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Publications

Reversing the Revolution: U.S. Intervention in Guatemala in 1954 - Carolyn R. Schintzius

INTRODUCTION:

In June 1954, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) executed operation PBSUCCESS to overthrow President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman of Guatemala in response to the Eisenhower administration's growing fears of a communist threat in Latin America. Democratically-elected in 1951, Arbenz's government initiated a series of revolutionary economic and political measures that ultimately led President Eisenhower to authorize the CIA intervention. On June 18, Commander Carlos Castillo Armas led a group of U.S.-trained Guatemalan exiles into the country. Their goal was to instigate an uprising among local citizens which would ultimately overthrow Arbenz. When no such rebellion occurred, Eisenhower ordered U.S. aircraft to attack Guatemalan military bases and force Arbenz from power. On June 27, 1954, President Arbenz was deposed and Castillo Armas succeeded him as the new Guatemalan president. The necessity and strategic success of PBSUCCESS, however, remain debated by leading scholars of the Guatemalan intervention.

STRATEGY:

The covert operation was the product of extremely secretive CIA planning, under the direction of CIA Director Allen Dulles, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Colonel Albert Haney. As part of the plan, U.S. officials used propaganda to spread rumors that President Arbenz was leading a communist regime in Guatemala. To cover-up PBSUCCESS, the State Department derailed an Organization of American States investigation and produced numerous white papers that accused Arbenz of being a communist dictator. U.S. journalists and reporters were also key players in the attempt to overthrow Arbenz as they composed compelling narratives that described Armas as the heroic "Liberator" who was saving the Guatemalan people from a tyrannical communist regime.

INTEGRATED ELEMENTS OF NATIONAL POWER:

Collaboration on the plan to intervene in Guatemala occurred principally between the Central Intelligence Agency under Allen Dulles and the Department of State headed by John Foster Dulles. Communication was facilitated by the fact that the two leaders were brothers. As CIA agent Howard Hunt wrote, "A word from one (brother) to the other substituted for weeks of inter- and intra-agency debate." While cooperation among other elements of the national security apparatus did take place, PBSUCCESS was essentially a CIA project. The multi-faceted operation involved defection efforts, logistic preparations, exile organization, propaganda, and paramilitary training. The plan, coupled with supplemental air support, eventually succeeded in threatening and bribing Arbenz's military, ensuring the triumph of the so-called Liberation Army.

EVALUATION:

Implementation of PBSUCCESS was executed with determination, however, the plan had a number of fundamental flaws. While the CIA was confident PBSUCCESS would create an indigenous rebellion and overthrow Arbenz with relative ease, this proved not to be the case. The operation failed to instigate an uprising among Guatemalans. Instead, good fortune determined success when Arbenz's military abandoned him. More importantly, the goal of the operation, to oust Arbenz, was arguably of little value to the United States. The national security system allowed an over-reaction to communism and possibly the economic interests of the United Fruit Company to compel a CIA operation that was not required to protect U.S. interests.

RESULTS:

The political benefits of operation PBSUCCESS are uncertain. While the plan successfully



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unseated President Arbenz, there is much debate over whether the Eisenhower administration had legitimate reasons for invading Guatemala. One thing is certain: PBSUCCESS produced immeasurable costs. The disastrous Guatemalan civil war that followed the 1954 invasion was fought until 1994 and left more than 150,000 dead. As a result of the invasion and subsequent years of devastation and violence in Guatemala, anti-American attitudes spread throughout Latin America.

CONCLUSION:

In hindsight, PBSUCCESS was severely flawed. The U.S. devised and funded operation failed in its first objective as President Arbenz was not overthrown the way U.S. officials had hoped. Moreover, there appears to have been little need for the American attempt to overthrow Arbenz. Scholars agree that the Soviet Union did not control Guatemala in 1954 to the extent that the Eisenhower administration perceived, nor were local communist groups on the verge of seizing power and spreading communism throughout Latin America.

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