

# Guatemala and the Forgotten Anniversary

By Arnold J. Oliver | June 18, 2004

Democracy has been much in the news of late. At the G-8 Summit in Georgia, one of the main items on the agenda was the democratization of the Middle East, and the recent commemoration of the D-Day anniversary and the passing of President Reagan both generated discussion concerning the defense and spread of democracy.

But amidst all the hoopla, the anniversary of a decisive event in the modern history of democracy has somehow escaped notice. Fifty years ago, on June 17, 1954, the government of the United States supported the overthrow of the legitimate and democratically-elected government of Guatemala. It was the Central Intelligence Agency's first major covert action in Latin America, and by leading to the rise of a series of military regimes across the region, it changed the course of history.

What was done to Guatemala in 1954 was criminal, and because the U.S. government committed the dreadful deed, American citizens are obliged to remember, and hopefully, to learn from it.

After throwing off dictatorial rule in the 1940s, Guatemala had several democratic elections that culminated in 1950 with Jacobo Arbenz becoming president with 65% of the popular vote. Arbenz was committed to modernizing the country. He pushed for more labor rights and higher wages, more spending on infrastructure and education, and land reform. The latter was a kind of Central American "trust busting"—an effort to break up large uncultivated land holdings to create thousands of family farms. President Arbenz himself lost 1700 acres to the reform program.

Unfortunately for Arbenz, his reforms ran up against a powerful multi-national corporation, the United Fruit Company, which owned over a half million acres of land in Guatemala and controlled the country's telegraph and rail systems, as well as the only Atlantic sea port. The company had good connections in Washington. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen Dulles, the

Director of the CIA, both had extensive financial ties to United Fruit. They both bitterly opposed the Arbenz government's proposal to nationalize and distribute 390,000 acres of uncultivated land owned by the company.

United Fruit spent heavily on public relations, and alleged that Guatemala was under the control of communists. Reader's Digest, The Saturday Evening Post, and NBC News—among others—joined in hyping the red scare. But the truth was that, while the communist party was legal in Guatemala, its membership never exceeded 4,000 in a nation of nearly three million people. In Arbenz' governing coalition, only four of fifty-one deputies were communists, and none were cabinet members.

"Operation Success," as the CIA-supported coup was called, removed the Arbenz government by force in June of 1954, and installed its hand-picked "Liberator," Castillo Armas, who promptly cancelled the land reform program, imposed press censorship, banned political parties, outlawed most labor union and leftist political activity, and re-hired the chief of the secret police from the old dictatorship. The U.S. ambassador presented to the new government a list of names of Guatemalans that had been marked for immediate assassination by the CIA.

For a short time after the coup, U.S. officials seemed to be committed to improving the lot of the Guatemalan people. Visiting Guatemala in 1955, Vice President Richard Nixon declared that it was important for the new regime to "do more for the people in two years than the communists were able to do in ten years."

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To say that Nixon's goal was unfulfilled would be an understatement. On the contrary, more than thirty years would pass before Guatemala would again have reasonably democratic elections. The CIA coup ushered in a long night of torture, repression, and state terrorism that took the lives of close to two hundred thousand Guatemalans. Among the victims have been nuns, priests, teachers, students, labor unionists, indigenous Mayans, and others labeled as "subversives." Throughout the decades of repression, U.S. government officials supported the terror with arms, training, diplomatic cover, and intelligence. State terror escalated to genocide in the 1980s as entire Mayan communities were wiped out with the active connivance of the Reagan administration, according to the findings in 1999 of a United Nations sponsored truth commission.

Although President Clinton apologized to the Guatemalan people in 1998 for the U.S. government's earlier backing of abusive regimes, the legacy of the coup and the decades of violence continue. Amnesty International's 2004 report declared that "human rights abuses in Guatemala reached levels not seen for many years." The victims now are mostly journalists, legal and human rights workers, and campesinos involved in land disputes. Adult illiteracy is at 25%, poverty is rampant, and Guatemala is now one of the most unequal countries in the world. Washington seems satisfied.

Guatemala in 1954 was a precedent. Elected governments in Brazil, Chile and Nicaragua later met a

similar fate, and others including Argentina and Uruguay fell indirectly. What might properly be called "The Really Bad Neighbor Policy" continues. Recently, the U.S. government has subverted or grossly interfered with democratic processes in Haiti, Venezuela, and El Salvador.

Remembering Guatemala is good, but not sufficient. The U.S. national security elite really needs to change its ways of giving mere lip service to democracy while subverting it in practice. For openers, perhaps we should stop honoring the smug suits in Washington who have shown such scant respect for democratic institutions.

We need indictments. We need perp walks and orange jump suits. We need trials both in the United States and at the International Criminal Court.

This we owe to Guatemala.

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