

**Covering a Coup: The American Press and Guatemala in 1954**

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## Introduction

The 1954 coup in Guatemala has been a subject of considerable debate almost since the day that Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas and his ragtag group of exiles toppled the democratically elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. In the years immediately after the coup—a covert CIA operation called PBSUCCESS<sup>1</sup>—the event was characterized as an internal uprising that pitted the people of Guatemala against a pro-Communist regime that had become, in the words of one writer, “one more weapon of Soviet foreign policy.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, as the CIA’s role in the event became more evident, historians have argued that the United States overreacted to the Communist threat in Guatemala and orchestrated the coup against Arbenz to protect American business interests in the region, namely those of the Boston-based United Fruit Company.<sup>3</sup>

As part of this discussion, historians and journalists have debated the role the news media played during the coup, with most analysts agreeing that American news coverage took on an anti-Arbenz tone. As early as 1961, for example, former *New York Times* correspondent Herbert L. Matthews blamed “a hostile and ill-informed American press” for fomenting a climate that helped turn U.S. public opinion against the Arbenz government.<sup>4</sup> Twenty years later, historian Richard H. Immerman argued that the press viewed the events in Guatemala through the prism of the Cold War and bought into the Eisenhower administration’s contention that the coup was “a successful anti-Communist uprising.”<sup>5</sup> Others, such as historians Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, took that argument one step further, contending that the media was intentionally manipulated by

the United Fruit Company and U.S. State Department as part of a far-reaching public relations campaign to build support for Arbenz's demise.<sup>6</sup>

But while the press has been criticized for how it covered the events leading up to the coup, there have been few, if any, detailed examinations of individual media organizations to determine how an ill informed and manipulated press corps translated into actual newspaper and magazine reports. This paper will fill this gap in the current research by looking at four publications to see specifically how the media reported the story of the Arbenz government in Guatemala.

As part of this examination, this paper will provide a brief history of Guatemala, including the struggle between the Arbenz government and United Fruit. It will also outline the public relations strategy United Fruit used to convince the American public that Arbenz was a Communist; and it will examine the Eisenhower administration's attitude toward the Arbenz government. Finally, this paper will look at reports that appeared in the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report* to determine whether the media reflected the themes presented by United Fruit and the Eisenhower administration or whether reporters challenged their assertions that the Arbenz government was heavily influenced by Communists and a threat to American strategic interests.

### **Brief History of Guatemala**

Guatemala had been ruled by a procession of right-wing dictators from 1821, when it gained independence from Spain, to 1944.<sup>7</sup> There were brief periods of reform, but for the most part the ruling class held onto power for more than 120 years, instituting policies that served the interests of the land owning aristocracy.<sup>8</sup> By the middle of the

20<sup>th</sup> century, 2.2 percent of Guatemala's population held more than 70 percent of the land. The great majority of Guatemalans had barely enough property to survive, but the feudalistic economic structure allowed big property owners to maximize their profits.<sup>9</sup>

One landowner that benefited from this economic structure was the United Fruit Company,<sup>10</sup> a multinational corporation that by the 1950s owned about 550,000 acres in Guatemala.<sup>11</sup> United Fruit, which has since become Chiquita Brands International,<sup>12</sup> had been the largest employer, landowner, and exporter in Guatemala for nearly a half century.<sup>13</sup> In addition to its large banana plantations, the company controlled almost all the rail lines in Guatemala, the only port on the Atlantic coast,<sup>14</sup> and a fleet of fifty-two freighters that transported bananas to the United States, Canada, and Europe.<sup>15</sup> Through most of its history, the company used its close relationships with various Guatemalan strongmen to negotiate favorable operating conditions. In 1936, for instance, United Fruit negotiated a ninety-nine-year contract with Guatemala that exempted the company from internal taxes and guaranteed that workers would be paid low wages.<sup>16</sup>

Things began to change in June 1944, however, when a series of nonviolent street demonstrations by teachers and students led to the resignation of General Jorge Ubico, a rigid dictator who had ruled the country for nearly thirteen years. While Ubico was replaced by another military strongman, the government of General Federico Ponce collapsed four months later when two army officers—Major Francisco Arana and Captain Jacobo Arbenz—led an uprising against the regime. Known as the October Revolution, the 1944 coup put a temporary three-man junta in charge of the government and set the stage for a new constitution that brought economic and political reforms to the nation, including the country's first democratic elections.<sup>17</sup>

Arbenz was elected president in November 1950 with 60 percent of the vote, becoming the country's second democratically elected leader under the 1945 constitution.<sup>18</sup> He promised to expand the progress made under his predecessor, Juan Jose Arevalo Bermejo, whose biggest achievement was passage of the 1947 Labor Code, which required companies to negotiate labor contracts with their employees and established other protections for workers.<sup>19</sup>

Arbenz's main objective was "to convert Guatemala from a country bound by a predominantly feudal economy into a modern, capitalist one."<sup>20</sup> In addition to building a new highway and Atlantic port,<sup>21</sup> he championed legislation that encouraged the construction of factories,<sup>22</sup> the development of a social security system, and the creation of a modern banking structure.<sup>23</sup>

The centerpiece of his economic plan, however, was a land reform proposal designed to transfer thousands of acres of uncultivated land from large property owners to the impoverished rural population.<sup>24</sup> Known as Decree 900, the agrarian reform bill adopted by the National Assembly in June 1952 allowed the government to expropriate uncultivated portions of large plantations and redistribute the land to peasants in plots of up to 42.5 acres.<sup>25</sup> The law required that property owners be compensated with 25-year bonds bearing 3 percent interest, with the amount paid by the government determined by the land value claimed by the property owner for tax purposes.<sup>26</sup>

The law had its first impact on United Fruit in March 1953, when the Arbenz government seized 209,842 acres of the company's land and offered to pay \$627,572 in bonds. However, because United Fruit had undervalued the property to reduce its tax liability, the amount offered by the Arbenz administration was significantly lower than

the company believed the property was worth. It appealed the decision, and on April 20, 1954, the U.S. State Department filed a formal complaint on behalf of United Fruit, demanding \$15.9 million for the land. The Arbenz administration refused to accept the State Department's complaint, and the company's appeal was ultimately rejected.<sup>27</sup>

Two more expropriations of United Fruit's land were ordered by the government between October 1953 and February 1954.<sup>28</sup> In all, the government seized 400,000 of the 550,000 acres United Fruit owned in the country<sup>29</sup> and compensated the company \$1.1 million in bonds, or about \$3 an acre.<sup>30</sup> Concluding that it could not work with the Arbenz administration, United Fruit began a public relations campaign to change the U.S. public's attitude toward Guatemala and build sympathy for the company's problems in Central America.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Public Relations Campaign**

United Fruit's public relations campaign was run by Edward Bernays, the premier public relations specialist at the time and a consultant for United Fruit since the early 1940s.<sup>32</sup> Bernays advocated an aggressive press campaign to convince reporters that there were real dangers of communism in Guatemala and other parts of Latin America. He was convinced that "if the people of the United States and our government understood the dangers of political and social instability in Latin America, they might take steps to improve the situation."<sup>33</sup> His arguments fell on deaf ears at first,<sup>34</sup> but by April 1951 United Fruit was concerned enough about the new Arbenz government that it gave Bernays the green light to proceed.<sup>35</sup>

The key to Bernays' strategy was to select the most influential communications media in the United States and saturate them with the company's version of the facts.<sup>36</sup>

This was done through personal contacts with reporters and editors and the distribution of company newsletters and other publications. But no strategy was more effective than a series of press junkets in which reporters were flown to Central America at United Fruit's expense so that they could see for themselves the dangers posed by communism.<sup>37</sup>

In a typical trip—five of which were organized between January 1952 and the spring of 1954<sup>38</sup>—a group of about 10 reporters would be flown to Bogota, Colombia, then to Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala.<sup>39</sup> Although Bernays insisted that reporters could “go where they wanted, talk to whomever they wanted, and report their findings freely,”<sup>40</sup> other company employees said reporters were closely monitored by United Fruit personnel.<sup>41</sup>

“The [company's public relations] department had only one task: to get out the word that a Communist beachhead had been established in our hemisphere,” said Thomas P. McCann, who worked in United Fruit's publicity department during the Guatemala campaign. “The [press junkets] were ostensibly to gather information, but what the press would hear and see was carefully staged and regulated by the host. The plan represented a serious attempt to compromise objectivity.”<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the junkets, Bernays kept in close contact with his friends in the press, including Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the publisher of the *New York Times*.<sup>43</sup> Through such contacts he passed on “news tips,” including one story in 1953 about a “school for Red agents” in Prague where Latin Americans were supposedly being trained in subversion.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, United Fruit financed and distributed several hundred copies of a 235-page book called *Report on Guatemala*, which referred to the Arbenz government as a

“Moscow-directed Communist conspiracy.”<sup>45</sup> In 1953, the book (whose author was anonymous) was given to every member of Congress as well as other people who Bernays referred to as “opinion molders.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, from 1953 to 1960, United Fruit distributed a confidential weekly report called the “Guatemala Newsletter.” The publication, which was written by the company’s public relations department, went to 250 American journalists, many of whom took information straight out of the newsletter.<sup>47</sup> Writing about the press campaign years later, McCann said about the newsletter: “...for about eight years a great deal of the news of Central America which appeared in the North American press was supplied, edited and sometimes made up by United Fruit’s public relations department in New York.”<sup>48</sup>

The company’s PR campaign didn’t stop there. When the coup was launched on June 18, 1954,<sup>49</sup> United Fruit spokesman provided reporters with regular updates about the fighting. One journalist who covered the coup said years later that “the company’s Boston headquarters, as I still vividly recall, was at the time an excellent source for newsmen in following almost on an hourly basis the progress of the invasion.”<sup>50</sup>

### **The Eisenhower Administration**

While United Fruit advanced its case in the press, the Eisenhower administration had its own concerns about events in Guatemala. Passage of the 1947 Labor Code, union unrest, and the agrarian reform bill all raised eyebrows in Washington and led some in the Eisenhower administration to worry that Communists were infiltrating the Arbenz government.<sup>51</sup> In May 1953, an American intelligence report concluded that “the current political situation in Guatemala is adverse to U.S. interests. The Guatemalan Communists exercise a political influence far out of proportion to their small numerical



strength. Their influence will probably continue to grow as long as President Arbenz remains in power.”<sup>52</sup> The administration was careful not to call Arbenz himself a Communist, but they argued that Communist elements within the administration had Arbenz’s ear. This view was pushed by John E. Peurifoy, the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, who said that Arbenz “thought like a Communist and talked like a Communist, and if not actually one, would do until one came along.”<sup>53</sup>

The final straw for Eisenhower came in May 1954, when Guatemala received a shipment of Czechoslovakian weapons from the Swedish freighter *Alfhem*. A firestorm erupted in the press as the Eisenhower administration said the weapons would be used by Arbenz to spread revolution throughout Latin America.<sup>54</sup>

Eisenhower had authorized the CIA to begin planning a coup against the Arbenz government in May 1953, and the agency had assembled a 150-man force under Colonel Castillo Armas on a base in Honduras.<sup>55</sup> Now, as tensions mounted over the arms shipment from the Eastern bloc, it was time for the administration to act. On June 18, 1954, Castillo invaded Guatemala. Nine days later Arbenz resigned.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Press**

Like the Eisenhower administration, the press viewed the events in Guatemala through a Cold War lens. Reporters frequently referred to the Arbenz administration as having “pro-Communist tendencies,”<sup>57</sup> or of being “Red-tinged”<sup>58</sup> and a captive of “Moscow-controlled Communism.”<sup>59</sup> *New York Times* correspondent Herbert L. Matthews was so angry by the coverage, that he later accused two of his colleagues at the newspaper of being “God’s gift to the United Fruit Company,” adding that “they unintentionally saw and wrote exactly what the State Department wanted to see.”<sup>60</sup>

But the story of the press is much more complicated than this. Press coverage varied widely depending on the individual reporter and the publication. To understand the true nature of the coverage, it's important to review and compare the coverage of individual media outlets. In this study, eighty articles from four publications were examined. All the articles appeared between January 1951 and June 1954, when Arbenz resigned. The four publications are *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *New York Times*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

### *The News Magazines*

Although there was little evidence that the small Communist Party in Guatemala had foreign origins,<sup>61</sup> *Time* and *U.S. News* often described the Communist movement there as a Moscow-driven operation that was growing. In early 1952, for example, *Time* reported on a trip that Guatemalan Congressman Victor Manuel Gutierrez took to Moscow. The magazine strongly implied that the Kremlin was pulling the strings in Guatemala, writing that when Gutierrez returned to Guatemala, he disbanded his "Communist-line Revolutionary Workers Party" and joined it to the country's Communist Party. "Closing Communist ranks apparently was a tactical reaction to growing anti-Red sentiment in Guatemala," the magazine wrote.<sup>62</sup>

Later, *Time* quoted Rep. Patrick J. Hillings, R-Calif., as saying that "there is no question that the leaders of Guatemala are taking orders from Soviet Russia." The magazine did not include any comments from Guatemalan officials denying the accusation.<sup>63</sup> The magazine acknowledged on other occasions that Arbenz was "no Communist himself" but it said "he seemed to be a prisoner of the Communist bureaucrats, politicians and union bosses who grabbed power during the Arevalo

regime.”<sup>64</sup> The magazine seemed to reflect Ambassador Peurifoy’s belief that Arbenz “talked like a Communist.”

Guatemalan sources were rarely quoted in *Time*. When they were, the magazine seemed to highlight the most extreme elements inside the government. On the eve of the U.S.-backed coup, *Time* quoted one Communist congressman as saying that the government would “cut off the heads of all anti-Communists.”<sup>65</sup> In 1952, the magazine quoted Congressman Gutierrez as praising the Soviet Union as a place where “everyone eats well.”<sup>66</sup>

Stories in *U.S. News and World Report* were more blunt about the alleged international connection between Moscow and Guatemala. The magazine’s coverage outlined the dangers of international communism to the United States and portrayed Guatemala as the kick off point for a worldwide, Moscow-driven movement designed to “create serious trouble for the U.S. in time of war.”<sup>67</sup> One story reported that the Soviet embassy in Mexico City was the headquarters for movements throughout Latin America, adding that Guatemala was the place where the Communists were strongest. “Guatemala now is the limelight,” *U.S. News* said. “Communists there wield much power. Government funds help to finance their operations. Russian sympathizers hold top posts in the army.”<sup>68</sup> The magazine was careful not to call Arbenz a Communist, but it echoed the Eisenhower administration’s assertion that the Guatemalan government was “pro-Communist.”<sup>69</sup>

Reporters at *U.S. News* often made blanket statements of fact without explaining the source of the information or providing evidence to verify that the information was true. For example, the magazine reported in 1953 that “a definite Communist influence is

showing up in public schools, in big labor unions, in youth groups,”<sup>70</sup> but it neither explained where the information came from nor offered proof that the statement was true.

United Fruit, meanwhile, was portrayed as a victim. *Time* reported that the company had undergone “months of harassment by Guatemala’s Communist-led unions.”<sup>71</sup> In November 1951, a few months after one of Bernays’ press junkets, *Time* wrote a piece explaining how United Fruit was coming under fire in Guatemala. The company’s bananas were described as “big” and “sweet,”<sup>72</sup> while its 13,000 Guatemalan employees were said to be the “best paid agricultural workers” in the country.<sup>73</sup> The story blamed declining profits on several factors, including a “Communist-led banana workers union,” which, the story pointed out, was asking that the company “jack up wage floors from \$1.36 daily to \$2.50.”<sup>74</sup> *Time* briefly discussed United Fruit’s exploitation of Guatemala, but it did so with a positive spin, pointing out that the company’s bad behavior occurred “years ago,” adding that United Fruit had “changed with the times, becoming a model big employer in the Caribbean.”<sup>75</sup>

The magazine clearly took United Fruit’s side when Guatemala announced that it was expropriating 233,973 acres in early 1953. The magazine reported that while the company unofficially valued the land at \$11.5 million, Guatemala had only offered \$594,572 in 25-year, 3 percent government bonds—which *Time* described as “bonds of doubtful worth.”<sup>76</sup> The article never pointed out that the government’s figure was based on the company’s official value claimed for tax purposes. In another article, titled “Practically Confiscation,” *Time* reported that the company would appeal the land seizure, but the story lamented that “the company appeal seems doomed” because four

pro-landowner judges had been “thrown out and replaced by stooges of the Red-tinged government.”<sup>77</sup>

*U.S. News* was equally as harsh when reporting on agrarian reform. The magazine ignored the long history of exploitation in Guatemala, instead reporting that land reform “is a startling example of Russian-type action in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>78</sup> The article also stressed United Fruit’s argument that it needed so much property because it must “abandon several hundred acres of land each year because the soil becomes infected with Panama disease, an ailment that sharply reduces the yield.”<sup>79</sup>

Aside from the question of communism, the magazine questioned the wisdom of giving land to peasants. The magazine said:

Apart from legal questions, there is considerable doubt as to how the Agrarian law is going to work out. The illiterate Indians who are to get land know nothing about modern farming. Most of them plant corn as their Mayan ancestors did 2,000 years ago—by making a hole in the ground with a stick. They have no tools or money...It is questionable, however, whether the Indians will take modern agriculture or will repay the money advanced to them. But the agrarian scheme could result in a lot of collective farms more or less on the Russian pattern.<sup>80</sup>

To make sure that readers would be interested, *Time* stressed the strategic importance of the region. It pointed to three airfields in the country from where bombers could reach Texas in “less than three hours.”<sup>81</sup> It also told readers that Guatemala is “halfway between the United States and the [Panama] Canal zone.”<sup>82</sup>

### *The Newspapers*

Coverage in the *New York Times* and *Christian Science Monitor* was much more complex. The two newspapers often used Guatemalan sources, and both sometimes tried to explain the events in Central America from a broader perspective that challenged the Eisenhower administration’s Cold War view. Ultimately, however, the newspapers were a product of their time, and both still reported the news from an anti-communist bent.

How the news was covered often depended on who was reporting it. In other words, the reporter made all the difference.

In 1952, for example, the *New York Times* ran a three-part series about Guatemala by reporter Herbert L. Matthews. Matthews attempted to place the events in Guatemala in a broader historical context, ostensibly to counter the anti-communist furor that was appearing in other publications. In the third part of the series, in fact, Matthews stated unequivocally in the lead paragraph that Americans had nothing to fear in Guatemala.

“Communism is very influential in Guatemala,” he wrote, “but it is not in control and the chances are that it is never going to get control.”<sup>83</sup>

The Matthews series reported that Communists held “no top positions in the government.” In addition, he said that the army was “decidedly anti-Communist;” the police were independent of Communist control; and neither Arbenz nor any members of his cabinet were Communists. The series also pointed out that the existing Communist Party activists were “amateurish and they do not have any strong, popular, demagogic leaders.”<sup>84</sup> He added:

Only four out of 58 Deputies in the National Congress . . . are avowed Communists... The leading Communist, Victor Manuel Gutierrez, for instance, heads the Agrarian Reform Commission but he is making so little progress in imposing his ideas that there will be no reform this year.<sup>85</sup>

Nationalism, rather than communism, was feeding the government’s actions in Guatemala, Matthews wrote. As he put it:

The Communists enthusiastically supported and exacerbated these campaigns, but it would only distort the meaning of what happened to hold the Reds responsible... After a century of repressive dictatorships, such legislation was necessary and inevitable... They [the government] bitterly resent accusations that they are Communist because they are putting the heat on United Fruit.<sup>86</sup>

Matthews framed the issue in a historical context, pointing out that Guatemalans had lived under “repressive dictatorships” for a century before the October 1944 revolution. His articles reported that under these dictatorships, 70 percent of the land was owned by 2.2 percent of the population,<sup>87</sup> adding that “the United Fruit Company flourished ... a circumstance that the Guatemalans have not forgiven or forgotten.”<sup>88</sup>

While the series had the underlying tone that communism as a movement was a threat to the United States (Matthews wrote: “After the ‘cold war’ began, the menace of communism became evident...”)<sup>89</sup> it reminded Americans that at the time of the 1944 revolution in Guatemala, the United States was allied with the Soviet Union in World War II and “communism had immense prestige.”<sup>90</sup>

“It must be remembered too, that when World War II ended, the Communists were welcomed into coalition governments in France, Italy, Czechoslovakia and all the Eastern European countries,” Matthews said.<sup>91</sup>

Matthews reported that the movement in Guatemala was based not on ideology, but a deep seated mistrust of the United States because of decades of American imperialism.<sup>92</sup> The series concluded that Guatemala “is a democracy and by no stretch of the imagination can it be called a police state.”<sup>93</sup>

The *Christian Science Monitor* also tried to present a balanced view of events in Guatemala. In a four-part series by reporter Robert M. Hallett that ran in January 1953, the *Monitor* concluded that the Arbenz government “certainly is not a ‘Soviet republic,’” adding that a Communist takeover of the country “does not seem to be an immediate possibility.”<sup>94</sup> Hallett wrote:

Any fair analysis of Guatemala must take cognizance that this is essentially an age of awakening nationalism and pride... People are coming to realize that their social and

economic systems are behind the times. This has created a vacuum into which leftist extremism with its neat, packaged solutions has rushed.<sup>95</sup>

The two newspapers were more likely than the news magazines to balance their stories by using Guatemalan sources and providing the Arbenz government's version of the event. In 1954, when Guatemala rejected a demand by the State Department to pay United Fruit \$15.9 million for expropriated land, the *Times* quoted Guatemalan Foreign Minister Guillermo Toriello at length on the subject.<sup>96</sup> In addition, when Castillo Armas invaded Guatemala from Honduras on June 18, 1954, the *Times* quoted Toriello as the main source in announcing the invasion.<sup>97</sup> It also published Toriello's accusations that United Fruit and the United States were behind the invasion, something that was not widely known at the time.<sup>98</sup>

The *Monitor* also tried to present the Guatemalan and Latin American views of events in the hemisphere. For example, in May 1954 the United States considered seeking joint hemispheric action against Guatemala after the Eisenhower administration learned that Arbenz purchased weapons from the Soviet bloc. While the first nine paragraphs in one *Monitor* story emphasized the Eisenhower administration's belief that the arms shipment "was disturbing,"<sup>99</sup> the report gave considerable space to the views of Latin American leaders. Wrote the *Monitor*:

Furthermore, the Latin Americans are not overly exercised about the threat of communism to the hemisphere. They are inclined to scoff at the 'threat' which the 3,000,000 citizens of Guatemala represent to the 160,000,000 of the United States... There is a feeling among some Latin American sources in Washington that the United States has overplayed the present issue. They point out, as did the Guatemalan Embassy spokesman here, that Guatemala has the right to buy arms where it can. They also point out that the United States has refused to sell arms to the Central American republic, so where else would they turn.<sup>100</sup>



Both newspapers were prone to anti-communist rhetoric, though. In early 1954, freelance writer Flora Lewis went to Guatemala and wrote a piece for the *New York Times Magazine* that outlined the evolution of the Communist takeover of Guatemala. The story argued that Guatemalan Communists had worked secretly behind the scenes since the 1944 revolution until they successfully captured “the slogans and machinery of political power.”<sup>101</sup> Wrote Lewis: “Guatemala City is a tranquil town... It doesn’t look or sound like the one place in the Americas where devoted, angry-tongued Communists have deeply entrenched themselves. Nevertheless, it is.”<sup>102</sup>

Unlike other stories in the press, Lewis did quote Arbenz denying that his government was pro-Communist, but the overall tone of the story was that Guatemala was a Soviet beachhead in the Western Hemisphere. She noted that the government radio station “rattles away the Kremlin line,” and she accused the government’s newspaper of echoing “Moscow’s tirades against American imperialism.”<sup>103</sup>

Other *Times*’ writers also focused on the threats of communism within the Arbenz regime. Reporter C.H. Calhoun focused on the threat early in the Arbenz administration, writing that the Communists “appear to have consolidated their positions and increased their power in the ten weeks since Col. Jacobo Arbenz Guzman became Chief Executive of this Central American country...”<sup>104</sup> He said that “the power of the Communists has grown at an alarming rate,” adding later that “the democracy that exists in Guatemala today is being used by the Communists to destroy it.”<sup>105</sup>

The *Times* also painted United Fruit as the victim. Even Matthews wrote in his series that the banana company was getting “a raw deal,”<sup>106</sup> while Calhoun reflected

United Fruit's contention that Arbenz was making it difficult to do business in Guatemala. Writing in 1951, Calhoun reported:

The situation has reached the point where the fruit company cannot increase further the cost of production in Guatemalan bananas and expect to break even, much less hope for any profit from any operation here.<sup>107</sup>

United Fruit also received sympathetic coverage when the Guatemalan government expropriated more than 200,000 acres of the company's land in 1953. The *Times* ran a three-paragraph story that only told United Fruit's side of the story. It pointed out that United Fruit lost its appeal to the Guatemalan supreme court, and it covered the company's contention that the land was worth more than the \$600,000 in bonds offered by the government. Wrote the *Times*:

While compensation is based on the actual declared value of the property for taxation purposes, the company offered documents supporting its statement that on different occasions it had endeavored to increase the value of its properties but had always been hindered by the authorities.<sup>108</sup>

Meanwhile, no government officials were quoted. Nor is the supreme court's reasoning for its decision given. Readers didn't know when United Fruit tried to increase the value of its property or why authorities may have rejected the offer.<sup>109</sup>

When United Fruit was accused of seeking to overthrow the government—a charge that turned out to be true—the *Times* undermined the credibility of the source of the accusation. For example, in one instance, the newspaper wrote: “Congressman Victor M. Gutierrez, a recent visitor to Moscow, accused the fruit company ... of financing a local anti-Communist campaign to overthrow the Arbenz Government.”<sup>110</sup> By reporting that Gutierrez was a “recent visitor to Moscow,” the *Times* seemed to tell readers that his comments should be read with skepticism.

The land reform bill was also covered as a Communist action rather than as an attempt by an impoverished nation to gain its economic independence. When Guatemala first passed agrarian reform, the *Times* wrote: “Congress passed and sent to President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman today a Communist-backed land reform bill.”<sup>111</sup> Since there were only four Communists in the fifty-eight member National Assembly,<sup>112</sup> the bill had to have been supported by many other groups. Yet by focusing on the Communist support of the bill, the *Times* placed the emphasis on the possible threat to the United States.

An underlying theme in the *Monitor*’s coverage was that the communist movement in Guatemala was something to watch closely. For example, the paper wrote that the “Communists, unfortunately, have produced the most forceful leader.”<sup>113</sup> On at least two occasions, it referred to agrarian reform as “not a Communist law” but one that had been used by Communists “for their own political ends.”<sup>114</sup>

The newspaper also gave considerable coverage to charges levied by Reps. John W. McCormack (D) and Joseph W. Martin, Jr., (R), both from United Fruit’s home state of Massachusetts. The newspaper quoted McCormack saying that he had learned from an unnamed but “‘unimpeachable’ source” that the “penetration of Guatemala by Soviet Communism had developed into ‘a position of great peril.’”<sup>115</sup> Wrote the *Monitor*: “[McCormack] characterized it as a ‘full-fledged Soviet beachhead’ on ‘our flank.’” The story gave only three paragraphs to a Guatemalan official who said that “we have some Communists but we are no worse off than any other country.” The rest of the article suggested that “evidence of pro-Communist tendencies in the Guatemalan government are not hard to find.”<sup>116</sup>

Even in the *Monitor*'s four-part series mentioned earlier, the paper seemed to adopt without question the State Department's contention that while Arbenz was not himself a Communist, he was pro-Communist. According to one article:

...A disturbing amount of evidence exists that gives substance to frequent charges that Guatemala is 'Communist dominated...' There is no doubt that communism has more power and influence in Guatemala today than in any other country in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>117</sup>

By the time the coup was underway, the *Monitor* bought the line that Guatemala was controlled by Communists. As the battle raged in Central America, the *Monitor* referred to the invasion as having "righteous" motives.<sup>118</sup> When Arbenz resigned, the newspaper referred to the coup as "the first anti-Communist 'war' in the Western Hemisphere," and characterized the overthrow as a success for the United States.<sup>119</sup>

### Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the conventional wisdom about the 1954 coup in Guatemala is that the press helped create an atmosphere that made it easy for the American public to accept the overthrow of the Arbenz government. Initially, some journalists complained that the press was simply "ill informed," but more recent arguments contend that journalists were intentionally manipulated by United Fruit and the U.S. State Department into believing that Arbenz was sympathetic to the Communists in his country. This study generally supports the argument that news coverage painted Arbenz in a negative light, but it also suggests that coverage of 1950s Guatemala was not as clearly biased as some critics imply.

There is no question that *Time* and *U.S. News* were biased against the Arbenz government. The stories in both magazines clearly favored United Fruit while casting the Guatemalan president as a Soviet puppet. Both publications reflected the Cold War

viewpoint of the Eisenhower administration and concluded that Arbenz was pro-Communist and a threat to the United States.

The reports in the *New York Times* and *Christian Science Monitor* were much more nuanced, however, and varied depending on which correspondent was writing the story. In some cases—such as the series of stories written by Matthews of the *Times* and Hallett of the *Monitor*—the two newspapers made strong attempts to present Guatemala in a broader historical light. Both challenged the simple argument that because Arbenz was taking action against American corporate interests in the region he must be a Communist sympathizer.

The newspapers also tried to calm fears that communism was knocking at America's doorstep, as Matthews did when he wrote that Communists did not control Guatemala. Both newspapers also provided Arbenz's version of what was happening in Guatemala, while the *Monitor* was particularly good at explaining how leaders throughout Latin America viewed the events in Guatemala. In many ways, this type of reporting was remarkable, given that the newspapers were covering this story at a time when Sen. Joseph McCarthy was on a witch hunt for Communists at home, the United States was fighting a war against communism on the Korean peninsula, and America was in the early stages of a Cold War with the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the newspapers, like the magazines, were also prone to characterizing the situation in Guatemala as a classic Cold War story pitting the United States against world communism. Stories by Lewis and Calhoun, both of the *Times*, took this angle, while Hallett of the *Monitor* seemed to buy into the communist story line by the time Arbenz was overthrown. It is hard to ascertain whether this was the result of

United Fruit's PR campaign, the Eisenhower administration's fear mongering, or the era in which the stories were written.

Whether anything would have been different had reporters seriously challenged U.S. foreign policy in the region is anyone's guess. One thing is certain, though. The American-backed coup that overthrew Arbenz had serious ramifications for the people of Guatemala. Over the next 36 years, the country would be thrust into a brutal civil war that would leave an estimated 200,000 people dead.<sup>120</sup>

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Nicholas Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert J. Alexander, *Communism in Latin America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 362-363.
- <sup>3</sup> See Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, Expanded Edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1999).
- <sup>4</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, *The Cuban Story* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1961), 124.
- <sup>5</sup> Richard H. Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," *Political Science Quarterly* 95 (Winter 1980 – 1981): 649.
- <sup>6</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 79-97.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25; Ronald M. Schneider, *Communism in Guatemala, 1944-1954* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1959), 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 28-29; Schneider, *Communism in Guatemala*, 2, 5-6.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1982), 27-28, 30.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>11</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 66, 75.
- <sup>12</sup> Adam Jones, "President Lends an Ear for Banana Battle," *The Times (London)*, 24 January 2001, Business Section; Anthony DePalma, "Citing European Banana Quotas, Chiquita Says Bankruptcy Looms," *New York Times*, 17 January 2001, A1.
- <sup>13</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 70.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71, 75.
- <sup>15</sup> Edward Bernays, *Biography of an Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 745.
- <sup>16</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 70.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-31, 35.
- <sup>18</sup> Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," 633; Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 61.
- <sup>19</sup> Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," 632-633.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 633.
- <sup>21</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 53.
- <sup>22</sup> Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," 634.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*; John Gillin and K.H. Silvert, "Ambiguities in Guatemala," *Foreign Affairs* 34 (April 1956): 474.
- <sup>24</sup> Chester J. Pach, Jr., and Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, Revised Edition (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 91.
- <sup>25</sup> Large landowners could avoid expropriation all together as long as they cultivated two-thirds of their land.
- <sup>26</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 54-55.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76; "United Fruit Loses Expropriation Plea," *New York Times*, 20 March 1953, 47; "Guatemala Rejects United Fruit Claim," *New York Times*, 27 April 1954, 22.
- <sup>28</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 76.
- <sup>29</sup> Pach and Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 91.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*; Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 76.
- <sup>31</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 75-77; Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," 637.
- <sup>32</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 80-81.
- <sup>33</sup> Bernays, *Biography of an Idea*, 758-759.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 86.
- <sup>36</sup> Thomas P. McCann, *An American Company: The Tragedy of United Fruit* ed. Henry Scammell (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1976), 46-47.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-49.

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- <sup>38</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 87.
- <sup>39</sup> McCann, *An American Company*, 47.
- <sup>40</sup> Bernays, *Biography of an Idea*, 761.
- <sup>41</sup> McCann, *An American Company*, 47.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 47.
- <sup>43</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 84, 88.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.
- <sup>45</sup> McCann, *An American Company*, 49.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> Associated Press, "Guatemala Revolt On, Attacks Launched By Anti-Reds From Land, Sea and Air: Planes Raid Capital and Oil Center: Invaders Attack From Honduras," *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 June 1954, 1.
- <sup>50</sup> Tad Szulc, "U.S. and ITT in Chile: Making Mischief Abroad," *The New Republic*, 30 June 1973, 21.
- <sup>51</sup> Immerman, "Guatemala as Cold War History," 634-636.
- <sup>52</sup> NIE 84, "Probable Developments in Guatemala," 19 May 1953, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, 4: 1061.
- <sup>53</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963), 422.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 424. Pach and Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 91. Pach and Richardson argue that Guatemala was forced to turn to Czechoslovakia for weapons because the U.S. government and its European allies had placed a weapons embargo on Guatemala in 1950.
- <sup>55</sup> Pach and Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 92.
- <sup>56</sup> Associated Press, "Guatemala Revolt On, Attacks Launched By Anti-Reds From Land, Sea and Air, 1; Homer Bigart, "Guatemala President Quits, Army Rules; Red Tinge Is Suspected in New Regime: Army Chief Pledges to Fight On: U.S. Diplomat Expects a Deal," *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 June 1954, 1.
- <sup>57</sup> "Communism's Footprints Get Bigger in Guatemala," *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 March 1952, 7.
- <sup>58</sup> "Practically Confiscation," *Time*, 16 March 1953, 47.
- <sup>59</sup> "The Problem of Guatemala," *Time*, 11 January 1954, 27.
- <sup>60</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, *A World in Revolution: A Newspaperman's Memoir* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 261.
- <sup>61</sup> Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 107. This book, which was written as part of the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence, points out that the U.S. government collected 150,000 documents from the Arbenz administration and found "no traces of Soviet control and substantial evidence that Guatemalan Communists acted alone, without support or guidance from outside the country."
- <sup>62</sup> "The Price of Caviar," *Time*, 11 February 1952, 39.
- <sup>63</sup> "Terror at Home," *Time*, 14 June 1954, 39.
- <sup>64</sup> "Under Western Eyes," *Time*, 23 July 1951, 26.
- <sup>65</sup> "Terror at Home," 39.
- <sup>66</sup> "The Price of Caviar," 39.
- <sup>67</sup> "Red Plan for War in Americas: From Argentina to Mexico, Communists Get Set," *U.S. News and World Report*, 4 June 1954, 30.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>69</sup> "When Communists Take Over: Eyewitness Reports on New Violence in Guatemala," *U.S. News and World Report*, 20 February 1953, 14.
- <sup>70</sup> "Communists Get New Toe Holds: They're Finding Soft Spots in Latin America," *U.S. News and World Report*, 16 January 1953, 30.
- <sup>71</sup> "The Reds Lose a Round," *Time*, 17 March 1952, 36.
- <sup>72</sup> "Unifruit Under Fire," *Time*, 12 November 1951, 36.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>76</sup> "Practically Confiscation," 47.
- <sup>77</sup> "Under Western Eyes," 24.



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<sup>78</sup> “When Communists Take Over,” 16. It should be noted that in *Bitter Fruit*, Schlesinger and Kinzer point out that Guatemala’s land reform movement was modeled after one in Mexico several years before.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, “Guatemalan Reds Are Strong But They Don’t Run Country: Army and Police Still Anti-Communist and Freedoms Rule—Danger Lies in Apathy,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1952, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, “United Fruit Becomes Victim Of Guatemala’s Awakening: Company is Caught in Nationalistic Drive Bursting From Century of Repression,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1952, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, “Guatemala’s Distrust of U.S. Feeds Communist Cauldron: Politically Immature People Overlook Red Dangers—Nationalism Plays Part,” *New York Times*, 27 March 1952, 15.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Matthews, “Guatemalan Reds Are Strong But They Don’t Run Country,” 4.

<sup>94</sup> Robert M. Hallett, “Analysis of Guatemala: Threat of Communist Coup Found Present,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 January 1953, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “Guatemala Rejects United Fruit Claim,” 22.

<sup>97</sup> Paul P. Kennedy, “Revolt Launched in Guatemala; Land-Air-Sea Invasion Reported; Risings Under Way in Key Cities: Bombings Charged: Minister Says Foreign Forces Join Exiles in the Assault,” *New York Times*, 19 June 1954, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>99</sup> Robert M. Hallett, “Guatemala Poses Riddle,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 May 1954, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Flora Lewis, “Communism in Guatemala: A Case History,” *New York Times Magazine*, 21 February 1954, 11.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>104</sup> C.H. Calhoun, “Guatemalan Reds Trade on Old Ills: Unionized Workers Falling Prey to Communist Lure After Years of Suppression,” *New York Times*, 5 June 1951, 6.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Matthews, “United Fruit Becomes Victim of Guatemala’s Awakening,” 5.

<sup>107</sup> C.H. Calhoun, “United Fruit Issue Vexes Guatemala,” *New York Times*, 25 October 1951, 21.

<sup>108</sup> “United Fruit Loses Expropriation Plea,” 47.

<sup>109</sup> It’s hard to believe that the government of Guatemala would reject the company’s offer to pay more taxes.

<sup>110</sup> “United Fruit Opposed: Red-Led Guatemalan Unions Back President’s Program,” *New York Times*, 7 February 1952, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Associated Press, “Guatemalans Adopt Land Reform; Communist Backed, It Splits Farms,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1952, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Pach and Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 90; Matthews, “Guatemalan Reds Are Strong But They Don’t Run Country,” 4.

<sup>113</sup> Robert M. Hallett, “Reds Stalk in Guatemala,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 January 1953, 14.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.; Robert M. Hallett, “Tension Grips Guatemala,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 February 1953, 3.

<sup>115</sup> “Communism’s Footprints Get Bigger in Guatemala,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 March 1952, 7.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Hallett, “Analysis of Guatemala,” 3.

<sup>118</sup> Robert M. Hallett, “Guatemala Issue: Red or U.S. Victory,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 June 1954, 1.

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<sup>119</sup> Robert M. Hallett, "Red Guatemala Rout Ups U.S. Obligations," *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 June 1954, 1. To the *Monitor*'s credit, the coverage did raise questions about U.S. involvement in the coup. In this same article, the newspaper reported that: "No evidence has come to light showing any direct relation between the United States and the Castillo forces. However, it would be surprising if the United States had not played some backstage part in the situation."

<sup>120</sup> Edward Hegstrom, "Guatemalan Report Says U.S. Helped Prop Up Regime," *Houston Chronicle*, 26 February 1999, 26A.