources into this project. Codenamed operation SHERWOOD, this CIA-operated radio station, calling itself *La Voz de la Liberación*, combined "intimidating misinformation with pithy slogans" of anti-communism in order to "intimidate the Communists and their sympathizers and stimulate the apathetic majority to act."⁵² Radio had proved integral in the CIA's capacity to sway public opinion in Iran, where false reports convinced listeners that the tides were turning against Mossadeq; such misinformation played a significant role in altering public

⁵⁰ See "CIA's Role in the Overthrow of Arbenz," a classified CIA report filed 12 May 1975, at <http://www.foia.cia.gov>. The amount of money put toward psychological warfare does not include other related costs, such as "subversion" (\$250,000), "intelligence operations" (\$150,000), "arms and equipment" (\$400,000), "transport aircraft and maintenance" (\$800,000), and "operation of the Nicaraguan training center" (\$100,000) at which the CIA-recruited anti-communist opposition was housed and trained until their U.S.-backed invasion of Guatemala in June 1954.

⁵¹ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 77.

⁵² Cullather, *Secret History*, 75-76.

opinion. However, Cullather argues that planners of PBSUCCESS placed excessive faith in “radio as a propaganda weapon” since, according to his estimates, only one in 50 Guatemalans owned a radio. Because this strategy “ignored local conditions,” its actual effectiveness is questionable.⁵³ That the CIA implemented this intricate system of mass radio propaganda in spite of the fact that so few Guatemalans actually owned radios reaffirms this paper’s argument. Rather than consider the idiosyncratic complexities of each country in which it intervenes, the CIA adopted a blanket, formulaic, one-size-fits-all propaganda campaign when it came to swaying popular opinion and subverting communism.

It is difficult to gauge the exact impact SHERWOOD exercised over Guatemalans. Nonetheless, the content of these radio programs in itself provides invaluable insight into the nature of the CIA’s attacks on Arbenz. As stated in a surprisingly blunt CIA review of the SHERWOOD operation:

The themes employed in this propaganda operation are what might be expected. Communism is the great evil. It is anti-God, anti-religion, anti-fatherland. President Arbenz is depicted not as a communist, but as a witting instrument of the Kremlin who has sold the country out to international communism, and who will be betrayed and destroyed by the communists whenever he is no longer useful to them.... Arbenz is regularly vilified throughout the broadcasts. The army is a primary target of the propaganda.... Other clear targets of the propaganda are intellectuals, women, workers, and peasants.⁵⁴

This sober description of the broadcasts produced under SHERWOOD implies that the CIA made conscious efforts to destabilize Guatemalan politics and demonize Arbenz, equating him with all things antithetical to traditional Latin American values—religion, patriarchy, loyalty, and the like. And as in Iran, *La Voz de la Liberación* intended to incite Guatemalans to join an opposition movement that did not actually exist. Not surprisingly, there is no evidence to suggest that the CIA knew what

⁵³ Cullather, *Secret History*, 41.

⁵⁴ See “The Sherwood Tapes,” estimated publication date 1 January 1954, at http://www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0000135031/DOC_0000135031.pdf. This document contains no mention of its author(s) or the circumstances under which it was written; nor does it provide any clear date of publication (the “estimated publication date” of 1/1/54 is nonsensical since SHERWOOD operated until 2 July of that same year, shutting down only after Arbenz’s had resigned). Regardless, this comprehensive document analyzes in great detail all aspects of the project.

would happen in Guatemala once Arbenz had been deposed, nor had any plans been made as to how the CIA would cooperate with the new leader, Castillo Armas. This lack of foresight would later prove disastrous for the stability of Guatemalan society.

Even more menacing was the CIA's complicity in outright civilian violence against members of the PGT. Of particular interest to the Agency was the *Comité de Estudiantes Universitarios Anticomunistas* (CEUA), a small group of university students that, with CIA weapons and training, staged campaigns of terror, sabotage, bombing, and propaganda in Guatemala City, the country's capital and urban center.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, "PBSUCCESS propagandists also spread rumors that land reform was simply a prelude to collectivized agriculture, state farms, and forced labor."⁵⁶

On the home front, the U.S. government made efforts to quell any doubts that the events unfolding in Guatemala were supported or encouraged by American forces. In a striking moment early in 1954, the CIA was compromised when an American operative in Guatemala disclosed the details of PBSUCCESS to Arbenz himself. Arbenz immediately released this information to the public. The U.S. denied the charges, however, writing them off as a political stunt. The State Department issued an official public response to the allegations, affirming that:

The charge is ridiculous and untrue. It is the policy of the United States not to intervene in the internal affairs of other nations. That policy has repeatedly been reaffirmed under the present administration.... The United States views the issuance of this false accusation immediately prior to the Tenth Inter-American Conference as a Communist effort to disrupt the work of this conference and the Inter-American solidarity which is so vital to all the nations of the hemisphere.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 82-84. Grandin deems the students of the CEUA "the foot soldiers of Operation PBSUCCESS," distributing anti-communist newspapers, leaflets, and comic books in their efforts to "educate," or perhaps reeducate, the masses. In his discussion on the anti-Arbenz student organization, Grandin insinuates that the CIA provided the CEUA not only with arms but "a number of manuals with instructions on how to plan and execute bombing, sabotage, and psychological warfare." See page 238, note 60.

⁵⁶ Cullather, *Secret History*, 61.

⁵⁷ See Department of State bulletin (volume v. 30 Jan-Mar 1954), "Charges of Intervention in Guatemala Denied," issued in late January 1954. The bulletin's full text is available online at <http://www.archive.org/stream/departmentofstat301954unit#page/n4/mode/1up>.

Although we know this statement to be false, it was naturally accepted as fact among the American public and the popular media. Following the issuance of the above response, newspapers immediately mimicked the State Department's rhetoric, asserting that Arbenz was making false accusations out of desperation to maintain his own power. In Guatemala, the fact that Arbenz's charges failed to gain traction on the international stage made civilians worried that their president was preparing to crack down on democratic freedoms.⁵⁸ Strangely and ironically, all of this appears to have strengthened the CIA's cause. Far from undermining their potential to engage in covert operations, this incident reinforced the notion that CIA agents were untouchable and infallible. At the same time, Arbenz had somehow become the boy who cried wolf—despite the veracity of his allegations, the American public and media passively accepted the U.S. government's denial to the point at which even hard evidence would not sway their opinions. In their minds, the United States could declare only unconditional truth. “Red Jacobo,” on the other hand, could not be trusted.

Available CIA documents suggest that a mid-May arms shipment carrying weapons from Czechoslovakia to Guatemala's Puerto Barrios triggered the culmination of PBSUCCESS: the invasion of Guatemala and the coup against Arbenz. Delivered on a Swedish freighter called the *Alfhem*, the arms—originally possessions of Nazi Germany and confiscated by Czech forces following World War II—were purchased secretly by Arbenz and his PGT allies; according to Cullather, Arbenz and the PGT sought to clandestinely give a portion of these arms to workers' militias in order to create a sort of buffer between Arbenz and the anticommunist military.⁵⁹ Needless to say, after the CIA exposed the shipment, the arms purchase was an American propaganda goldmine. The Washington Post wrote that the “threat of Communist imperialism is no longer academic; it has arrived,” and Congressman Paul Lantaff is quoted proclaiming, “If Paul Revere were living today, he would view the landing of Red arms in Guatemala as a signal to ride.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Cullather, *Secret History*, 55-57.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Cullather, *Secret History*, 79. Similarly sensationalist reporting can also be found in the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The above allusion to Paul Revere is particularly intriguing. Apart from its hyperbolic appeal to American nationalism and its romanticized, largely mythical heroes, it is a particularly ironic reference for another reason: Lantaff is alluding to a time in history when the North American colonies were rebelling against their subjugator, the undemocratic and imperialist Great Britain. In 1950s Guatemala we see a similar predicament: the oppressed Guatemalan people are on the verge of democratic reforms when, suddenly, a foreign imperialist power comes from

And so the invasion began: as CIA-trained Guatemalan exiles filtered into the country, the Guatemalan military backed down without a serious fight. Realizing that he had lost the army, Arbenz tried in vain to arm the masses. However, on 26 June, the civilian army Arbenz had envisioned failed to emerge. Left with no other options, the president reverted to the inevitable: on 27 June 1954, Arbenz announced his resignation.

On 30 June, Secretary of State Dulles addressed the American public. "Tonight, I should like to talk with you about Guatemala," he began. He continued:

It is the scene of dramatic events. They expose the evil purpose of the Kremlin to destroy the inter-American system, and they test the ability of the American States to maintain the peaceful integrity of this hemisphere. For several years international communism has been probing here and there for nesting places in the Americas. It finally chose Guatemala as a spot which it could turn into an official base from which to breed subversion which would extend to other American Republics.... Arbenz, who until this week was President of Guatemala, was openly manipulated by the leaders of communism.... If world communism captures any American State, however small, a new and perilous front is established which will increase the danger to the entire free world and require even greater sacrifices from the American people.... Led by Colonel Castillo Armas, patriots arose in Guatemala to challenge the Communist leadership and to change it. This the situation is being cured by the Guatemalans themselves.... The United States pledges itself not merely to political opposition to communism but to help to alleviate conditions in Guatemala and elsewhere which might afford communism an opportunity to spread its tentacles throughout the hemisphere. Thus we shall seek in positive ways to make our Americas an example which will inspire men everywhere.⁶¹

the shadows and takes away their Ten Years of Spring. Could Arbenz be considered a Paul Revere-esque historical figure in Guatemalan folklore? Given the guerilla warfare that endured for decades following Arbenz's forced resignation and exile, it indeed appears that the reforms he unleashed and the values he preached left a lasting mark on the collective consciousness of the Guatemalan people.

⁶¹ "International Communism in Guatemala: Address by the Secretary of State, June 30, 1954; Delivered to the Nation over radio and television networks," John Foster Dulles. The excerpts included are those most relevant to the discussion at hand. For the full text of the speech, see Department of State Bulletin 12 July 1954, 43-45.

These remarks encapsulate the U.S. government's message to the American public following the events that led to Arbenz's resignation and, ultimately, decades of instability in the region. Dulles's speech also reveals the blatant discrepancy between the government's public rhetoric and its behavior behind closed doors. According to this double standard, human freedom is an inalienable right so long as the US does not disagree with others' expression of that freedom; suffrage and representative democracy are fundamental to liberty so long as a nation's elected leaders do not resist US political and economic interests abroad.

Conclusion: The Case Against Historical Amnesia

Jacobo Arbenz was among the first victims of Cold Warfare at the hands of an increasingly powerful post-WWII United States. To the detriment of millions abroad, the tactics used to oust Arbenz would soon be adopted in covert operations worldwide to remove those leaders hostile to U.S. interests—even if democratically elected—and replace them with leaders friendly to U.S. hegemony—even if dictatorial.

The Arbenz affair is a crucial piece of history for a number of reasons. For the Guatemalan people, this is most pertinently because Castillo Armas, Arbenz's U.S.-backed successor, ushered in an immediate period of political instability that soon gave way to a decades-long period of partisan violence, corruption, and coercion, particularly against the indigenous masses. Operation PBSUCCESS was successful only in achieving its immediate aim—to oust Arbenz. Looking any further than that, however, reveals the overwhelmingly negative consequences of U.S. covert action in the region.

Less obviously, Arbenz symbolizes a key component of modern American history. It was the U.S. "triumph" over Arbenz and the perceived threat of international communism that provided the Central Intelligence Agency with the reputation of stealth, strength, and competence that it enjoys today. The CIA's rise to prominence also had significant consequences for clandestine operations and intelligence agencies throughout the world. "Following the costly Korean War," Grandin writes, "U.S. foreign policy moved away from frontal assaults on Communism toward more indirect methods of containing subversion, primarily through the strengthening of the internal security capabilities of its allies. In its sphere of influence in the Third World, the United States helped to establish or fortify central intelligence agencies."⁶² Indeed, as we see following the removal of Arbenz in 1954, Guatemala enjoyed—with U.S. support—an unprecedented proliferation in government intelligence and information gathering. These newly available resources

⁶² Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 74.

would soon contribute directly to the terrorism, subjugation, and massacres inflicted upon any real or perceived subversives throughout the country.

The United States also displayed its condescension toward Guatemala on multiple occasions and through multiple avenues. In addition to Secretary of State Dulles's speech cited above, a July 1954 column from the New York Times titled "The Castillo Armas Regime" reads:

As was generally expected...Lieut. Col. Carlos Castillo Armas has been chosen head of the anti-Communist junta in Guatemala.... *Norteamericanos* may with all earnestness wish this slight, tired-voiced, bright-eyed little Colonel well. Because in very large measure how he does will affect the regard with which we ourselves are held by the other Latin Americans for years to come.⁶³

In patronizing language, this column portrays the murderous Castillo Armas as if he were a simply boy embarking on an adventure worthy of U.S. patronage. The New York Times gives him full support, of course, but not without first establishing for its readers that the U.S. still considers its Central American neighbors inferior.

Furthermore, PBSUCCESS had implications far beyond the borders of Guatemala. Westad notes, "Guatemala was seen in Washington as a template for future success, even after the interventionist strategy had failed in quelling the Cuban revolution in 1961. As one CIA analyst observed later: 'The language, arguments, and techniques of the Arbenz episode were used in Cuba in the early 1960s, in Brazil in 1964, in the Dominican Republic in 1965, and in Chile in 1973.'"⁶⁴ As this paper has argued, the CIA's covert operations reveal its tendency to generalize and oversimplify matters that demand more complex considerations. Although PBSUCCESS was nominally successful in the short-run, later attempts to build upon this success with similar models of intervention in places like Cuba, Brazil, and Chile proved more damaging than the U.S. government could possibly have realized.

Finally, Guatemala in 1954 was significant in the grander scheme of the Cold War itself. According to a member of the National Security

⁶³ "The Castillo Armas Regime," New York Times, published 11 July 1954. For the column's full text, see <http://proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/pqdweb?index=0&did=83341636&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1303085407&clientId=17822>.

⁶⁴ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 149.

Council, Guatemala represented “in miniature all of the social cleavages, tensions, and dilemmas of modern Western society under attack by the Communist virus. We should regard Guatemala as a prototype area for testing means and methods of combating Communism.”⁶⁵ I would take this one-sided outlook further: Guatemala represented not only a “prototype” for future U.S. foreign policy, but, in a historical perspective, a standard model of Cold War tensions, miscommunication, and oversimplification. That is, Guatemala demonstrates on a small scale the much larger, more abstract origins underpinning the inscrutable Cold War era. By acting on its suspicions and intervening to an increasing degree in Guatemalan affairs, the United States drove Arbenz to become what they saw him to be, something he might otherwise not have been—not a communist, but a good man left with fewer and fewer options except to cling more tightly to his PGT allies. In short, the U.S. engaged in what is known in psychological terms as “self-fulfilling prophecies,” in which our expectations are met because we act in such a way that the expected outcome is the only one possible. This, mixed with grave uncertainty, contributed to the strained U.S.-Guatemalan relations in the 1940s and ‘50s as well as the Cold War tensions throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

I close with a word on American nationalism and historical amnesia. In addition to the abovementioned Cold War tensions, the ways the U.S. government responded to the perceived Guatemalan threat of communism were understandable, but unacceptable: I say this not with regard to the CIA or the State Department, but to the American public itself. Regardless of the role of United Fruit, the United States intervened in Guatemala on false or unsubstantiated grounds. The moment the government suspected that communists had infiltrated the ranks of the Arévalo and Arbenz administrations, the overwhelming majority of the American populace had jumped on the bandwagon to exterminate communists from the western hemisphere; too few had the willingness and the courage to think critically, resist conformity, and second-guess Washington’s policies toward its Central American neighbor. There is no way to tell whether the CIA might have approached the Arbenz regime differently if it had allowed itself the opportunity to understand the state they were about to overthrow. That is an unsolvable matter.

However, in the present, American citizens *do* have the power to prevent such injustices from occurring—to voice dissent when their government acts not out of rationality or even the common good, but out of hubris, paranoia, and insensitivity. These factors, in short, led to the CIA’s intervention in Guatemala. It is disheartening that today, in the contemporary United States, unwarranted and arrogant interventions of

⁶⁵ Quoted in Cullather, *Secret History*, 35.

this sort are still allowed to occur: specifically, President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. As in the case of Guatemala, the American public supported this intervention largely on emotional grounds—Americans responded precisely as expected to buzzwords like “freedom,” “patriotism,” and “democracy.” President Bush's appeals to American nationalism, in short, served to convince the American populace that war in Iraq was justified in much the same way that President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles convinced the public that Arbenz's communist allies threatened their freedom, democracy, and the American way of life.

Richard Hughes writes that “there is perhaps no more compelling task for Americans to accomplish in the 21st Century than to learn to see the world through someone else's eyes.”⁶⁶ Indeed, as a way of doing so, it is time the citizens of the United States learn from their country's own history. It would be a disservice to the nation they so dearly love and a dishonor to those abroad, like Jacobo Arbenz and the Guatemalan masses, who have paid steeply and unnecessarily for the sake of American hegemony. The rise of the CIA in the aftermath of Guatemalan intervention signified American hubris precisely because the antithesis to hubris is humility, and it is humility before our history of which Americans are most desperately in need today.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63.

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