

# Ghosts of Guatemala's Past

By STEPHEN SCHLESINGER | JUNE 3, 2011

In 1954, the American government committed one of the most reprehensible acts in its history when it authorized the C.I.A. to overthrow the democratically elected leader of Guatemala, President Jacobo Arbenz. It did so secretly but later rationalized the coup on the ground that the country was about to fall into communist hands.

Guatemalan society has only recently recovered from the suffering that this intervention caused, including brutal military dictatorships and a genocidal civil war against its Indian population, which led to the deaths of an estimated 200,000 people. Only in the 1980s, when a peace process commenced, did democratic governance resume. But a silence about the Arbenz era continued.

Now, after 25 years of increasingly vibrant democratic rule, Guatemalans feel confident enough to honor the memory of their deposed leader by incorporating his achievements into the national school curriculum, naming a highway after him, and preparing an official biography. America should follow suit by owning up to its own ignoble deed and recognizing Arbenz as the genuine social progressive that he was.



Washington feared Arbenz because he tried to institute agrarian reforms that would hand over fallow land to dispossessed peasants, thereby creating a middle class in a country where 2 percent of the population owned 72 percent of the land. Unfortunately for him, most of that territory belonged to the largest landowner and most powerful body in the state: the American-owned United Fruit Company. Though Arbenz was willing to compensate United Fruit for its losses, it tried

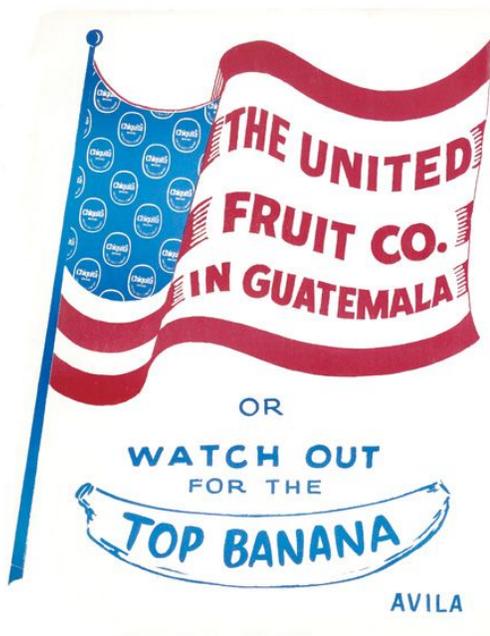
to persuade Washington that Arbenz was a crypto-communist who must be ousted.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, along with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen, the C.I.A.'s director, were a receptive audience. In the cold war fervor of the times, Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers believed a strike against Arbenz would roll back communism. And the Dulleses had their own personal sympathies for United Fruit: they had done legal work for the company, and counted executives there among their close friends.

It is true that Arbenz's supporters in the Guatemalan Legislature did include the Communist Party, but it was the smallest part of his coalition. Arbenz had also appointed a few communists to lower-level jobs in his administration. But there was no evidence that Arbenz himself was anything more than a European-style democratic socialist. And Arbenz's land reform program was less generous to peasants than a similar venture pushed by the Reagan administration in El Salvador several decades later.

Eisenhower's attack on Guatemala was brilliantly executed. A faux invasion force consisting of a handful of right-wing Guatemalans used fake radio broadcasts and a few bombing runs flown by American pilots

to terrorize the fledgling democracy into surrender. Arbenz stepped down from the presidency and left the country. Soon afterward, a Guatemalan colonel named Carlos Castillo Armas took power and handed back United Fruit's lands. For three decades, military strongmen ruled Guatemala.



The covert American assault destroyed any possibility that Guatemala's fragile political and civic institutions might grow. It permanently stunted political life. And the destruction of Guatemala's democracy also set back the cause of free elections in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras — all of which drew the lesson that Washington was more interested in unquestioning allies than democratic ones. It was only after the cold war and a United Nations-negotiated peace deal with leftist guerrillas in 1996 that genuine democracy began to take hold in Guatemala. And even since then, the cycle of violence and lawlessness unleashed by the 1954 coup has continued.

In 1998, an assassin bludgeoned to death the Catholic bishop Juan Gerardi shortly after he issued a damning report blaming the army for widespread massacres. In 2007, Guatemala had the world's third-highest homicide rate, according to a United Nations-World Bank study. In 2009, more civilians were murdered in Guatemala than were killed in the war zones of Iraq.

Washington took the first step toward making amends when President Bill Clinton visited Guatemala in 1999 and offered a vague apology for America's support of violent and repressive forces there. This year is an opportunity for Washington to fully own up to its shameful role in destabilizing Guatemala and honor Arbenz for having the courage to lead one of Central America's first democracies — and send a signal that America has learned to stop placing its ideological concerns and business interests ahead of its ideals.

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