

Motivations of US Covert Action in Guatemala :

External or Internal Constraint?

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· **Key words** : US foreign policy, Guatemala, covert action, intelligence policy, public opinion

[ABSTRACT]

During the Cold War era, US decision makers made extensive use of covert action to bring about regime change in a number of countries. In the context of examining US covert action in Guatemala in 1954, I attempt to assess the motivations of American decision makers for opting for covert action as a particular means of foreign policy. From the perspective of ‘external constraint’, covertness is undertaken to deceive target countries, to avoid conflicts with other stakeholders, and to skirt negative international opinion. From the perspective of ‘internal constraint’, secrecy is undertaken to circumvent domestic opposition against involvement in target countries. By and large, the outcomes of this case study lend credence to the explanation provided by the former perspective. By going underground rather than using overt military force, US decision makers attempted to circumvent negative

international publicity that open aggression toward Guatemala would have brought. Circumstantial evidence also suggests that by using covert action, US decision makers were able to minimize the domestic public-relations risk associated with overt involvement in the region.

I . Introduction

In its broadest definition, covert action is any action carried out covertly in a manner that the identities of parties responsible for that action are undisclosed. In everyday life, ordinary individuals and groups can undertake covert action for a variety of reasons. In the jargon of the US Intelligence Community, however, covert action is usually understood as action undertaken covertly by the US government in foreign states or territories for the purpose of accomplishing US foreign policy objectives without disclosing American involvement.¹⁾ During the Cold War era, the US decision makers made extensive use of covert action of this type to bring about regime change in so-called Third World countries.

The terms ‘covert actions’ and ‘covert operations’ are used interchangeably in the US intelligence lexicon, but the US Intelligence Community (IC) differentiates ‘covert action’ from ‘clandestine action.’ According to the definition adopted by the US Defense Department, “a covert operation differs from a clandestine operation in that emphasis is placed on concealment of *identity* of sponsor rather than on concealment of the *operation*.”²⁾ At the time of American covert actions in Iran, Guatemala, Chile, and many other countries, the United States was able to deny its involvement in those actions, although actions to replace existing regimes were not carried out

1) For definition of covert action, refer to Gary J. Schmitt and Abram N. Shulsky, *Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of 1944-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1999).

2) US Department of Defense, “Joint Publication 1-02 Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms,” (2001), available at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf> (accessed on 4 October 2010).

clandestinely. That is, the actions themselves were not clandestine, but people were kept in the dark about American involvement. During the Cold War era, the United States was able to deny its involvement in most of the covert operations that it carried out in other countries. Why was the United States so anxious to conceal its involvement? What motivated the US decision makers to use covert action instead of other foreign policy means? This research explores the motives of American decision makers when covert action is used as a particular tool of statecraft to accomplish foreign policy objectives during the Cold War era. By investigating the less studied but important US covert action in Guatemala (1954), I attempt to evaluate the different theories that vie to explain American motivations for choosing covert action as a means of foreign policy.

II. Why Covert Action?

1. The Cases of US Covert Action during the Cold War Period

The United States resorted to covert action during the Cold War era to bring about regime change in target countries. The chart below (Table 1) lists ‘successful’ covert action to assassinate national leaders of foreign states or to overthrow regimes. This list is by no means exhaustive, since truly successful US covert actions would not have been disclosed to the public. The following list includes only the cases of US action that are generally accepted as confirmed cases of US covert action.

Covert action is one of many foreign policy tools available to the decision-making elites in the United States. American decision makers can use diplomatic means to resolve conflicts with other states. If diplomacy appears unviable, elites may resort to more violent means such as war or the threat of war. Covert action is another option. But what motivates US decision makers to undertake covert action? Various explanations exist that attempt to assess the motivations behind US covert action during the Cold War era. By and large, these explanations are grouped into two broad categories: ‘external’ and ‘internal’ constraint.³⁾

3) Jaechun Kim, “Covert Action and Democratic Peace: Why Democracies Fight Secret Wars” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2001), p. 17.

Table 1. *US Covert Action during the Cold War Era*

Year	State	Achievements
1953	Iran	• change of regime from Mossadeq to Pahlavi
1954	Guatemala	• overthrow of Arbenz regime
1961	Ecuador	• change of regime from Jose Belasco to Carlos Arosemena
1961	Congo (former Zaire)	• assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and support of Mobutu regime
1963	Dominican Republic	• overthrow of Bosch regime
1964	Brazil	• change of regime from Goulart to Branco
1965	Indonesia	• overturn of Sukarno government and installation of Suharto regime
1970	Cambodia	• overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and help to establish Lon Nol regime
1971	Bolivia	• change of regime from Juan Torres to Hugo Banzer Suarez
1973	Chile	• overthrow of Salvador Allende and installation of Augusto Pinochet
1980	Nicaragua	• regime change from Sandinistas to Chamorro

2. 'External Constraint' Explanation

From the perspective of 'external constraint', the targets of concealment lie outside the territorial boundary of the perpetrator of the covert action, which in this case means outside the United States.⁴⁾ First, deception of the target is crucial. Deceiving a target of a covert action works to ensure the success of related missions. If, for instance, a target is aware of American involvement, it will attempt to frustrate the US efforts. Secrecy is necessary for the US to penetrate the central organs of a target state and successfully implement preplanned covert action. Disclosing its involvement can only put US agents and agencies in harm's way. Secrecy helps protect American spies and negate counterintelligence measures of the target governments or states. Additionally, disclosing American involvement in covert action to promote, for example, a coup could fuel anti-American sentiments in the target states.

4) *Ibid.*

Such action could also appear as a treasonous action propagated by Americans against a legitimate government. In short, concealing American involvement is necessary to implement covert action efficiently and contain anti-American sentiments in the target country.

Second, as David Gibbs argues, secrecy allows decision makers to avoid conflicts with other states that are considered to be major stakeholders in the target state.⁵⁾ For instance, the US attempted to conceal its covert action in Iran in 1953 because open involvement could have invited confrontation with the Soviet Union, which had a stake in neighboring Iraq in the 1950s. Covertness in this case allowed the United States to avoid open confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Third, secrecy helps stave off negative international opinion against one's policy to intervene in the domestic affairs of another state.⁶⁾ For instance, French covert action in 1985 to sink the Rainbow Warrior, the Pacific Ocean campaign vessel of Greenpeace, without disclosing French involvement was an attempt to fend off adverse international opinion against French policy. On the night of July 10, 1985, the French government secretly sank the Rainbow Warrior, which was docked in Auckland harbor in New Zealand. In the early 1980s, the controversial French nuclear test in the Pacific had created adverse international opinion as Greenpeace waged noisy demonstrations against the test. The elites in France regarded covert action as the most efficient way of thwarting the Greenpeace plan to send a protest flotilla to the Pacific and of avoiding international accusations. The French public in general felt that the French nuclear test was in the national interests of France and thought the Greenpeace movement was undermining legitimate French interests. After the revelation of the French government's complicity, the French public stood behind its government's action.⁷⁾ Secrecy of French covert action to sink the Rainbow Warrior therefore was deemed to circumvent negative international publicity. US decision makers may also resort to covert action to skirt

5) David N. Gibbs, "Secrecy and International Relations," *Journal of Peace Research* 32-2 (1995), pp. 213-28.

6) Patrick James and Glenn E. Mitchell II, "Targets of Covert Pressure: The Hidden Victims of the Democratic Peace," *International Interactions* 20-1 (1995), pp. 85-107.

7) For details on the Rainbow Warrior Incident, see Isobelle Gidley and Richard Shears, *The Rainbow Warrior Affairs* (UK: Uwin, 1986) and John Dyson, *Sink the Rainbow!: An Enquiry into the Greenpeace Affair* (UK: Victor Gollancz, 1986).

negative international publicity—international opinion condemning American action that infringes upon the sovereign rights of other states. In American foreign policymaking circles, the advocates of US covert action subscribe to one of the three aforementioned rationales of covert action.

- Hypothesis 1: Secrecy allows the US to deceive target countries of the US covert action, to avoid conflicts with other stakeholders in the regions, and to skirt negative international opinion.

3. 'Internal Constraint' Explanation

From the perspective of 'internal constraint', "government officials use secrecy as a device to mislead the domestic public and to ensure elite control over foreign policy."⁸⁾ This interpretation of US covert action hypothesizes that the target of covertness lies *within* the territorial boundaries of the United States, that is, US domestic audience. This line of explanation asserts that elites in the US may resort to covert use of force to skirt constraints imposed by domestic political participants. When the US decision-making elites find it difficult to mobilize support for certain foreign policy decisions—for example, decisions to topple legitimate governments in foreign states—secrecy may be employed to keep those controversial foreign policy decisions hidden from public scrutiny. The target of secrecy in this case is not foreign governments or adversary states, but the US public, Congress, and mass media.⁹⁾ This need for secrecy may loom larger in democratic states such as the United States because democratic political institutions constrain decision-making processes of the government.

Democratic political institutions provide the mechanism whereby the public sets the parameters within which the decision-making elites should act. The checks and balances inherent in democratic political institutions would restrain the decision-making process of American decision makers. In this context, covert action allows them to pursue foreign policies in secret, which otherwise could provoke public outrage. For instance, the Lyndon B. Johnson

8) David N. Gibbs, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

9) Itzhak Golnoor (ed.), *Government Secrecy in Democracies* (New York: Polity Press, 1977); Thomas M. Frank and Weisband Edward (eds.), *Secrecy and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

administration used covert action in Vietnam to outskirt public opinion at home that opposed continued American involvement in Vietnam.¹⁰⁾ Secrecy of covert action provides an avenue through which leaders in democracies could preempt “public furor” which may accompany open foreign policy decisions.¹¹⁾ The perspective of internal constraint therefore hypothesizes that decision makers in the United States utilized covert action due to the process of checks and balances inherent in democratic political institutions; covert action is antithetical to democratic political theory that emphasizes public control of public policymaking in democracies.

- Hypothesis 2: Secrecy allows the US decision makers to circumvent domestic oppositions against the US involvement in target countries.

Decision making elites, particularly those who have a track record of endorsing US covert action usually share external explanations of covert action. However, it is still possible for the US decision makers to use covert action and conceal American involvement for the purpose of skirting US domestic opposition against such policy. Constraints can be created by (a) participating elites within the administration itself (e.g., State Department officials), (b) attentive elites/public (e.g., Congress via legislation or the War Powers Act and opinion leaders such as journalists and scholars), and (c) the mass public or voters (via either an *ex ante* approval mechanism or *ex post* electoral punishment). Elites in the United States are not always in agreement with one another on how to cope with particular foreign policy issues. For example, during the Indian-Pakistan Crisis of 1971, the core decision-making elites, notably President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, favored a hard-line policy toward India, whereas State Department officials, media elites, and Congress expressed greater sympathy toward India. After open discussions and consultations, the policy advocated by Nixon and Kissinger prevailed in the end. Evidence suggesting that the decision-making elites used secrecy to circumvent due process of open policy debates or the procedure of checks and balances support the internal

10) Mark Mazzetti and Tim Weiner, “Declassified CIA Archives Detail Illegal Activities,” *New York Times* (27 June 2007), available at <<http://nytimes.com/2007/06/27/washington/27cnd-cia.html>>

11) Mary Lauren Lilley and Alexander B. Downes, “Covert Action, Democratic Peace, and the Cold War,” Working paper, Duke University, 2007, p. 13.

constraint explanation.

III. Case Study: Operation PBSUCCESS in Guatemala in 1954

The objective of the case study included herein is to assess the explanatory power of two divergent interpretations that explain motivations of American decision makers when they opted to use covert action instead of open aggression during the Cold War era. However, according to King, Keohane, and Verba, if the number of cases is not greater than that of the hypotheses, it is not possible to “test” the hypotheses because of the problems associated with “indeterminate research design.”¹²⁾ Therefore, the objective of the case study herein should be more modest. The case study in this research does not intend to “test” the hypotheses in scientific manner enunciated by King, Keohane, and Verba but to explore relative validity of internal and external explanations of US covert action.

I selected the US covert action in Guatemala in 1954 (PBSUCCESS) because, as with US covert action in Iran in 1953 (AJAX), it stands as an important case of US covert action in the early Cold War era, which came to set the tone for US covert actions thereafter.¹³⁾ Despite its significance, PBSUCCESS is a relatively less-studied case.

1. *Historical Context of PBSUCCESS*

The first American covert action was waged in Iran (codenamed AJAX) in 1953 to overthrow the legitimate leader there, Mohamed Mossadeq.¹⁴⁾ After

12) Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 43-45. Social science researchers are chronically faced with the problem of “small-N” that interferes with scientific evaluation of hypotheses. If N=1, researchers cannot test even a single hypothesis.

13) Nick Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala 1952-1954* (Washington, DC: Unknown binding, 1994).

14) Mossadeq wanted to make the oil industry of Iran a national possession, which had been monopolized by British oil interests. With the CIA’s assistance, not only the Mossadeq regime was replaced with the US-supported (and brutal) Shah regime, but the oil rights were successfully retrieved to British and Americans.

the successful completion of covert mission in Iraq, the Eisenhower administration became confident that it could launch equally successful covert action in Guatemala. What motivated the Eisenhower administration to use covert action to overthrow the Arbenz regime in Guatemala? More specifically, why did the Eisenhower administration take great pains to keep its involvement in PBSUCCESS secret? Did decision makers in the Eisenhower administration attempt to shun negative international publicity? Or was it domestic opposition against such action that the American leaders tried to circumvent by keeping the action ‘covert’? Before assessing the motivations of the Eisenhower administration for secrecy, a brief history of PBSUCCESS is in order.

Before the popular revolution took place in 1944 that ousted military dictator General Jorge Ubico, Guatemala had been ruled by a series of authoritarian regimes since it achieved independent status in 1821. The “October Revolution” of 1944 opened the door for democracy for the first time in the history of Guatemala. Democracy seemed to flourish in Guatemala from 1944 until 1954, but the “Ten Years of Spring” ended when the US covert action overthrew the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz.¹⁵⁾ After the October Revolution, Guatemalans elected a former university professor, Juan José Arévalo into office in 1944. Arévalo was the first leader of Guatemala who came to power through democratic political process; he won 85 percent of the popular vote.¹⁶⁾ Arévalo was a social democrat who believed that government should play a proactive role to rectify social injustices. Soon after his inauguration, Arévalo initiated overarching reformist programs such as massive public health and literacy programs not to speak of land reforms to improve the lots of less privileged Guatemalans whose lives had been impoverished during the Ubico dictatorship. In 1947, Arévalo enacted a controversial piece of legislation, the Labor Code, the objective of which was to guarantee the most fundamental rights of laborers.

Arbenz became the second president of Guatemala who rose to power by winning a fair and democratic election in 1950.¹⁷⁾ After coming into power,

15) Christian G. Appy (ed.), *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), p. 191.

16) Mary Lauren Lilley and Alexander B. Downes, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

17) Richard H. Immerman, “Guatemala as Cold War History,” *Political Science Quarterly* 95-

Arbenz continued most of the reform programs initiated by his predecessor. Most of the reform programs of Arbenz proceeded within the broad framework of democracy. In fact, many scholars evaluated his reform programs as substantially democratic. For approximately ten years the fight for organizing a labor union and reforming a program of land distribution continued with a desire for establishing a foundation of mass support that would provide institutional bases of democracy.¹⁸⁾ One scholar even stated that “Guatemala’s new social welfare programs were more modest than those advocated by Democrats in the United States and Laborites in Great Britain.”¹⁹⁾

One of the most conspicuous changes that the Arbenz presidency brought about in Guatemalan politics was legalization of Guatemalan Communist Party (PGT). Subsequently, some of the PGT members became advisors to Arbenz. But what upset the Eisenhower administration in the United States was Arbenz’s decision to expropriate 40 percent of property owned by the American-owned United Fruit Company (UFC).²⁰⁾ Arguably, the most ambitious reform program of Arbenz was completion of land reform that Arévalo initiated. The land reform act of Arbenz—Decree 900—was deemed necessary to rectify the skewed distribution of land ownership.²¹⁾ Like many other large landowners, UFC lost a great portion of its uncultivated lands with little reimbursements.²²⁾ The Eisenhower administration thought that Arbenz’s land reform would hurt American commercial interests and open the door for communist influence in the region.

UFC lobbied aggressively in Washington to persuade the US government

4 (1980/1981), p. 633.

18) José M. Aybar de Soto, *Dependency and Intervention: The Case of Guatemala in 1954* (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1978).

19) Stephen G. Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

20) Arbenz wanted to offer \$1,185,000 but UFC demanded higher compensation, \$15.6 million. “Communism and Calumny: Arbenz and Allende,” in Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

21) At the time of land reform, an overwhelming 72 percent of arable land was owned by 2 percent of the rich landowners. The Guatemalan masses were impoverished because of this skewed distribution of land ownership. Jim Huck, “1954: Covert War in Guatemala,” *Press for Conversion!* 50 (2003), p. 14.

22) UFC only received \$1.1 million for expropriated lands because UFC had undervalued its property for tax purposes. The Arbenz government’s reimbursement scheme was based on the value the landowners declared for tax returns.

into bringing down the Arbenz regime. In the summer of 1953, the Eisenhower administration decided to embark on covert action to unseat Arbenz. PBSUCCESS to overthrow Arbenz began with paramilitary support to a group of Guatemalan insurgents in Honduras. The CIA also bribed high ranking military officers in Guatemala.²³⁾ These military officers demanded that Arbenz purge communists. When Arbenz refused, they demanded that Arbenz resign. The Guatemalan insurgents in Honduras were led by Carlos Castillo Armas, who thought of himself as Arbenz's archenemy. The CIA not only provided Armas and the insurgents with money and military equipment, but also rigorous training to prepare them for invasion of Guatemala. Besides this paramilitary activity component of the covert action, the CIA also launched massive psychological warfare in Guatemala to undermine the ability of Arbenz to rule. By the time Armas launched a beach invasion into Guatemala, the CIA propaganda had already convinced many in Guatemala, particularly conservative military officers, that continuation of the Arbenz regime would pit their country against the United States. Thus, implicit threats of US open military attack were successful in inducing a large segment of Guatemalan society to turn its back on Arbenz.²⁴⁾ Even the paramilitary program served a psychological rather than military function. As an Agency (CIA) memo prepared for Eisenhower explained, the operation relied "on psychological impact rather than actual military strength."²⁵⁾ After ousting Arbenz, the US installed Castillo Armas as President of Guatemala. Armas was quick to restore expropriated lands for UFC, and Guatemala once again became the clientele state of the United States. The brief introduction of democracy in this small impoverished country in the Central America ended abruptly.

23) The first CIA effort to overthrow the Arbenz regime was collaborative work with Nicaraguan dictator Anastacio Somoza. This covert action was authorized by President Truman in 1952, and the codename for this covert action was PBFORTUNE. Jim Huck, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

24) A variety of instruments—(black) propaganda, sabotage, aircraft, an army of insurrectionists, and the implicit threat of US military power—were used to topple the Arbenz regime. Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard and the CIA* (New York: Alfred Knoff, 1979), p. 85.

25) Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 55.

2. National Interests of the US in Guatemala

Why did the Eisenhower administration decide to intervene in the internal affairs of Guatemala and to oust the legitimate regime of Arbenz? Evidence suggests that the American government officials worried about the communist intrusion in the region, since Arbenz appeared “soft” on communism. In fact, Arbenz legalized the activities of communists in the country and even appointed several of them as his advisors. Among Arbenz’s ruling coalition of 51 congressional deputies, four were communists.²⁶⁾ The Eisenhower administration estimated that the number of communists in the country amounted to 1,000 and believed that communists were gaining influence in organized labor and the agrarian reform movement. In January 1954, President Eisenhower told Guatemala’s foreign minister that he “couldn’t help a government which was openly playing ball with communists” and that the United States was “determined to block the international communist conspiracy.”²⁷⁾ The Arbenz regime replied that their land reform would undermine the appeal of communism. According to Rabe, the Eisenhower administration rejected explanations from the Arbenz administration and concluded that Arbenz was either a “dupe” of the communists or worse.²⁸⁾ Secretary Dulles and the administration were convinced that a relationship existed between Guatemala and the Soviet Union. Dulles, thereafter, stated in a radio broadcast that economic interests are highly related to national security. Thus the American fear that communism was spreading in Third World certainly seemed to have influenced the decision to topple the socialist-leaning, yet democratically elected president of Guatemala.

However, the threat of communism in Guatemala seemed to have been exaggerated to a great extent. According to Gleijeses, “the communists were not in control of Guatemala... Neither the CIA nor embassy officials ever claimed that the Guatemalan army was infiltrated by communists.”²⁹⁾ In fact, the communists had very little influence in Guatemala and no ties with the Soviet Union, as the Eisenhower administration had claimed. Schneider also

26) Christian G. Appy, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

27) Stephen G. Rabe, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-46.

28) *Ibid.*, p. 50.

29) Piero Gleijeses, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

found no traces of Soviet influence in the country.³⁰⁾ Bowen also claims that “insights from a thorough 1955 Department of State (DOS) analysis of the communist movement in Guatemala, based on years of DOS and CIA intelligence reports and over 50,000 pages of captured PGT documents, reinforce this interpretation.”³¹⁾ DOS analysts stated that “the material does not reveal the existence of a well organized system of administrative dependence on centers of international communism.”³²⁾

Evidence suggests that Eisenhower’s decision to topple Arbenz was influenced more by commercial interests than by geostrategic interests—although it is true that security and economic interest are intertwined to a certain extent. Several scholars point out the influential roles played by private commercial interests in instigating the US decisions to oust Arbenz.³³⁾ CIA officials, in collaboration with the UFC public relations team, fabricated the evidence of a ‘communist menace’ in Guatemala. According to former UFC public relations official Thomas McCann, the CIA and UFC implanted unconfirmed reports in America press about the “red menace” in Guatemala.³⁴⁾ UFC used Washington connections to oust Guatemala’s new regime. Walter Bedell, former CIA Director and Undersecretary of the US, was a UFC executive. UFC president Sam Zemurray employed Thomas Corcoran, a Washington lobbyist, to inspire a coup. Thomas Dudley, former President of UFC, was the brother of Eisenhower’s first Assistant Secretary of State for Central America. John F. Dulles was a partner with the Sullivan & Cromwell (S&C) law firm, which represented the UFC. His brother, CIA Director Allen Dulles was an S&C attorney. Ann Whitman, Eisenhower’s personal secretary, was married to UFC’s main lobbyist. Assistant Secretary of State John Cabot owned UFC stock and his brother was a former president. All these connections incriminate commercial interests of UFC in instigating the

30) Nick Cullather, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

31) Gordon L. Bowen, “U.S. Foreign Policy toward Radical Change: Covert Operations in Guatemala, 1950-1954,” *Latin American Perspectives* 10-1 (1983), pp. 88-102.

32) “Communism in Guatemala,” July 1, 1955, Office of Intelligence Research Psychological Intelligence Digest Supplement No.1/Intelligence Research Report 6712, declassified 1979.

33) Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1991); Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

34) Thomas P. McCann, *An American Company: The Tragedy of United Fruit* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 57-62.

Eisenhower administration to wage a secret war in Guatemala. In sum, national security interests as well as commercial interests of the United States compelled the Eisenhower administration to unseat Arbenz. But one question still stands: Why did the Eisenhower administration opt to use covert action, instead of the military option, as a means to accomplish the objective of toppling Arbenz?

3. *Why Covert Action in Guatemala?*

Among other foreign policy tools that were available, why did the Eisenhower administration decide to use covert action to topple the Arbenz regime? More specifically, what was the target of secrecy associated with PBSUCCESS? By keeping PBSUCCESS secret, what or who did the Eisenhower administration attempt to deceive? Overwhelming evidence suggests that the US government officials wanted to keep the action secret because of any international repercussions that overt intervention in Guatemala could bring about. Most of all, the Eisenhower administration worried that any overt intervention in Guatemala could damage American standing in Latin America. It was no secret that the US treated Latin America as its backyard at the turn of the twentieth century. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 declared that European intrusion in this region would be treated as an act tantamount to intruding into domestic affairs of the United States. The Roosevelt Corollary in 1904 to the Monroe Doctrine made it clear that the United States would exercise a police role to safeguard Latin America from European colonialists. The United States had exercised exclusive rights over this region throughout the first half of the twentieth century, during which the United States enjoyed *de facto* sovereign rights over many countries in the region.

After World War II, however, as new independent Third World countries began mushrooming, the United States declared that it would not intervene in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. Franklin Roosevelt's new policy stance toward Latin America was the 'Good Neighbor Policy'. Roosevelt pledged the United States would be a 'good neighbor' of Latin America, and no longer play the role of international police in the hemisphere. Latin American countries did not appreciate the imperialist policy of the United States toward the region; therefore after the Second World War, the United

States had to deal carefully with the Latin American states. Cullather notes, “The United States had pledged not to intervene in the domestic affairs of any American state... The appearance that the United States was supporting the invasion of any OAS member state in retaliation for expropriating American property would set US policy back 20 years.”³⁵⁾

As one former US diplomat pointed out in his memo to the White House, open intervention in Guatemala was not a viable option “because of the immense complications which it would raise all over the hemisphere,” so the open military option should not be used “except as an extremely bad last resort.”³⁶⁾ According to Gleijeses, “President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles wanted to protect the image of the United States abroad, particularly in Latin America... NSC 144/1 stated that the United States must ‘avoid the appearance of unilateral action’ in the internal affairs of the Latin American republics.”³⁷⁾ One released CIA document reported:

We need a general go-around with consideration being given to (a) is PBSUCCESS the way to handle this operation (b) if it is the way to handle it, are we using all possible means not attributable to the United States to carry the operation to a successful conclusion? If attributable to the United States, it should not be done. High level state thinking is that an act which can be pinned on the United States will set us back in our relations with Latin American countries by fifty years.³⁸⁾

The US elites were clearly worried that overt intervention in Guatemala ran “the risk of turning all of Latin America against the United States and patently violating the Good Neighbor policy of Franklin Roosevelt as well as the OAS and UN charters.”³⁹⁾ Given the evidence, the Eisenhower administration used covert action instead of open aggression to oust Arbenz, because it did not want to pit the entire Latin America region against the United States.

A bulk of evidence lends credence to the external constraint explanation of

35) Nick Cullather, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

36) Piero Gleijeses, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

37) *Ibid.*, p. 247.

38) “Weekly PBSUCCESS Meeting with [excised],” (9 March 1954), p. 3. The original scanned-document is available at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/browse_docs.asp?doc_no=0000135895>.

39) Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

covert action that claims secrecy of covert action functions to circumvent negative international publicity. One of the sticking points of this explanation is that most of the people in Latin America, not to speak of Guatemalans themselves, were aware that the United States had been deeply involved in the plot to oust Arbenz while the US public was kept completely in the dark. On January 29, 1954, the Guatemalan government published several documents it had intercepted detailing Castillo Armas's plot and the involvement of Somoza and the "Government of the North." The government of Guatemala knew that the United States was plotting a covert action against Arbenz, but the American mass public did not believe this. Rather than investigating the veracity of these allegations, "every American publication within the liberal-conservative arc blithely dismissed the charge that the United States was plotting against Arbenz." The *New York Times* haughtily warned the Guatemalans that in "railing against 'Yankee Imperialism' it is fighting a ghost of the dead past, resurrected only in the imagination of extreme nationalists and Communists." Even the most liberal member of the Senate, William Fulbright, accused the "communist-dominated Government of Guatemala" of conducting a "vicious propaganda attack."⁴⁰ Contrary to the ignorance of Americans, the Guatemalans and the world were aware of the American conspiracy in Guatemala. Still, the State Department was able to deny the US involvement, stating: "It is the policy of the US not to intervene in the internal affairs of other nation." PBSUCCESS thereafter remained one of "the best-kept secrets of the Eisenhower administration for a long time."⁴¹ If the negative international publicity had been the target of covertness, the US government should not have taken such great pains to hide PBSUCCESS from the American public.

The early 1950s was the period when the Cold War temperature was at its height. In the United States, not only the government officials, but the Congress, media, and public believed that the US President and a small number of his foreign policy advisors should have the absolute foreign policy making prerogatives. Foreign policy making was understood as the preserve of the President, and the public believed that it was in the best interest of the nation as a whole not to interfere with the President and his advisors. Given

40) Piero Gleijeses, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

41) Gregory F. Treverton, *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 46.

this “Cold War consensus,” the majority of the American public would have supported their government’s decision to overthrow Arbenz, even if the plan to overthrow Arbenz had proceeded in overt manner. The US mass media in the 1950s had been ‘government-friendly.’ Therefore, the American media seldom challenged the US government’s explanation of the Guatemalan policy. For instance, the *New York Times* in 1954, reflecting the dominant view within the White House, State Department, and Congress, wrote that the “constant harassment here [in Guatemala] to which the company [UFC] now is being subjected is largely a Communist tactic.”⁴²⁾ America press treated the coup that overthrew Arbenz as an indigenous affair, and the American public believed that Guatemalan citizens revolted against the communist-friendly Arbenz regime.

However, had the American press and people been aware of the true nature of Arbenz regime and reform policies that he pursued, would they have supported open policy to oust Arbenz? First of all, Arbenz was a democratically elected president of Guatemala. Scant evidence exists that would suggest that the US public had developed strong identification toward burgeoning democracy of Guatemala. Nevertheless, overthrowing democracy in an open manner could have created public backlash at home. For this reason, the Eisenhower administration went to great lengths to manipulate American media coverage and public perception of Arbenz. According to Bowen, in order to mislead the US and other Latin American public opinion, then CIA director Allen Dulles fabricated the press.⁴³⁾ American elites were painfully aware that the regime that they were about to overthrow was a democratic one.

Second, the threats that Arbenz posed to the United States were commercial in nature. Although the US government officials took great pains to highlight the security threats associated with Arbenz and his reform policy, Arbenz and his policy were not at odds with American national interests as some US government documents suggest. Emphasizing communist threats to American security interests were necessary for “domestic political purposes.”⁴⁴⁾ Rabe claims that Guatemala’s new social welfare programs were more modest than those advocated by Democrats in the United States and Laborites in Great

42) Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (University of Texas press, 1982), p. 114.

43) Gordon L. Bowen, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

44) *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Britain. Simply put, the policy of Arbenz was not radical enough to call for overt US interventions and the American public did not see any vital national interests at stake in Arbenz's Guatemala.⁴⁵⁾ Open aggression that might produce substantial American casualties would not have been justified given the insignificance of American national interests at stake. The Eisenhower administration would have been hard-pressed to mobilize public support for the American open military invasion in Guatemala. Circumstantial evidence suggests that, by going underground instead of using open war, the Eisenhower administration was also able to minimize the public relations risks at home as well as abroad. Although many Guatemalans as well as the international community were aware that the coup was carefully premeditated by the United States, Operation PBSUCCESS had become one of the best-kept secrets of the Eisenhower administration.

IV. Conclusion

During the Cold War era, Washington made extensive use of covert action to bring about regime changes in Third World countries. Covert action was an attractive middle option on the part of American decision makers when neither diplomacy nor military intervention was deemed viable. One of the most important elements of covert action is 'plausible deniability.' When the Cold War temperature was at its height in the early 1950s, many suspected that the United States was involved in coups to overthrow neutralist or pro-Socialist regimes in many parts of the world. Nonetheless, the American decision makers were able to deny American involvement in secret operations that toppled many legitimate regimes in Third World countries. US denials of involvement appeared plausible. US decision makers even took great pains to keep American involvement in those plots secret long after those missions ended. Why did they go such great lengths to safeguard secrecy? What was the target of secrecy? Was it adverse international opinion that decision makers tried to outskirt by engaging in covert action, or was it domestic institutional constraints? In the context of examining covert action the US waged in Guatemala in 1954, this article attempted to assess the

45) Stephen G. Rabe, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

motivations of American decision makers for opting ‘covert action’ as particular means of foreign policy. By and large, the outcomes of the case support the ‘external constraint’ explanation. By going underground rather than using overt military force, the Eisenhower administration attempted to circumvent negative international publicity. The results of the study also support the ‘internal constraint’ explanation to a certain extent. US decision makers were able to minimize the domestic public-relations risk by using covert action. This finding suggests that covert action can be misused by decision makers in the United States as a way of circumventing constraints imposed by democratic political institutions. If secrecy of covert action is to outskirt domestic opposition, covert action can no longer serve as a legitimate policy tool of democratic states.

In the early Cold War era, American decision makers had been quite successful in keeping the domestic as well as international audience in the dark about the nature and scope of American illegal interventions in foreign states that brought about regime changes there. Mass media in the United States basically followed cues and facts provided by the American government and accepted them without reservations. For this reason, the American decision makers were able to keep these covert actions secret. Toward the 1980s, however, the American mass media began to increasingly challenge the government. Since covert action is more susceptible to public scrutiny, American decision makers tend to resort to it in limited cases where they can garner popular consent for such action afterwards. After the CIA covert action in Afghanistan, the George W. Bush administration admitted that it did launch covert action in that country. Public opinion at home and abroad did not denounce this action undertaken by the Bush administration, because such action was not used as an avenue to circumvent public-relations risks. At least since the end of the Cold War, US covert action to deceive domestic audiences has been virtually nonexistent. As long as the objectives of covert action can be justifiable on a post hoc basis, US decision makers will continue to make extensive use of covert action as a legitimate and effective foreign policy tool in the twenty-first century.

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