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An Illusion of Omnipotence: U.S. Policy Toward Guatemala, 1954–1960

Charles D. Brockett

ABSTRACT

Based primarily on declassified U.S. government documents, this study analyzes the U.S. effort to build a “showcase for democracy” in Guatemala following the U.S.-engineered regime change of 1954. The effort was doomed, for the U.S. government lacked both unity of purpose and the necessary continuous commitment at the top. The documents also demonstrate limited consideration of the sociopolitical constraints that U.S. policy objectives would face. This is clear from examining three key U.S. objectives: to eliminate the “communist threat”; to create a stable, legitimate, democratic government; and to develop a free, independent labor movement. Domination and the limits of power are equally central to understanding the relationship between the Eisenhower administration and Guatemala, a case study that also has more general utility.

[P]eople, and the United States press in general, think that we have a special responsibility for the success of the new government. Entirely apart from the danger that failure to achieve our objectives here might spell a return of communism, is the enormous loss of prestige here and abroad which such failure would entail for the United States.

U.S. Ambassador Edward J. Sparks, 1956

We were on the crest of a wave and nobody, literally nobody on the Hill or anywhere else ever questioned our ability to do anything if we wanted to do it [and] if we were willing to spend the money and the effort to do it.

*Thomas C. Mann, Former Chief Political Officer,
U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, 1975*

After the overthrow of the Jacobo Arbenz government, which it engineered in 1954, the United States approached “liberated” Guatemala promising to build a “showcase for democracy.” Even more, U.S. government officials were committed to continuing the job of eliminating “communism” from the country. The two goals were perceived as compatible; after all, the communist threat that the United States perceived in the Arbenz government was assumed to be inherently destructive to democratic values. The documentary record, however, indicates clearly

that what was not understood at the time was how much these two objectives would conflict in practice. When conflict did occur, anticommunism invariably trumped reform.

This subordination of reform does not mean that it was unimportant as a goal or that it was a cynical façade cloaking self-interest.¹ While the Eisenhower administration “fawned over” dictators and “effusively supported” them elsewhere in the region (Rabe 1988, 39, 87), special circumstances in Guatemala required a different approach. On this the documentary record is clear, as it is on the dangerously simplistic assumptions guiding U.S. Guatemalan policy.

Democratization and social reform threatened the power, resources, and status of the small elite that had dominated Guatemala largely unchallenged until the ten-year progressive period that began in 1944. To that elite, the elimination of what they perceived as the communist threat of the Arbenz period (1951–54) also meant a return to their privileged position, a dominance justified by a level of socioeconomic underdevelopment that still required elite “guidance.” They, along with Guatemalan conservatives more generally, found mass politics and reformist policies in the postliberation period too reminiscent of the prior “communist” years. Accordingly, elites and the rest of the right wing used the club of anticommunism, whether cynically or sincerely, to attack left-of-center political parties, labor organizing, and any reforms that might threaten their vested interests. In doing so, they effectively resisted the democratic reform project that had been crucial to U.S. justifications for the overthrow of the Arbenz regime.

U.S. government documents from the period contain many insightful analyses of the intricacies of Guatemalan politics. But they show limited understanding—or even consideration—of the sociopolitical constraints that U.S. policy objectives would face. Instead, U.S. policy toward Guatemala during the Eisenhower administration was based more on ideologically driven wishful thinking. U.S. officials at the time seldom gave explicit attention to ideology, but the documentary record is still imbued with the optimistic liberalism of the U.S. political culture of the time, one that assumed that “change and development are easy” and that “all good things go together” (Packenham 1973, 20; also see Smith 1994).

Because the ideology was widely shared, key terms, such as *communist* and *democracy*, did not need to be clarified; “everyone understood” what they meant. Ideology discourages analytical thought; and this ideology in particular, because it was optimistic, allowed U.S. officials to avoid questioning basic assumptions. The cost of this avoidance was paid not by the United States, of course, but by the Guatemalan people. The price was high, as there is a direct link between the policy failures of the 1950s and the ever-worsening cycles of state terrorism that followed, leaving some two hundred thousand people dead by the

mid-1990s (CEH 1999, 1:73), and to the economic stagnation that has plagued the country since the political violence ended.

The successful U.S. project to depose Arbenz through a multifaceted effort, including the invasion of a small army of exiles, has been thoroughly researched (Blasier 1976; Cullather 1999; Gleijeses 1991; Immerman 1982; Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983).² It stands out as a classic example of the vulnerability of small countries to the imperial objectives of larger powers. Surprisingly, though, little has been written on the aftermath of the regime change, when the United States was centrally involved in turning the "Liberation Movement" into the government of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas; primarily, two dissertations address this period (Jonas 1974; Streeter 1994, 2001; also see Siekmeier 1994; Streeter 1999).

The post-1954 literature continues the theme of domination, usually emphasizing U.S. economic motivations over security matters. But policy success does not follow necessarily from hegemony and imperial hubris. From the first days following the Arbenz overthrow, U.S. officials were frustrated again and again by Guatemalan political actors and a Guatemalan sociopolitical reality that would not conform to their wishes or pressures. As much as domination, the limits of hegemonic power are central to understanding the relationship between the Eisenhower administration and Guatemala in the years that followed the overthrow of Arbenz.³ A closer look at Guatemala during this period also shows a civil society more active than is usually assumed.

The Guatemalan case also has a more general utility. The United States frequently has intervened in the domestic affairs of the nations of the Caribbean region, including the drastic intervention of fostering regime change. Just in the 1980s, such interventions occurred in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Grenada, and Panama, followed by Haiti in the 1990s, with Colombia a possibility for the near future. These interventions were invariably justified by the humanitarian intention of promoting centrist democratic reformism, usually in addition to anticommunism (or anti-*narcotraficantismo*). But were these objectives achieved? Were they based on an adequate understanding of the target society? Does the United States even follow through on its promised assistance? The answers to such questions are critical to the evaluation of the interventions of the past and the justifications for those that will inevitably be promoted in the future.⁴

Given the availability of the appropriate diplomatic records, the Guatemalan case provides an excellent opportunity for examining these still all-too-relevant issues for Latin America. This study will explore these issues in relation to specific U.S. policy objectives in Guatemala: eliminating the communist threat, creating a united and effective government, democratizing the new regime, and developing a free, democratic labor movement. The magnitude of the U.S. failure to achieve

these objectives is striking. This failure should serve as a stark warning against any similar “illusions of omnipotence” in the future.

The Guatemalan case is a study of the Eisenhower administration, not an analysis of President Eisenhower himself as a foreign policy leader.⁵ The relevant archival documents indicate virtually no involvement of the U.S. president in relations with Guatemala once Arbenz was removed from office in mid-1954. Neither, for that matter, do they show much involvement of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.⁶ Relations were handled instead by the regional bureau at the State Department. This should be no surprise; far more pressing security problems arose during these years from the core areas of Western Europe and the communist states and, in the Third World, from Asia and the Middle East. Consequently, far less attention was given to Latin America.⁷ Besides, Eisenhower’s view of leadership was that “military commanders and presidents . . . were paid to make decisions; details were for subordinates” (Brands 1988, 68).

BUILDING A DEMOCRATIC SHOWCASE

From the U.S. perspective, the first step in building a showcase for democracy in Guatemala was to consolidate a stable regime. This required both the elimination of the communist threat and the creation of a united and effective government. This government could then democratize, important for legitimating the regime both domestically and internationally. Gaining popular support also would require adequate government performance, especially with the economy, which was in perilous shape. These objectives, though, proved to be unobtainable. The frustrating constraints were not all internal to Guatemala, either, as some were back in the United States itself, especially as related to the delivery of the ample economic assistance Guatemalans expected.

More fundamentally, irreconcilable tensions between core objectives—glimpsed at times in the field—went virtually unrecognized in Washington. “Viewing the Third World through the invariably distorting lens of a Cold War geopolitical strategy,” as McMahon describes it more generally, post-Arbenz Guatemala provides a telling example of the Eisenhower administration “simplifying complicated local and regional developments, confusing nationalism with communism, aligning the United States with inherently unstable and unrepresentative regimes, and wedding American interests to the status quo in areas undergoing fundamental social, political, and economic upheaval” (McMahon 1986, 457).

ELIMINATING THE COMMUNIST THREAT

The overriding U.S. preoccupation regarding Guatemala in the 1950s was communism, as it was more generally for all of Latin America (Rabe

1988, 40). The growing influence of Guatemalan communists in the Arbenz government was what led the Eisenhower administration to perceive a threat to the country and the broader region and therefore to engineer Arbenz's demise (see especially Gleijeses 1991; Immerman 1982; and USDS). Following the collapse of the Arbenz regime on June 27, 1954, the primary concern now was fully and permanently to liberate Guatemala from communism. Instead, many ordinary people were persecuted and even executed while the leaders who most concerned the United States left the country, many to return to Guatemala and political activity within a few years.

The United States wanted all communists found; tried, if possible, for criminal acts—possibly on the charge “of having been [a] covert Moscow agent” (USDS 1954ag); and removed from Guatemala. Instead, the U.S. embassy regretfully informed Washington, although “the overt Guatemalan Communist apparatus” had collapsed, “the Communist conspiracy has yet to be totally destroyed” because of the “ineptness and laxity” of the new government (USDS 1954e). Indeed, most of the leaders of the left quickly escaped from the country or sought refuge in foreign diplomatic missions. Altogether, about 770 people took diplomatic asylum, which became a point of contention between the United States and the Guatemalan government, as communicated repeatedly to Guatemalan officials (see, for example, USDS 1954a). U.S. officials put substantial pressure on the leaders of the government the United States had just created, arguing that the Latin American tradition of asylum should not be extended to communists because their political offenses were not related to domestic controversies but instead were “connected [to] international conspiracies” (USDS 1954af).

Latin American governments, by contrast, pressured the new regime to respect traditional practices. The tradition was upheld. Frustrated, the State Department cabled its Latin American embassies, “we can only view with most serious concern extent to which [asylum] has been used in this instance to protect communist or communist line enemies of government” (USDS 1954ah). The State Department's reference to “communist line enemies” indicates its broad perception of the “communist threat.” Guatemalan anticommunist activists often had an even broader one; they embarked on a widescale witchhunt.

The police and the secret National Defense Committee Against Communism filled “the jails to overflowing” but with “mostly farm workers from the local Agrarian Committees.”⁸ According to embassy figures, more than five thousand people were jailed. As health conditions in the jails “threatened to become serious, the government began to let them out in dribbles” (USDS 1954ae). In December the embassy declared that the 142 remaining prisoners would be released by Christmas Eve, with the exception of 20 who were to be indicted (USDS 1954w). Although

charges were filed against only a few of those arrested, the judiciary did continue to function, ordering many prisoners freed. The Guatemalan press covered the issue with increasing attentiveness. By mid-October it was giving front-page coverage to allegations of torture. This criticism reinforced a growing public demand for the return of full civil liberties and constitutional government (USDS 1954j).

Although arrests were widespread and indiscriminate, political violence did not occur on the scale that it would in future waves of repression or, apparently, on the scale some subsequent accounts assert (for example, Brockett 1990, 104; Jonas 1991, 41). Not that the new leader, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, was credible on this issue; he boasted in the fall that “no one has been executed before a firing squad” under his regime despite “the magnitude of the crimes the Communists committed” (1954a). It is true that no members of the Arbenz government were killed (Haines 1995, 8), although assassination of Arbenz-period leaders had been the subject of CIA discussion for some time (Haines 1995).

Urban and rural labor leaders and peasant activists were not so fortunate. Independent U.S. observers reported 200 to 250 summary executions in the months following the overthrow (Gillin and Silvert 1956, 470, 477; *NYT* 1956c).⁹ This was not enough for some of Castillo’s rightist critics, though, who “openly claim they would like to see a blood bath to purge Guatemala of its alleged Communist population” (USDS 1955c). In some rural areas they did, with the number of people killed impossible to estimate accurately, as the recent report of Guatemala’s truth commission points out.¹⁰

Rural and urban elites took full advantage of the “communist” witch-hunt to get rid of any “troublemakers.” Most of the abuses were in the first days of the regime change, when, according to the U.S. embassy, “it was reasonable to fear peasant uprisings in view of the intense agitation work that the Communists had carried on in the rural areas under Arbenz.” Many of those arrested were leaders of campesino unions, but, it was conceded, they usually had little understanding of communism. Instead, those arrested were “regarded as troublesome by farm managers and owners who seized on the change of regime as an opportunity to get rid of them.” One small farmer “boasted to an Embassy officer that he had ‘finished’ with Communism in his area by personally loading 82 campesinos on a truck and sending them to Guatemala City” (USDS 1954aa).

When peasants were freed from jail, punishment continued when they returned to the farms where they had been working: they were evicted, in what had come “to be a fairly common practice . . . of restoring what owners and managers consider the necessary agricultural labor discipline” (USDS 1954ai).

Similarly, a frontal attack on organized labor, such as dissolving the four union confederations on August 10, was justified as necessary to

protect workers from communism. The major effect, however, was to remove all workers' protection from antilabor actions, as both private employers and the government conducted mass firings without the required separation pay. Workers who complained, the embassy noted, were "denounced as Communists and jailed," with apparently no attempt "made to separate Communists or Communist sympathizers from non-Communist old line government employees." In reality, the firings were often motivated less by political reasons than by "the desire for 'spoils' or a wish to extend reprisals to all individuals who served the Arbenz regime," even all the way down "to the porters and scrub-women" (USDS 1954n; also see ASIES 1995, 8–22).

Three months after the fall of Arbenz, the embassy was still reporting its frustration at both the lack of arrests of communist leaders and the counterproductive indiscriminate arrests of noncommunists.¹¹ As one particularly good description of the situation points out,

The confusion and ineptitude in the program to arrest Communists appear to be due to the disorganization of the government, its own lack of detailed knowledge of who is a Communist and . . . that there are at least four sets of authorities ordering arrests. Working in an atmosphere notable for a wealth of irresponsible denunciations of "Communists," these various organizations have evidently been unable to date to put into effect any methodical and effective plan of arresting the Communist conspirators most likely to lead an underground organization, while at the same time their continued imprisonment of large numbers of campesinos and often indiscriminate arrests and internment of leftist but non-Communist figures of the past regimes is opening up the Guatemalan Government to charges from abroad of operating a police state. (USDS 1954ai)

One result was certainly unintended: by the end of the decade, the embassy reported that *anticommunist* had become a negative label, an association with reactionary forces (USDS 1959b).

Consolidating the New Regime

A year after the new regime seized power, the U.S. embassy reported that "the basic problem remains . . . that the Castillo government came to power without basic cohesion among the varied elements, ranging from the nationalistic left to the far right" (USDS 1955k). This lack of unity frustrated the purposes of both Guatemala and the United States. For the latter, though, an additional frustration was the incompetence of its chosen vehicle, Castillo Armas.

U.S. Ambassador John Peurifoy had misgivings about the "Liberator," predicting at the beginning that "we will have trouble with Castillo Armas" (USDS 1954m) and complaining two months later that Castillo

“doesn’t know how to make a decision and stick to it” (USDS 1954l). Peurifoy’s successor, Norman Armour, shared this view: “There are moments when he seems almost pathetic. He must literally be led by the hand step by step.” (Armour then noted the dilemma: “It will be a difficult task to do this without arousing nationalistic reactions” [USDS 1955g]). The *New York Times* correspondent wrote that “occasionally during an interview a quick expression seemed to appear as if [Castillo] were mutely asking, ‘What am I doing here?’” (Kennedy 1971, 144).

Compounding the problem, the CIA found Castillo “surrounded by highly suspicious opportunistic elements” (USDS 1954ak).¹² A year later, the judgment remained the same. Although people found him “well-meaning,” the embassy reported that “his failure to better consolidate his position . . . raises a presumption that he is lacking in qualities of the highest type of leadership” (USDS 1955k).¹³

Ironically, U.S. officials were more impressed by Castillo’s rivals. Peurifoy preferred Colonel Elfegio Monzón, wanting him to share power with Castillo Armas because “he lends stability” (USDS 1954m). The ambassador informed Washington that Monzón “was by far the best man, the most intelligent and the only man in the administration who is doing any work” (USDS 1954l), an assessment shared by the CIA (USDS 1954ak). Monzón, however, unlike Castillo, had no base of popular support. His service as a top military officer during the Arbenz period also made him suspect to the right wing and its top leader in the Castillo camp, Juan Córdova Cerna.¹⁴

Described by Immerman (1982, 142) as “the brains of the counter-revolutionary movement,” Córdova Cerna was a wealthy coffee grower and United Fruit’s Guatemalan legal adviser. He impressed Peurifoy, who described him as “potentially [the] most mature adviser available to Castillo Armas” (USDS 1954r). Córdova was even more highly regarded by the CIA, with which he had good ties: earlier he had been one of its top choices to play the role of Liberator (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983, 121). The CIA faithfully transmitted to Washington the views of the right wing in Guatemala, claiming in this case that virtually all anticommunist groups “have eagerly awaited the return of Córdova with the view that he is the only one capable of solving the situation and giving the needed political guidance” (USDS 1954ak). Although top State Department officials realized that he lacked “significant popular support except among conservative and business groups” (USDS 1954ag), they agreed that Córdova “was the best man in sight as advisor to Castillo Armas, and perhaps eventually president” (USDS 1954ad).

The State Department initially hoped that unity could be maintained among the contenders, at least “until revolutionary changes [were] better consolidated” (USDS 1954ag). At the end of August, however, the junta was dissolved, leaving only Castillo Armas in power. A week earlier, the

CIA had stated its belief that Monzón should be removed from the junta, claiming that this was also the desire of Castillo Armas and Córdova. The latter also had bigger ambitions, sounding the CIA out on August 18 about its position on deposing Castillo Armas if a working agreement could not be reached between the two of them (USDS 1954ak).

Again in mid-September, the CIA reported that Córdova “has concluded that it will be impossible to reach an agreement with Castillo Armas and may be forced to attempt a coup within a few days if Castillo continues with his intention of removing” military figures associated with Córdova from their positions. In both cases, the CIA advised against a coup, hoping that the two could work out their differences, although “this possibility is rapidly disappearing since both are beginning to feel strong personal animosity” (USDS 1954p). For his part, the Guatemalan president attempted “to maintain unity with the position he described as ‘neither to the right or to the left, but upwards’” (USDS 1954aj).

The conflict between the two came to a head in October, when Córdova attempted to obtain a share of the executive power through the Council of State, an advisory body to the president that had been created at Córdova’s insistence and that had been part of their pre-invasion political plan (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983, 125). Losing the battle, Córdova resigned. The embassy reported back to Washington that “there appears to be no feasible alternative to supporting Castillo, who has the authority of the position of President, is more acceptable than Córdova to the regular army, and is at this time the only person” with the necessary public support (USDS 1954b). In mid-1956 Córdova was sent into exile (*Time* 1956).

In early 1955, Monzón also was forced abroad with a diplomatic assignment, following an abortive coup attempt on January 22 that some thought implicated him (Martz 1959, 64). Coup attempts were a continual problem for Castillo; many of them responded to his efforts to gain control of the army. This was done by dismissing or arresting those known to be disloyal, reassigning the untrustworthy, and placing his own liberation officers in leadership positions and his soldiers into regular army units. In August 1954 alone, he faced three unsuccessful or aborted revolts (USDS 1954k). In 1955 he faced three more (ASIES 1995, 80).

As Ambassador Armour prepared to leave his intentionally brief Guatemalan assignment in the spring of 1955, he took pride in the embassy’s role in preserving the Castillo Armas government. As he informed Washington, “it is not an exaggeration that there have been times, during the past months, when only the conviction—carefully nurtured by us in certain quarters—that Castillo Armas had the support of the American Embassy and government—prevented an attempt to unseat him” (USDS 1955h). Yet because of Castillo Armas’s indecisiveness and willingness to turn to the United States, there was “a political

vacuum into which the Embassy could easily be sucked." The embassy claimed to resist this pull, adopting (without apparent irony) "the position that there should be a minimum of embassy intervention in internal affairs." After all, "it would be disastrous in view of local nationalist sentiment both to the Castillo regime and for our policy here if it became known that we called the plays on domestic political matters" (USDS 1955k). Calling plays and having them well executed, however, are very different matters.

Democratizing the Regime

Along with consolidating power in the hands of its imperfect creation, the U.S. project for Guatemala needed to promote democratization. Soon after the junta was dissolved, leaving Castillo Armas as president, Peurifoy "endeavored to impress on him need for decisive action if he was to hold confidence of country." Peurifoy suggested that this would be a good time to hold elections for a constituent assembly, which would "reassure Guatemalans who feared long period of dictatorship." Castillo Armas worried about holding elections amid high unemployment, though, as the "jobless would be easy prey to Communist propaganda" (USDS 1954t).

The Liberator's solution was sham elections. The law promulgated for the October 10 election was "clearly designed," according to Peurifoy, "to assure full control of this assembly by elements favorable to continuing Castillo Armas in presidency with full powers." The law affirmed, for example, the policy of the new regime that illiterates were to be disenfranchised but granted an exception for this one election. "It is clear," Peurifoy explained to Washington, "that the government intended to . . . [avail] itself of traditional practice of voting masses of illiterate farm workers for hand-picked Government candidates, making it impossible for any incipient opposition to hope to beat official ticket." Castillo Armas was well organized to take advantage of the elections, but his opposition, including other anticommunist groups, lacked both national organization and time to campaign (USDS 1954u).

Washington appeared unconcerned, believing that Castillo Armas's popularity far surpassed that of any potential opponent (USDS 1954ad). Castillo's camp won all the assembly seats, facing no opposition. In addition, an oral referendum with responses recorded was held on the continuation of his presidency; he won this, too, with just under 100 percent of the vote. In November 1954, the assembly set his term to run until March 1960.

Castillo Armas and his circle wanted to govern by decree for about three years, so as to stabilize the country in an apolitical environment. Accounts of this period are often written as if they did so, but the real-

ity is otherwise. After the first repressive months, his rule was less draconian than it is often portrayed. More important, Guatemalans from across the political spectrum soon began to assert their interests to the government, with growing boldness as time passed. The United States, moreover, was not a passive bystander, but encouraged movement toward a more open political system.

As 1954 ended, the question of "Dictatorship or Democracy" was "increasingly taking the center of the stage on the Guatemalan political scene," according to the U.S. embassy (USDS 1954e). By the following June, Castillo Armas was confronting "vociferous demands" from urban middle sectors for democratization, forcing him to speed up the process of returning to constitutional government (USDS 1955k). Part of this opposition came from the right, including elements of the Liberation army, which was disappointed—and sometimes irate—at the government's "soft policy toward avowed enemies of the regime" (NSC 1955; *NYT* 1955a; also see Vielman 1955).

There was also "considerable resentment" over a one-time-only "liberation tax" to deal with the budgetary crisis that hit, most prominently, landowners, growers, and businesspeople (USDS 1955d). Opposition also came from the left, which was growing more aggressive in its activities. Just a year after the "liberation," the *New York Times* correspondent found in Guatemala City what he characterized as "a sizable number of known Communist sympathizers and fellow travelers, if not actual party members" (*NYT* 1955a).

Democratization, of course, brings uncertainties and risks, as the embassy acknowledged in a series of reports. The first uncertainty was whether a political party or coalition could be organized "with sufficient strength and discipline to provide a political base" for Castillo in elections and in the Congress (USDS 1955k). This was a problem because Castillo "has shown little skill in transforming his personal popularity into a solid political base" (USDS 1954aj). Subsequent events, though, showed that it could be done by electoral manipulation. When congressional elections were held in December 1955, the administration's bloc won all 66 seats in procedures that the *New York Times* (1955b) editorialized were "stacked in favor of the Castillo government."

The more fundamental problem, according to the embassy, was how to prevent "the surge of sentiment in favor of a return to the [democratic] principles of 1944 from going so far that it will revive the radical-extreme nationalist climate which prepared the way for Communist domination" (USDS 1955k). If the regime resisted this democratic surge, the embassy worried, "they run the risk of losing identity with the national aspirations and driving the leftist-nationalist back into alliance with the Communists." If, however, the regime identified itself "too closely with these aspirations, they run the risk of opening the door to

radical currents.” Meanwhile, the embassy pointed out to Washington, “the Communists, their sympathizers and former collaborators are well aware of this dilemma confronting the Castillo regime and are apparently doing all they can to spur the demands for ‘democratic’ government to an extreme” (USDS 1955k).

Civil society, especially urban labor and students, grew more assertive across the Castillo years, as openly reported in the Guatemala press. This caused great consternation in the right wing. Given the climate of fear still prevalent, few workers participated in the International Workers’ Day events of May 1, 1955, generally an important symbolic occasion for labor movements throughout the region. The local press described the speakers as moderate and staying within the boundaries of the expected anti-communist rhetoric. Yet they also used the occasion to denounce the persecution of labor and peasants and to present the government with a petition of 31 demands calling for the preservation of the rights of labor won under the prior regime (EIA 1955; ASIES 1995, 53–56).

The following year, more radical workers and students seized the stage from scheduled speakers, giving what the press described as “incendiary” speeches emphasizing the gains of the October 1944 revolution and the need for workers to fight to restore rights and benefits. A few arrests did occur at the rally, but not of the unexpected speakers (EIA 1956a; Levenson-Estrada 1994, 38), although a few weeks later one was discovered in hiding and taken into custody (*NYT* 1956b). By the end of Eisenhower’s second term, placards at the annual event were routinely attacking Castillo Armas for betraying the country; they had moved from praising former social democratic president Juan José Arévalo (EIA 1959) to honoring Arbenz and Fidel Castro (EIA 1960).

Students also protested in other venues. In March 1955, law students placed a newspaper manifesto denouncing the arbitrary acts of the National Defense Committee Against Communism. In June they were denied permission to stage a march commemorating a 1944 student death in the struggle against dictator Jorge Ubico, but were allowed to hold events on campus and at the graveside, which some three thousand people attended. An equal number then joined a demonstration nominally intended to honor the first anniversary of the “liberation” but actually used to attack openly the Castillo government. Also that month, when police entered the Instituto de Señoritas Belén in Guatemala City to arrest a “communist” teacher, protesting students went on strike, joined later by other schools in the capital and Quetzaltenango (ASIES 1995, 80–85; *NYT* 1955a).

In March 1955, the annual University of San Carlos Huelga de Dolores parade, traditionally used to satirize the pompous and the powerful, changed Castillo Armas’s motto “Dios, Patria y Libertad” to “Adiós, Patria y Libertad” (*Time* 1955). The following year, marchers portrayed

the Liberator as a puppet of the United States, with the United States indicted for instigating the betrayal of the fatherland (USDS 1956j).

The worst confrontation of the Castillo period occurred on June 25, 1956, growing out of escalating conflicts between the students and the government. Following charges of increasing repression (*NYT* 1956b) early that month, tensions heightened as the month progressed. The government banned demonstrations, but students marched anyway. The police fired on their last demonstration, killing six and wounding dozens. A state of siege was immediately declared, and the government reported 168 arrests, virtually all of them students (EIA 1956b; *NYT* 1956c). Students went on strike, and from this point on remained opposed to the regime (ASIES 1995, p. 85).

Today, establishing responsibility for this key event is difficult. The press at the time reported that Castillo had given orders that the march be broken up but without violence, and was said to be upset over what occurred. The police denied responsibility for the violence, blaming it on unknown others. The following month, however, the police officials whom the administration held responsible for the massacre were transferred, along with another official known for his brutality (EIA 1956b, c). Certainly, it was well known at the time that the right was upset that Castillo had not executed a more thorough purge of Guatemalan society, an assessment reiterated by the U.S. embassy following the June violence. The right was perhaps reassured by Castillo's acquiescence to cracking down on popular mobilization. This move, however, cost him popularity, for many Guatemalans believed that the government exaggerated the communist danger and "used sterner measures than were necessary" (USDS 1956f).

Castillo Armas was assassinated on July 27, 1957. No better judgment of his regime has been given than that of the pro-U.S. president of the Guatemalan Congress, Ernesto Viteri, speaking two years after Castillo's death. As related by U.S. Ambassador Lester Mallory, Viteri stated,

[I]f he had remained much longer with the graft, corruption and inefficiency of the members of his government about him, he, in turn, would soon have fallen by an internal revolt or coup. The idealistic approach of Castillo Armas and his patriotic desire to really aid his country has never been really challenged. The fact that before the end he was surrounded by a group of venal, self-seeking, corrupt politicians has likewise not been challenged. (USDS 1959d)

Another Time Around: Ydígoras

The process of building democracy therefore had to begin again. A new figure to embody U.S. objectives in Guatemala needed to be found, one who hopefully could gain the presidency legitimately. He would need

to consolidate his power without splitting the country's anticommunist forces. Then the task of constructing the showcase—which still showed few results—could be resumed.

Presidential elections were held on October 20, 1957, and the government's candidate won overwhelmingly. The key loser, General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes (who also had lost to Arbenz in 1950 and had competed with Castillo Armas for casting as the Liberator), charged fraud, mounted demonstrations, and threatened that "rivers of blood" would flow if the elections were not annulled. As the disorder continued, the army stepped in, vitiated the clearly fraudulent vote, and called new elections. Ydígoras won a large plurality in the election of January 19, 1958, but not the necessary majority, creating much apprehension about whom the legislature would pick, given its domination by Castillo's political party, the Movimiento Democrático Nacionalista (MDN). Some observers predicted civil war if Ydígoras were denied the presidency, but in the end he finally achieved his long-time ambition (Martz 1959, 77–78; Ebel 1998).

The deepest concern of the United States during this period was its perception of a revived communist threat, especially as represented by the newly formed political party of the moderate left, the Partido Revolucionario (PR). The Guatemalan right reinforced U.S. concerns, informing the embassy that it was "alarmed at the sudden emergence of the [PR] which they regard as procommunist" (USDS 1957b). These were misleading portrayals of the PR, which actually fit into "the general democratic reformist category," like the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) of Costa Rica (Martz 1964, 43), and whose presidential candidate in 1958, Mario Méndez Montenegro, "took special pains to underscore the fact that his was the revolutionary ideology of the 1940s and not that of the 1950s" (Ebel 1989, 26).

Political exiles had been returning to Guatemala, first slowly and then in large numbers after Castillo Armas's death. Their return fed U.S. apprehensions, especially as the PR grew more vigorous. Accordingly, the State Department sent the ambassador to present Guatemalan leaders with a list the United States had compiled of five hundred "dangerous" "undesirables" who should not be allowed to return home. Often these persons were not "Communists," but "many of the important non card-carrying communist and non commie exiles are as dangerous or more so and can further [the] interests of international communism in Guatemala" (USDS 1957f). Many Guatemalans, though, did not share this concern, from anticommunist labor officials (*NYT* 1957a) to the leading moderately conservative newspaper to the provisional president himself (*NYT* 1957c).¹⁵

In November, Assistant Secretary of State Roy R. Rubottom in Washington telegraphed important instructions to Ambassador Edward J.

Sparks. Following the unself-consciously ironic preface that the United States “must, of course, avoid any kind of intervention in Guatemalan internal affairs,” Rubottom directed the embassy to impress on Guatemalan leaders

the serious problem which is now posed for Guatemala by return of certain key extreme leftist and communist leaders who threaten to reinstall a vulnerable ostensibly Liberal Government which will then proceed through same insidious cycle as turned country over to communists during Arévalo-Arbenz period. Explanation of these conditions should make crystal clear to Guatemalan leaders from all above sectors urgent necessity their independently deciding rally around a suitable candidate acceptable to all.

In the event that Guatemalans did not so rally, the ambassador was instructed to use his leverage.

You need not hesitate make clear . . . that continuation of economic aid to Guatemala depends on emergence of solidly anticommunist government from elections. U.S. public and U.S. Congress simply would not tolerate supporting a government tainted with communism. (USDS 1957g)

This instruction was soon reiterated in one of the few documents clearly emanating from Secretary Dulles himself (USDS 1957h).

Although certainly not as objectionable as the PR's candidate, Ydígoras was not preferred by the United States. He was strongly supported by “the extreme right-wing element of the country, including big landowners.” Many of the top leaders of his movement had been prominent in the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (1931–44)—as had Ydígoras himself—and now hoped, through Ydígoras, to return to “the good old days” of the Ubico period (*NYT* 1958b; Kennedy 1971, 148). Back when the CIA was considering Ydígoras for the role of Liberator, the State Department apparently had vetoed the choice, considering him too “authoritarian” and a “right-wing reactionary” (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983, 121).

The United States undoubtedly preferred Colonel José Luiz Cruz Salazar, a former ambassador to the United States, the choice of Castillo's MDN, and the centrist among the three candidates. Although the embassy never admitted favoring Cruz, this was the common perception in Guatemala (*NYT* 1958a). It also proved to be a major problem for his candidacy. Ydígoras used the issue effectively, successfully appealing to Guatemalan resentment of the “intrusive” U.S. presence in the country. He also charged during the campaign that U.S. economic interests in Guatemala, especially oil interests, were supporting Cruz (USDS 1957d).

With Ydígoras's large margin over Cruz in the election, however, U.S. officials concluded that they and the Cruz forces should accept “Ydígoras in interest of national unity and an anticommunist front”

(USDS 1958g). The United States resolved “to try and maintain Ydígoras in power and make his term of office worthwhile to Guatemala and to ourselves” (USDS 1958e). Ydígoras himself, though, never quite trusted that support. At every opportunity in the past, the United States had preferred others to him. Later, after two years of U.S. efforts, Ambassador Mallory reported that Ydígoras was still “convinced elements at least close to, if not within United States official circles are determined to see his Government overthrown and are working with Castillo Armas’ heirs to this end” (USDS 1958f; also see Ydígoras Fuentes 1963).

In the context of Guatemalan history, the Ydígoras administration represented movement in a democratic direction. Elected in probably the fairest election to that date (and with few rivals in the following three decades), he also ran one of its less despotic governments. Ydígoras soon proved, however, to be an even more defective instrument for U.S. purposes than Castillo Armas. After his first year-and-a-half in office, the U.S. judgment was harsh: “His administration has done nothing, constructive or destructive, and his entourage is brazenly corrupt, even for the area” (USDS 1959a). The corruption extended to his “closest and most trusted advisers, including members [of] his family” (USDS 1959b).

Ydígoras did demonstrate a “consistent genius” in maintaining his dominance of Guatemalan politics, but State Department analysts saw even these political skills as creating graver problems for Guatemala and for U.S. policy. As a result of the president’s “divide and conquer” policy toward the country’s disparate political forces, “Guatemala verges on maximum political fractionalization, with most fractions opposed bitterly to the government, but all opposed to each other” (USDS 1959a).

From the beginning of his term, the United States was especially concerned about Ydígoras’s “apparent lack of firmness in dealing with communist and procommunist elements.” Indeed, another telegram actually signed by Secretary Dulles instructed the ambassador to convey these concerns to Ydígoras (USDS 1958h).

As it had during the recent elections, much of U.S. concern centered on what to do about the growing public support for the PR. The party scored a big electoral victory in July 1959, winning the mayoralty of Guatemala City. Ydígoras considered annulling the election but backed down because of the prospect of significant popular opposition. As a consequence, the right wing went “into a panic,” according to the embassy, deciding that “this was the ultimate proof that Ydígoras was ‘soft’ on communism and that a return to Arévalo-Arbenz was just around the corner.” The department analyst also noted that these “fears of a Leftist renaissance” were also “shared by important army elements, which are acutely aware of antimilitarism in the masses.” The analyst then added two observations, which in retrospect are chilling in their tragic accuracy: “The fact that the Army is now examining the political picture

and thinking of taking an active part is perhaps the most explosive new element in the Guatemalan scene"; and "The Right seems to have learned nothing and to think only in terms of crushing the Left" (USDS 1959a).

After three years of military dissension and angry demonstrations, Ydígoras was overthrown on March 30, 1963, ending an administration that was "a farce of incompetence, corruption and patronage" (Handy 1984, 152; also see Gleijeses 1991, 250). The military came to power, bringing horrific violence that would steadily worsen for years to come. The incompatibility of the anticommunist crusade and democratization in Guatemala, unapparent to U.S. policymakers at the level of abstract goals but increasingly bedeviling to U.S. officials in practice as the 1950s progressed, was to grow even more severe in the years ahead.

Political Constraints in the United States

The prompt infusion of U.S. economic assistance in Guatemala was crucial to the U.S. project; it would help the new government demonstrate very tangibly the superiority of "democracy" to "communism." Given Guatemala's importance as a showcase for U.S. policy, one would suppose that U.S. assistance would have been delivered expeditiously. It was not. The story is a textbook case of bureaucratic politics (Allison 1969; Lowenthal 1973). It would become familiar to later governments in post-Noriega Panama and post-Sandinista Nicaragua. As U.S. disunity, sluggishness, and seeming disinterest at the highest policy levels frustrated the later "liberation" governments of the region, so, too, did they frustrate the Guatemalans, and certainly U.S. embassy personnel, in the 1950s, a point missed in many accounts of the period.

Here, too, ideology shackled effective policy. The Republican Party's cardinal principle in international development assistance was "trade, not aid." As the failures of this approach grew apparent to Eisenhower and Dulles, the approach was loosened, first in those areas of the Third World with the most pressing security concerns for the United States: Asia and the Middle East. But a more open approach to foreign aid faced much resistance; indeed, Eisenhower's preeminent biographer, Stephen Ambrose, calls it "one of the most frustrating experiences of his life," as Congress repeatedly reduced his foreign aid proposals (quoted in Bowie and Immerman 1998, 253; also see Brands 1988, 30–41; Rabe 1988, esp. 64–99).

Academic observers on the scene charged that "for more than a year after the revolution the United States did little to help the government of Castillo Armas and appeared relatively uninterested in its success" (Gillin and Silvert, 1956, 469). U.S. funds did not begin reaching Guatemala until more than six months after the takeover (*NYT* 1954d). About \$10 million had been appropriated, but only half of that was

spent during the fiscal year beginning July 1 because of delays and insufficient planning. Of that expenditure, about half was spent outside Guatemala for material and salaries to U.S. personnel (USDS 1955l). The appropriation for fiscal year 1956 did not even become available to Guatemala until seven months into the year (USDS 1956b).

Guatemalan Ambassador Cruz Salazar met with the State Department in late September 1954 to request the \$10 million in emergency aid received in that fiscal year, arguing that the "economic situation was extremely grave and, unless relieved, may lead to political disaster, namely resurgence of communism in the country" (USDS 1954f). He assumed that the funds could be transferred right away from the secret funds that "all the world knows" the United States maintained for fighting communism (USDS 1954z). State Department personnel indicated that they were "acutely aware of the urgent need" for assistance and were doing their "utmost to find a solution." Ambassador Cruz, however, was reminded that "governments being what they are, obstacles appeared which had to be overcome before money could be provided, and this took time" (USDS 1954c).

Around the same time, the U.S. embassy requested an immediate \$5 million in assistance, in addition to \$1.8 million that had been authorized earlier for highway and hospital construction. Ambassador Peurifoy returned to Washington in early October, having completed his Guatemalan mission, and "emphatically confirm[ed] the urgent need" for the assistance. Accordingly, the State Department made an emergency request for this amount from the Foreign Operations Administration (FOA), the precursor to the Agency for International Development (USDS 1954al).

The new ambassador, Armour, presented the case to FOA director Harold Stassen, arguing that "it was essential for the United States to prove now that it paid to cooperate with the free world rather than the communists" (USDS 1954h). A few days later, however, the acting regional director stated that the FOA intended to provide only \$1 million in new funds. After all, he argued, a grant of the requested size "would put every American Ambassador in Central America in a most difficult position, since the other governments would insist on similar treatment." Furthermore, it would be "unwise to establish the principle that a nation only need be offensive to the United States in order to get preferred treatment" (USDS 1954i).

The FOA formally notified Secretary Dulles in mid-October that it would provide only the \$1 million in funds. It was also reported that Under Secretary Herbert Hoover, Jr. was "inclined to accept FOA's counter proposal," leaving the Inter-American Bureau at State "quite unhappy about this situation" (USDS 1954d). The U.S. government, however, announced at the end of the month a \$6.4 million grant pack-

age for Guatemala. How this turnabout came to pass is not completely clear, although undoubtedly important was the meeting Peurifoy and Armour gained with Secretary Dulles, who told them that he would look into the matter and do what he could (USDS 1954a).

Perhaps equally significant was helpful pressure from Congress, as a House subcommittee chaired by Rep. Patrick J. Hillings (R-CA) opened two-day hearings in mid-October to discover why Guatemala had yet to receive any cash assistance from the United States (*NYT* 1954b). In addition, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) charged that the administration had failed to aid the anticommunist government. Newspaper reports of the aid announcement discussed it as a direct response to McCarthy and noted that Stassen was expected to make such an explicit statement the following week (*NYT* 1954c).

Delays in economic assistance and the small amount that was finally appropriated had their consequences. Ambassador Armour pointed out that the delays troubled Castillo Armas, who claimed that his right-wing opposition was taking it as a "sign of dissatisfaction" with his regime. Beyond its economic justification, the assistance, for Castillo, was "even more desperately needed for psychological and political effect [to] assign U.S. support [for his] liberation movement." Armour concurred, adding that his entire staff believed that the "Castillo regime may not long endure unless it receives prompt and meaningful U.S. aid" (USDS 1954v). Indeed, the CIA had already reported that the failure to obtain aid promptly had "been interpreted in government and business circles as a lack of U.S. confidence in Castillo" (USDS 1954ab). Guatemalan press editorials did appear soon along these lines (USDS 1955f). From the embassy's viewpoint, "It does not reflect to the credit of the United States that in the first desperate six months of this new government, FOA has not been able to render prompt, effective or increased assistance" (USDS 1955i).

The year ended with serious corn shortages, 10 percent inflation, increasing unemployment, all-time high dissatisfaction with the government, and pervasive rumors of coups (USDS 1954aj). The embassy argued that the Castillo government needed, politically, to maintain at least the same level of economic activity in 1955 as that of Arbenz. That was becoming increasingly difficult, however, because a fall in coffee prices had resulted in a revenue loss of \$11 million to \$12 million. The embassy therefore requested a minimal grant level of \$14 million for fiscal year 1956, which would cover the costs of highway construction and agrarian reform. It should be grant aid, not loans, the embassy noted, to avoid saddling the government with debts and to demonstrate better the level of U.S. confidence in Castillo Armas's government (USDS 1955a). Some State Department officials disagreed on the latter point, arguing that "we had to be careful to avoid making gifts to Guatemala which would undermine its eventual self-reliance" (USDS 1955b).

Following the embassy's request, Assistant Secretary Henry Holland wrote a strong memo to Secretary Dulles documenting the need for the full \$14 million, hitting hard on the precarious position of Castillo Armas and the risks to U.S. prestige (USDS 1955j). In the end, the administration requested only \$5 million, but Congress raised it back to \$15 million. Apparently important in this regard was a study mission to the region in June by seven members of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs (U.S. House 1955, 17), and backdoor efforts by the State Department's inter-american team itself (USDS 1955e). Essentially the same process occurred for fiscal year 1957: the administration originally requested only \$5 million in grant aid for Guatemala, which Congress subsequently upped to \$10 million and then \$15 million, over the objections of the International Cooperation Administration—the new name of the aid agency (USDS 1956c).

Economic conditions improved in 1956 as coffee prices rose, production recovered, and the impact was registered from the public works projects financed by U.S. aid and a large loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (USDS 1957a). In October the embassy reported, nevertheless, that the standard of living was still no better than before the regime change (USDS 1956h). Not until the summer of 1957 was the country's economy said finally to show the full effect of the nearly \$90 million of international assistance injected during the past three years (*NYT* 1957b).¹⁶ Even then, the U.S. ambassador acknowledged to Guatemalan leaders that the aid programs "had not yet provided desired results" (USDS 1957f).

Then U.S. assistance largely stopped. A joint State-ICA message informed the U.S. embassy that no new grant funds were contemplated for Guatemala for fiscal year 1958 or thereafter (USDS 1956g). Resistance to any further aid for Guatemala had been growing from year to year because it was an exception to prevailing general policy. From the beginning of the Eisenhower administration, grant economic assistance was to be provided to Latin American countries only during temporary emergencies that both affected U.S. interests and met needs when local resources were insufficient (USDS 1957e). Indeed, this point was emphasized to Castillo Armas himself when he visited Washington in October 1955 (USDS 1955m).

As time passed, it became increasingly difficult to justify aid on the basis of an "emergency." It was certainly clear by FY1957 that continuing assistance was more for political rather than economic reasons; and Guatemalan authorities were on notice that this would probably be the last appropriation (USDS 1956d). Congress, furthermore, now seemed to be less concerned with fighting communism through economic assistance and more worried about reducing the U.S. budget, as the Guatemalan ambassador was informed when requesting further defense support aid (USDS 1957c).

There were other considerations. As Ambassador Mallory explained (apparently unself-consciously), through U.S. aid programs “we have engendered a very substantial feeling that we should support Guatemala out of some sort of undefined duty to the people and that if we do not do so, political blackmail will result.” The ambassador then argued that the United States should emphasize loans rather than grant aid, fostering the idea that “some self help, some local pulling of the boot straps, some honesty and responsibility are important” (USDS 1958c).

Of course, U.S. assistance was not always a blessing. Certainly, it brought substantial U.S. influence over the Guatemalan government, as U.S. officials admitted among themselves. For example, Assistant Secretary of State Holland’s view on the appropriate level of U.S. involvement in Guatemalan economic policy was summarized as follows:

he felt that the United States should participate . . . in every phase of their planning as long as the United States Government is carrying the heavy responsibilities it is in that country. He feels that there is no aspect of their internal affairs of which we should not be aware, concerned and vigilant. . . . the Guatemalan Government would not have survived and cannot yet survive if we do not discharge this function. (USDS 1956e)

The U.S. technical economic assistance project of this period provides a concrete example: “In a very short time Mission personnel were working side by side with Guatemalan fiscal officers and offering pertinent and constructive advice” (USDS 1958d; also see Streeter 1999).

THE SOCIOECONOMIC STRUCTURE PREVAILS

A major intention of U.S. economic assistance was to improve the material conditions of life for Guatemalans. This was obviously important in itself, but it was also meant to build support for the U.S.-created regime. According to observers at the time, though, the programs focused too narrowly on economic development, ignoring the critical importance of more basic social change (Adams 1960, 274–75). Many of the programs, moreover, languished rather than achieving their objectives, victims of the resistance of Guatemalan elites and the ideological myopia of U.S. policymakers. This is especially clear in examining labor policy, one of the areas most important to the U.S. project.

Soon after the overthrow of the prolabor Arbenz government, the new junta pledged to preserve the social conquests of workers (USDS 1954q), a promise reiterated by Castillo Armas in his July 12 inaugural speech (USDS 1954x). The actions of the Castillo government, however, usually contradicted this promise, much to the frustration of U.S. officials, who viewed a free anticommunist labor movement as vital to U.S.

objectives. Further frustrating this objective were the antilabor practices of the dominant U.S. companies in Guatemala.

Developing a Free Democratic Labor Movement

As the Arbenz regime collapsed, so too did the labor movement. Labor officials major and minor sought asylum or were arrested. The number killed is unknown, but a case brought before the International Labor Organization claimed 45 dead just among United Fruit unionists, and a special Amnesty International report estimates more than two hundred (CEH, 1:180, n. 70; 2:390). The police sealed the offices of the Confederación General de Trabajadores de Guatemala (CGTG) and the Confederación Nacional Campesina de Guatemala (CNCG). "Labor unions for all practical purposes ceased to exist for the time being in Guatemala" (USDS 1954x). In early August 1954, all "communist-tainted" organizations of the Arbenz period were dissolved by decree.

Ambassador Peurifoy complained to Washington that the decree made a "major political blunder" by including four major unions, causing an "acute labor problem." Because three of the unions comprised employees of U.S. companies, this action "would inevitably be taken here and abroad as indication [of] government's subservience [to] foreign interests." Furthermore, Peurifoy argued, the action would "undermine Castillo Armas' public promises to maintain social advances and repeated assurances to Embassy and U.S. labor representatives that he favors establishment [of] free trade unions" (USDS 1954s). Castillo Armas defended his decree to Peurifoy as not antilabor but rather a security measure necessary to cleanse labor of communists (USDS 1954s).

During this same period, the reorganization of a "democratic" labor movement began, with ample assistance from labor organizers from both the AFL and the CIO. They—especially Serafino Romualdi, the AFL's ubiquitous Latin American representative—helped anticommunist Guatemalan labor leaders organize the Comité Nacional de Reorganización Sindical (USDS 1954ae). The CNRS also had a "strong adverse" response to Castillo Armas's actions. Peurifoy informed Washington that anticommunist labor organizers were "extremely pessimistic [about] future [of] free labor movement." He added that the antilabor attitudes and practices now dominant in Guatemala were "turning labor back to Communists and generating even stronger anti-American feelings." These worries were more than reinforced when Castillo Armas told the CNRS executive board, Peurifoy reported, that "workers causing trouble for their employers or for the Government would not be tolerated." Indeed, newspapers were full of stories reporting the discharge of urban and rural workers without apparent cause or recourse (USDS 1954n).

In the face of this hostility, incubation of the “free democratic labor movement” was lengthy. The embassy reported the dismal situation to Washington in late September, pointing out that the reorganization of the anticommunist union movement “has, for all practical purposes, come to a halt.” The Castillo government had failed both to provide the promised support and “to protect workers engaged in reorganization activities from unjust arrest, imprisonment, and discharge.” For example, when workers reorganized at Finca El Salto in Escuintla in September, their new leaders were arrested on orders of the governor (ASIES 1995, 46).

So sorry was the situation that the embassy found it “impossible to find responsible elements in the Administration capable of handling the labor problem.” But U.S. policy was locked into supporting the consolidation of the Castillo regime, and policymakers did not want to jeopardize this more fundamental objective. The embassy therefore recommended that any condemnation by U.S. labor of the Guatemalan situation be discouraged, at least until after the elections for the constituent assembly on October 10, 1954. In the meantime, the embassy would “take every opportunity to impress Government officials with some of the unfavorable political and economic consequences which may result if a free trade union movement is denied existence in Guatemala and particularly the advantages both domestic and foreign accruing to the Communists in such a situation” (USDS 1954am).

Later there were moments of encouragement, such as the first legal recognition of a trade union in November (USDS 1954g), but they ultimately had little significance. Characteristic was a 1956 statement of the minister of economy, who called the elimination of the labor-management strife of the Arbenz period one of the best incentives for foreign investment in the country and promised that the government intended to keep it that way (*NYT* 1956a). A 1958 embassy report analyzing the frustration of the democratic labor effort pointed out that “not only was the working class dubious and unreceptive, but the Left, the employer class and politicians worked against them.” The report concluded that few employers “have given any indication of being willing to adjust wages, profit margins or working conditions, to reduce basic causes of labor unrest” (USDS 1958i).

It is nonetheless important to remember the labor activities that did occur, which were especially remarkable given the level of repression directed against labor activists. Within a month of the regime change, progressive Christian activists organized the Federación Autónoma Sindical (FAS), intended as a labor federation independent of both the United States and of communists. Beginning with 25 unions representing some 50,000 workers, the FAS played an important role during the Castillo years in helping unions organize new leadership under the government’s anti-communist constraints and in asserting labor’s economic interests (ASIES

1995, 26–113; Levenson-Estrada 1994, 35–48). As the ASIES study notes, the experience and memory of ten years of worker mobilization and gains were not extinguished with the Arbenz overthrow (ASIES 1995, 107).

U.S. Labor Versus U.S. Business

Reactivating the unions at the major U.S. companies in Guatemala, particularly United Fruit Company (UFCO) and its subsidiaries, the Tropical Radio Telegraph Company and International Railways of Central America (IRCA), was critical for both the Guatemalan labor movement and the U.S. embassy. These companies' anachronistic labor practices did much to frustrate U.S. objectives. Although it should be noted that United Fruit disclaimed any influence over either subsidiary, this "has never been believed by the Guatemalan public" (USDS 1958a).

The frustration is clear in a 1958 State Department memo, which reports that UFCO believed that the State Department was "entirely misguided in its view that the answer to Communist infiltration is democratic unionism friendly to the United States. As [an UFCO official argued] . . . 'A democratic union will go Communist,' and 'It makes no difference whether the Company is killed by a red union or a white union'" (USDS 1958m).

This was two years after UFCO had announced a new, enlightened labor policy, which actually did somewhat improve company practices. United Fruit was willing to suffer the organization of its employees but wanted to deal with an "independent" union rather than one affiliated with national and international federations or confederations, especially with the Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores (ORIT), the international wing of the AFL-CIO. The embassy had warned UFCO that without the backing of "mature guidance," such an "independent" union would be weak and vulnerable to influence from leftist political forces. As the embassy predicted, "one of the first acts of PR leaders after the party was legalized was to make a bid for Tiquisate [UFCO's Pacific coast operation] workers' support by promising them the moon" (USDS 1958b). Later the embassy characterized the Tiquisate union as "a perfect example of how so-called 'national, independent' unions develop neither leaders nor self-confidence and are easily taken over by left-wing politicians" (USDS 1958i).

These embassy reports came during a time of intense conflict between UFCO and the union over a company effort to lay off more than one hundred workers after a hurricane, and union efforts to negotiate a new contract with higher wages. One mediation proposal was accepted by the union but rejected by the company, which then shut down operations for a month, threatening to do so permanently (ASIES 1995, 186–90). Domestic politics further complicated the dispute. United

Fruit already paid higher wages than did domestic producers. According to embassy reports, “politically powerful agricultural groups . . . have the President’s ear that UFCO should not again raise its agricultural wages, accentuating still further the great disparity between UFCO pay rates and those paid by even the most progressive other agriculturists” (USDS 1958b). An agreement finally was reached; but ten months later, seven hundred workers were fired, and in 1964 the operation at Tiquisate was shut down (ASIES 1995, 190–92).

Both International Railways and Tropical Radio also received substantial criticism in Guatemala for their union-busting practices. Following the regime change, IRCA’s “officials have shown themselves inflexibly opposed to the rebirth of any railway workers union for a period of at least six months, and they have stated that they consider the entire crop of current railway labor leaders . . . as dangerous agitators” (USDS 1954ad). Consequently, IRCA proceeded “to institute a retaliatory policy against employees who have been strong union men, as distinguished from Communists or sympathizers,” reported State Department personnel, alarmed at this “turn-back-the-clock operation” (USDS 1954ad).

All of the union leadership was removed as part of the firing of 129 workers (ASIES 1995, 15). Not surprisingly, the remaining employees were “very much afraid of losing their jobs by engaging in any sort of union activity” (USDS 1954n); and the reorganization of what historically had been one of Guatemala’s most militant unions took longer than with many others. Eventually, though, it gained back some of its old form, going on strike in both 1957 and 1959. Both strikes ended the same day, however, when the government sent in the military to take over railroad operations (ASIES 1995, 39–41, 124–31, 173–86).

The labor dispute at Tropical Radio had a significance far beyond the rights of the 54 employees who organized a union in 1957. It was clear to the embassy that the company “used coercion in [its] efforts to break up” the union (USDS 1958k), or, as another memo put it, “systematically tore the union apart” (USDS 1958m). It was also clear to organizers like Serafino Romualdi, and William Doherty, Jr., of the Postal Telegraph and Telephone International union. After traveling to Guatemala, Romualdi decided that the fate of the ORIT-affiliated union was of “paramount importance to the future of democratic unionism in Latin America,” and that therefore the AFL-CIO “must fight the local union’s cause to a finish” (USDS 1958k).

Romualdi pushed that cause with Ydígoras, but the president said “he was being subjected to strong pressures from both sides” of the controversy. In particular, he told Romualdi that the strongest pressures on him to ban AFL-CIO and ORIT activities in the country came from U.S. companies, which accused the U.S. embassy “of perpetuating communism by sponsoring those organizations” (USDS 1958l). More specifi-

cally, the U.S. manager of the Radio Company repeatedly called Doherty “a Communist and Romualdi an agitator, and has absolutely no use for unions in general and ORIT in particular” (USDS 1958j).

The consequence was “the unhappy spectacle of United States labor and management fighting it out” in Guatemala (USDS 1958j). Ambassador Mallory cabled Washington in August 1958 that the “attitudes and lack of action” by the U.S. companies “seriously counter [our] efforts to improve relations or advance our cause.” He also complained that raising the issue with the companies had yielded only “negative results” (USDS 1958c).

President Ydígoras apparently was ambivalent on the subject. He spoke of ORIT in sympathetic terms to the U.S. ambassador, but on other occasions referred to “Communist infiltration” of its local affiliate. The embassy perceived a number of anti-ORIT officials around the president, some of whom were “outspoken opponents of all forms of trade-unionism” and others who were in favor of only “purely national” unions (USDS 1958a).

In a move to reinforce Ydígoras’s support for “democratic unionism,” the embassy prepared a “deliberately optimistic” analysis of the president’s labor policies, supposedly for its own use but with a copy given to Ydígoras “for his information.” As the labor attaché who prepared the analysis explained, “The purpose was to encourage Ydígoras to follow the line of reasoning attributed to him in the ‘analysis’ and if possible to offset the daily pressure known to be exerted on him by persons in his immediate entourage who strongly oppose efforts to develop a democratic labor movement in Guatemala.” These officials included the minister of labor. Ydígoras reported back to the embassy that he found the analysis “excellent,” summarizing “accurately his views and policies” (USDS 1958i). The possibility that he was playing his own game of manipulation, though, cannot be discounted.

CONCLUSIONS

The U.S. effort to build a “showcase for democracy” in Guatemala during the Eisenhower administration was doomed from the beginning. The U.S. government itself lacked both the continuous commitment at the top and the unity of purpose necessary to mount such an undertaking. Even with such a commitment, it still faced the leverage problem that Gelb and Betts (1979, 82) so well described for the United States in South Vietnam: “How could the United States make its clients act like clients?”

Guatemalan leaders, like their Vietnamese counterparts, had their own interests, which did not always coincide with those of their U.S. sponsors. Although the United States certainly had leverage and did use it, at the same time, it was attempting to create political stability. Too much pressure could “throw the fragile government into chaos in the

short run" (Gelb and Betts 1979, 83). Too much use of its leverage, furthermore, might create resistance from public officials or delegitimize the client regime with the public, provoking an anti-U.S., nationalist response.

More fundamentally, U.S. policymakers never came to grips with the problems of class and economic interests. Forming a truly effective labor policy was impossible in Guatemala without confronting the questions of economic structures and power, just as in other critical policy areas, such as agrarian reform. The U.S. government records contain little evidence of policymakers, either in the field or in Washington, addressing these fundamental constraints. If they had, their analyses would have led them to a more sympathetic understanding of the deeper reforms pursued under the Arévalo and Arbenz administrations of the 1944–54 progressive period. Those reforms, however, were either "communist" policies or policies that facilitated the rise of "communism," according to the prevailing U.S. official perspective, as well as that of the Guatemalan right. Because the fundamental determinant of U.S. policy toward Guatemala was anticommunism, such a sympathetic—and sound—understanding was precluded. Ideology straitjacketed policy.

These contradictions sharpened in the early 1960s. Leaders of a failed military uprising started a leftist guerrilla movement in 1960. Broad-based demonstrations against Ydígoras recurred, starting in late 1961. As the 1963 presidential elections approached, two center-left parties proposed former social democratic president Arévalo as their candidate. These challenges were too much for the military and for the civilian right. The latter had long been disappointed with the government's inability decisively to rid the country of the left. Ydígoras was deposed, Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdía assumed power, and Guatemala's descent into tragedy accelerated.

The United States did not embrace dictatorship in Guatemala during the 1950s, but instead worked against it. As Ambassador Sparks expressed the widely held sentiment, "we have a special responsibility for the success of the new government." U.S. commitments to democracy and reform in Guatemala were sincere, but these goals were fully subordinated to a powerful drive to eliminate the "communist" threat from Guatemala. In the prevailing U.S. ideology, these goals did not conflict; in practice in Guatemala, however, the anticommunist drive repeatedly stymied reformist objectives. U.S. embassy officer Thomas Mann later acknowledged an "illusion of omnipotence" (1975, 15) that reinforced a blindness to both the contradictions of U.S. policy and the damage being done to Guatemala. The illusion, the blindness, and the damage would only increase in the years ahead.

The United States currently faces similar cross-pressures in Colombia, and certainly will encounter similar ones elsewhere in the future. The Guatemalan case teaches that if there is to be a congruence between the

long-term interests of the United States and the Latin American country of its interest, then U.S. policy must be significantly based on a deep understanding of the structural causes of that country's difficulties and much less on narrow interpretations of its own national security interests. Otherwise, those narrowly defined security interests will once again undermine the ability of the United States to achieve its broader objectives, undoubtedly to the detriment of the other country it is purportedly attempting to help.

NOTES

The author began in the late 1980s to seek the declassification of U.S. government documents relevant to this study stored in the State Department collection (Record Group 59) at the U.S. National Archives, supported partly by a National Endowment for the Humanities summer stipend. A Fulbright fellowship supported research at the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) in Antigua, Guatemala. Research also was conducted at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas. A broad effort was made to examine all documents at both the National Archives and the Eisenhower Library that might be relevant to this study, including both the Central Decimal and Lot files at the former and the papers and oral histories of a number of officials at the latter, from Latin American specialists to more general advisers.

Useful revisions of this paper were suggested by Heather Tosteson and anonymous reviewers for this journal. Helpful reactions to earlier versions came from listeners at panels of the Latin American Studies Association (April 1991) and the Southeastern Council on Latin American Studies (February 1993) and by two former State Department officials, Thomas C. Mann and Andrew B. Wardlaw.

1. Lowenthal 1973 remains an insightful discussion of the dangers of deducing policy motives from their effects.

2. For an argument giving more credit to the exile army itself and less to the United States, see Marks 1990, but also the response by Rabe 1990.

3. Gambone 1997 provides an analysis of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations for the same time period that is sensitive to such constraints.

4. The best analysis of the tension between security considerations and reformist concerns in U.S. policy toward Latin America is Schoultz 1987. For a survey of U.S. policy toward Central America covering this period, see Leonard 1991. For Eisenhower policy toward Latin America, see Gilderhus 1992; Rabe 1988.

5. Relevant discussions of traditional, revisionist, and postrevisionist views of Eisenhower as a foreign policy leader include Bowie and Immerman 1998; Brands 1988; Gilderhus 1992; Immerman 1990; McMahan 1986; and Rabe 1993.

6. That includes the summaries of Dulles' phonecalls that are available at the Eisenhower Library. A parallel example of Dulles' noninvolvement in Latin American affairs: with Batista's government collapsing in Cuba, the U.S. ambassador was flown back to Washington for consultations on November 22, 1958, but Secretary Dulles did not attend the meeting, as he was "too busy dealing with European and Soviet issues" (Grover 1995, 240a).

7. As McMahan (1986, 466) points out, "Only the threat of communist penetration could arouse high-level interest in Latin American issues during Ike's

presidency; otherwise, the administration pursued a policy of benign neglect.”

8. Martz (1959, 72) compares the National Defense Committee Against Communism to the Ku Klux Klan in its operations, as it searched homes and made “wholesale arrests without a warrant, ranging far and wide over the countryside for months.”

9. According to the recent Comisión Esclarecimiento Histórico, the number of opposition figures killed during the Arbenz period was listed at 250 by the press after the overthrow. The “Liberation Movement” presented a list of 108 deaths but claimed up to 500 (CEH 1999, 1:108).

10. An independent effort by the Guatemalan truth commission to estimate the death toll for this period was beyond its scope. It does cite estimates from other sources of two thousand to three thousand deaths for the Castillo Armas years, 1954–57 (CEH 1999, 1:108).

11. Embassy officials varied in the quality of their reporting on the communist issue; some paid more attention than others to the right wing’s opportunistic abuse of the label. Generally, the reporting appears more attentive to this problem in the year following the intervention and again at the end of the decade than it was in the intervening period.

12. This document and others cited below as from the CIA are not labeled as to author or originating agency. All of them, however, are similar in format, and one has, penciled in at the top, “From CIA” (USDS 1954o). Most of them, like this one, are addressed to Raymond Leddy, whom former CIA officials identified to Gleijeses (1991, 245) as their contact in the State Department.

13. Despite these many flaws, Gleijeses (1991, 250) does note that Castillo was “courageous, not unintelligent, [and] honest.” Similarly, Gillin and Silvert (1956, 469) describe him as “a modest and earnest man to whom both efficiency and practical idealism mean a great deal.” For background on Castillo Armas, see Gleijeses 1991, 217–22, 248–51.

14. Another right-wing leader and a close aide to Castillo Armas, Luis Coronado Lira, in a letter to a United Fruit executive that was mistakenly sent to the State Department, referred to “the red clique” around Monzón and spoke bitterly of the “interference” by Peurifoy and Monzón that prevented “a complete cleaning up of Communism” (USDS 1954y).

15. See *El Imparcial* daily coverage for 1957. The comparable press in the United States, though, was alarmed. *U.S. News and World Report* featured the headline “Now The Reds Are Back on U.S. Doorstep” (1957).

16. This assistance breaks down as follows: U.S. grants and gifts, \$39.1 million; U.S. contributions to highway construction, \$26 million; U.S. technical assistance, \$6.2 million; IBRD loan, \$18.2 million (*NYT* 1957b). For the entire 1954–60 period, total U.S. economic assistance was \$107.3 million, with another \$21.4 million from multilateral sources (Streeter 1994, 250).

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