Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

Vol. 2 No. 1 December 15, 2000

The United States Media and the Guatemalan *Coup d'etat* of 1954

John Kyle Day
PhD candidate
Department of History
University of Missouri-Columbia

Introduction

The media has always played a significant role in the tradition of United States intervention in the internal affairs of Latin America. From the earliest days of the Republic, foreign policy has to an extent been influenced by the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of a free press. Nowhere is this more apparent than in U.S policy toward Latin America. Consciously or not, the media has been pivotal in the U.S. taking a more direct role in Latin American affairs than its official policy has ever stated. The Monroe Doctrine, the premier statement of U.S. foreign policy that was originally drafted in 1823 to grant formal recognition to the new republics of Latin America and to halt further conquest of the Americas by European empires, has in turn also been used to justify United States intervention into the affairs of its sister nations of the Western Hemisphere. The media has always been involved in this intervention. Whether motivated by what has been perceived as protection of national self-interests or a sense of paternal obligation toward its southern neighbors, the U.S., with the aid of its media, has traditionally constructed a largely unilateral foreign policy in American affairs.

This does not mean, however, that the media has had a predominate influence upon public opinion and has thus directly constructed U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America. Within the realm of U.S.-Latin American relations, the U.S. media has generally served as a tocsin that has accentuated, but not created, public attitudes towards particular situations in Latin America. Explicitly, the media historically has not determined how U.S. citizens and their leaders feel toward Latin America, but it has largely determined what the U.S. citizenry thinks about. Thus, although the media has not constructed the specific U.S. policies toward Latin American nations, it has contributed to what U.S. leaders have determined vital to the nation's interests.

There are numerous instances where the media undertook this role in U.S.-Latin American relations prior to the Second World War. For example, in the Spanish-American war of 1898, the media played a significant role in galvanizing public opinion to support U.S. intervention. The "yellow journalism" of the period—specifically the exaggerated depiction of the questionable sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine* and other alleged atrocities committed by the Spanish—aroused the American public into supporting intervention. Likewise, journalists' glorified depiction of the charge up San Juan Hill contributed, among other things, to the persona of Theodore Roosevelt as an American folk hero and would be integral to his eventual ascendancy to the presidency in 1901. Another instance where the U.S. media assumed this alarmist role was U.S. attitudes toward Nicaragua in the period between the world wars, particularly the relationship between leftist ideologues and General Augusto César Sandino. According to American journalist Shirley Christian, Sandino in the 1930's became the "darling of avant-garde political and socialist activists in New York, Mexico, and Europe" with the aid of favorable press coverage by liberal American journalists such as Carleton Beals of *The Nation*.[1]

Both of these examples demonstrate how the media has contributed to U.S. foreign policy by focusing the nation's interests upon these particular situations. The media did not, however, significantly alter U.S. actions to the point where policymakers would have acted differently in Cuba or Nicaragua if the media had not taken the stance that it did. The media had aroused public support for the Spanish-American War by sensationalizing these events, yet the U.S. would have certainly become involved in Spanish-Cuban affairs at sometime in the near future even if the U.S.S. *Maine* had never been sunk in Havana harbor. Given the overwhelming amount of U.S. financial interests in Cuba, coupled with the race for empire that the U.S. was running with the European powers under the climate of *Realpolitik*, it was only a matter of time before the newly emerged superpower sought control over the Caribbean Sea. Similarly, given the isolationism inherently predominant in any U.S. foreign policy, the occupation of Nicaragua by U.S. Marines would still not have lasted through the Great Depression even if Sandino had not received favorable coverage by the U.S. press. When President Herbert Hoover decided to end occupation of Nicaragua in 1931,[2] he was bowing to isolationist political pressure that has always existed in the U.S. Hoover

withdrew the Marines—in Christian's words—"largely in reaction to the public [U.S.] outcry against intervention." In this same light, the deification of Sandino by American leftists was but an early rendition of the New Left's support of other third world insurgents—such as Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara—in the 1960s. These may be oversimplifications, and surely the media's relationship with both the Spanish-American War and the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua require individual studies, but these examples illustrate the general pattern of a triangular relationship between the U.S., the American media, and the Latin American nations in which the U.S. has become involved.

Nowhere can this triangular relationship be seen more clearly than in the 1954 *coup d'état* in Guatemala, where with U.S. assistance a republican form of government with a democratically elected president was overthrown in favor of a military dictatorship. Studies such as Stephen Schlesinger and Steven Kinzer's *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York: Doubleday, 1982) and Richard H. Immerman's *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), have both exposed the media's prominent role in the events that led to the demise of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán by forces led by Col. Carlos Enrique Castillo Armas. Particularly, Schlesinger and Kinzer have proven the influence upon the U.S. media establishment by the public relations machinations of Edward Bernays of the United Fruit Company of Boston, Massachusetts.[4] Schlesinger and Kinzer have shown how Bernays used his intimate contacts within the American media establishment to portray the expropriation of United Fruit's lands and other reforms by Arbenz as iniquitous and contrary to U.S. interests. However, Immerman, Schlesinger and Kinzer, as well as other authors addressing the period, have not explicitly addressed exactly how journalists conveyed the events surrounding the overthrow of Arbenz to their readers. Considering the dim view that the U.S. populace has traditionally held toward foreign intervention, one would likely assume that a few if not many journalists would question and/or criticize the Eisenhower administration's decision to intervene in Guatemala. But this was not the case. As will be seen, the U.S. media supported its government's actions almost absolutely. Thus, an assessment of the media's depiction of events, combined with an examination of general trends in society and culture, is needed if an understanding is to be reached of exactly how and why the U.S. media supported the Eisenhower administration.

This paper will examine the media's coverage of the events of 1954 that led to the overthrow of the duly elected Arbenz with aid from the U.S. Specifically, the presentation of events by the *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Nation*, the *New York Times*, and *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines will be addressed. Though these periodicals by no means cover the entire spectrum of U.S. journalism of this or any era, they are key national mainstream publications, widely read and highly influential. Therefore, these periodicals provide for this study an adequate representation of the prevalent trends within the U.S. media during the period.

By examining these periodicals' coverage of the Guatemalan *coup d'état* of 1954, this paper will show that during the period the U.S. media failed in its responsibility to objectively report upon the activities of its government within Latin America in general and Guatemala in particular. This failure by the journalism community was the result of preexisting notions of paternalism, the historical precedent of intervention, financial and political ties between U.S. media and business interests in Latin America, and most importantly, the prevailing climate of public opinion that existed in the U.S. during the Cold War. The subsequent coverage of these events by the U.S. media directly contributed to the allowance of the U.S. government to conduct a largely clandestine foreign policy without the public being properly informed of neither their government's actions in Guatemala nor affairs transpiring within Latin America at large. The inadequate news coverage in turn added to the continuing antagonism felt by Latin Americans toward the U.S., as well as the traditional iniquitous relationship between the two peoples.

Certain questions need to be answered concerning the U.S. media in this affair if the above arguments are to be proven. Did the U.S. press look favorably upon a situation that was apparently in direct contrast to American ideals concerning democracy and republican forms of government? Was the U.S. media indifferent, or did it protest? Another question that needs to be answered is whether or not the press's opinions reflected their views toward the Eisenhower administration. This area of inquiry should really not have existed, since the U.S. led "Operation Success" was supposedly covert. Yet the articles used in this study clearly show that the U.S.'s clandestine role was one of the worst kept secrets of the Eisenhower administration. None of the periodicals used in this study ever publicly declared U.S. involvement in the *coup d'état*, but the insinuation was everywhere: the analogy of the elephant in the living room that everybody knows is present, but nobody discusses, seems to fit in this instance. Therefore, the media's views toward this supposed secret should be addressed. Whether or not the media justified the events of 1954 as necessary to the defense of U.S. interests, or condemned them as typical "Yanqui imperialism" should also be taken under consideration. Lastly, though the Fourth Estate has traditionally not been regulated by the system of checks and balances constructed by the U.S. Constitution, it still has been influenced by and responsive to the prevailing ethos of its society. Thus, a general, albeit brief, assessment of the political atmosphere of both the U.S. and the world at large should be undertaken if a complete understanding of the events of Guatemala in 1954 and the American media's reaction are to be placed into proper context.

The U.S. Media and the Overthrow of President Arbenz

The Guatemalan revolution lasted from 1944 to 1954. A complete analysis of the U.S. media's role and reaction to this entire period is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, four events of 1954 crucial to the fall of Arbenz will be addressed; (1) the Organization of American States (OAS) conference; (2) the Alfhem arms shipment; (3) the Castillo-U.S. led insurrection—including Washington's explanation as well as the United Nations Security Council and the OAS proceedings; (4) the aftermath and the media's response to the outcome. There are other significant events involved in the eventual ascendancy of Castillo, but these four were the most prominent and therefore received the most media coverage and generated the most editorials and strongest viewpoints. Therefore, they provide an adequate assessment of the media's opinion towards the entire affair.

The fall of the dictatorship of Gen. Jorge Ubico in 1944 began a period of progressive reform in Guatemala that lasted for ten years. Under the leadership of Dr. Juan José Arévalo, the Guatemalan government enacted legislation—in such areas as education, agriculture, land, labor, and administration—which sought to break the hold of the rural oligarchy and foreign interests in order to incorporate the vast majority of the populace into national affairs and improve their status in society. Upon election to the presidency in 1950, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán continued these reforms, attempting to transform the third world country "into a modern capitalist state."[5] The most ambitious reform was a massive agrarian redistribution law, which divided up the large estates (*fincas*) of the native and foreign elite, to be allotted to individual small farmers or be worked collectively as communes (*ejidos*). Most affected by this agrarian reform law was United Fruit Company of Boston, which had over 200,000 acres expropriated by the Arbenz government for redistribution.[6] To further weaken the domination of the Guatemalan economy by U.S. companies, Arbenz enacted other measures such as constructing transportation facilities that would compete and offset those controlled by foreign corporations.[7] Briefly stated, these reforms by Arbenz led to much antagonism between his government and these foreign companies, principally United Fruit, who in turn took measures to reverse the reforms and restore their monopolies. Led by Edward Bernays and the famous New Dealer turned Washington lobbyist Thomas "Tommy the Cork" Corcoran, United Fruit conducted a propaganda campaign to portray the reforms as unfair and socialist. Specifically, United Fruit used its media and political connections to depict Arbenz's government as communist and, if not checked, would thus establish a satellite of the Soviet Union in Central America.[8] By the beginning of 1954, Bernays and Corcoran's efforts were apparently successful, for the media, government, and citizenry of the U.S. all seemed convinced that a Soviet influenced communist state had been established in the Western Hemisphere. The U.S. hence launched "Operation Success" to overthrow Arbenz, to be replaced with a government friendly to U.S. political and financial interests.[9] This study will focus upon the media's reaction to the main events of "Operation Success" occurring mainly throughout the first half of 1954.

The controversy in Guatemala had been drawing the attention of the U.S. for some time before the actual *coup d'état* (*golpe de estado*) in June 1954. Before leaving office in 1953, the administration of President Harry S. Truman began to look unfavorably upon Arbenz's reforms, namely the confiscation of the lands of U.S. companies.[10] Continuing the propaganda assault upon the Arbenz administration instigated by Bernays, prominent U.S. journalists in early 1954 called attention to the iniquities of the Guatemalan government throughout the first months of the year, depicting Arbenz as a prisoner of communist influence. When the Arbenz government, led by Foreign Minister Guillermo Toriello, first discovered evidence of a plot to overthrow the Guatemalan regime and then publicly accused the U.S. and United Fruit of conspiring with Guatemala's neighbors —namely Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza—in aiding Arbenz's opponents, the U.S. press dismissed the charges. For example, Sidney Gruson of the *New York Times* charged that the Arbenz government's allegations was a typical strategy used in Latin American politics that "had for its primary aim the frightening of the opposition."[11] *Time* magazine—whose owner Henry Luce apparently was working with U.S. officials in depicting the Arbenz regime in the worst possible manner[12] —described the accusations as "a scenario—a sort of Reichstag fire in reverse, masterminded in Moscow and designed to divert the attention…from Guatemala as the Western Hemisphere's Red Problem child."[13] Instead of exploring the charges made by the Arbenz government, major U.S. periodicals concentrated on exposing Arbenz's arrest of political opposition, and emphasized the supposed communist influences within Guatemala's labor community. *Newsweek* accused Arbenz of financing communist propaganda through Guatemalan labor unions in an effort to provoke a response by the U.S. that would lead to Central American nations uniting for "the greater glory of world Communism." Accordingly, *Newsweek* charged that the entire region was in jeopardy, for "Red expansion will always be a possibility while the focus of infection remains in Guatemala." Accompanying this article was a map showing the relatively short distance between Guatemala, the U.S., and the Panama Canal.[14] Numerous other articles in *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* from February 1954 portrayed the communist influences within the

Guatemalan labor movement as endemic of the entire Arbenz government. The fact that Marxist labor leaders such as Congressman Victor Manuel Gutierrez or Carlos Manuel Pellecer were not official members of the Arbenz administration was not mentioned. Instead, the attendance of avowed communist Humberto Gonzalez Suarez—Arbenz's personal secretary—was depicted as proof that the Guatemalan government was under the Soviet Sphere of influence.[15] With "Operation Success" well under way by this point, the media had already seemed to surrender its objectivity to Cold War propaganda.

This acquiescence by the media continued, even flourished, during coverage of the Organization of American States (OAS) Conference held in Caracas, Venezuela in early March 1954. At the conference on March 5, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, using American financial aid as a bargaining chip, successfully persuaded the conference to pass an anti-communist resolution, which, though not stating specifically, was directly aimed at Guatemala and in effect provided the U.S. with a *carte blanche* to intervene in Guatemala. Despite an impassioned protest from Foreign Minister Toriello, the delegates from the American nations overwhelmingly passed the resolution seventeen to one.[16] Although the U.S. delegation preempted the conference's original purpose of a discussion of economic matters and bulldozed through the anti-communist resolution under veiled threats, the U.S. media simply applauded Dulles's flagrant abuse of economic superiority—a virtual return to the Dollar Diplomacy of President William Howard Taft. Most viewed the passage of the resolution as a triumph for Dulles and the Eisenhower administration's foreign policy. Gruson presented Dulles's actions as strengthening the U.S.'s reputation within Latin America, stating that Dulles had "succeeded in reassuring most of the delegates of its [the U.S.] anxious desire to participate in inter-American affairs, not as 'the Colossus of the North,' but as a friendly equal." Gruson said further that the overwhelming passage of the anti-communist resolution was not due to U.S. economic pressures, but "was a measure of the trust Latin America has developed for the United States in regard to this issue."[17] Luce's *Time* declared the resolution as "the first Western Hemisphere agreement that gives real promise of stopping Communist infiltration in the Americas."[18] This magazine also chided Arbenz's response to the OAS conference, stating that his response merely left him "Standing shoulder to shoulder with his Marxist comrades," and that he had only encouraged further communist infiltration into his government.[19] Dismissing the enthusiastic response that Toriello's protest received at the conference from OAS delegates as merely a face saving gesture, *Newsweek* quoted one attendee who said "the clapping of hands is not always the same thing as the shaking of hands."[20]

There were, however, some who acknowledged that Latin American delegates to the OAS conference were justifiably wary of giving the U.S. a rubber stamp with the passage of the anti-communist resolution, given the U.S.'s history of unilateral intervention. Many foresaw the problems in the Eisenhower administration's attempt to link economic assistance with hemispheric defense of Soviet aggression. Recognizing the hypocrisy inherent in a U.S. foreign policy that supported military dictatorships in the region that suppressed civil liberties while simultaneously denouncing governments such as Guatemala that allowed political dissent, some journalists implied that the U.S. should offer the carrot before employing the stick. For example, the *New York Times* editorial of March 5, 1954 stated: "The most democratic, and hence the most genuinely anti-Communist states are the very ones who are most anxious not to get entangled with this [Communism] issue," adding that "Communism has to be attacked by alleviating the causes that permit it to gain ground."[21] Milton Bracker of the *New York Times* professed that unilateral action in Guatemala would alienate many Latin American nations, stating "it would serve Soviet purposes if the United States could be provoked into some sort of unilateral action."[22] They did not, however, advocate exploring the Guatemalan situation further. While the *New York Times* and other periodicals did insist that the situation should be resolved in some manner other than military intervention, they continued to denounce the Arbenz government as a Soviet satellite, without offering alternative explanations why Guatemalan-U.S. relations had become so antagonistic.

The *Alfhem* arms shipment caused a similar reaction. That is, the media accepted as fact the notion that Guatemala was a Soviet satellite yet recognized that the prevailing anti-American sentiment made the U.S. government's proper response difficult to ascertain. When the Arbenz government's purchase of arms from Warsaw Pact member Czechoslovakia was discovered aboard the freighter *Alfhem* in May 1954, it set off a wave of protest from both the U.S. government and the American media.[23] Most within the U.S. media agreed with *Time's* assessment that Guatemala's purchase of arms "amounted to the Red bloc's first public display of big-brotherly trust and confidence" that a communist state could be successfully established in Central America.[24] Paul Kennedy of the *New York Times* stated: "People from Panama to the southern Mexican border have…been asking themselves…whether now is the time they have been expecting and dreading—the beginning of an all-out Communist expansion from a Guatemalan bridgehead."[25] Some, however, concluded that the U.S. could not act unilaterally in Guatemala without drastic repercussions. Kennedy in the same article recognized that many Latin

Americans saw the U.S.'s public denouncement of the arms shipment as just another instance of the U.S. meddling in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation, when he stated that Guatemala had become a country "where 'Uncle Sam' was made the butt of all conceivable types of bitter jest."[26] Sidney Gruson of the *New York Times* concurred, suggesting that U.S. attacks upon Arbenz had only resulted in increased support for his regime: "Washington's outcry over this country's purchase of arms from communist sources in Europe appears to have boomeranged: It has achieved for Guatemala a greater degree of national unity than she has experienced in a long time."[27] Despite this development of solidarity behind Arbenz, clearly the U.S. used the Alfhem arms shipment as the pretext for the launch of "Operation Success."[28]

When Col. Castillo led a small insurgent force into Guatemala to begin the invasion that would lead to Arbenz's downfall, the U.S. media's response was the first time in which serious questions began to be raised about the entire situation, including the role played by the U.S. government. The general perception remained that Castillo was leading a rebel force in the liberation of Guatemala from Soviet domination, yet certain journalists began to question whether U.S. was acting appropriately and fairly in the situation. This was the first time that the U.S. media divided in their opinions, with some questioning the Eisenhower administration's policies. The unequivocal support that the media had given the administration up to this point now began to fade, with some even denouncing U.S. policies toward Guatemala.

This development was seen in commentary on the Eisenhower administration's efforts to block an appeal by Guatemala to the United Nations Security Council to declare a cease-fire and conduct an investigation of the situation. The U.S. disputed Guatemala's claims that Castillo's forces were an act of foreign aggression, claiming that Castillo was leading an internal insurgency and therefore the affair should be handled by the OAS, which the U.S. dominated and therefore could control the investigation by using the anti-communist resolution passed the previous March.[29] U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. was at the time president of the Security Council. His efforts to stall a meeting of the council to address the situation, then block an inquiry being pushed by the Soviet Union, received scrutiny in the press, namely from *The Christian Science Monitor*, published in Lodge's —as well as United Fruit's—hometown of Boston, Massachusetts. Correspondent William R. Frye asserted that Lodge's refusal to call a meeting to address the situation was to "erect a diplomatic shield for the…invasion forces of Col. Castillo Armas."[30] Frye also contended that the U.S. delegation headed by Lodge was being inconsistent in its assertion that the Guatemala conflict was a civil war and not a conflict of aggression. Frye noted the hypocrisy of the U.S. when it had declared situations in Korea and Indochina as acts of aggression when soldiers of one nationality—with foreign material assistance—attacked members of the same nationality. But in Guatemala, when soldiers of various nationalities—with foreign assistance—crossed international frontiers, the U.S. deemed it an internal conflict.[31] The *Christian Science Monitor* was one of the few periodicals to call for an U.N. inquiry, stating, "it does not create a good impression abroad for…Lodge…to refuse to call a meeting of that agency to consider a Guatemalan protest. If a UN commission would find facts embarrassing to the United States or Honduras or Nicaragua, they should nevertheless be faced."[32] J.A. del Vayo of *The Nation*, a traditionally left-wing journal, agreed that Lodge's actions were designed to give Castillo an open hand in his invasion: "Thus United States diplomacy took care of all contingencies. If the war against Guatemala's progressive regime could not be won on the battlefield, preparations were made to achieve the victory through the anti-Communist machinery set up by the Caracas resolution."[33] The *New York Times*, however, continued its unequivocal support for the Eisenhower administration. Forgetting that the entire justification behind passage of the Caracas resolution was to halt the spread of "world communism," the *New York Times*, in supporting Lodge's efforts to shift the debate to the OAS, wrote, "Russia…is in no way concerned." Adding, "The Guatemalan situation is part of a developing hemispheric situation which directly involves only the twenty-one nations of North and South America."[34]

The press was unabashedly sympathetic to some of the principal players involved in "Operation Success." Castillo was depicted as an underdog fighting overwhelming odds to liberate his *patria* from the Red menace. Numerous times he was referred to as the "little colonel," who was "unquestionably a patriot and a man of deep seated anti-Communist convictions."[35] Likewise, U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala John E. Peurifoy—who had also played an integral role in the U.S. supported Iran *coup d'ètat* in 1953—was portrayed in a similar fashion. *Time* described the ambassador as a "dashing sportsman in a green Tyrolean hat and a checked jacket," seemingly straight out of a Hollywood western. Describing the role he played in the events, *Time* lauded Peurifoy: "With a .38 Colt in his shoulder holster, Peurifoy drove through the empty, fear-haunted streets to the armed forces headquarters," helping to save the world from Communism.[36] Arbenz in contrast was described as a tyrant who "persisted in typical Communist butchery in his last days in office,"[37] and who was "forced to bow for the first time in his

stubborn life," when he was ousted from office.[38]

The American media did address the question of U.S. participation during the coup. Virtually all the periodicals recognized that the U.S. was behind the events, but they divided in their opinions as to whether the U.S. was justified in taking such action. Maintaining the line it had taken throughout the year, *Time* acknowledged the U.S. role and even justified some of the barbarities undertaken by the new regime that was installed by the U.S. Relaying a story about a leftist Guatemalan judge who was killed by firing squad without the benefit of either *habeas corpus* or a formal trial, *Time* dismissed the event as justified in light of the atrocities committed by Arbenz, stating that the execution, "showed that the new junta means business with any Communist criminals it can get its hands on."[39] Joseph C. Harsch of *The Christian Science Monitor* asserted that the U.S.-sponsored coup was justified due to similar Soviet actions in other parts of the world: "it would be extremely foolish of the United States to renounce an instrument of policy which the Soviets use constantly and sometimes effectively."[40] *Newsweek* took a similar stance, insinuating that since the U.S. clearly supported the coup, it should therefore make sure that events transpire favorable to its interests, even if this meant landing U.S. Marines.[41] Many, however, linked U.S. prestige and credibility in Latin America to the future actions of Castillo. The *New York Times* said, "how he [Castillo] does will affect the regard with which ourselves are held by the other Latin Americans for years to come." Robert M. Hallett of the *Christian Science Monitor* pointed out that U.S. credibility in Latin America, already damaged by the coup, would only worsen if Castillo did not continue the reforms begun by Arévalo and Arbenz: "Replacement of a pro-Communist government by a right-wing dictatorship hardly will be construed by Latin Americans as a fair swap."[42]

After Castillo had been successfully installed and the OAS investigation committee had been recalled because the outcome was no longer in doubt, the reaction of the U.S. press was mixed. Most, such as Henry Luce's *Time*, continued to support U.S. actions and dismiss, even justify, the anti-democratic and dictatorial measures Castillo quickly instituted once in power. When Castillo outlawed the communist party, dissolved the labor unions and other political organizations, disenfranchised all illiterate peasants, and hired former dictator Jorge Ubico's henchman José Bernarbé Linarnares—who was infamous for using torture techniques such as electric-shock baths—*Time* said that Castillo had "finally struck at Guatemalan Communism with the sort of command decisions his followers have been demanding…."[43] When Castillo held a blatantly rigged plebiscite in which he received over 99 percent of the vote with some 486,000 votes cast,[44] *Time* asserted that Castillo "could have won a free and secret ballot just as easily."[45] *Newsweek* was also of this opinion. Declaring that Guatemala had "been snatched from the clutches of Communism and restored to the free world," the magazine labeled Castillo a "middle of the roader—some Guatemalans compare him with President Eisenhower."[46] Accordingly, they also denied U.S. involvement in the coup, and asserted that the "Latins were happy about the whole thing." Dismissing the charges of U.S. sponsorship of the coup, *Newsweek* argued that even if U.S. allies Nicaragua and Honduras had assisted Castillo, this was not a problem since "Central American Republics traditionally poke into each others affairs."[47] Though the *New York Times* acknowledged that there was a real need for reforms in Guatemala, correspondent Milton Bracker defended United Fruit, calling the company an "enlightened and benevolent organization," and patronized Latin Americans for not understanding the nature of the Cold War, asserting that it was the U.S.'s duty to show the "unknowable millions…that our enemies are their enemies."[48]

There were some journalists who denounced the *coup d'état* and recognized the irreversible damage that it had done to U.S.-Latin American relations. Writing in *The Nation*, Bernard Rosen heavily criticized the propaganda barrage used to attack the Arbenz reforms, comparing them to the "campaign slander directed against 'bolshevik' Mexico in the twenties and thirties." Rosen dismissed the charges of communism made against the Arbenz regime, stating the reforms were concessions to the Guatemalan middle class, not the proletariat. Rosen charged that by instigating the overthrow of Arbenz, the U.S. demonstrated that it was opposed to the industrial development of Guatemala.[49] Also appearing in *The Nation*, J. Alvarez del Vayo believed that "People like Castillo Armas will ultimately be left behind as grotesque accidents in the historical process."[50]

Conclusion

These journalists of *The Nation* alluded to a development that was endemic to almost all of the coverage of the *coup d'état*. That is, the overwhelming majority of the journalists covering the events in Guatemala accepted the prevalent belief that Arbenz's government was controlled by international communism. All periodicals used in this study approved of the Eisenhower administration's policies without exploring how these policies were constructed and what the motivation was behind them. Even *The Nation*, which traditionally had a left of center orientation, did not address the issue of the nature of the Arbenz regime until after the conclusion of "Operation Success."

Therefore, the press in this regard not only surrendered its objectivity but also failed in its duty to scrutinize the government under which it serves. They accepted statements made by U.S. government officials and charges made by Guatemalan dissidents without making any attempt to prove whether or not they were factual.

This does not mean the fear of Soviet expansion by both U.S. officials and the general public should be readily dismissed. There certainly were communist influences within the Guatemalan government under Arbenz. The president's personal secretary was an avowed communist, as was the President of the Congress, who was second in line for the presidency. Communists also headed the Department of Press, Propaganda, and Tourism, the social security department, were prominent within the diplomatic corps, and oversaw the administration of the Agrarian Reform Act. Communists also controlled the labor and peasant unions.[51] Generally, however, the journalists covering Guatemala neglected to point out that the Communist party was the smallest of the four parties making up the government coalition and had only 532 registered members in the entire country.[52] The press corps also portrayed the unions and the Arbenz government as synonymous, which they were not. The unions did make up a substantial portion of Arbenz's support, but in no way were union leaders official members of his regime.[53] The press ignored the vast improvements in Guatemalan society sustained under Arévalo and Arbenz, the substantial problems inherent in the latifundia system, or the lavish concessions given to United Fruit and other foreign companies. Instead, the press corps focused exclusively upon the communism issue while virtually ignoring United Fruit's role in the controversy. United Fruit, known to Guatemalans as *el Pulpo* (the octopus), was rarely if ever mentioned in the stories covering events in Guatemala in 1954. Therefore, the media neglected to inform the general public of the complexity of the situation or point out some of the justified grievances that Guatemalans had concerning both U.S. business interests and other aspects of their nation's relationship with the North. The media establishment had clearly succumbed to the bi-polar rhetoric of the Cold War. As in so many other conflicts between the U. S. and Latin America, the U.S. media would never attempt to consider situation through the eyes of Latinos.

As previously stated, Schlesinger and Kinzer have shown in their study of the *coup d'état* that people such as Edward Bernays used contacts within the media for the benefit of United Fruit and other U.S. financial interests. Yet it is improbable that all journalists and editors were manipulated by Bernays to the degree to which they portrayed the events in the slanted manner that they did. All of these were reputable journalists and periodicals, known for their integrity and objectivity. These journalists were certainly not hacks writing for tabloids that could be bought off to spread gossip and half-truths. This would apparently mean that Bernays was one the greatest propagandists of all time, who had "wagged the dog" better than anyone before or since. This, however, is unlikely. Certainly Bernays was highly successful in portraying United Fruit as a victim of an unjust agrarian reform law. He and Corcoran have also been shown to be highly effective in spreading the misperception that the Arbenz government was a communist satellite controlled by the Soviet Union. However, it is improbable that the journalist community accepted the United Fruit propaganda campaign verbatim without ever questioning at least some of the stories released by Bernays. Therefore, there must be other reasons why the events in Guatemala were covered so subjectively.

The best explanation for this subjectivity is the nature of U.S. domestic politics during the period. Like all events, the episode in Guatemala was inextricably tied to other events, and thus was caused and influenced by other seemingly unrelated occurrences throughout the globe. It can be argued that the prevailing influence upon U.S. foreign policy during the period was domestic anti-communism. By 1954, Cold War propaganda that warned of the dangers of the international communist movement was at its zenith. Although his influence upon the political process was beginning to decline by 1954, Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin and the ideology that he represented remained the predominant issue in U.S. politics. McCarthy's infamous purge of the State Department —namely the "old China hands"—has been well documented by historians. Whether this had an effect upon U.S. policy toward Latin America is unknown. What is evident, however, is that this purge and other related criticism did make the Department of State vulnerable to charges of being "soft" on communism. Given Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's policy of "rolling back the iron curtain," coupled with the intricate financial ties that U.S. government officials had with United Fruit,[54] Latin American specialists within the Department of State had little chance of constructing an objective Cold War foreign policy toward a country that was left of center, did not take direct orders from Washington, and was in the sphere of U.S. hegemony.

What does this mean for the U.S. media? Foremost, the coverage of the Guatemalan *coup d'état* reveals that the press was heavily influenced by this Cold War ethos. The belief in a bipolar world was held not only by U.S. government officials and the public at large, but the people within the media as well. The coverage shows that the media was just as subject to the fear of communist infiltration as the rest of the U.S. They, like the rest of the U.S. populace, believed that Latin America was in the U.S. sphere of influence, and any hint of communist infiltration into the Americas had to be cut off at the source. The French defeat by communist forces at Dien Bien Phu on

May 7, 1954[55]—just one week before the *Alfhem* arms shipment was reported— only exacerbated this fear. Undoubtedly many believed that if the French could be defeated by communism in their own backyard, then the U.S. certainly could be as well. Regardless of the machinations of Bernays, the media's traditional notions of the proper role of U.S.-Latin American relations, coupled with the dominating influence of the Cold War, clearly gave sufficient impetus for supporting intervention in Guatemala. The affair had started as an effort to defend United Fruit financial interests, but quickly became ensconced in the bipolar conflict. United Fruit and the financial interests held by prominent U.S. officials blended with the domestic politics of anti-communism and the Cold War to create a situation where the American media would easily acquiesce to efforts to control a small nation whose politics were questionable. Therefore, David Graham's charge in 1955 that portraying the Arbenz regime as a Soviet satellite "was pure McCarthyism,"[56] was a fairly accurate assessment of the press's behavior.

The media's susceptibility to accept United Fruit propaganda, and neglect to scrutinize official U.S. foreign policy, only re-enforces the notion that the media does not determine people's thoughts, but does determine what they are thinking about. During the U.S. led overthrow of Arbenz, the press only accentuated the feelings of paternalism and self-righteousness that the U.S. has traditionally had toward Latin America in general and Guatemala in particular. They did not create them. Under the awesome influence of the Cold War, the Fourth Estate—like the vast majority of U.S. policy makers—would surrender most if not all objectivity in its assessment of Latin American politics. *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *The Nation*, and other major periodicals assisted the U.S. government in the overthrow of a democratic system by focusing the inherent fears of the American people upon a small Central American nation that was experiencing democracy for the first time in its history. The press in turn surrendered its objectivity to both the public relations division of a corporation that was only concerned with its self-interests, and to its own mistaken beliefs that were endemic to the society in which it functioned.

Endnotes

1 Christian, Shirley. *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1986), 15. N.B. Despite this favorable view among many within the Left, U.S. Marines fought Gen. Sandino and trained the Nicaraguan National Guard to put down his rebellion. Return

2 Ibid., 19. Return

3 Ibid., 381. Return

4 V. Stephen Schlesinger & Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), chap. six. Return

5 Ibid., 53. Return

6 For a complete description of the agrarian reform legislation and its immediate effects, see ibid., *passim*. Return

7 A discussion of these measures of Arbenz can be found in Paul J. Dosal's *Power In Transition: The Rise of Guatemala's Industrial Oligarchy, 1871-1994* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), chap. five. Return

8 Schlesinger & Kinzer, chap. six and seven. Return

9 Ibid., *passim*. Return

10 Immerman, chap. four. Return

11 *New York Times*, January 31, 1954, 3; Ibid., February 3, 1954, 3; *infra* Gruson and Marshall Bannell of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) were subsequently declared *persona non grata* by Arbenz for "defamation" of the Guatemalan government. Return

12 Schlesinger & Kinzer, 153-54. Return

13 *Time*, February 8, 1954, 36. Return

14 *Newsweek*, February 15, 1954, 54-55. Return

15 *V., New York Times*, February 2, 1954, 10; February 21, 1954, 21; *Newsweek*, February 8, 1954, 44. Return

16 For a discussion of the OAS Conference, see Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), chap. six. Return

17 *New York Times*, March 14, 1954, 6E. Return

18 *Time*, March 22, 1954, 39. Return

19 Ibid., March 15, 1954, 30. Return

20 *Newsweek*, March 15, 1954. Return

21 *New York Times*, March 5, 1954, 18 Return

22

Ibid., 2. Return

23 For details of the *Alfhem* arms shipment and the reaction by the U.S., see Schlesinger & Kinzer, chps 10-11, *passim*; and Immerman, 155-60. Return

24 *Time*, May 31, 1954, 30; *op cit.* Immerman, 158. Return

25 *New York Times*, May 23, 1954, E9. Return

26 Ibid. Return

27 Ibid., May 21, 1954, 1. Return

28 *V.*, Schlesinger & Kinzer, chps11-12; Immerman, 7; and Cole Blaisier, *The Hovering Giant: U.S. Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America, 1910-1985* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 167-168. Return

29 Schlesinger & Kinzer, 180. Return

30 *Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 1954, 1. Return

31 Ibid., June 24, 1954, 1. Return

32 Ibid., 12. Return

33 *The Nation*, July 3, 1954, 4. Return

34 *New York Times*, June 22, 1954, 26. Return

35 Ibid., July 11, 1954, 8E. Return

36 *Time*, July 12, 1954, 39. Return

37 Ibid., 38. Return

38 Ibid., July 5, 1954, 31. Return

39 Ibid., July 12, 1954, 39. Return

40 *Christian Science Monitor*, June 22, 1954, 1. Return

41 *Newsweek*, July 5, 1954, 46. Return

42 *Christian Science Monitor*, June 30, 1954, 1. Return

43 *Time*, August, 23, 1954, 34. Return

44 Immerman, 177. Return

45 *Time*, October 4, 1954, 38. Return

46 *Newsweek*, December 6, 1954, 59. Return

47 Ibid., July 26, 1954, 40. Return

48 *New York Times*, July 11, 1954, (Magazine Supplement), 38. Return

49 *The Nation*, July 31, 1954, 88-89. Return

50 Ibid., August 14, 1954, 124. Return

51 John Gillin and K.H. Silvert, “Ambiguities in Guatemala.” *Foreign Affairs*, April 1956, 471. Return

52 Ibid. Return

53 *v.*, Ronald M. Schneider, *Communism In Guatemala, 1944-54* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959), chap. six, *passim.* Return

54 For a discussion of the financial ties between U.S. officials and United Fruit, see Schlesinger & Kinzer, chap. seven, *passim*. Return

55 Patrick J. Hearden, *The Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 59. Return

56 *The Nation*, May 21, 1955, 449. Return

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Christian Science Monitor. Columbia: University of Missouri Library.
Foreign Affairs. Columbia: University of Missouri Library.
Nation. Columbia: University of Missouri Library.
Newsweek. Columbia: University of Missouri Library.
New York Times. Columbia: University of Missouri Library.
Time. Columbia: University of Missouri Library.

Secondary Sources:

Blasier, Cole. *The Hovering Giant: U.S. Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America, 1910-1985*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985.

Christian, Shirley. *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family.* New York: Random House, 1986.

Dosal, Paul J. *Power in Transition: The Rise of Guatemala's Industrial Oligarchy, 1871-1994*. Westport: Prager, 1995.

Hearden, Patrick J. *The Tragedy of Vietnam*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1991.

Immerman, Richard H. *The CIA In Guatemala: The Politics Of Intervention*. Austin: University Of Texas Press, 1982.

Schlesinger, Stephen & Stephen Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. New York: Doubleday, 1982.

Schneider, Ronald M. *Communism in Guatemala, 1944-54*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958.

Last updated: December 14, 2000