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### Democracy Deposed: U.S. Media Coverage of 1950's Guatemala

After World War II, the United States established itself as a crusader for democracy and capitalism around the world. The urge to fight communism while advocating for democracy meant a dilemma when faced with countries with democratically elected leftist governments. By no means does leftism mean communism, however, during the Cold War, the United States feared that left of center governments could fall to communism with the Soviet Union's influence. Ultimately, the United States was more intent on stopping the spread of communism than supporting true democracies, so it supported military coups against democratically elected leftist governments to put right-wing regimes in their place. The fact that the CIA backed these coups is no longer a secret, and the CIA has even admitted to involvement in some of them. Despite these operations being clandestine at the time, that did not stop the media from subjectively reporting in opposition to these leftist governments, especially Guatemala's. Newspapers in the United States reported with clear bias against the leftist democratically elected government in Guatemala before, during, and after the CIA military coup.

The people of Guatemala elected Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán to be their president in their 1950 national election. Árbenz ran on a platform calling for agrarian reform, and in his inaugural speech he claimed he wanted "to convert Guatemala from a country bound by a predominantly

feudal economy into a modern, capitalist one.”<sup>1</sup> Árbenz sought to pass policies to help the Guatemalan peasantry, who had suffered greatly under Jorge Ubico, their recently overthrown dictator. In order to shift Guatemala from feudalism into a modern capitalist economy, in June 1952, Árbenz announced Decree 900, which mainly expropriated and redistributed 603,704 hectares of unused land and gave it to around 100,000, predominately indigenous, Guatemalan families.<sup>2</sup> Despite striving to make Guatemala’s economy more capitalist, taking land from the rich and giving it to the poor came off as communist and raised alarms in the United States government. The Guatemalan government repaid owners of expropriated lands with bonds that were based on the value they reported their land to be valued at on their taxes; a United States based company that owned a large part of Guatemala’s arable land, the United Fruit Company, greatly underreported the value of its land, was outraged by the low payments received for the expropriated lands, and fueled a lobbying campaign for the United States to overthrow Árbenz.<sup>3</sup>

The story of Guatemala expropriating the United Fruit Company’s land did not go unnoticed as the company also pushed a propaganda campaign in the press to make Guatemala appear to be ruled by communists. Various newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Wall Street Journal* reported on the story. Their reports were biased in favor of the United Fruit Company and the United States and did not explain Guatemala’s side of the issue. For instance, on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1953, *The New York Times* published an article explaining that the U.S. State Department wrote a note criticizing Guatemala for not offering adequate compensation for the United Fruit Company’s expropriated lands, that the company

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History." *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (1980): 629-623, 53, 633.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas W. Trefzger "Guatemala's 1952 Agrarian Reform Law: A Critical Reassessment," *International Social Science Review* (March 22, 2002): <http://www.ditext.com/trefzger/agrarian.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History." 634.

needed the land to rotate their crops, and that the company had invested millions into Guatemala.<sup>4</sup> However, the article failed to mention why the Guatemalan government offered little money for the land, why they took the land, and how the United Fruit Company was hurting the local economy by abusing the Guatemalan people's labor. The quotes in the article were all from the U.S. State Department's note condemning Guatemala, which offered no insight or perspective to the other side of the issue. In an article in *The Wall Street Journal* published in April 1953, Guatemala's government was reported to be full of communists despite a minority of the country being communist.<sup>5</sup> Articles like these overshadow the fact that the Guatemalan people had democratically elected Árbenz, he never appointed any communist to the Cabinet, only sub-cabinet positions, and there were only four communists in Guatemala's sixty-one-member congress.<sup>6</sup> However, while four out of sixty-one is a minority, any communist was perceived as a threat to the United States and anti-communist sentiments were everywhere.

In November 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected President, and his strong stance on containing communism inclined him to act in favor of the United Fruit Company. Eisenhower appointed John Foster Dulles as his Secretary of State and Allen Dulles as the head of the CIA. They both were fervently anti-communist and were former attorneys for the United Fruit Company.<sup>7</sup> Soon after taking office, Eisenhower authorized the CIA's plan, known as PBSUCCESS, to overthrow Árbenz; a CIA memo summarizing PBSUCCESS, mentioned manipulation of United States' public opinion as necessary to the plan's success.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Guatemala Chided by US on Seizure." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Aug 29, 1953.

<sup>5</sup> Ray Vicker, "American Redland?" *Wall Street Journal* (1923 - Current File), Apr 10, 1953.

<sup>6</sup> Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's classified account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, (1999): 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History." 638.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 644.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article published in June 1954, Sebastian Buccellato, an American priest, wrote about his residency in Guatemala for two years. He described how the communists maintained power through rigging elections, how they controlled the media, and how he eventually got arrested for being in Guatemala illegally, by giving out anti-communist flyers and driving non-communists to the polls; at the end of the article, he advocated for action against the communists in Guatemala by calling the situation urgent and saying people need to act before an Iron Curtain descended on the American continent.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. press ran articles, like Buccellato's, calling for action against the Guatemalan government, knowing that they had the power to help transform public opinion and generate support for U.S. action against Guatemala. This article lacked perspectives from Guatemalans; the only perspective offered was from Buccellato, showing the biased nature of U.S. press coverage of Guatemala.

The article claimed that the owners of expropriated land were paid with worthless bonds, that peasants who wanted land had to join the communist party, that many of the communist members and people of Guatemala would not tolerate communism if they were taught its ungodliness, and that a local communist bureaucrat was only semi-literate.<sup>10</sup> Buccellato called the expropriation of land arbitrary and the payment worthless, but as was the case with the United Fruit Company's holdings, the land was most likely not being used and had been appraised at the value that its owners had claimed for it in an effort to reduce their tax obligations. His claims portrayed members of the Communist Party as illiterate, incompetent, and corrupt, making them appear unfit to be running the country. There is no way to know if these claims are credible as Buccellato is the only voice in the article and he fails to back his

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<sup>9</sup> Sebastian Buccellato, "Report from Guatemala." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Jun 27, 1954.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

claims up in any way. One of his claims was that the Guatemalan government tried to falsely deport him on the day he was supposed to be electioneering despite his having the legal documentation; however, records show that he had failed to renew his residence permit.<sup>11</sup> If a newspaper as influential as *The Los Angeles Times* wanted to uphold good journalistic standards, it surely had the means to find more credible sources, or at least balance Buccellatto's perspective with those of others.

Articles featuring Guatemalan perspectives were not completely absent from U.S. newspapers. A *Washington Post* article published in May 1954, quoted President Árbenz's reply to Guatemala being called a "beachhead for communism in Latin America" by the U.S. State Department. Árbenz said that Guatemala was disposed to defend its sovereignty, and the article even pointed out that the probable reason for Guatemala buying arms from communist countries was because the United States would not sell to them.<sup>12</sup> The *Post* article provides the government's perspective, and that of independent Guatemalan newspapers, saying that they accepted social reforms, and sided with the government's purchase of arms despite being alarmed at the number of communists jumping on the bandwagon. Despite this attempt at neutrality and objective reporting the author still called Árbenz's government a "regime".<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps because the CIA was wary of those who did not express anti-communist sentiments in their writings. Such was the case with *New York Times* writer, Sidney Gruson. His December 1953 article reported that other Latin American leaders were skeptical of the United States' double standard about governments in the region, how they tolerated dictatorships, but not

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<sup>11</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered hope: the Guatemalan revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 213.

<sup>12</sup> Edwin A. Lahey, "Guatemalans Say U.S. Charges 'Hide' Colonialism." *The Washington Post and Times Herald* (1954-1959), May 25, 1954.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

communists.<sup>14</sup> Gruson went to Guatemala and reported that there was legitimate concern and suspicion towards the United States' involvement in the region. His reporting raised suspicion in the CIA, causing the organization to investigate him.<sup>15</sup> It is possible that journalists in the United States acted out of fear of falsely being ousted as communists, which interfered with their ability to objectively report the news, especially the news from Guatemala.

On Jun 17<sup>th</sup>, 1954, Carlos Castillo Armas invaded Guatemala from Honduras with less than a thousand troops; CIA agent Richard Bissell called the force "extremely small and ill-trained." The Guatemalan Army most likely would have won in a direct confrontation with Castillo Armas' army, however, the CIA used propaganda to create the illusion that Armas' army was winning battles against the Guatemalan Army that did not occur and provided U.S. Air Force pilots who bombed parts of Guatemala City.<sup>16</sup> The CIA's propaganda along with the bombings resulted in the Guatemalan Army turning on Árbenz and demanding his resignation.

After the June 17<sup>th</sup> coup, newspapers in the United States reported on the success of Castillo Armas' coup. In a July 1954 article in *The Washington Post*, Secretary of State Dulles was quoted saying "Guatemalan patriots led by Col. Castillo Armas arose to the challenge to combat the Communist leadership and change it. Thus, the situation is being cured by the Guatemalans themselves".<sup>17</sup> While the U.S. press did not know that the CIA had planned and executed the military coup, newspapers still reported with clear bias against the overthrown government, emphasizing that Guatemala had been saved and that the future of the country was

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<sup>14</sup> Zachary Carl Fisher, "American Propaganda, Popular Media, and the Fall of Jacobo Arbenz." (M.A. thesis, Department of History, University of Nevada Las Vegas (2012). 10-32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> William Galbraith. "Dulles Says Guatemalans Blocked Red Beachhead." *The Washington Post and Times Herald (1954-1959)*, Jul 01, 1954.

now in the hands of the Guatemalan people, although no mention was made of them having democratically elected their previous government.

Nearly three years after Árbenz' ousting, *The Los Angeles Times* published an article praising the new government that took Árbenz' place. The clear bias and outright lies about Guatemala's former government did not end after the coup. The author of *The Los Angeles Times* article wrote: "Castillo Armas has been faced with a momentous task – to prove to his people that the democratic way is far better than the Communist".<sup>18</sup> The article reported that Castillo Armas helped Guatemala prosper through funding infrastructure, education, and social welfare, and by enacting agrarian reform. In reality, Guatemala was less democratic than ever before, as Castillo Armas disenfranchised three quarters of the population through a literacy requirement and by outlawing all political parties and labor unions; he later became more and more like a dictator, rigging elections in his favor, censoring the press, and cancelling Decree 900, thus reverting Guatemala back to a country that relied on few crops.<sup>19</sup> The United States government's support of Castillo Armas could have very well contributed to newspapers' lack of critical reporting of Guatemala's new government. *The Los Angeles Times* article praising Castillo Armas and reporting falsehoods is a clear indication of press bias against Árbenz (even though he no longer maintained power), perhaps to help justify the United States funding the coup if that reality were to ever become public knowledge.

The press in the United States rarely showed any favor to the democratically elected government in Guatemala. Anti-communist reporting was nothing new at the time; however, the inaccurate reporting was so significant that it helped sway public opinion against Árbenz. Instead

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Hillinger, "Guatemala Booms Under New Rule." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, Jun 30, 1957.

<sup>19</sup> Schlesinger, Stephen, and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 215..

of objective reporting, including criticism of the United States' foreign policy, the major newspapers fed into the United Fruit Company's policy of portraying Guatemala as a communist-run country, and they supported any anti-communist efforts against Árbenz. Their biased reporting against Guatemala before, during, and after the CIA military coup allowed for the coup to seem necessary and helped transform American public opinion, when, in reality, the coup violated the Guatemalan people's right to choose and keep their government through democratic means. If the major U.S. newspapers had been objective, they would have run articles with perspectives from Guatemalan people, explained the Guatemalan government's reasons for redistributing land, and not used their power to influence the American public by calling for military action against Guatemala's democratically elected government.



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