

**Cullather, Nick. Secret History, The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954, with a new introduction by the author and an Afterword by Piero Gleijeses. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.**

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Cullather, Nick. *Secret History, The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954*, with a new introduction by the author and an Afterword by Piero Gleijeses. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

June 1954: a ragtag army of less than 500 men, under the gauche leadership of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, set in motion OPERATION PBSUCCESS, the CIA's plot to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala. The impetuous colonel, commanding one of the four rebel bands, was to seize a few lightly defended border towns and then march on the capital. But after three days in action, the "plan" had already given way to chaotic improvisation. Two of the invasion's four prongs "had been turned back (one by the Salvadoran police), and one had been halted by minor resistance." (p. 90) Castillo Armas persistently attempted to seize and occupy territory, launching frontal and deadly assaults on populated areas. In vain, CIA agents invited the rebels "to remain in the countryside, broken into small contingents that would strike and melt away in true guerrilla fashion." (p. 100)

The author of *Secret History* speculates, correctly in my view, that "had the Guatemalan Army crushed Castillo Armas at Chiquimula, as it easily could have done, investigations would have uncovered the chronic lapses in security, the failure to plan beyond the operation's first stages, the Agency's poor understanding of the intentions of the Army, the PGT [*Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo*, communist], and the government, the hopeless weakness of Castillo Armas's troops, and the failure to make provisions for the possibility of defeat." (p. 109)

But wait: "just as the entire operation seemed beyond saving, the Guatemalan Government *suddenly, inexplicably* collapsed. The Agency never found out why. After the conclusion of PBSUCCESS, no one asked the captured Guatemalan officers what happened in the regime's final days. Instead, an Agency legend developed [...] that Arbenz 'lost his nerve' as a result of the psychological pressure of air attacks and radio propaganda." (pp. 97-98, emphasis added)

I can't help drawing some politically incorrect parallels between this infamous coup and the glorious Cuban revolution. In both cases, wily but untried assemblages of rebels with scant popular support ultimately prevailed against militarized (Arbenz) and military (Batista) regimes, mostly by not going away. More than 10 years before the vogue of the Foco theory, the CIA was urging Guatemalan rebels to adopt a guerrilla strategy! The collapse of Arbenz and Batista is only "inexplicable" if one sings to the tune of the military/heroic dimension of the coup/revolution. Both governments could have crushed the rebellions in their nests, but didn't, and then a powerful and plainly explainable psychological and geo-strategic factor set in: the hovering giant of the North supported the rebels and pre-emptively scared the army into submission in

Guatemala (as the author points out, the Arbenz regime did not fear Castillo Armas's ragtag army, but "considered the invasion part of a larger US plan to create a pretext for direct intervention" [p. 96]); and in Cuba, the US indirectly propped up the rebels by depriving Batista of its support in Spring 1958, instantly turning his regime into a house of cards (less we forget, Batista's memoirs, entitled *Cuba Betrayed*, is a rancorous charge against the US). The US involvement, direct or indirect, made the difference, not the rebels' military prowess, and not the involvement of other actors – though significant – such as the United Fruit Company in the case of Guatemala. The Truman administration and especially the Eisenhower administration (with the Dulles brothers in charge of the State Department and the CIA) "saw events not in a Guatemalan context but as part of a global pattern of Communist activity," an epoch that featured such events as the Berlin Crisis, the fall of China, and the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1948 and 1949. Arbenz and his few communist friends, not to mention his arms shipment from Czechoslovakia, had to be taken care of, bananas or not. (Incidentally, the US government demanded that the United Fruit grant higher wages and then proceeded to target it with antitrust action, Microsoft style, thus contributing to the company's decline in the 1960s.)

Of course, this is not to say that the elected Arbenz, for all his human rights violations he committed at the end of his regime, is morally comparable to the dictatorial Batista. The Cuban revolution was just whereas the coup against Arbenz doubtlessly wasn't. Still, the comparison helps us understand how power was seized and lost in Latin America during the Cold War.

The book under review offers a fast-moving narrative account of OPERATION PBSUCCESS from an insider's perspective. The author, Nick Cullather, joined the History Staff of the Center for the Study of Intelligence at the CIA in July 1992, soon after completing his PhD at the University of Michigan. His mission, in the wake of the CIA's "openness" initiative announced in 1992: studying some of the Agency's "document collections" (called "jobs" in agency parlance) on its operations in Guatemala in 1952-54, and then to write a concise report, which was classified "secret" and published internally under the title *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala, 1952-1954*. Several thousand copies were distributed throughout the agency in 1994. The author does not consider his study to be "a full account or an 'official version' of PBSUCCESS." He had only one year to go over massive amount of documents ("Job" 79-01025A contained 180,000 pages). Rather, it was "meant to stand alone only as a training manual, a cautionary tale for future covert operators." Nor did he expect his study to be released to the public. This book, published by Stanford University Press, is that study in the form in which it was released.

The little history of the book, exposed in a lively and concise introduction, is worthy of note. We are talking about the CIA reluctantly divulging rather sensitive material to public scrutiny. *Operation PBSUCCESS* was censored, osten-

sibly to protect the anonymity of key individuals. Brackets indicate where cuts have occurred, reproducing the excisions' relative size "in order to allow the reader to speculate on the contents of the missing passage." (p. xiv) The text is dotted with intriguing "sentences" like: "[ ] continued to negotiate with [ ] while [ ] stepped up the air war." (p. 89) The author also reveals, amusingly, that the Agency, having done so little historical research of its own, "had to rely on accounts by historians with no access to classified documents," and in one particular case "assigned an article that I later learned was based on disinformation the agency itself spread in 1954." (p. xii)

Cullather admits that "The most sensational disclosure contained in the 1,400 pages of documents released along with this study concerned an aspect of PBSUCCESS that is not discussed in this narrative: agency plans to assassinate Guatemalan officials either in conjunction with the operation or in the event of its failure." (p. xv, emphasis added) An appendix to the book offers a "do-it-yourself guide to political murder," entitled "A Study of Assassination." I doubt that *Secret History* offers crucially new revelations about the burlesque and tragic episode of the Cold War that was the coup against Arbenz. Still, this is a fascinating book, for in addition to delivering a useful amount of information, it conveys the ambiance of bureaucratic unreality and political paranoia that led to what Piero Gleijeses, in his otherwise dispensable Afterword, calls "wanton criminal negligence." After Arbenz's resignation, five successive juntas occupied the presidential palace, "each more amenable to American demands than the last." (p. 103) Castillo Armas, whom the Agency hoped would align himself with centrist and moderate elements, turned out to be a mediocre and autocratic head of state, shredding civil and political liberties (banning truly subversive books by Victor Hugo and Fyodor Dostoevsky!) and setting the stage for decades of lawlessness, corruption, and violence. In a vintage sentence, Cullather asserts that "In Guatemala, US officials learned a lesson they would relearn in Vietnam, Iran, [ ] and other countries: intervention usually produces 'allies' that are stubborn, aid-hungry, and corrupt." (p. 117) Fill the blank!

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