

STERILIZING A "RED INFECTION" CONGRESS, THE CIA, AND GUATEMALA, 1954

Posted by Joan Russow

Sunday, 24 June 2018 11:11 - Last Updated Monday, 25 June 2018 17:24

The destabilization of Latin America ; the Guatemala example . It is important to take into consideration the role of the US in destabilizing Latin America, along with the US role in the School of Americas;. the US obsession over the years with stamping he " red infection "cannot be ignored in the discussion of refugees. The three enclosed articles provide background of the US involvement in destabilizing Guatemala, in supporting dictators and in protecting corporate interests.

Joan Russow

Global Compliance Research Project.

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Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz (center facing camera) in 1951, before a U.S.-led overthrow (HO/AFP/Getty)

Congress, the CIA, and Guatemala, 1954

STERILIZING A "RED INFECTION"

CONGRESS, THE CIA, AND GUATEMALA, 1954

DAVID M. BARRETT

One of the paradoxes of legislative oversight of intelligence in the early Cold War period was that the United States Congress could give strong, if de facto, support of aggressive covert action while, with the exception of a few leaders, not really knowing which such policies were being carried out. Guatemala is a perfect example. Following its 1944 revolution, which brought democratically elected leftist governments to power, this Central American government faced an increasingly hostile neighbor to the north, the United States. Guatemala's treatment of US-based corporations, especially the United Fruit Company, in expropriating land and other assets, did nothing to improve relations. Elites in Guatemala helped persuade US journalists and members of Congress, not to mention the executive branch, that their government was veering further and further leftward toward Communism in the early 1950s.

Late in the Truman presidency, the US government aborted an attempt to support Guatemalans who aimed to overthrow President Jacobo Arbenz. Those at CIA Headquarters who were involved in the effort felt "grimly" about that "horrifying" turn of events, one Agency leader noted in his diary. But, not surprisingly, new administration leaders--President Dwight Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and DCI Allen Dulles--also persuaded

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themselves that the Guatemalan government was "red." The CIA leader had help from the Board of National Estimates, which informed him on 22 April 1954 that "The Communists now effectively control the political life of Guatemala." ¹ A deal made by Arbenz's government to purchase Soviet-made armaments from Czechoslovakia that spring only sealed the matter in the American leaders' minds.

What unfolded in May and June of 1954 is now a familiar story in US intelligence and diplomatic history: Washington used the CIA and US Ambassador John Peurifoy to support and direct certain Guatemalan military leaders in overthrowing Arbenz's government. It was also psychological warfare--cleverly deceptive efforts to persuade Guatemala's citizens and political/military leaders that a major invasion force was steadily moving toward the nation's capital so unnerved Arbenz and others that the government fell without much of a battle.

The story has been told most notably by historian Richard Immerman, who carefully analyzes the American and Guatemalan political environments. ² While the overthrow of Arbenz was unfolding, the US government pretended to have nothing to do with it. In the year or so after President Castillo Armas's anti-Communist government was brought into power with Agency assistance, CIA quietly judged that his government was "inept," despite his "virtually dictatorial powers," and that there were growing "public demands for a return to constitutional democracy." Still, while American news reports and Congressional debates began to acknowledge that the United States had been involved, the overthrow became one of CIA's "well-known successes." This was the analysis of a Washington Evening Star article in early 1956, for example. Even critics of CIA in the 1950s and 1960s were reluctant to challenge that interpretation of events.

In the late Cold War period and since, however, the American overthrow of the Arbenz government came to be widely seen as shameful. This is mostly because the governments that followed the 1954 coup in the subsequent five decades were far more repressive than Arbenz's

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elective government. Even intelligence scholar Christopher Andrew, an Eisenhower admirer, describes the Guatemala affair as a "disreputable moment"--Eisenhower was "directly responsible" for "death and destruction," yet showed no signs of embarrassment then or later over his "bullying of a banana republic." A culminating moment in the evolving historical memory of the United States and Guatemala in 1954 came in 1999, when President Clinton visited Guatemala and said, "Support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake." 3

Aside from morality, there were other unfortunate legacies of the Guatemalan "success:" Allen Dulles used it as a model in advising President Kennedy seven years later to pursue the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Also, since the early Eisenhower-Dulles period, the CIA has had a vastly exaggerated reputation worldwide for causing all sorts of havoc.

A CONGRESSIONAL ROLE IN INTELLIGENCE POLICY?

While it is accurate to view CIA's involvement in overthrowing the Guatemalan government as mandated by higher political authorities in the US government, it is a mistake to assign responsibility and blame for the covert operation solely on the Eisenhower White House. While direct evidence of what Congressional leaders knew of the operation before, during, and immediately after its occurrence is fragmentary, a suggestion that they did not know something of what was happening is thoroughly implausible. Congressional intent--judged by speeches, votes, and interactions between the administration and key legislators--was clearly that the US government should do whatever it might take, short of outright war, to stop ongoing "Soviet aggression" in Central America.

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The claim here that Congress played some role in bringing about CIA's involvement in ridding Guatemala of the Arbenz government flies in the face of most conventional wisdom about legislative oversight of the Agency in the early Cold War period. Many published accounts hold that Congressional monitoring of the CIA was virtually nonexistent before the 1970s. A more accurate view can be summarized this way: Congressional oversight of CIA in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s was limited and informal in comparison to the current oversight system, which features House and Senates committees on intelligence, created after the upheavals of the 1970s. But limited oversight was not "no oversight." In fact, on periodic occasions, legislators became persistent and aggressive in monitoring the Agency.

Essentially, early Cold War Congresses delegated major intelligence oversight responsibility to the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees of the House and Senate. In turn, those four committees delegated such powers to small, informal, and highly secretive subcommittees on the CIA. Of equal significance, those four subcommittees deferred heavily to their chairs and ranking minority members. (In this, they resembled most Congressional committees and subcommittees of the time.) Across nearly three decades, those subcommittees almost never leaked confidential information.

Therefore, most members of Congress knew little about CIA's functioning; members of the four appropriations and Armed Services subcommittees typically knew a fair amount about the Agency activities and budget; their chairs and ranking minority members usually knew a good deal about CIA's operations. In addition, the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JACE) interacted with, relied on, and sometimes criticized CIA for its intelligence on the nuclear capabilities of other countries, especially the USSR. And a few other Congressional leaders, such as the chairs of foreign affairs committees, often insisted with some success on knowing what CIA was doing. 4

THE CASE OF THE GUATEMALAN COUP

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In the winter and spring of 1954, a number of Congressional leaders had frequent private contacts with the Dulles brothers and the White House about Guatemala. Among these was Senator Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin, chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, who believed that a "Communist octopus" had for years used its tentacles to control events in Guatemala. "Homegrown Communism" was a myth, according to Wiley: "There is no Communism but the Communism which takes orders from the despots of the Kremlin in Moscow." The Wisconsin senior senator was far less known than the other senator from his home state, but he garnered more respect within the Senate itself. In his two years (1953-1954) as chair of Foreign Relations, Wiley persistently urged the Eisenhower administration to go beyond limp diplomatic means to get rid of Arbenz's government. A few years before things came to a head, Wiley had explained the urgency behind his unchanging and unambiguous views to Senator Theodore Green of Rhode Island: "It seems to me that Guatemala is going to be a source of Red infection throughout Central America, and the sooner we help sterilize that source, the better."

Wiley readily agreed to the DCI's request to go public in describing the shipment of Soviet-made armaments from Czechoslovakia to Guatemala in May as "part of the master plan of world Communism." So, too, did Senator George Smathers of Florida, relying on "information gathered by me and my staff." The Senator did not mention his source, the CIA. But he did warn that "the Politburo of Guatemala" was "taking orders from Moscow." The cargo ship that left Stettin, Poland, on 17 April, laden with armaments and arrived at Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, on 15 May was concrete evidence of Soviet intervention. "Are we not solemnly pledged to prevent and to frustrate such intervention?" Smathers asked. 5

Various Senators' urgency and frustration with what seemed like a slow-moving Eisenhower administration was shared across parties and by many in the House. In the spring of 1954, Representative Charles Kersten of Wisconsin was among House members pushing the administration to act decisively. While Kersten's interactions with the CIA are unknown, he was long interested in the Agency and intelligence matters. (After losing a reelection bid later in 1954, Kersten would become a consultant on psychological warfare for the Eisenhower White House in 1955 and 1956.) As Richard Immerman explains, Kersten reasoned that "the Guatemalans had a right to revolt against the Communists, [so]...the United States had a right to assist the revolt." 6

THE JOHNSON RESOLUTION

A long-forgotten Congressional debate in June 1954 over a sense-of-the-Congress resolution displayed this unambiguous intent. The resolution's author was a man who would become famous ten years later for fathering a different, overwhelmingly supported, hastily passed resolution to enactment--Lyndon Johnson. The Senate minority leader was reacting to published reports of Guatemala's arms purchases from Czechoslovakia. In consultation with the State Department, Johnson offered his colleagues and those in the House an opportunity to give unstinting support to Eisenhower with "an unmistakable warning that we are determined to keep Communism out of the Western Hemisphere."

Johnson's and other Senators' language was immoderate, to say the least; the challenge facing the United States in Guatemala was "a new type of imperialism," "an open declaration of the aggressive designs of international Communism." Therefore, the United States had to "support" the Organization of American States (the OAS, much influenced by the United States) which fought against the "upsetting of sovereign governments by the international Communist movement or conspiracy." 7

The rhetoric was no less fervent in the House, where support for the Johnson Resolution and hostility toward the Guatemalan government were overwhelming. Senator Johnson took "firm and constructive action," showing "leadership and statesmanship on a high level," said Minority Leader John McCormack of Massachusetts. According to Representative Jack Brooks of Texas the resolution was "so basically American and so basically anti-Communist" that support for it was urgent, in light of the fact that "a Communist-dominated government in Guatemala is only 700 miles from Texas--only 960 miles, or a few hours' bomber time, from the refineries, the chemical plants, and the homes of my own Second District in Texas. The Monroe

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Doctrine--1823--is still a vital, living force. But it needs restatement in light of modern conditions," said Brooks. Fellow Texan Martin Dies agreed: "The Soviet government...has challenged the Monroe Doctrine. To that challenge there can be but one response." 8

A DISSENTING VOTE

When the House voted on 29 June, the result was a unanimous "yes." No one referred to the CIA, and no one raised the possibility that the United States might be in the process of interfering in the internal affairs of Guatemala. The House vote was immensely satisfying to the Eisenhower White House; only slightly less gratifying was the Senate vote, where only one member voted "no." It was William Langer of North Dakota, widely dismissed as an old-fashioned isolationist. This was not entirely fair: in part, the Senator was a critic of the morality of certain aspects of US foreign policy in the early Cold War era. While a fair number of legislators periodically questioned the competence of CIA or other foreign policy agencies, few focused on ethical questions. Langer's statement in explanation of his vote--at a time when Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade was in full flower--is, in retrospect, not easily dismissed:

I am as much opposed to international Communism as is any other member of this House.... I trust that there are sufficient remains of an atmosphere of reason in this country so that Senators can disagree without being called Communists.... I am opposed to the Johnson Resolution. I do not think the United States should jump into the Guatemala situation, a sensitive and very grave threat to world peace, with such elephantine delicacy. I do not believe that the Members of the Senate have been adequately informed as yet as to what is going on in Guatemala. We have had inadequate time to consider such a major declaration on foreign policy.... Is there a foreign invasion of Guatemala, or is there a civil war? If it is a foreign invasion, exactly who are the invading forces, and who are behind them? I ask any Senator if he can answer those questions, and answer them intelligently? ...There has been much talk about the malevolent influence of the \$548 million United Fruit Company in Guatemala, which some have charged is bigger than the government itself. ...Of course we are opposed to external interference with the affairs of any nation, especially so with regard to our sister republics of Latin America. But even more, we will, or we ought to be, committed to the principle that every

sovereign nation has a right to determine for itself its own form of government. 9

Langer's statement and his vote were the talk of Capitol Hill, but no Senator replied to him on the floor, a sign of how at odds he was with the political times.

THE DEGREE OF KNOWLEDGE

While Congressional intent--that Arbenz should be removed from power--was clear, Congressional knowledge of specific, unfolding events remains obscure. One question Langer raised, for example, is still hard to answer: how much did members of Congress know about what was actually occurring in Central America in June of 1954? Langer also might have asked: how much did Congressional members know about the involvement of the CIA, the State Department, and the Eisenhower White House in the attempt to overturn Arbenz's government?

On the first question, it would be a mistake to think that Congress at large was simply ignorant. While the Eisenhower administration issued innumerable statements--from the White House, the State Department, and at the UN--claiming that a conflict wholly involving Guatemalans was unfolding, US newspapers did report alternate versions of the story. While tending to accept the administration's view in their editorial pages and in many news stories, they also reported claims from the Guatemalan and Soviet Governments, from many newspapers in Latin America, and others that the United States was behind the conflict. Even the British government expressed reservations about the US account of the Guatemalan crisis. So, any interested member of Congress at least knew that the US Government was being charged with a hidden role in the affair.

PRESS COVERAGE

The words "Central Intelligence Agency" hardly ever showed up in newspapers, though. During the entire month of June 1954, The Washington Post never suggested--in news stories, editorials, opinion columns, or letters to the editor--that the Agency played a role in the Guatemalan crisis. The New York Times was a first-rate newspaper in the 1950s, with reasonably comprehensive treatment of events in Washington and internationally, while the Post was inferior, even in its coverage of Washington politics. Still, both papers' editorials argued that the United States had to stop the Soviet Union from solidifying its Guatemalan "beachhead" in Central America. Neither newspaper explained specifically how this was to be done. The Post's and Times's writing resembled editorials in other major newspapers. For example, The Philadelphia Inquirer wrote:

In recent weeks, the Communists--the real government [in Guatemala]--have been building up a reign of terror and suppression that sent hundreds fleeing across the borders to safety. And now they are streaming back into their own country with the avowed purpose of smashing the Russian plot and liberating Guatemala from the most dangerous threat the Western Hemisphere has had to face.

The Times's news pages, more so than other American newspapers, prominently featured accusations from around the world that the US government was behind the little war in Guatemala. A good example is from 20 June--the very day that Allen Dulles let Eisenhower know that events were coming to a head in Central America, but that the outcome was "very much in doubt." That day's issue, on page one, indicated that the State Department "said that it had no evidence indicating that the violent developments of the last 24 hours were anything but a `revolt of Guatemalans against the government'." The Foreign Minister of Guatemala said that "aggression" had the "firm support" of the United States Department of State. The Soviet Union charged that "the United States had `prepared and inspired' the attack on the Guatemalan

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government."

Furthermore, the newspaper actually mentioned Allen Dulles and the CIA in connection with the crisis, though just twice, and only on its op-ed page. The first reference to Dulles was by James Reston, also on 20 June, in his regular column written from Washington. (Here it is worth emphasizing the Times's influence in Washington, DC, of the mid-1950s. One analyst of the press in the early Cold War decades found that "State Department staff members often remarked that their jobs would be impossible were it not for The New York Times , a paper described on Capitol Hill as `everyone's Bible of information' and `every man's CIA'.") 10 In the "Bible" on 20 June, Reston's column was titled, "With the Dulles Brothers in Darkest Guatemala." It began:

John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, seldom intervenes in the internal affairs of other countries, but his brother Allen is more enterprising. If somebody wants to start a revolution in, say, Guatemala, it is no good talking to Foster Dulles. But Allen Dulles, head of the Central Intelligence Agency, is a more active man. He has been watching the Guatemalan situation for a long time.

Though he underestimated Foster Dulles's role, Reston's column was a rare case of realism in the US press about the parties behind the conflict in Guatemala. While he recognized that a coup would not solve Guatemala's problems, the Times columnist was no critic of Allen Dulles or CIA:

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Moscow is now definitely fishing in these long-troubled waters. It sees the possibility of Latin America's disillusion. It resents the strong Latin American support for the United States at the UN. It fears United States bases of operation near its own frontiers and is now obviously trying to establish Communist governments near ours. Mr. Dulles (Allen, that is) can no doubt help block this objective in Guatemala, but it will take Foster Dulles and the Congress to bring about a policy change that will deal with the central economic problems of the hemisphere.

Curiously, but no doubt willingly, the Times ignored CIA's role in the Guatemalan crisis in a 21 June editorial and instead gave credence to US claims that the crisis was purely a matter of freedom-loving Guatemalans, led by Castillo Armas, versus Communists, led by Arbenz. (The Times also kept reporter Sydney Gruson, based in Mexico City and learning about US activities to the south, out of Guatemala during the coup, at the request of Allen Dulles.)

The second prominent mention by The New York Times of CIA in relation to Guatemala came in response to that editorial. A lengthy letter from a reader had prime placement in the 24 June Times . It castigated the Times for its own inconsistencies:

We will not escape the consequences of this aggression by proxy by taking a "who, me?" attitude. In your issue of 20 June, James Reston frankly admitted Allen Dulles's role in the invasion of Guatemala. Ambassador Peurifoy's cynical answer to the Guatemalans' complaint about American planes bombing and strafing Guatemalan towns that "there are American planes everywhere in the world" will be thrown into our teeth wherever and whenever we try to persuade people that our presence serves exclusively peaceful ends. It is easy to conform in the name of "my country, right or wrong." True patriotism says: "my country--to be put right when she is wrong." Will your great paper set patriotism above conformity and help to put our country right in Guatemala?

HUSH-HUSH TREATMENT

Given the near-universal readership of the Times on Capitol Hill, the CIA's involvement in the Guatemala affair was a widely suspected "secret," even among legislators with little seniority and power. Still, no members of Congress talked for public consumption about the Agency's suspected activities. 11

Among leaders in Congress, what more specific knowledge was there of the CIA covert action program carried out in Guatemala, with direction from the State Department and White House? Here, again, the answers are not easy to come by, because the record is so limited. Walter Pforzheimer, the first Legislative Counsel for the CIA, asked if he remembers any reactions from the subcommittees on CIA to events in Guatemala, says, "I don't remember any reactions, but, of course, I knew the guys running the Guatemalan operation. I'm sure the committees were informed. It was on my watch." Without claiming a specific memory, Pforzheimer says the House Appropriations Subcommittee on CIA (headed by an aggressive John Taber of New York) would have been closely consulted, and there would have been "no holding back of details." 12

My exploration of the papers of a dozen leaders of the legislative subcommittees on CIA from the early Cold War period supports Pforzheimer's general recollection that, while DCIs did not share details on all covert operations with those legislators, "Of course, you're going to brief them on Guatemala." Also, notes prepared for Allen Dulles to use in briefing one of the Appropriations subcommittees on CIA in March 1954, while not mentioning names of specific countries, are straightforward in describing the work of the CIA's Clandestine Service and defending the necessity of covert action: "We attempt to influence foreign peoples and governments in support of US foreign policies in such manner that the hand of the US Government is not apparent. The sensitiveness of foreign governments is such that covert political action to influence them is often more effective than overt measures." Dulles took along

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a chart for the hearing, listing not just successes, but also failed paramilitary and other covert actions in the Agency's brief history. 13

Concerning Guatemala, two documents in declassified CIA files show some interactions between Agency personnel and unspecified Congressional committee staff members in February and April 1954. The staffers were passing on information from individuals who themselves had information on persons inside the Guatemalan Government. The staffers provided the names "as possible assistance [to] KUBARK [that is, CIA] activities." Agency leaders passed on the information to PBSUCCESS [the CIA cryptonym for the Guatemala operation] leaders in Guatemala. Regarding those sources revealed to the Agency by the Congressional figures, CIA wanted in April to "obtain names of most likely defection possibilities in WSBURNT [Guatemalan government] hierarchy plus information on their personalities, weaknesses, plus channels and methods of approach." The significance of this is that Congressional staffers exchanging information with CIA leaders regarding the Guatemalan operation did so, presumably, with the knowledge of one or more superiors on the unnamed committee(s). 14

Immerman's *The CIA in Guatemala* says that a few powerful legislators--especially Senate majority leader William Knowland of California and Appropriations Chair Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, in addition to Senators Wiley, Johnson, and others--interacted with Eisenhower or State and CIA leaders, pressing them to do "more" about the Guatemalan government, and were given at least oblique assurances that such was being done. 15

Bridges headed one of the four CIA subcommittees in Congress. What other subcommittee chairs and ranking minority members, like Taber, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, and Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts, knew of specifics is open to question. Saltonstall, chair of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee, saw Allen Dulles every few weeks on business and social occasions. His son and legislative aide, William, assumed in a

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memo to his father some years later that the Senator had had prior knowledge of the CIA's role in overthrowing Arbenz. His assumption was credible, for rumors of past CIA involvement in Guatemala were among topics scheduled to be discussed in an apparently unrecorded meeting of the subcommittee with Allen Dulles on 22 March 1954. 16

Overall, available evidence suggests that Congress--counting both leaders and followers--had not just a permissive, but an enthusiastic attitude toward getting rid of the Arbenz government. Legislative leaders are likely to have had far greater knowledge of events unfolding between the CIA and Guatemala's government in the spring and summer of 1954 than did the rest of Congress.

CIA'S VIEW OF CONGRESSIONAL INTENT

Dulles, Pforzheimer, and others could easily judge legislative preferences in The Congressional Record and in conversations with leaders. They never doubted, later on, that CIA's 1954 operation had reflected those preferences. But what documentary record is there of CIA's views of Congressional sentiment at the time? Perhaps the best piece of evidence comes from notes of one of the weekly PBSUCCESS meetings in March 1954, with attendees (their names still sanitized from the document at 20th century's end) from CIA, the State Department, and possibly other organizations. This, of course, was a time when more and more members of Congress, Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, for example, vocalized on Guatemala: "We might as well do away with the diplomatic niceties right away." And Eisenhower had already assured Knowland that he anticipated dealing soon with a new government of Guatemala. In this political atmosphere, the meeting's participants connected Congressional opinion to the coming months' imperatives in Guatemala:

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Mr. [name deleted] then stated that he and Mr. [name deleted] were there to take stock of the present situation, to determine where we stand now and what are the future prospects. Are things going downhill so fast in Guatemala that PBSUCCESS , as it now stands, may not be enough? Consideration must be given to the much greater pressure which may come from Congress and public opinion on the present administration if the situation in Guatemala does deteriorate. It may be necessary to take more calculated risks than before.... Mr. [name deleted] then asked Mr. [name deleted] exactly what was meant by possible additional calculated risks. Messrs. [name deleted] and [name deleted] replied: (a) We might reconsider exploiting the conclusion arrived at by [Dominican Republic leader] Trujillo last year and transmitted to [Venezuelan leader] Perez Jimenez that the best way to bring about the fall of the Arbenz government would be to eliminate 15 to 20 of its leaders with Trujillo's trained pistoleros.... Mr. [name deleted] replied that he thought the operation could be brought to a conclusion by 15 June; that the program was complex but that we believe the Agency has the capability of doing the job.... Mr. [name deleted] "...If attributable to the United States, it should not be done. High-level 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 50 years." [Name deleted] then expressed himself as opposed to the elimination of 15 to 20 Guatemalan leaders as a possible solution to the problem, although stating that such elimination was part of the plan and could be done. 17

CIA leaders in Washington and Central America, along with members of the State Department continued to discuss the assassination option off and on in the three months leading up to the overthrow of the Arbenz government. It appears that no assassinations occurred, however.

The notable feature of the March discussion, though--aside from the fact that assassination was an option in the days of PBSUCCESS--is that participants linked the necessity of "more calculated risks" such as assassination to "pressure which may come from Congress...." 18

CONCLUSION

The extent of detailed discussions of the Guatemalan operation between CIA and Congressional leaders may never be known, but there was little doubt at CIA or the White House as to overarching Congressional intent before or after the overthrow. Senator Smathers, typical of the Congressional enthusiasts in the spring of 1954 for doing what was "necessary" to get rid of Arbenz's government, reflected legislative sentiment when word emerged out of Guatemala on 30 June that the government had fallen: "In all candor, we must admit that the democratic nations of the Western Hemisphere could not permit the continued existence of a Communist base in Latin America, so close to home." 19

Any lingering views that the US policy toward Guatemala in 1954 was simply the product of a hawkish executive branch, with Congress having little complicity in the policy, can safely be put to rest.

NOTES

1. ADDI Diary, 12 December 1952; Harold Bull to Dulles, 22 April 1954; in CIA Declassified Reference Materials (CIA/DRM), Box 185, National Archives.

2. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala : The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

3. Sherman Kent to Dulles, 23 February 1955, CIA/DRM, Box 185, National Archives. Even "the relevant branch of DDP" (the Plans Directorate, which carried out the operation) agreed with the analysis. "Product of CIA Expenses Queried on Capitol Hill," *Washington Evening Star* , 21 February 1956, reprinted in *The Congressional Record (CR)* , 9 April 1956, pp. 5932-3; Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency From Washington to Bush* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 209-210. Clinton, quoted in *The New York Times* , 11 March 1999.

4. For an elaboration, see David M. Barrett, "Glimpses of a Hidden History: Senator Richard Russell, Congress, and Oversight of the CIA," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* , Vol. 11, No. 3, Fall 1998, pp. 271-298.

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5. Wiley, quoted in Immerman, pp. 103, 115, 156; Smathers, (CR), 28 May 1954, pp. 7336-8.

6. Kersten, quoted in Immerman, p. 153.

7. The quotes are from Johnson and Republican leader William Knowland; see CR , 25 June 1954, pp. 8922-8926.

8. CR, House, 29 June 1954, pp. 9176-9179.

9. CR, Senate, 28 June 1954, pp. 9065-9066.

10. Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 40-41, 134-135, cited in Immerman, p. 115.

11. *The New York Times*, 20 June 1954, pp. 1, and 8E; 24 June 1954, p. 26;

The Philadelphia Inquirer, 22 June 1954, p. 20. I examined every issue of the *Times* and *The Washington Post* in May and June 1954. Dulles to Eisenhower, 20 June 1954, Ann Whitman File, Admin. Series, Box 13, DDE Library. On the Gruson story, see his obituary in the *Times*, 9 March 1998.

12. Pforzheimer, interviewed by the author, 30 September 1994; my description of Taber is based on a review of his papers at Cornell University.

13. The notes survived the usually heavy hand of censors in 1998, apparently because no specific operations or countries are mentioned, and the chart listing successes and failures is not included in the CIA/DRM, Box 4, National Archives.

14. The two documents are cryptic CIA cables referring to PBSUCCESS and noting that the Congressional staffers had some information on some type of "infiltration." CIA Records, Guatemala, 1952-54, Box 1, National Archives.

15. Immerman, p. 152.

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16. William L. Saltonstall to Senator Saltonstall, 6-1-66, Saltonstall Papers, Box 43, Massachusetts Historical Society. The younger Saltonstall was preparing his father for forthcoming Senate debate over increasing legislative oversight of the CIA. "Guatemala" was treated as one of a group of CIA "successes" in the memo, which suggested that the Senator might find it "useful to say, if you can, how far ahead you knew about these and how much detail you had on them." William Darden to Saltonstall, 19 March 1954, Senate Armed Services Committee, Box 230, National Archives.

17. "Weekly PBSUCCESS meeting with [word(s) deleted]," 9 March 1954, CIA-Guatemala Records, 1952-1943, Box 1, National Archives; Smith quotation and Eisenhower-Knowland interaction, both in Immerman, pp. 151-3.

18. See also the 1995 paper from CIA's History Staff: Gerald K. Haines, "CIA and Guatemala Assassination Proposals, 1952-1954" in CIA Records, National Archives. An overview of the Guatemala affair, also produced by the same office, is in print: Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operation in Guatemala, 1952-1954*

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(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Papers Show U.S. Role in Guatemalan Abuses

By Douglas Farah

Washington Post Foreign Service

Thursday, March 11, 1999; Page A26

During the 1960s, the United States was intimately involved in equipping and training Guatemalan security forces that murdered thousands of civilians in the nation's civil war,

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Posted by Joan Russow

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according to newly declassified U.S. intelligence documents.

The documents show, moreover, that the CIA retained close ties to the Guatemalan army in the 1980s, when the army and its paramilitary allies were massacring Indian villagers, and that U.S. officials were aware of the killings at the time. The documents were obtained by the National Security Archive, a private nonprofit group in Washington.

Some of the documents were made available to an independent commission formed to investigate human rights abuses during Guatemala's 36-year civil war, which killed an estimated 200,000 people. The report by the Historical Clarification Commission, which grew out of the U.N.-brokered peace agreement that ended the conflict in 1996, was released last month in Guatemala and blamed government forces for the overwhelming majority of human rights violations during the conflict.

But some of the documents were not released until yesterday. One was a Jan. 4, 1966 memo from a U.S. State Department security official describing how he set up a "safe house" in the presidential palace for use by Guatemalan security agents and their U.S. contacts. The safe house became the headquarters for Guatemala's "dirty war" against leftist insurgents and suspected allies.

"I have never seen anything like it," said Kate Doyle, Guatemala project director at the archives, expressing amazement at "the description of our intimacy with the Guatemalan

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security forces."

Three months after the cable about the safe house, on March 6, 1966, security forces arrested 32 people suspected of aiding Marxist guerrillas; those arrested subsequently disappeared. While the Guatemalan government denied any involvement in the case, a CIA cable sent later that year identifies three of those missing, saying, "The following Guatemalan Communists and terrorists were executed secretly by Guatemalan authorities on the night of March 6."

The CIA has a long history of involvement in Guatemala, having helped to orchestrate the army's overthrow of a democratically elected government in 1954. Nevertheless, largely because of human rights concerns, the United States never provided Guatemalan security forces with the same level of support it gave anti-communist forces in neighboring Nicaragua and El Salvador during fighting in the 1980s.

In 1977 the Guatemalan government rejected \$2.1 million in U.S. military aid because it was conditioned on improved performance on human rights. But in the early 1980s, under the Reagan administration, the relationship warmed up again despite occasional clashes over the military's brutal tactics.

As the Cold War raged in the 1960s and '70s, the United States gave the Guatemalan military \$33 million in aid even though U.S. officials were aware of the army's dismal track

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record on human rights, the documents show.

On Oct. 23, 1967, for example, a secret State Department cable reported that covert Guatemalan security operations included "kidnapping, torture and summary executions." The cable said that "in the past year . . . approximately 500-600 persons have been killed; with the addition of the 'missing' persons this figure might double to 1,000-2,000." It also described the government's Special Commando Unit, which used civilians as well as military personnel and carried out "abductions, bombings, street assassinations and executions of real or alleged communists."

A 1992 CIA cable confirmed that indigenous villages were targeted for destruction because of the army's belief that the Indians supported the guerrillas.

In describing one episode, which occurred shortly before it was written, the cable reported that "several villages have been burned to the ground." It continued, "The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is [pro-guerrilla] has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and noncombatants alike."

An April 1994 Defense Intelligence Agency report outlined how, in the 1980s, as U.S. aid grew, Guatemalan military intelligence agents dumped suspected guerrillas – dead and alive – out of airplanes into the ocean.

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"In this way they have been able to remove the majority of the evidence showing that the prisoners were tortured and killed," the memo said.

But as grim a picture as the documents portray, said Doyle, the project director, the Clinton administration was to be commended for making them public.

"The commission asked for documents from Argentina, Israel and Taiwan," Doyle said. "Only the United States responded.

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19. CR, 30 June 1954, p. 9267

Congress, the CIA, and Guatemala, 1954

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Sterilizing a "Red Infection"

Congress, the CIA, and Guatemala, 1954

David M. Barrett

One of the paradoxes of legislative oversight of intelligence in the early Cold War period was that the United States Congress could give strong, if de facto, support of aggressive covert action while, with the exception of a few leaders, not really knowing which such policies were being carried out. Guatemala is a perfect example. Following its 1944 revolution, which brought democratically elected leftist governments to power, this Central American government faced an increasingly hostile neighbor to the north, the United States. Guatemala's treatment of US-based corporations, especially the United Fruit Company, in expropriating land and other assets, did nothing to improve relations. Elites in Guatemala helped persuade US journalists and members of Congress, not to mention the executive branch, that their government was veering further and further leftward toward Communism in the early 1950s.

Late in the Truman presidency, the US government aborted an attempt to support Guatemalans who aimed to overthrow President Jacobo Arbenz. Those at CIA Headquarters who were involved in the effort felt "grimly" about that "horrifying" turn of events, one Agency leader noted in his diary. But, not surprisingly, new administration leaders--President Dwight Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and DCI Allen Dulles--also persuaded themselves that the Guatemalan government was "red." The CIA leader had help from the Board of National Estimates, which informed him on 22 April 1954 that "The Communists now effectively control the political life of Guatemala." [1](#) A deal made by Arbenz's government to purchase Soviet-made armaments from Czechoslovakia that spring only sealed the matter in the American leaders' minds.

What unfolded in May and June of 1954 is now a familiar story in US intelligence and diplomatic history: Washington used the CIA and US Ambassador John Peurifoy to support and direct certain Guatemalan military leaders in overthrowing Arbenz's government. It was also *psychological warfare--cleverly deceptive efforts to persuade Guatemala's citizens and political/military leaders that a major invasion force was steadily moving toward the nation's capital so unnerved Arbenz and others that the government fell without much of a battle.*

The story has been told most notably by historian Richard Immerman, who carefully

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analyzes the American and Guatemalan political environments. [21](#) While the overthrow of Arbenz was unfolding, the US government pretended to have nothing to do with it. In the year or so after President Castillo Armas's anti-Communist government was brought into power with Agency assistance, CIA quietly judged that his government was "inept," despite his "virtually dictatorial powers," and that there were growing "public demands for a return to constitutional democracy." Still, while American news reports and Congressional debates began to acknowledge that the United States had been involved, the overthrow became one of CIA's "well-known successes." This was the analysis of a [Washington Evening Star](#) article in early 1956, for example. Even critics of CIA in the 1950s and 1960s were reluctant to challenge that interpretation of events.

In the late Cold War period and since, however, the American overthrow of the Arbenz government came to be widely seen as shameful. This is mostly because the governments that followed the 1954 coup in the subsequent five decades were far more repressive than Arbenz's elective government. Even intelligence scholar Christopher Andrew, an Eisenhower admirer, describes the Guatemala affair as a "disreputable moment"--Eisenhower was "directly responsible" for "death and destruction," yet showed no signs of embarrassment then or later over his "bullying of a banana republic." A culminating moment in the evolving historical memory of the United States and Guatemala in 1954 came in 1999, when President Clinton visited Guatemala and said, "Support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake." [3](#)

Aside from morality, there were other unfortunate legacies of the Guatemalan "success:" Allen Dulles used it as a model in advising President Kennedy seven years later to pursue the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Also, since the early Eisenhower-Dulles period, the CIA has had a vastly exaggerated reputation worldwide for causing all sorts of havoc.

A Congressional Role in Intelligence Policy?

While it is accurate to view CIA's involvement in overthrowing the Guatemalan government as mandated by higher political authorities in the US government, it is a mistake to assign responsibility and blame for the covert operation solely on the Eisenhower White House. While direct evidence of what Congressional leaders knew of the operation before, during, and immediately after its occurrence is fragmentary, a suggestion that they did not know something of what was happening is thoroughly implausible. Congressional intent--judged by speeches, votes, and interactions between the administration and key legislators--was clearly that the US government should do whatever it might take, short of outright war, to stop ongoing "Soviet aggression" in [Central America](#).

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The claim here that Congress played some role in bringing about CIA's involvement in ridding Guatemala of the Arbenz government flies in the face of most conventional wisdom about legislative oversight of the Agency in the early Cold War period. Many published accounts hold that Congressional monitoring of the CIA was virtually nonexistent before the 1970s. A more accurate view can be summarized this way: Congressional oversight of CIA in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s was limited and informal in comparison to the current oversight system, which features House and Senates committees on intelligence, created after the upheavals of the 1970s. But limited oversight was not "no oversight." In fact, on periodic occasions, legislators became persistent and aggressive in monitoring the Agency.

Essentially, early Cold War Congresses delegated major intelligence oversight responsibility to the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees of the House and Senate. In turn, those four committees delegated such powers to small, informal, and highly secretive subcommittees on the CIA. Of equal significance, those four subcommittees deferred heavily to their chairs and ranking minority members. (In this, they resembled most Congressional committees and subcommittees of the time.) Across nearly three decades, those subcommittees almost never leaked confidential information.

Therefore, most members of Congress knew little about CIA's functioning; members of the four appropriations and Armed Services subcommittees typically knew a fair amount about the Agency activities and budget; their chairs and ranking minority members usually knew a good deal about CIA's operations. In addition, the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JACE) interacted with, relied on, and sometimes criticized CIA for its intelligence on the nuclear capabilities of other countries, especially the USSR. And a few other Congressional leaders, such as the chairs of foreign affairs committees, often insisted with some success on knowing what CIA was doing. [4](#)

The Case of the Guatemalan Coup

In the winter and spring of 1954, a number of Congressional leaders had frequent private contacts with the Dulles brothers and the White House about Guatemala. Among these was Senator Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin, chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, who believed that a "Communist octopus" had for years used its tentacles to control events in Guatemala. "Homegrown Communism" was a myth, according to Wiley: "There is no Communism but the Communism which takes orders from the despots of the Kremlin in Moscow." The Wisconsin senior senator was far less known than the other senator from his home state, but he garnered more respect within the Senate itself. In his two years (1953-1954) as chair of Foreign Relations, Wiley persistently urged the Eisenhower administration to go beyond limp diplomatic means to get rid of Arbenz's government. A few years before things came to a head, Wiley had explained the urgency behind his unchanging and unambiguous views to Senator Theodore Green of Rhode Island: "It seems to me that Guatemala is going to be a source of Red infection

throughout Central America, and the sooner we help sterilize that source, the better."

Wiley readily agreed to the DCI's request to go public in describing the shipment of Soviet-made armaments from Czechoslovakia to Guatemala in May as "part of the master plan of world Communism." So, too, did Senator George Smathers of Florida, relying on "information gathered by me and my staff." The Senator did not mention his source, the CIA. But he did warn that "the Politburo of Guatemala" was "taking orders from Moscow." The cargo ship that left Stettin, Poland, on 17 April, laden with armaments and arrived at Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, on 15 May was concrete evidence of Soviet intervention. "Are we not solemnly pledged to prevent and to frustrate such intervention?" Smathers asked. [5](#)

Various Senators' urgency and frustration with what seemed like a slow-moving Eisenhower administration was shared across parties and by many in the House. In the spring of 1954, Representative Charles Kersten of Wisconsin was among House members pushing the administration to act decisively. While Kersten's interactions with the CIA are unknown, he was long interested in the Agency and intelligence matters. (After losing a reelection bid later in 1954, Kersten would become a consultant on psychological warfare for the Eisenhower White House in 1955 and 1956.) As Richard Immerman explains, Kersten reasoned that "the Guatemalans had a right to revolt against the Communists, [so]...the United States had a right to assist the revolt." [6](#)

The Johnson Resolution

A long-forgotten Congressional debate in June 1954 over a sense-of-the-Congress resolution displayed this unambiguous intent. The resolution's author was a man who would become famous ten years later for fathering a different, overwhelmingly supported, hastily passed resolution to enactment--Lyndon Johnson. The Senate minority leader was reacting to published reports of Guatemala's arms purchases from Czechoslovakia. In consultation with the State Department, Johnson offered his colleagues and those in the House an opportunity to give unstinting support to Eisenhower with "an unmistakable warning that we are determined to keep Communism out of the Western Hemisphere."

Johnson's and other Senators' language was immoderate, to say the least; the challenge facing the United States in Guatemala was "a new type of imperialism," "an open declaration of the aggressive designs of international Communism." Therefore, the United States had to "support" the Organization of American States (the OAS, much influenced by the United States) which fought against the "upsetting of sovereign governments by the international Communist movement or conspiracy." [7](#)

The rhetoric was no less fervent in the House, where support for the Johnson Resolution and hostility toward the Guatemalan government were overwhelming. Senator Johnson took "firm and constructive action," showing "leadership and statesmanship on a high level," said Minority Leader John McCormack of Massachusetts. According to Representative Jack Brooks of Texas the resolution was "so basically American and so basically anti-Communist" that support for it was urgent, in light of the fact that "a Communist-dominated government in Guatemala is only 700 miles from Texas--only 960 miles, or a few hours' bomber time, from the refineries, the chemical plants, and the homes of my own Second District in Texas. The Monroe Doctrine--1823--is still a vital, living force. But it needs restatement in light of modern conditions," said Brooks. Fellow Texan Martin Dies agreed: "The Soviet government...has challenged the Monroe Doctrine. To that challenge there can be but one response." [8](#)

A Dissenting Vote

When the House voted on 29 June, the result was a unanimous "yes." No one referred to the CIA, and no one raised the possibility that the United States might be in the process of interfering in the internal affairs of Guatemala. The House vote was immensely satisfying to the Eisenhower White House; only slightly less gratifying was the Senate vote, where only one member voted "no." It was William Langer of North Dakota, widely dismissed as an old-fashioned isolationist. This was not entirely fair: in part, the Senator was a critic of the morality of certain aspects of US foreign policy in the early Cold War era. While a fair number of legislators periodically questioned the competence of CIA or other foreign policy agencies, few focused on ethical questions. Langer's statement in explanation of his vote--at a time when Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade was in full flower--is, in retrospect, not easily dismissed:

I am as much opposed to international Communism as is any other member of this House.... I trust that there are sufficient remains of an atmosphere of reason in this country so that Senators can disagree without being called Communists.... I am opposed to the Johnson Resolution. I do not think the United States should jump into the Guatemala situation, a sensitive and very grave threat to world peace, with such elephantine delicacy. I do not believe that the Members of the Senate have been adequately informed as yet as to what is going on in Guatemala. We have had inadequate time to consider such a major declaration on foreign policy.... Is there a foreign invasion of Guatemala, or is there a civil war? If it is a foreign invasion, exactly who are the invading forces, and who are behind them? I ask any Senator if he can answer those questions, and answer them intelligently? ...There has been much talk about the malevolent influence of the \$548 million United Fruit Company in Guatemala, which some have charged is bigger than the government itself. ...Of course we are opposed to external interference with the affairs of any nation, especially so with regard to our sister republics of Latin America. But even more, we will, or we ought to be, committed to the principle that every sovereign nation has a right to determine for itself its own form of government. [9](#)

Langer's statement and his vote were the talk of Capitol Hill, but no Senator replied to him on the floor, a sign of how at odds he was with the political times.

The Degree of Knowledge

While Congressional intent--that Arbenz should be removed from power--was clear, Congressional knowledge of specific, unfolding events remains obscure. One question Langer raised, for example, is still hard to answer: how much did members of Congress know about what was actually occurring in Central America in June of 1954? Langer also might have asked: how much did Congressional members know about the involvement of the CIA, the State Department, and the Eisenhower White House in the attempt to overturn Arbenz's government?

On the first question, it would be a mistake to think that Congress at large was simply ignorant. While the Eisenhower administration issued innumerable statements--from the White House, the State Department, and at the UN--claiming that a conflict wholly involving Guatemalans was unfolding, US newspapers did report alternate versions of the story. While tending to accept the administration's view in their editorial pages and in many news stories, they also reported claims from the Guatemalan and Soviet Governments, from many newspapers in Latin America, and others that the United States was behind the conflict. Even the British government expressed reservations about the US account of the Guatemalan crisis. So, any interested member of Congress at least knew that the US Government was being charged with a hidden role in the affair.

Press Coverage

The words "Central Intelligence Agency" hardly ever showed up in newspapers, though. During the entire month of June 1954, The Washington Post never suggested--in news stories, editorials, opinion columns, or letters to the editor--that the Agency played a role in the Guatemalan crisis. The New York Times was a first-rate newspaper in the 1950s, with reasonably comprehensive treatment of events in Washington and internationally, while the Post was inferior, even in its coverage of Washington politics. Still, both papers' editorials argued that the United States had to stop the Soviet Union from solidifying its Guatemalan "beachhead" in Central America. Neither newspaper explained specifically how this was to be done. The Post's and Times's writing resembled editorials in other major newspapers. For example, The Philadelphia Inquirer wrote:

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In recent weeks, the Communists--the real government [in Guatemala]--have been building up a reign of terror and suppression that sent hundreds fleeing across the borders to safety. And now they are streaming back into their own country with the avowed purpose of smashing the Russian plot and liberating Guatemala from the most dangerous threat the Western Hemisphere has had to face.

The Times's news pages, more so than other American newspapers, prominently featured accusations from around the world that the US government was behind the little war in Guatemala. A good example is from 20 June--the very day that Allen Dulles let Eisenhower know that events were coming to a head in Central America, but that the outcome was "very much in doubt." That day's issue, on page one, indicated that the State Department "said that it had no evidence indicating that the violent developments of the last 24 hours were anything but a `revolt of Guatemalans against the government'." The Foreign Minister of Guatemala said that "aggression" had the "firm support" of the United States Department of State. The Soviet Union charged that "the United States had `prepared and inspired' the attack on the Guatemalan government."

Furthermore, the newspaper actually mentioned Allen Dulles and the CIA in connection with the crisis, though just twice, and only on its op-ed page. The first reference to Dulles was by James Reston, also on 20 June, in his regular column written from Washington. (Here it is worth emphasizing the Times's influence in Washington, DC, of the mid-1950s. One analyst of the press in the early Cold War decades found that "State Department staff members often remarked that their jobs would be impossible were it not for The New York Times , a paper described on Capitol Hill as `everyone's Bible of information' and `every man's CIA'.")

[10](#)

In the "Bible" on 20 June, Reston's column was titled, "With the Dulles Brothers in Darkest Guatemala." It began:

John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, seldom intervenes in the internal affairs of other countries, but his brother Allen is more enterprising. If somebody wants to start a revolution in, say, Guatemala, it is no good talking to Foster Dulles. But Allen Dulles, head of the Central Intelligence Agency, is a more active man. He has been watching the Guatemalan situation for a long time.

Though he underestimated Foster Dulles's role, Reston's column was a rare case of

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realism in the US press about the parties behind the conflict in Guatemala. While he recognized that a coup would not solve Guatemala's problems, the Times columnist was no critic of Allen Dulles or CIA:

Moscow is now definitely fishing in these long-troubled waters. It sees the possibility of Latin America's disillusion. It resents the strong Latin American support for the United States at the UN. It fears United States bases of operation near its own frontiers and is now obviously trying to establish Communist governments near ours. Mr. Dulles (Allen, that is) can no doubt help block this objective in Guatemala, but it will take Foster Dulles and the Congress to bring about a policy change that will deal with the central economic problems of the hemisphere.

Curiously, but no doubt willingly, the Times ignored CIA's role in the Guatemalan crisis in a 21 June editorial and instead gave credence to US claims that the crisis was purely a matter of freedom-loving Guatemalans, led by Castillo Armas, versus Communists, led by Arbenz. (The Times also kept reporter Sydney Gruson, based in Mexico City and learning about US activities to the south, out of Guatemala during the coup, at the request of Allen Dulles.)

The second prominent mention by The New York Times of CIA in relation to Guatemala came in response to that editorial. A lengthy letter from a reader had prime placement in the 24 June Times. It castigated the Times for its own inconsistencies:

We will not escape the consequences of this aggression by proxy by taking a "who, me?" attitude. In your issue of 20 June, James Reston frankly admitted Allen Dulles's role in the invasion of Guatemala. Ambassador Peurifoy's cynical answer to the Guatemalans' complaint about American planes bombing and strafing Guatemalan towns that "there are American planes everywhere in the world" will be thrown into our teeth wherever and whenever we try to persuade people that our presence serves exclusively peaceful ends. It is easy to conform in the name of "my country, right or wrong." True patriotism says: "my country--to be put right when she is wrong." Will your great paper set patriotism above conformity and help to put our country right in Guatemala?

Hush-hush Treatment

Given the near-universal readership of the Times on Capitol Hill, the CIA's involvement in the Guatemala affair was a widely suspected "secret," even among legislators with little

seniority and power. Still, no members of Congress talked for public consumption about the Agency's suspected activities. [11](#)

Among leaders in Congress, what more specific knowledge was there of the CIA covert action program carried out in Guatemala, with direction from the State Department and White House? Here, again, the answers are not easy to come by, because the record is so limited. Walter Pforzheimer, the first Legislative Counsel for the CIA, asked if he remembers any reactions from the subcommittees on CIA to events in Guatemala, says, "I don't remember any reactions, but, of course, I knew the guys running the Guatemalan operation. I'm sure the committees were informed. It was on my watch." Without claiming a specific memory, Pforzheimer says the House Appropriations Subcommittee on CIA (headed by an aggressive John Taber of New York) would have been closely consulted, and there would have been "no holding back of details." [12](#)

My exploration of the papers of a dozen leaders of the legislative subcommittees on CIA from the early Cold War period supports Pforzheimer's general recollection that, while DCIs did not share details on all covert operations with those legislators, "Of course, you're going to brief them on Guatemala." Also, notes prepared for Allen Dulles to use in briefing one of the Appropriations subcommittees on CIA in March 1954, while not mentioning names of specific countries, are straightforward in describing the work of the CIA's Clandestine Service and defending the necessity of covert action: "We attempt to influence foreign peoples and governments in support of US foreign policies in such manner that the hand of the US Government is not apparent. The sensitiveness of foreign governments is such that covert political action to influence them is often more effective than overt measures." Dulles took along a chart for the hearing, listing not just successes, but also failed paramilitary and other covert actions in the Agency's brief history. [13](#)

Concerning Guatemala, two documents in declassified CIA files show some interactions between Agency personnel and unspecified Congressional committee staff members in February and April 1954. The staffers were passing on information from individuals who themselves had information on persons inside the Guatemalan Government. The staffers provided the names "as possible assistance [to] KUBARK [that is, CIA] activities." Agency leaders passed on the information to PBSUCCESS [the CIA cryptonym for the Guatemala operation] leaders in Guatemala. Regarding those sources revealed to the Agency by the Congressional figures, CIA wanted in April to "obtain names of most likely defection possibilities in WSBURNT [Guatemalan government] hierarchy plus information on their personalities, weaknesses, plus channels and methods of approach." The significance of this is that Congressional staffers exchanging information with CIA leaders regarding the Guatemalan operation did so, presumably, with the knowledge of one or more superiors on the unnamed committee(s). [14](#)

Immerman's The CIA in Guatemala says that a few powerful legislators--especially Senate majority leader William Knowland of California and Appropriations Chair Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, in addition to Senators Wiley, Johnson, and others--interacted with Eisenhower or State and CIA leaders, pressing them to do "more" about the Guatemalan government, and were given at least oblique assurances that such was being done.

[15](#)

Bridges headed one of the four CIA subcommittees in Congress. What other subcommittee chairs and ranking minority members, like Taber, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, and Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts, knew of specifics is open to question. Saltonstall, chair of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee, saw Allen Dulles every few weeks on business and social occasions. His son and legislative aide, William, assumed in a memo to his father some years later that the Senator had had prior knowledge of the CIA's role in overthrowing Arbenz. His assumption was credible, for rumors of past CIA involvement in Guatemala were among topics scheduled to be discussed in an apparently unrecorded meeting of the subcommittee with Allen Dulles on 22 March 1954.

[16](#)

Overall, available evidence suggests that Congress--counting both leaders and followers--had not just a permissive, but an enthusiastic attitude toward getting rid of the Arbenz government. Legislative leaders are likely to have had far greater knowledge of events unfolding between the CIA and Guatemala's government in the spring and summer of 1954 than did the rest of Congress.

CIA's View of Congressional Intent

Dulles, Pforzheimer, and others could easily judge legislative preferences in The Congressional Record and in conversations with leaders. They never doubted, later on, that CIA's 1954 operation had reflected those preferences. But what documentary record is there of CIA's views of Congressional sentiment at the time? Perhaps the best piece of evidence comes from notes of one of the weekly PBSUCCESS meetings in March 1954, with attendees (their names still sanitized from the document at 20th century's end) from CIA, the State Department, and possibly other organizations. This, of course, was a time when more and more members of Congress, Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, for example, vocalized on Guatemala: "We might as well do away with the diplomatic niceties right away." And Eisenhower had already assured Knowland that he anticipated dealing soon with a new government of Guatemala. In this political atmosphere, the meeting's participants connected Congressional opinion to the coming months' imperatives in Guatemala:

Mr. [name deleted] then stated that he and Mr. [name deleted] were there to take stock of the present situation, to determine where we stand now and what are the future prospects. Are things going downhill so fast in Guatemala that PBSUCCESS, as it now stands, may not be enough? Consideration must be given to the much greater pressure which may come from Congress and public opinion on the present administration if the situation in Guatemala does deteriorate. It may be necessary to take more calculated risks than before.... Mr. [name deleted] then asked Mr. [name deleted] exactly what was meant by possible additional calculated risks. Messrs. [name deleted] and [name deleted] replied: (a) We might reconsider exploiting the conclusion arrived at by [Dominican Republic leader] Trujillo last year and transmitted to [Venezuelan leader] Perez Jimenez that the best way to bring about the fall of the Arbenz government would be to eliminate 15 to 20 of its leaders with Trujillo's trained pistoleros.... Mr. [name deleted] replied that he thought the operation could be brought to a conclusion by 15 June; that the program was complex but that we believe the Agency has the capability of doing the job.... Mr. [name deleted] "...If attributable to the United States, it should not be done. High-level 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 50 years." [Name deleted] then expressed himself as opposed to the elimination of 15 to 20 Guatemalan leaders as a possible solution to the problem, although stating that such elimination was part of the plan and could be done.

[17](#)

CIA leaders in Washington and Central America, along with members of the State Department continued to discuss the assassination option off and on in the three months leading up to the overthrow of the Arbenz government. It appears that no assassinations occurred, however.

The notable feature of the March discussion, though--aside from the fact that assassination was an option in the days of PBSUCCESS--is that participants linked the necessity of "more calculated risks" such as assassination to "pressure which may come from Congress...." [18](#)

Conclusion

The extent of detailed discussions of the Guatemalan operation between CIA and Congressional leaders may never be known, but there was little doubt at CIA or the White House as to overarching Congressional intent before or after the overthrow. Senator Smathers, typical of the Congressional enthusiasts in the spring of 1954 for doing what was "necessary" to get rid of Arbenz's government, reflected legislative sentiment when word emerged out of Guatemala on 30 June that the government had fallen: "In all candor, we must admit that the democratic nations of the Western Hemisphere could not permit the continued existence of a Communist base in Latin America, so close to home." [19](#)

Any lingering views that the US policy toward Guatemala in 1954 was simply the product of a hawkish executive branch, with Congress having little complicity in the policy, can safely be put to rest.

Notes

[1.](#) □ *ADDI Diary, 12 December 1952; Harold Bull to Dulles, 22 April 1954; in CIA Declassified Reference Materials (CIA/DRM), Box 185, National Archives.*

[2.](#) □ *Immerman, □ The CIA in Guatemala □ The Foreign Policy of Intervention (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.*

[3.](#) □ *Sherman Kent to Dulles, 23 February 1955, CIA/DRM, Box 185, National Archives. Even "the relevant branch of DDP" (the Plans Directorate, which carried out the operation) agreed with the analysis. "Product of CIA Expenses Queried on Capitol Hill," □ *Washington Evening Star* , 21 February 1956, reprinted in □ *The Congressional Record (CR)* , 9 April 1956, pp. 5932-3; Andrew, □ *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency From Washington to Bush* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 209-210. Clinton, quoted in □ *The New York Times* , 11 March 1999.*

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[4.](#) *For an elaboration, see David M. Barrett, "Glimpses of a Hidden History: Senator Richard Russell, Congress, and Oversight of the CIA," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Fall 1998, pp. 271-298.*

[5.](#) *Wiley, quoted in Immerman, pp. 103, 115, 156; Smathers, (CR), 28 May 1954, pp. 7336-8.*

[6.](#) *Kersten, quoted in Immerman, p. 153.*

[7.](#) *The quotes are from Johnson and Republican leader William Knowland; see CR, 25 June 1954, pp. 8922-8926.*

[8.](#) *CR, House, 29 June 1954, pp. 9176-9179.*

[9.](#) *CR, Senate, 28 June 1954, pp. 9065-9066.*

[10.](#) Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 40-41, 134-135, cited in Immerman, p. 115.

[11.](#) *The New York Times*, 20 June 1954, pp. 1, and 8E; 24 June 1954, p. 26; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 June 1954, p. 20. I examined every issue of the *Times* and *The Washington Post* in May and June 1954. Dulles to Eisenhower, 20 June 1954, Ann Whitman File, Admin. Series, Box 13, DDE Library. On the Gruson story, see his obituary in the *Times*, 9 March 1998.

[12.](#) Pforzheimer, interviewed by the author, 30 September 1994; my description of Taber is based on a review of his papers at Cornell University.

[13.](#) The notes survived the usually heavy hand of censors in 1998, apparently because no specific operations or countries are mentioned, and the chart listing successes and failures is not included in the CIA/DRM, Box 4, National Archives.

[14.](#) □ *The two documents are cryptic CIA cables referring to PBSUCCESS and noting that the Congressional staffers had some information on some type of "infiltration." CIA Records, Guatemala, 1952-54, Box 1, National Archives.*

[15.](#) □ *Immerman, p. 152.*

[16.](#) □ *William L. Saltonstall to Senator Saltonstall, 6-1-66, Saltonstall Papers, Box 43, Massachusetts Historical Society. The younger Saltonstall was preparing his father for forthcoming Senate debate over increasing legislative oversight of the CIA. "Guatemala" was treated as one of a group of CIA "successes" in the memo, which suggested that the Senator might find it "useful to say, if you can, how far ahead you knew about these and how much detail you had on them." William Darden to Saltonstall, 19 March 1954, Senate Armed Services Committee, Box 230, National Archives.*

[17.](#) □ *"Weekly PBSUCCESS meeting with [word(s) deleted]," 9 March 1954, CIA-Guatemala Records, 1952-1943, Box 1, National Archives; Smith quotation and Eisenhower-Knowland interaction, both in Immerman, pp. 151-3.*

[18.](#) □ *See also the 1995 paper from CIA's History Staff: Gerald K. Haines, "CIA and Guatemala Assassination Proposals, 1952-1954" in CIA Records, National Archives. An overview of the Guatemala affair, also produced by the same office, is in print: Nick Cullather, □ Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operation in Guatemala , 1952-1954*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[19.](#) □ *CR*, 30 June 1954, p. 9267

Tr

ump and foreign policy entanglements: the cautionary tale of U.S. involvement in Guatemala

By ZACHARY JACOBSON

| NEW YORK DAILY NEWS |

FEB 07, 2017 | 12:51 PM

Trump and foreign policy entanglements: the cautionary tale of U.S. involvement in Guatemala

Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz (center facing camera) in 1951, before a U.S.-led overthrow (HO/AFP/Getty Images)

To many, it has come as a surprise that the United States has no laws instructing the President to de-conflict business ventures that overlap with his duties as commander-in-chief. No laws mandate the selling off of foreign investments. No statutes demand the transformation of companies into blind trusts. As then-President-elect Trump explained shortly after his election to a boardroom full of New York Times staffers, with more than a touch of Nixonian flair: If he's the President, he "can't have a conflict of interest."

And yet, it all begs the question, so what? What kind of petty corruption can really come from foreign emissaries staying in Trump's hotels? So what if there ends up being a few fewer wind farms in Scotland? Will an extra call to Taiwan to massage a business deal really upset the delicate trio danced with China? We certainly do not want to become a kleptocracy, a banana republic in which the President acts as both chief executive and most-favored businessman, enriching himself on a large scale at the expense of his people. But is Trump really going to go to war over the building of a few hotels?

STERILIZING A "RED INFECTION" CONGRESS, THE CIA, AND GUATEMALA, 1954

Posted by Joan Russow

Sunday, 24 June 2018 11:11 - Last Updated Monday, 25 June 2018 17:24

The answer is, it's happened before. In 1954, in Guatemala, in a now too-much forgotten episode of the Cold War, the United States went to war not over hotels, but over the business of bananas.

After a popular uprising in 1944 that became known as the October Revolution and overthrew the previously American-backed dictator and bloody fascist Jorge Ubico, Guatemala began what appeared to be an attempt to transform the Central American nation into a liberal and capitalist democracy. The new state provided its people near-universal suffrage, stricter labor laws, more spending on public education and a minimum wage.

In 1950, the defense minister, Jacobo Arbenz was popularly elected Guatemala's second post-revolution president. To continue the revolutionary reforms, most notably, Arbenz confiscated and redistributed some of the United Fruit Company's unused banana farmland to near-destitute workers.

The Boston-based UFC (the world's largest exporter of bananas) had operated hand-in-hand with previous Guatemalan dictators. They paid nearly no taxes while becoming not only the nation's largest landowner but also its biggest employer (nearly 40,000 Guatemalans). The company bought up "shares of the railroad, electric utility and telegraph." So entrenched was UFC, Guatemalans called the American enterprise El Pulpo, the Octopus. To maximize profits, the UFC imposed near-slave conditions on its peasant workers.

It was thus a monumental shift that, by 1954, the Arbenz government had redistributed 1.4 million acres of UFC land to 500,000 of his citizens (one sixth of all Guatemalans) while legalizing the right for workers to strike against unfair labor practices.

The UFC was furious. And, as historians including Gabriel Kolko have found, conflicts of interest abounded. Kolko describes "an intricate web of personal and political relations between United Fruit and many of the Republican and Democrat officials dealing with the Guatemalan issue." Relentlessly the UFC lobbied their allies in the government for American intervention and what today we would call regime change.

Finally, the U.S. acted with bipartisan support. After an aborted operation by President Harry Truman, President Dwight Eisenhower launched operation PBSUCCESS in August 1953.

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His efforts were buoyed by his defense secretary, John Foster Dulles, and his brother, the head of the CIA, Allen Dulles.

The brothers just happened to have a conflict of interest with UFC. They had monetary holdings in the company. John Foster Dulles' law firm in the mid-1930s had composed the contracts between the banana company and Ubico's corrupt regime. Allen Dulles had been on the UFC board of directors.

Under extreme psychological propaganda (\$2.7 million of "psychological warfare" and "subversion"), and harboring a disintegrating officer corps who resented many of his aggressive military reforms and in fear of the great U.S. menace, Arbenz failed to gather the Guatemalan military into a fighting force. In fear of an escalation, the Guatemalan high command forced Arbenz to resign. With U.S. support, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas was installed as the next president of Guatemala. He took to his role with relish, determined to reinstall the dictatorship.

Within just a few years a guerilla war raged. Armas arrested so many opposition forces that the prisons overflowed, and it was necessary to erect concentration camps to hold all of the new dictator's enemies. The rest of his foes simply "disappeared."

Did the Dulles brothers' financial interests in the UFC serve as the motivation to go to war? It is impossible to prove but impossible to deny. The conflict generated a pall of corruption over the affair which demanded that the brothers could not have been impartial actors judging the merits of war and peace. They had skin in the game that went beyond American national interest. And they had no interest in recusing themselves.

Yet to understand the Guatemalan coup we must still complicate the matter. The interests of UFC and the Dulles brothers' conflicts did not play the only role in convincing first the Truman and then the Eisenhower administrations to go to war against Arbenz. Crystalizing the American crusade was an aversion against Communism, growing throughout the American government, that would not allow for Arbenz's socialist-like land reforms and a Czech arms deal between the Soviet satellite and Guatemala. With a wider lens, we can understand the overthrowing of Arbenz as a continuation of the Monroe Doctrine, an operation to ensure pro-U.S. regimes up and down the western hemisphere.

And so we return to Trump. In the Guatemalan war, the Dulles brothers' financial conflict of interest was but one factor in driving the Americans into war. And just so, the fear is not that Trump's every move will be fueled by an avarice to enrich himself, but that his business interests will be one factor tipping the scales of policy decision-making away from American national interest.

This multi-determinative view is key to instruct us on the question of Trump's financial conflicts of interests. His business dealings may not play the sole consideration in his foreign policy. Yet they may be, along with his pro-business ideology and like the UFC in Guatemala, a key consideration in tipping his decisions for issues as large as war to peace or peace to war.

Former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers has critically termed this practice "deals-based capitalism" (as opposed to rules-based capitalism). The ad hoc practice of "deals-based capitalism" that Summers fears trades consistency, predictability, impartial law and the governing by rules for an economy of inconsistent action, partiality, "corruption, abuse of power, favoritism and selective enforcement" of regulations.

Adding to the problem is that we just don't know. Because the President has refused to release his tax returns, we don't know where his conflicts of interest lie. We are blind to ulterior motive. Is he palling up to Russian President Vladimir Putin because of oil shares in the Urals? Or perhaps worse, because he owes some Russians some indeterminate amount of money? Frankly, without his full tax returns, we haven't a clue.

As The New York Times laid out, we do know that Trump retains business ventures throughout the developing world. No doubt, over the next four years, some of these unsteady regimes will stagger and sway as they attempt to develop into modern, first-world democracies. No doubt some of Trump's holdings will be threatened by insecure even explosive conditions. If Trump retains his business holdings, there is little doubt that situations will arise in which Trump will not be able to act as an impartial observer while deciding whether the United States will intervene. As Trump's Chief-of-Staff Reince Priebus warned (ironically) against the corruption charges surrounding Secretary Hillary Clinton, "when that 3 a.m. phone call comes, Americans deserve to have a President on the line who is not compromised" by foreign business operations.

Jacobson holds a Ph.D. in cold war history from Northwestern University. He is the author

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