

THE PRICE OF PROGRESS
GUATEMALA AND THE UNITED STATES DURING THE ALLIANCE FOR
PROGRESS ERA

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is an examination of US-Guatemalan relations during the 1960's. At that time, the United States was promoting a major developmental program throughout Latin America: The Alliance for Progress. A "Marshall Plan for Latin America" the Alliance was meant to modernize the region by promoting democratic institutions, invigorating local economies, and expanding access to education and medical care. In Guatemala, however, anticommunist dogma prevailed over the lofty rhetoric of the Alliance for Progress. Instead of becoming the promised "showcase for democracy", Guatemala was transformed into a garrison-state engulfed in a long, violent civil war. This history will reconstruct these events and explain how even policies crafted with the best of intentions can end in tragedy.

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INTRODUCTION

Shortly after taking office in 1961, John F. Kennedy announced to the world that the United States would invest in an ambitious new partnership with the countries of Latin America: The Alliance for Progress. The program, greeted with considerable fanfare from Latin Americans, promised to develop the region's economic and political institutions as a ward against communism. Seven years later, the Deputy Chief of Mission to Guatemala, Viron Vaky, charged that the policies of the United States condoned and encouraged state terrorism. Over the course of the 1960s, the aid money that President Kennedy claimed would build schools and hospitals funded the people who burned them to the ground.

This history reconstructs how the Guatemalan state transformed during the Alliance for Progress era. On the surface, it seems paradoxical that a brutal military regime should emerge during a period when democratization and development were championed as the guiding force behind US policy in Latin America. Economic exploitation and military intervention had created perpetual crises in Guatemala by time Kennedy launched the Alliance, and his administration hoped to blunt the lure of communism with economic development programs and political reform. Despite these goals, President Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, instead facilitated the militarization of Guatemalan society. When challenged by revolutionary movements inspired by nationalism and Castro's Cuba, the idealism of the Alliance for Progress gave way to anticommunist dogma and the harsh realities of Cold War Guatemala.

The imbalance of power between the United States and Guatemala was enormous, but this did not prevent Guatemalan actors from exerting their will. In fact, this study often reveals that Guatemalan officials outmaneuvered their American counterparts and retained control over their personal and national destinies. The United States certainly exerted considerable influence over Guatemalan affairs, but most of the major decisions and events turned on the actions taken by the citizens of Guatemala. Both President Ydigoras and Defense Minister Peralta, who proved themselves to be ardent anticommunists and obvious Cold War allies, routinely rebuffed Washington's demands. Certainly, the United States, through the Alliance for Progress, contributed to the militarization of Guatemala, but it was Guatemalans, and the conflicts between them, that ultimately transformed the country from a democratic republic into a military dictatorship. Specifically, officers in the Guatemalan military routinely pursued opportunities that advanced their personal power and the influence of the armed forces as a whole. As we shall see, many Guatemalans resisted the encroachments of the military, and eventually even some American officials attempted to halt its advances. By the end of the 1960s, however, the Guatemalan officer corps prevailed and dominated national political life for nearly a quarter-century.

The Alliance for Progress often manifested the push and pull between US officials and Guatemala's political and military elite. Initially, the aims of the vast modernization project were developmental and intended to act as soft-power approach to anticommunism. The Kennedy administration, however, failed to fully appreciate local factors and constraints that prevented the Guatemalan government from taking advantage of Alliance for Progress initiatives in the early years when its programs might have been

less tied to the military.¹ When Guatemalan leaders attempted to comply with US requirements, they often faced hostility from nationalists on both the right and the left. The funds coming from the Alliance for Progress only began to pour into Guatemala in full after the military seized control of the state under the direction of Defense Minister and Head-of-State Enrique Peralta. We cannot know how a Guatemalan government ruled by civilians would have allocated the full breadth of the Alliance for Progress' resources, but Peralta's military regime ensured that the armed forces implemented these programs in a manner that reinforced its control over Guatemala. Instead of being the benevolent alternative to counterinsurgency warfare, the Alliance for Progress directly supplemented the Guatemalan military's campaigns to annihilate guerrillas and their potential supporters. As such, the transformation of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala mirrors the nation's transition to a state consumed by counterinsurgency doctrine.

The research presented here focuses on the relationship between Guatemala and the United States during the Alliance for Progress era, but it is also part of a much larger Cold War history. The global confrontation between the US and USSR drew impacted nearly every country on the planet, and Guatemala became one of the major battlefields in the contest between capitalism and communism. Both Guatemalan and American officials made decisions with the wider context of the Cold War. Moscow never appeared as a significant actor in the relations between Guatemala and the United States, but the

¹ For example, in order to receive the bulk of loans and aid packages, the Kennedy administration required the Guatemalan government pass tax reforms. President Ydigoras attempted to pass minor tax reforms and was met with fierce opposition from conservatives, who would have been his natural political allies. As a result, Ydigoras became increasingly isolated and faced a proliferation of coup plots. This topic is covered extensively in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

Central American republic's support for the US prosecution of the Cold War was important to American officials and the presidential administrations they served. Most, if not all, US policymakers viewed Guatemala as a necessary ally within its sphere of influence. This study reveals that a major fault in US assessments of the situation in Guatemala often resulted from US officials ignoring crucial local factors while being overly preoccupied with regional, hemispheric, and even global concerns. Making use of US paranoia over communism, Guatemalan officials and military personnel often exaggerated the links between native dissidence and guerrilla activity and international communism. Busy looking for connections between Castro and the Guatemalan oppositionists, the leaders of both countries failed to address the country's national problems and instead blamed the insidious influence of international communism. The United States would make similar miscalculations in other Cold War hotspots throughout the globe.

This is not to say, however, the intricacies of Cold War international intrigue were not in play in Guatemala during the 1960s. Guatemalans and Americans may have exaggerated the magnitude of infiltration by agents of communism, but they were indeed present. In particular, Castro's promise to export the Cuban Revolution to the rest of Latin America was put into practice in Guatemala. Cuba overtly and covertly supported various guerrilla movements in Guatemala, and some of the most prominent leaders of the insurgency trained in Cuba. The impact of the Cuban Revolution on American and Guatemalan perspectives cannot be overstated. Direct material support from Castro, however, did not match the fevered estimates of some US officials whose own preconceived notions regarding Cuban infiltration were often amplified by conservative

Guatemalan politicians and military officers seeking increased aid and influence by stoking anticommunist paranoia. The full complexity of the Cold War—global, regional, and local—all had significant bearing on US-Guatemalan relations during the Alliance for Progress.

The inspiration for this research originates from a chronological and historiographical gap in our understanding of the Cold War and US-Guatemalan relations. Scholars have generally failed to explore this critical period of Guatemala's history, favoring the watershed moments of the CIA's 1954 coup and the Maya genocide of the 1980s.² Some scholars have briefly covered this period as part of a broader project on Guatemala, Latin America, or Cold War foreign policy.³ Despite its many dramatic episodes and crucial events, the 1960s is essentially a lost decade. This study helps to bridge that gap. It endeavors to be part of the essential connective tissue between the coup and the genocide, while suggesting that this period was as critical to shaping the history of US-Guatemalan relations as those two, better-known catastrophic upheavals. Specifically, the evidence presented here argues that the decisions made by President

² For examples of the former see: Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999); Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1982); Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991). For the latter see: Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala Under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010); Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*. (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)

³ For examples see: George Black, *Garrison Guatemala*. (London, Zed Books Ltd., 1984); Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*. (Toronto, Between the Lines Press, 1984); Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1991); Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), Stephen Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution: The United States and Guatemala, 1954-1961*. (Athens, Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000).

Kennedy supported the irrevocable step in the Guatemalan military's takeover of the state.

A major ambition of this research is to show that this understudied period of US-Guatemalan relations is essential for assessing how the Cold War impacted Guatemala. We cannot understand the genocide committed by the military-regimes during the 1980s without uncovering how this state-driven killing machine was created. Guatemalan politics had long been fraught with violence, but these confrontations were largely between elites vying for power. Indiscriminate massacres, especially against indigenous peoples, also have a long and storied past in Guatemala. The scorched-earth tactics that the Guatemalan military applied across wide regions of the country during the counterinsurgency campaigns of the 1960s marked a significant shift in how the state dispensed violence, suffering, and death to achieve its goals. Moreover, this approach produced results; the counterinsurgency campaign broke and scattered the armed opposition groups by the end of the 1960s. The apparent success of exterminationist practices encouraged subsequent military regimes to indulge in death-squads, indiscriminate massacres, forced disappearance, and public mutilation when the insurgency regrouped and returned in the late 1970s. Familiar with the efficacy of wholesale slaughter, in the 1980s the Guatemalan military made the short leap to genocide when General-Presidents Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt attempted to annihilate guerrillas by wiping out any village that could offer them support. The military's seizure of power and counterinsurgency campaigns of the 1960s, both supported by the United States, were some of the first, and most crucial steps along the path to genocide.

During the 1960s, political and military elites from the United States and Guatemala oversaw the seizure of state power by the armed forces in Central America's largest country. Other options presented themselves, but Washington officials, under the direction of two professed progressive presidencies, routinely chose to rely on Guatemalan military officers to achieve US policy objectives. For their part, Guatemalan officers made themselves the most viable partner for the United States by labeling dissenters as communists and neutralizing political contenders not beholden to the military. As a result, the Guatemalan security forces received the lion's share of funding meant for improving the standards of living. In turn, high-ranking officers used these programs to permeate Guatemalan civil society with the military's presence and wage a war of extermination against a rebellion that had originated from within their own ranks. Capitalizing on their unchecked control over the state and a bounty of foreign aid, Guatemala's military leaders began to acquire wealth and social standing that outstripped the oligarchs their institution had been created to protect. As the clique of ruling officers systematically eliminated all other forms of political competition, the United States found it had little choice but to maintain its alliance with the increasingly violent military dictatorship that it had helped establish. By the end of the Alliance for Progress in 1969, Guatemala had become a counterinsurgency state – a nation whose government institutions are consumed by the overriding goal of eliminating armed resistance and political dissidence. The importance of maintaining US dominance in the Western Hemisphere far outweighed the professed ambitions of the Alliance for Progress' creators. This fear of potential communist subversion, and the economic and political consequences it could bring about, resulted in a disastrous inversion of the stated

intentions of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala. Simply put, when developmentalists' modernization schemes did not immediately inoculate Guatemala from the spread of communism, Washington quickly defaulted to supporting repressive militarism.

Two moments in Guatemalan politics anchor this study of the inevitable clash between conflicting approaches to foreign relations: the overthrow of President Miguel Ydigoras in 1963 and the 1966 election and presidency of Julio César Méndez Montenegro. President Kennedy earned the admiration of millions of Latin Americans by creating the Alliance for Progress, but despite the soaring rhetoric of change, his administration rarely delivered on its promises in Guatemala. The Kennedy administration undermined Alliance for Progress principles of self-determination and democracy by permitting the Guatemalan military, under the direction of Defense Minister Enrique Peralta, to overthrow the duly elected president, Miguel Ydigoras, in order to prevent a reformist candidate, former president Juan Jose Arévalo, from running for office. Threatened by the example of Castro's Cuba, Kennedy and his administration equated nationalist reform with communist revolution in Guatemala. Moreover, during Kennedy's tenure in office, the United States empowered leaders within the Guatemalan Armed Forces with foreign aid, arms, and extensive counterinsurgency training. Guatemalan military officers used these resources, in the name of anticommunism, to consolidate their stranglehold over state. While we will never know how Arévalo's return to office would have affected Guatemala, the results of the coup are clear – military rule, mass-murder, and nearly four decades of civil war.

President Kennedy was assassinated nine months after Peralta's coup, and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, inherited an unenviable situation in Guatemala. The factionalized, communist guerrilla groups that had once been a minor nuisance to the Guatemalan government grew dramatically after the military takeover and formed a united front capable of challenging security forces. When the military finally agreed to permit elections in 1966, President Johnson hoped to facilitate the return of democracy to Guatemala. Critics and scholars have charged that the Johnson administration was responsible for decline of the Alliance for Progress because it narrowly focused on commercial development instead of social and political reform. His administration's record in Guatemala, however, complicates this characterization. During Johnson's tenure, Guatemalans elected Julio César Méndez Montenegro, the leader of the *Partido Revolucionario* who ran on a reformist platform, to the presidency. By the end of the decade, the military had crippled the communist insurgency and the Guatemalan economy had expanded and diversified.

Despite these nominal successes, this study shows that little could be done to reverse the decisive gains already made by Guatemala's military elite during Kennedy's time in office. Military leaders forced President Méndez Montenegro to grant total autonomy to the Guatemalan Armed Forces and used the façade of a civilian government to obscure their control over the state. This failure of electoral politics left many Guatemalans disillusioned with democracy and violently polarized political life. Under Johnson, the Alliance for Progress had succeeded in making Guatemala more attractive for private investment and the economy grew, but most Guatemalans remained impoverished. Many of Guatemala's military leaders, however, formed lucrative

partnerships with the US government and corporations. They protected their new position at the top of the social hierarchy with armed forces trained and equipped by the United States. By the end of decade, the upper echelons of the Guatemalan military, glutted on US aid, emerged as a distinct socio-economic class that exercised de facto rule over the country.

The Guatemalan military's counterinsurgency tactics of terror, torture, and massacre stymied the guerrilla operations by 1967. The perceived success of these operations legitimized the use of state-terror in the eyes of the Guatemalan high-command. The generals who ruled Guatemala following the Alliance for Progress era continued to make use of these nefarious practices to maintain their shaky rule, most notoriously during the Maya Genocide of the 1980s. Despite the ruthlessness of the Guatemalan military, it failed to completely eliminate the revolutionary movement or provide real security. Even after incurring heavy losses, guerrilla fighters assassinated several important US personnel including the head of the US military attaché, Ernest Munro, and Ambassador John Gordon Mein in 1968. It was the final year of the Alliance for Progress.

This study reconstructs the gradual development of the Guatemalan counterinsurgency state during the Alliance for Progress era. As such, the events it depicts are predominately presented chronologically instead of thematically. This methodology serves two purposes. First, a chronological presentation is better suited to show the evolving partnership between the United States and the leaders of the Guatemalan officer corps. The intertwined causes and effects of US policymaking and

Guatemalan politics are more comprehensible when events unfold in their historical order. Second, because the existing literature on US-Guatemalan relations during the Alliance for Progress era is scant, developing a clear, detailed reconstruction of the sequence of events is a necessary initial exploration of this poorly understood period. This study pauses to provide selective analysis on many key issues, but its major focus, and contribution to the field, is presenting an in-depth account that relays the complexity of Cold War diplomacy, incorporates the diverse perspectives of dozens of historical actors, and fills some of the holes in the existing body of scholarship.

Crafting a narrative that attempts to explain the relationship between two entities as large and complex as nation-states is a complicated task that requires significant curation. Thousands of government officials from both countries toiled daily in order for these enormous political collectives to conduct something akin to communication and transaction. Millions more were affected by their actions. This study regularly relies on accounts and documents supplied by individuals at the highest levels of power: ambassadors, presidents, generals, and rebel commanders. The records that they left behind, housed in archives and special collections, preserve only a narrow slice of the historical memory of these vast enterprises. Nonetheless, these individuals acted as focal points for the leviathan institutions they represented. Many of the primary documents used to stitch together this narrative come from various archives of the United States government, the personal papers or writings of Guatemalans, and newspapers from both countries. The voices this study privileges represent the organizations and individuals that left behind the most robust records in order to reconstruct this understudied period

broadly, but with sufficient detail to convey the intricacies of international relations. These sources, however, have their own issues of bias and reliability.

Documents housed in numerous collections and libraries of the US National Archive system provide the bulk of the primary source material that this research has relied upon. The exchanges between Washington and the US embassy in Guatemala proved a particularly rich source of information. The relatively terse and dry “cable-speak” presents the appearance of hard facts, but confusion, bias, and manipulation often seep into the dispatches and memos of these organizations. Basic information provided by these sources—dates, names, summaries of events and meetings—is typically corroborated by other supporting documents that can be found in the archives, but were not necessarily cited. Alternatively, in some instances, other scholars have used the source in their own works, and this has served as a basis of verification. This study attempts to alert the reader when the information presented in one of these archival sources cannot be corroborated, reflects an opinion, or is otherwise suspect. Occasionally, the Guatemalan and American actors reveal personal biases, manipulate facts, or outright lie to achieve a certain end. In these instances, the present study highlights these individuals’ words and actions to clarify the situation and analyze their intentions. Sometimes there are contradictions between individuals accounts in memoirs or interviews and the exchanges recorded in the documents. In other cases, false-impressions, manipulations, and fabrications are plainly obvious, some to the point of being corrected by other individuals in conversation with the questionable source. As much as is possible, this study identifies when a document is particularly problematic, but

the reader should be aware that these records, and the individuals who composed them, are as capable of error and falsehood as any historical actor.

The varying sources this study relies on to construct Guatemalan perspectives also present challenges. The present research makes use of newspaper clippings, personal writings, military and governmental publications, and political pamphlets, manifestos, and fliers. Many of these sources are politically charged and have a definite agenda. For example, President Ydigoras' memoirs routinely stake claims that, with the benefit of decades of research and declassification of documents, are demonstrably false. In most cases, they are an attempt to blame Fidel Castro for the problems faced by his administration. Other material, like the internal circulars of the Guatemalan military preserved at CIRMA, display a blatant bias and enthusiastically champion the actions of the Guatemalan Armed Forces.⁴ The collection of political street-propaganda housed in the Benson Collection of UT Austin's Latin America library also promote partisan agendas of the party that has issued them. Guatemalan newspapers, the most varied and journalistic material this study makes use of, also reflect the biases of the publications writers and editors. Despite these hurdles, which are inherent in all primary sources, the research presented here extracts useful information from these materials. In tandem with the governmental documents provided by US archives, these Guatemalan sources help corroborate, complicate, or contradict the accounts provided by both sides. Where there is consensus, the information gleaned from these sources is presented as fact. Where there is contradiction, this study makes note and attempts to explain the causes of the discrepancy.

⁴ These circulars, titled "*Ejercito*" even published opinion pieces written by officers that challenge negative press from Guatemalan newspapers.

Perhaps the most significant weakness of the vast majority of the data utilized in this study is that it largely reflects the opinions and observations of the political and military elites of both countries. As a study of US-Guatemalan foreign relations, this project has followed a traditional trajectory of relying on records of policymakers, military officers, and business leaders. Even the guerrilla fighters are represented by the movement's leaders, who were almost entirely drawn from the urban, middle and upper classes, and the officer corps. This effectively omits a large segment of the population of both the United States and Guatemala. In the case of the former, the average American citizen likely did not give much thought to the plight of Guatemalans, and when they did it probably reflected their concerns about the broader Cold War and the potential threat of communism in the Western Hemisphere. For the common people of Guatemala, particularly indigenous groups, the impact of the decisions made by the elites featured in this study was much more direct. These Guatemalans certainly played important roles in their country's Cold War struggle, and we will see them mobilized to support organizations across the political spectrum. Their own experiences and motivations, however, largely fall outside of the scope and capabilities of this dissertation. Nonetheless, the conflicts and collaborations between the diplomatic, economic, and military elites of the United States and Guatemala that are the core of this research provide a narrative that is essential to understanding the complex relationship between Guatemala and the United States in the Cold War.

The two sprawling organizations that largely occupy the focus of this study are the foreign policy apparatus of the United States and the Guatemalan Armed Forces. Individuals who controlled or wielded considerable influence over these state organs

drive the narrative of this work. For the United States, the most significant contributor is the State Department, but the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, and the Executive Branch all play important roles in US policymaking. Unless specifically noted, this study refers to this broad coalition of foreign policy institutions under the simplified heading of “the United States government” and their emissaries as “US officials.” Similarly, the Guatemalan Armed Forces, although dominated by the Army service branch, incorporates the Air Force, Navy, *Guardia de Honor*, the Ministry of Defense, and intelligence agencies. The term “military” or “armed forces” is applied here when referring to these distinct entities as a collective. Within this general term, it is typically the officer class that is being discussed in this study. Enlisted men, being drawn largely from the indigenous population, often lacked literacy in Spanish, were subjected to racial bias, and were generally excluded from national political intrigue. The phrase “security forces” is used to describe the conjoined efforts of the military with national and regional police forces, which appears more frequently after 1963. These choices reflect the terms used in existing scholarship on the topic of US-Guatemalan relations.

Although the struggle of the revolutionary movements occupies a good deal of scholarship on Cold War Guatemala, a few authors have endeavored to penetrate the inner-workings of Central America’s largest, most powerful military. Many of these publications attempt to explain the genocidal campaign against the Maya by tracing the history and development of the Guatemalan Armed Forces.⁵ Most of these scholars owe a

⁵ For an example that explores the military’s Cold War history and the rise of military officers within the social hierarchy see: Black, *Garrison Guatemala*.; For an account that incorporates all of Guatemala’s national history and concludes that the genocide was a modern manifestation of military massacres designed to prevent or crush indigenous rebellions see: Handy, *Gift of the Devil*.; Schirmer’s *Guatemalan Military Project* provides the most detailed and comprehensive English-language evaluation of the structure and tactics of the Guatemalan Armed Forces during the 1970s and early 1980s.

good deal to the work of Richard Adams in *Crucifixion by Power*. The collection of essays is a towering achievement in analyzing the structures of Guatemalan society from 1944-1966.⁶ *Crucifixion* examines the breadth of Guatemalan social institutions, but its contribution to understanding the development of Guatemala's military, particularly the officer class, remains the bedrock upon which all subsequent studies have been built.

Adams describes three major characteristics the Guatemalan Armed Forces have developed over the twentieth century: professionalization, incorporation, and a proclivity towards national politics. Originally a praetorian force designed to maintain the power and wealth of the landowning elite, the Guatemalan Army transitioned to a national, professional military following the introduction of the country's preeminent military academy *Escuela Politécnica* in 1873. In addition to fostering cohesion among the regional garrisons under a unified training program, the instructors at *Escuela Politécnica* encouraged the professionalization of the military career.⁷ Adams specifies that "professionalization" here means that the individual has dedicated their life to the military vocation, and should not be confused with apolitical connotations sometimes associated with the term.⁸ Despite being considered a lifelong commitment, Adams remarks that as of 1966, all Guatemalan officers understood that their base salary provide insufficient means for respectable living. This forced most officers to seek out other

⁶ It should be noted that there has been some pushback against Adams work as being apologist for the Guatemalan military government and the United States relationship with it. Susanne Jonas (formerly Bodenheimer) published a particularly scathing critique, which she later reversed and described her negative review as "misconceived". See Susanne Bodenheimer, "Crucifixion by Adams" *Berkley Journal of Sociology*. Volume 16, (1971-1972). Pp 60-74; and Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*. Page 71, note 1.

⁷ Originally, many of the officers who ran the academy were Spanish military men. Officers from the United States frequently held positions, including the highest offices, during the twentieth century.

⁸ Richard Adams, *Crucifixion by Power: Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944-1966* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970) 239.

means of financial gain. Adams identifies two major avenues Guatemalan officers used to supplement their income. An officer could seek out a government or military position with a *sobresueldo*, a special stipend attached to highly coveted jobs.⁹ Obtaining such a position often relies on political affiliation and personal contacts. The other means of increasing an officer's income is private enterprise—ranging from selling off commissary supplies to owning land. These two methods are not mutually exclusive, and officers often used political connections or their position in government to obtain capital and vice versa. That military officers needed to seek outside income would seem to work against the development of professionalization, but the corporatist nature of the Guatemalan military along with a concentrated effort towards developing internal solidarity and loyalty to the Armed Forces as an institution helped to mitigate the poor pay.

Adams portrays the Guatemalan officer corps as a corporate group that “encourages its members to seek their rewards almost entirely from within the establishment.”¹⁰ Officers enjoyed a number of benefits including reduced prices for food, appliances, imports, liquor, housing, and even land. They could more easily afford these purchases because of access to the *Fondo de Previsión Militar*, a credit union exclusively for military personnel. An active-duty officer and his extended family received free healthcare services. Capable young Guatemalans were lured to *Escuela Politécnica* with the promise of free tuition in exchange for six years of service. Retired officers had opportunities to take courses in public administration, many assuming regional and ministry positions after leaving the service. In addition to these material

⁹ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*.240.

¹⁰ Ibid. 244.

perquisites, Adams highlights that the military was extremely reluctant to ostracize or punish its own members for misconduct.¹¹ The present study discusses several examples of the unwillingness of the high-command to rebuke disobedient officers, even in cases of outright rebellion.

Despite the martial comradery that these structures engendered, Adams admits that factionalism was a major internal issue that arose from these conditions. There is no doubt that competition for prized political positions exacerbated this further, driving officers to form cliques around promising aspirants. Adams identifies three major dividing lines within the Guatemalan Armed Forces: officers and enlisted men, line officers and academy officers, and the rivalry between the Army and Air Force. The gulf between enlisted men and the officers is the widest. The rank-and-file of the Guatemalan Army were overwhelmingly conscripted from indigenous populations, whereas the majority of the officer corps were Spanish-speaking Ladinos.¹² Adams work on the Guatemalan military, like the research presented here, focuses predominately on the officer corps and, as a result, does not delve into the complexities of the cultural and racial dimensions of Guatemalan society. This is an understudied aspect of the Guatemalan military that deserves its own analysis.

Within the officer corps, Adams states that the older division between line officers and graduates of *Escuela Politécnica*, had become less important over time as the enrollment in the academy's programs became practically mandatory for career officers

¹¹ Ibid. This includes the officers that took part in the 1960 officer revolt. Those that did not flee were not punished. Even the rebels that became leaders of the insurgency, like Yon Sosa and Turcios Limia, continued to fraternize with active-duty military officers from their cohort until 1963.

¹² Adams uses a military report from 1966 to conclude that 57.13% of all members of the Guatemalan Armed Forces were indigenous. This figure includes the universally Ladino officer corps. Only 30.63% of enlisted men spoke Spanish as their first language. See Adams, 247.

by the 1960s. In its place, a rivalry between the Army and Air Force emerged, especially after the fall of the Arbenz government in 1954. Previously, army officers with flight training comprised the nascent Guatemalan Air Force, but it did not separate into a distinct branch of the military until the United States began furnishing the Guatemalan government with military aircraft after the CIA-backed coup against Arbenz.¹³ The divide between these branches grew as President Ydigoras lavished additional perquisites to Air Force members in exchange for loyalty during the 1960 officer revolt.¹⁴ This split narrowed after Ydigoras rescinded many of these bonuses and punished some officers after a faction within the Air Force unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the government in November, 1962.¹⁵ After Peralta seized power and instated a military government, internecine conflict and cliques remained within the armed forces, but the institution as a whole became much more cohesive and collaborative as they waged their US-sponsored counterinsurgency campaign.

Adams most crucial insight into the development of the Guatemalan military is that its highly competitive structure actively encouraged officers to engage in political and economic activities to enhance their standing within the relatively insulated institution. This, in turn, led the armed forces, specifically commanding officers, to what Adams terms an “assumption of regnancy”—a gradual process whereby the military took over the responsibilities of governance in Guatemala. Adams argues that the process began as early as the introduction of *Escuela Politécnica* in 1873, but officer corps made

¹³ Adams, 249

¹⁴ For example, Ydigoras promised new uniforms, equipment, increased pay, and commercial flying licenses for pilots looking for extra income. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapters 1,2, and 3 of this study.

¹⁵ See Chapter 3

incredible gains after it began to receive technical and material aid from the United States beginning in 1954.¹⁶ One of the major objectives of the present study is to locate and analyze the moment when the Guatemalan Armed Forces transitioned from regnant guardians to dictatorial rulers.¹⁷

The leaders of the Guatemalan military wielded considerable power over the country long before the Cold War, but the policies of the United States during its crusade against international communism drastically altered the potential opportunities for ambitious officers. At its core, this project is an examination of the causes and consequences of US foreign policy in Guatemala. Within the topic of the Cold War history of Latin America and the United States, and the wider field of diplomatic history, this project synthesizes a variety of perspectives in order to reconstruct and explain how the policies of the United States contributed to the transformation of Guatemala into a counterinsurgency obsessed military regime during the Alliance for Progress era.

Identifying the ideological underpinning of US foreign policy is necessary for understanding how and why historical actors made certain choices under specific circumstances. Michael Hunt's *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* earned considerable acclaim for extracting the fundamental ideological tenets from the entire diplomatic history of the United States. Hunt begins by defining ideology as "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that

¹⁶ Adams, 264

¹⁷ This topic is the focus of Chapter 3.

reality.”¹⁸ From this operational definition, Hunt presents three pillars of US ideology in foreign relations: a sense of exceptional national greatness or Manifest Destiny; a hierarchical view of race prejudiced against people of color; and an antipathy toward radical social revolution. Hunt presents these theses as a break from previous schools of thought that have dominated discourse on US foreign policy, embodied in the works of George Kennan and William Appleman Williams. For Hunt, Kennan’s zero-sum *realpolitik* put more effort into removing ideological considerations from foreign policy, for the benefit of technocratic diplomats, rather than explaining these impulses.¹⁹ On the other hand, Hunt finds Williams revisionist designation of ideology as a “tool used by the grandees of American capitalism to maintain their economic power and with it their sociopolitical control” to be “an excessively narrow conception.”²⁰ Instead, Hunt’s three essential components of US foreign policy—exceptionalism, racism, and anti-radicalism—possess greater explanatory and analytical power than those put forward by his predecessors. This study demonstrates how these principles manifested abundantly in Cold War Guatemala.

Although the present study incorporates Hunt’s interpretation, it does not outright reject economically focused theses of adherents to Williams’ revisionist interpretation diplomatic history. Specifically, the work of Walter LaFeber, a protégé of Williams, has significantly influenced this project. In his examination of US involvement in Central America, *Inevitable Revolutions*, LaFeber condemns American foreign policy in the

¹⁸ Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*. (London: Yale University Press, 1987). xi.

¹⁹ Hunt. 7,8.

²⁰ Ibid. 9,11.

region as reckless economic imperialism that created enormous tragedies. A proponent of dependency theory, LaFeber argues that the exploitative economic relationship between the United States and Central America originated in the late nineteenth century, but the threat that communism posed to US market domination amplified hegemonic aggression in the region. LaFeber's work covers all of the countries in Central America, but he looks to Guatemala as a particularly apt example to illustrate his points. Instead of recognizing the desperate conditions that caused many Guatemalans to sympathize with communist revolutionaries, the United States government regularly intervened in the country's affairs, most notoriously in the 1954 coup, in order to maintain Guatemala as a peripheral subordinate with an economy based on resource-extraction. The Alliance for Progress, in LaFeber's analysis, proved to be "the weapon to fight revolution in Latin America" instead of a project aimed at genuine reform and socioeconomic improvement.²¹ In Guatemala, this "weaponization" of the Alliance for Progress played a vital role in ongoing counterinsurgency efforts as developmental projects, and their funding, came under the control of Guatemalan military officers. The result was antithetical to the purported purpose of the Alliance for Progress, and the disparity between the wealthy and the poor grew during the 1960s.²² Moreover, LaFeber states that through its relationship with the United States, the Guatemalan Armed Forces transformed from a "rag-tag force" racked by internal conflict into a centralized, sophisticated institution capable of controlling the state.²³ The research presented here supports LaFeber's claims, but places

²¹ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. Second Edition, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993) 151.

²² LaFeber, 169.

²³ *Ibid.* 170.

less emphasis on purely economic considerations and places it alongside the three factors presented by Hunt.

LaFeber's examination of US policies in Guatemala during the Alliance for Progress era is insightful, but only fills a few subsections of a single chapter. Stephen Rabe has produced research that plunges into the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to provide scholars a more in-depth look at how these ostensibly progressive presidents adhered to the longstanding traditions of US-Latin American relations instead of making the radical changes they professed. Rabe portrays these administrations as haunted by Castro's revolution and determined to "win" the Cold War in the Western Hemisphere by stopping the spread of communist revolution at all cost. As a result, Rabe concludes, "Like Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, the president and his advisors opted for short term security that anti-Communist elites, especially military officers, could provide over the benefits of long-term political and social democracy."²⁴ The Alliance for Progress faced a variety of hurdles, but Rabe believes that it ultimately failed because of Kennedy and Johnson's reliance on covert action, overt intervention, and counterinsurgency warfare led them to "compromise and even mutilate those grand goals for the Western Hemisphere."²⁵

Guatemala features regularly in Rabe's works on US-Latin American relations. In his survey of US-Latin American Cold War relations, Guatemala serves as a key case study that exemplifies certain trends in US policy. The 1954 coup is the "Mother of

²⁴ Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). 197.

²⁵ Rabe, 199.

Interventions” that plagued Cold War Latin America.²⁶ The impoverished country was an ideal candidate in need of the economic and political reform promised by the Alliance for Progress, but instead became a prime example of how dollars meant for development instead fueled repressive military regimes. Guatemala maintained its status as an unfortunate example US policy results through the 1970s and 1980s as the military-government committed atrocities culminating in genocide. Nonetheless, because Rabe’s goal is to offer an overarching examination of US Cold War policy in Latin America, he is, understandably, not able to delve into the details of the period that this study covers for Guatemala alone. Even within Rabe’s book that focuses exclusively on the Kennedy and Johnson administration, fewer than thirty pages cover Guatemala specifically. The research presented here provides a detailed account of Guatemala’s experience during the Alliance for Progress era that supports Rabe’s argument that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations embraced aggressive, interventionist strategies to preserve hemispheric hegemony instead of adhering to the ideals of the Alliance for Progress.

The bulk of the literature that scholars have produced on the interactions between Guatemala and the United States focuses on the 1954 coup against President Jacobo Arbenz. This is for good reason: it is a defining moment where several broad historical fields overlap. In the history of the United States, the intervention in Guatemala is one of the first covert actions designed to unseat a sitting government conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency. It marks a significant new direction of US foreign policy in Latin America—a shift from Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy to the much more

²⁶ Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Chapter 3, page 36.

aggressive doctrines employed during the Cold War. For Latin American countries, especially those in the Caribbean and the Central American isthmus, American interventionism was nothing new, but the US intervention in Guatemala in 1954 was a turning point for politics in the region. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Ernesto “Che” Guevara, whose experience in Guatemala during the coup confirmed his worst assumption about the United States and set him on the course of revolution. For Guatemalan history, the 1954 coup is a paradigm shift, a nexus of the country’s history from which nearly all events, especially in the twentieth century, are related. The gravitational pull of the 1954 coup likewise locks this study within its orbit.

The most widely read English-language historical scholarship on the 1954 coup proliferated in the early 1980s, during the worst years of the Maya Genocide carried out under the military regime of General Efraín Ríos Montt. Of those works published during that period, Richard Immerman’s *The CIA in Guatemala* alongside Stephen Kinzer and Stephen Schlesinger’s *Bitter Fruit* have become the standard texts for readers in the United States. Immerman is highly critical of the 1954 coup and argues that the United States government undermined democracy and progress in Guatemala and the region by removing Arbenz from power and replacing him with a series of repressive militarists supported only by their sycophants and USAID dollars. He blames the ideological rigidity and imperialistic impulses of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations for the coup.²⁷ Published in the same year as Immerman’s work on the same topic, *Bitter Fruit* presents a slightly broader interpretation of the Guatemala’s brief revolution and the causes for its end. Whereas Immerman focuses largely on interactions between the US

²⁷ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*. 10

and Guatemalan governments, *Bitter Fruit* emphasizes the role of private corporations, especially United Fruit, in bringing a close to the Guatemalan Revolution. Kinzer and Schlesinger, in particular highlight the numerous connections between the Eisenhower administration and the United Fruit company and postulate that this created a conflict of interest at the highest levels of government when dealing with Guatemala.

These two slightly varied interpretations formed the definitive narrative of the 1954 coup until the 1990s and are still highly influential. Both accounts, however, focused extensively on the actions of American policymakers, and in doing so, exaggerated the power of that the United States had over Guatemalan affairs. This likely reflects the sources available to the authors at the time: recently declassified documents from the State Department and other US governmental bodies. Additionally, condemning the United States for its role in the 1954 coup was timely. The military dictatorship that emerged from the notorious intervention was still waging its war against communism nearly thirty years later and its exterminationist practices were unfolding before the entire world. Even as scholars produced new, more nuanced research on the 1954 coup, the works of Immerman, Schlesinger, and Kinzer remain highly relevant and regularly cited. The history presented here is an outgrowth of these two interpretations in that it agrees that Cold War ideological rigidity and economic hegemony motivated US policymakers, but the actions of Guatemalans are given more weight and consideration here than in these venerable, but unbalanced accounts.

The 1990s saw the publication of studies that deepened historical understanding of the 1954 coup and US-Guatemalan relations. Two groundbreaking works from this period demand mention: Piero Gleijeses' *Shattered Hope* and Nick Cullather's *Secret*

History. Gleijeses provides a rare commodity in his examination of the 1954 coup: an English-language narrative from the perspective of Central Americans. While most historians from the United States focus on the actions of the CIA and the State Department, Gleijeses delves into the inner workings of the Arévalo and Arbenz administrations. Gleijeses concludes that Jacobo Arbenz was not a communist, although he sympathized with their goals and associated with members of the Guatemalan Communist Party.²⁸ He also charges that the commanding officers of the Guatemalan military bear significant responsibility for the overthrow of Arbenz. They refused to crush the bumbling “liberation” army led by the incompetent CIA-stooge, Carlos Castillo Armas, and then subsequently pushed Arbenz to resign for fear of a full invasion by US marines. Gleijeses’ account upended the notion of the United States as a hemispheric titan dictating its will within its proclaimed sphere of influence and duly portrayed Guatemalans as pivotal actors within their own history. This study attempts to emulate Gleijeses’ approach by incorporating Guatemalan figures and highlighting how, despite the enormous disparities in global power between the two countries, their actions had enormous influence within the international dialogue.

Published in 1999, at the opposite end of the decade from Gleijeses’ work, Nick Cullather’s *Secret History* continued to chip away at image of the Northern Colossus’ ability to dictate policy in the Western Hemisphere. As part of the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence, Nick Cullather produced a detailed report from the Agency’s classified material that revealed, for the first time, an internal appraisal of the 1954 coup that overthrew Jacobo Arbenz. Several scholars have studied the 1954 coup, but

²⁸ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 147-148

Cullather's work is unique in that it unveils the internal communications of the CIA operation while it was underway. Of particular note is the revelation that Operation: PBSUCCESS was nearly a failure. Had the leaders of the Guatemalan military taken action against the CIA trained mercenaries in the invading "Liberacionista" army, the coup attempt would have likely failed and the Eisenhower administration would have been hopelessly embarrassed.²⁹ This information, in tandem with Gleijeses' *Shattered Hope*, provided a fuller account that demystified many aspects of the 1954 coup that still remained shrouded in the 1980s. This study's examination of the 1960s continues the work of using newly accessible information to complicate the narrative of relations between the United States and Guatemala and offer some insight into the limits of US power.

The other period that has yielded considerable research in the area of US-Guatemalan relations is the Maya Genocide. The preponderance of the Guatemalan military government's campaign of annihilation against the peasant population capable of supporting guerrillas in contested regions took place during the Rios Montt regime (March, 1982—August, 1983), but the practice of state-terror had been ongoing since the 1960s. Widespread, state-induced violence continued after Rios Montt was deposed by his Minister of Defense—another unfortunate tradition with a precedent from the 1960s—but his downfall signaled the impending end of the military's control over the state. The generals maintained their hold over Guatemala for a brief time after Rios Montt, but the crimes against humanity committed by the military during more than thirty years of direct and indirect rule had so tarnished the institution that it could no longer

²⁹ Cullather, *Secret History*. 94-99, 109-110.

government, even through extreme repression and violence. In 1986, Guatemalans elected a civilian president, the first in twenty years. While the Guatemalan Civil War continued until 1996, the genocidal campaigns of Rios Montt appear as the monstrous culmination of the partnership between the United States and the Guatemalan military that began with the overthrow of Arbenz.

Social scientists from several fields, along with journalists, have tackled the period surrounding the genocide with great care and a diversity of approaches.³⁰ Anthropologist Victoria Sanford produced one of the most critically regarded accounts of the genocide in *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (2003). Many scholars have addressed the genocide perpetrated by the Guatemalan military-government against highlands Maya during the early 1980s, but Sanford's work stands out for its outstanding research into the experiences of victims and witnesses of atrocity. In addition, Sanford simultaneously uses her involvement within the Commission for Historical Clarification, the truth commission that investigated these crimes, to prove categorically that the Guatemalan government was responsible for an overwhelming majority of the violence that plagued the country during its long civil war and that these actions constituted genocide during the Rios Montt regime. Her work dismantled the notion that the liquidation of the Maya population was a result of protracted warfare between two sides—the Guatemalan military and guerrilla fighters—and that both were to blame for the extreme civilian casualties. Instead, Sanford mobilizes the findings of the international truth commission to reveal that over ninety percent of the abuses, forced-

³⁰ Two particularly stirring accounts that somewhat fall outside the bounds of traditional academic publications are: Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala* (London: Duke University Press, 2004); Rigoberta Menchu with Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (ed.), *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. (New York: Verso, 1984).

disappearances, and executions were the work of the Guatemalan Armed Forces.³¹ The research presented here reveals that many of barbarous practices used by security forces during the genocide began during the 1960s. Moreover, many Guatemalan officers had learned these gruesome tactics from US counterinsurgency training. The success of death-squads, forced-disappearance, and other human rights abuses that debuted during the Alliance for Progress era led to the refinement and widespread integration of these tactics into Guatemalan counterinsurgency strategy. They became hallmarks of state-terror in Cold War Latin America and were key instruments in orchestrating the Maya Genocide.

Sanford's thorough research, compelling narrative, and her direct role in working for the Commission for Historical Clarification, cemented her interpretation as authoritative on the subject of the Guatemalan genocide, but some scholars saw room for debate. The anthropologist David Stoll set himself as Sanford's foil in *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Perhaps the most controversial English-language book on modern Guatemalan history, Stoll challenges the dominant narratives of the field, which he deems as overly sympathetic to the guerrilla movements.³² He sets about this task by questioning the veracity of the survivor-story of Rigoberta Menchu, an indigenous Guatemalan woman who lived through the harsh repression of the 1970s and genocidal campaigns of the early 1980s. Menchu used her story to raise awareness for the crimes against humanity perpetuated by the Guatemalan regime and gained international recognition for her efforts in 1993 when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Stoll's

³¹ Sanford, *Buried Secrets*. 252.

³² ³² David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008) 11-12.

contentious claim is that the story Menchu has put forward is a quasi-fictional amalgamation that romanticized, and in some cases fabricated, indigenous experiences in order to promote the agenda of the guerrilla movement, and later her own political aspirations. Stoll's iconoclastic study has created considerable debate within this field, and Victoria Sanford, among others, has led the charge to counter some of his more audacious arguments.

While many scholars of modern Guatemala discredit Stoll's work, he does raise some interesting questions on the problems of memory and identity, the value and power of testimonials, and the potential rise of 'sacred' forms of knowledge that are privileged, and as Stoll states, unassailable in contemporary academia.³³ The research presented here, although closely related to the Maya Genocide, does not wade into the debates between these specialists. Nor does it attempt to evaluate Stoll's controversial claims. It does, however, take into account the predominance of the 'guerrilla perspective' that exists in scholarly works that cover Guatemalan history during the Cold War.³⁴ Although this study certainly includes various oppositionist leaders within the narrative, Guatemalans that sided with the military-state receive the most attention.

Historians have also begun to engage the Guatemalan Genocide and *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit* by Virginia Garrard-Burnett stands out for providing particularly useful insights into the methods and motivations of Rios Montt's murderous regime. The majority of scholarly works on Cold War Guatemala highlight the ideological, social,

³³ Stoll, xxiv-xxv.

³⁴ The use of guerrilla testimonials and interviews in scholarship covering this period is the result of their relative abundance and availability. The records held by the Guatemalan security forces and government are often inaccessible, although recent efforts at the Central American Archives and the AHPN have allowed for greater access to information from these formerly closed-off institutions.

economic, and racial dimensions of this history. Garrard-Burnett's work adds the lens of religion to this list in her study of the regime of General Rios Montt—the dictator who evolved longstanding practices of violence and repression against indigenous people into systematic extermination. She argues that the Protestant evangelism expressed by the Rios Montt regime imbued the scorched-earth campaigns against highland Maya with a religious justification of Christian salvation against godless communism. In turn, the death-squads and regular military units pursued atrocities with zealous fervor. Additionally, Garrard-Burnett shows how Rios-Montt's Protestantism played a significant role in rebuilding the frayed alliance with the United States under Ronald Reagan after President Carter had cut economic and military aid over Guatemala's human rights abuses. While Garrard-Burnett is certainly correct in identifying the religion as a component that shifted ongoing violence in Guatemala to genocide, the research presented here reveals a decades-long process of militarization and repression that served as the foundation of the targeted mass-murder of the 1980s.

Between these two thoroughly researched moments in Guatemala and the United States shared Cold War history, there is a dearth of information and explanation. A casual observer would likely conclude that, in basic terms, the 1954 coup was a cause and the genocide its eventual effect. Over twenty-five years separates these events, however, and very little scholarship exists to help explain how they connect. A handful of scholars have carved out smaller segments of these neglected decades, usually focusing on a specific topic or event and extrapolating from that point of reference.³⁵ More often, this

³⁵ An excellent example of this is: Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Grandin uses the 1978 massacre of indigenous protestors in the village of Panzos as a vehicle for exploring dimensions and individual experiences in the Guatemalan Civil War.

transformative period is briefly described in studies that survey the full scope of the Cold War in Guatemala or Latin America.³⁶ These works have made considerable contributions to our knowledge of US-Guatemalan relations, but some crucial pieces are still missing. This study recovers some of these pieces and incorporates them into the existing body of literature to show that understanding the developments that occurred during the Alliance for Progress era is crucial for uncovering how the Guatemalan military-state came to commit genocide in the 1980s.

Stephen Streeter fills part of the chronological gap in his examination of the counterrevolutionary governments that controlled Guatemala during Eisenhower's remaining tenure in office in *Managing the Counterrevolution: The United States and Guatemala, 1954-1961*. Through his research, Streeter shows that the United States was much better at overthrowing governments than reconstituting them. Streeter argues that US attempts to restore its hegemony in Guatemala after the 1954 coup could not fully succeed because of the pervasive nationalism that the revolutionary period had instilled in the public consciousness.³⁷ As a result, the counterrevolutionary government of Castillo Armas was difficult for the United States to directly control and his successor, President Miguel Ydigoras, proved even more so. The anticommunists had seized power in Guatemala in large part thanks to the intervention of the United States, but American

³⁶ For examples of scholarship that surveys the history of Guatemala's state and military development see: George Black, *Garrison Guatemala*. (London, Zed Books Ltd., 1984); Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*. (Toronto, Between the Lines Press, 1984); Jennifer Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press: 1998. See Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.: 1970) for perspective from Latin American leftists during the 1960s and 1970s. For a comparative study of Guatemalan and El Salvadoran political violence during the Cold War see: Charles D. Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central America*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 239.

officials lacked leverage over their Guatemalan counterparts who still had to display their nationalist credentials by resisting, or even rejecting, Washington's orders. A nearly identical situation would recur in Guatemala after the Kennedy administration facilitated another military coup in 1963, a topic covered extensively in Chapter Four of this project.

Streeter's book concludes with the military uprising in 1960, where nearly a third of the officer corps rebelled against President Ydigoras for, among other things, allowing the United States to use Guatemala as a staging area for the invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. Streeter's study demonstrates that the United States' meddling produced results antithetical to policy goals: a prolonged struggle between repressive military governments and the armed leftist that opposed them. Furthermore, Streeter does the much needed work of expanding our understanding of US-Guatemalan relations beyond the 1954 coup.

Hailing from Tulane University, political scientist Roland Ebel dissects the highest levels of Guatemalan political history in his biography of President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes (1958-1963) in *Misunderstood Caudillo: Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes and the Failure of Democracy in Guatemala*. Ebel's presentation often runs counter to the prevailing characterizations of this controversial Guatemalan politician. Renowned for corruption and ineptitude, Ebel seeks to reframe the presidency of Ydigoras and highlights positive qualities that most other scholars of Guatemala rarely mention. He argues that while Ydigoras practiced authoritarian tactics and had many flaws, he was dedicated to preserving democracy in Guatemala. According to Ebel, Ydigoras' greatest ambition was to oversee a legal, peaceful transition of power from his regime to the next

through elections.³⁸ Ebel claims that Ydigoras was overthrown by the military for a number of reasons, but chief among them was his refusal to bar Juan José Arévalo from running for office. As such, Ebel postulates that the primary cause of Ydigoras' downfall was his commitment to the democratic ideal against opposition from his own military and the United States. The research presented by this study largely supports the contention that Ydigoras' unwillingness to forgo elections and attempts to adhere to the Alliance for Progress were major factors that led to his overthrow, but it does not fully echo Ebel's characterization of Ydigoras as a born-strongman who wanted to be remembered as a democratic trailblazer.

This biography of Ydigoras is a valuable asset for scholars studying US-Guatemalan relations during the early 1960s, but the extent of Ebel's praise for the regime may be somewhat problematic. Ebel admits that he was drawn to the topic because President Ydigoras' grandson was his student at Tulane University. This friendly relationship extended further over time, and former-president Ydigoras granted Ebel an audience. The two must have enjoyed each other's company, as Ebel conducted several private interviews and gained access to the personal archive of the deposed Guatemalan president.³⁹ The author's potential for bias notwithstanding, Ebel's work is one of the few studies that offers a detailed examination of Guatemalan national politics in the early 1960s.

Susanne Jonas is one of the most prolific writers on Cold War Guatemala and her work *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* represents a

³⁸ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 303-307.

³⁹ Some of these papers have been preserved in a special collection at Tulane University.

distillation of her numerous publications on the topic since the 1970s. Jonas provides an in-depth look at political developments in Guatemala from 1954 to the end of the 36 year civil war in 1996. Unlike most historians, whose focus is limited to the 1954 coup or the genocide of the early 1980s, Jonas explores the 1960s and 1970s with considerable detail. Although the Guatemalan military government and the United States are necessarily analyzed in her work, Jonas' focuses more on the actions and motivations of those who opposed the US-backed regimes.

Jonas claims that her work does not defend any particular argument or theory, but her writing makes clear that she believes "the Guatemalan counterinsurgency project can never be stabilized" because of its inability to achieve legitimacy through violence and its refusal to acknowledge that the roots of the country's social problems are widespread poverty resulting from exploitative economic practices and bigotry.⁴⁰ Perhaps more than any other single author, Jonas' decades of research is foundational to this project. She was among the first, and most vocal, scholars to characterize Guatemala as a counterinsurgency state and identifies its origins in the 1960s.⁴¹ Moreover, she argues that the United States played a decisive role in forming the Guatemalan counterinsurgency state. Jonas' work, like this study, seeks to build an explanatory bridge between the 1954 intervention and the genocide of the 1980s. Jonas' research, however, is much more thorough and comprehensive when discussing the 1970s, whereas the research presented here details developments of the preceding decade.

⁴⁰ Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*. 3, 226.

⁴¹ Ibid. 120

Jonas' work examines nearly fifty years of Guatemalan political history and offers a narrative of the country's experience in the Cold War. Compared to *Power in the Isthmus*, the sweeping political history of Central America written by James Dunkerly, Jonas' study of Guatemala is relatively small-scale. Dunkerly's opus spans from the independence movements of the 1820s to the latter years of the Cold War. Within this vast narrative that interweaves the distinct, yet related, body of nations that comprises Central America, Guatemala stands out as an example of some of the most tragic and deadly developments. Within the twenty pages Dunkerly dedicates to the Alliance for Progress era in Guatemala, he argues that the coup initiated by Defense Minister Enrique Peralta in 1963 as the "critical transition" that resulted in the Guatemalan Armed Forces control over national politics and "systematic arbitration of public affairs."⁴² He, like Jonas, describes the military-government that developed from this transition as a counterinsurgency state.⁴³ The transition that Dunkerly identifies is the core of this study, and the turning point of this transformation is covered in considerable detail in Chapter Three, and Chapters Four and Five elaborate on how the Guatemalan government became consumed by its counterinsurgency campaign.

Michael McClintock offers perhaps the most comprehensive English-language account of the collaboration between the United States and Guatemalan security forces in *The American Connection*. McClintock's work focuses on the evolution of Guatemala's police and military organizations through the twentieth century. He dedicates two chapters to the developments that occurred during the 1960s, and concludes that the

⁴² James Dunkerly, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Central America* (London, Verso, 1988). 445.

⁴³ Ibid. 458.

Alliance for Progress era saw the institutionalization of military-rule for Guatemala. Moreover, McClintock argues that the United States played a central role in this transformation of the Guatemalan state and attempted to legitimize the repressive dictatorship with flimsy justifications that the Guatemalan security forces were ideal for achieving the simultaneous goals of anticommunist counterinsurgency and economic development.⁴⁴ McClintock provides numerous detailed examples of how various entities within the United States government worked in tandem with specific officers to develop training programs, build intelligence networks, and direct Alliance for Progress funds into the hands of the military, but his presentation of the 1960s is somewhat lacking in political analysis. This is most glaring in his treatment of the events surrounding the 1963 coup that replaced the constitutional presidency of Miguel Ydigoras with the military dictatorship of Enrique Peralta. The two paragraphs McClintock dedicated to this critical moment are likely the result of a lack of available sources at the time of publication. This study has benefitted greatly from McClintock's research, and has significantly expanded upon it by providing a more politically driven narrative that compliments McClintock's predominately military-focused perspective. Moreover, this project makes use of recently declassified material to elaborate on previously unavailable information regarding the 1963 coup in order to emphasize its importance in the history of US-Guatemalan relations.

The research published by the aforementioned authors has been crucial for constructing the narrative and argument of this study. Despite the excellence of the

⁴⁴ Michael McClintock, *The American Connection: Volume II State Terror and Popular Resistance in Guatemala*. (London: Zed Books, 1985) 271.

scholarship listed, much of the history of the Alliance for Progress era in Guatemala remains uncharted. This project aims to correct this omission in the historical record by providing an in-depth examination of the period from the perspective of the Guatemalan and American political elites who participated in policymaking and international exchange. This study relies heavily on archival records to provide a detailed reconstruction of the events that occurred during the Alliance for Progress era, but it also interweaves information and analysis provided by the handful of authors who have touched on this period. The argument that the United States contributed to Guatemala's transformation into a counterinsurgency state does not originate with this project, but the research presented here provides answers as to how, when, and why this conversion came about. Furthermore, the evidence presented in this dissertations shows that Guatemalan politicians, rebels, and military officers had substantial agency and did not passively bend to the policies of the United States. It was the joint efforts of conservative military leaders and anticommunist American officials that dismantled Guatemalan democracy and replaced it with a garrison state.

Chapter One broadly surveys the history of US-Guatemalan relations through 1960. The first major exchanges between the United States and Guatemala laid the foundation for the fundamentally unbalanced relationship between the two countries. Corporations, most significantly United Fruit Company, served as virtual proxies for the United States in Guatemala and dominated the economic and political realms of their 'banana republics' through the twentieth century. This chapter includes two of the most significant events in Guatemala's history: the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944 and the Counterrevolution that began after the CIA-backed coup in 1954. The onset of the Cold

War caused Washington to view progressive politics in Latin America with antipathy and deep suspicion. As the administrations of Juan Jose Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz moved toward more revolutionary changes, the United States began to draft plans to depose the Guatemalan government. In doing so, the United States partnered with reactionary former officers of the Guatemalan military, an alliance that would deepen over time. The multi-prong attack from the United States incorporated international isolation, a state-of-the-art propaganda campaign, and an invading “liberation army” of exiles and mercenaries, but it was the leaders of the Guatemalan Armed Forces that ultimately decided to push Arbenz from office. Threatened by the prospect of losing their station in the event of a US invasion, formerly loyal members of the military high-command refused to direct their forces to aid their besieged commander in chief. The United States certainly played an important role in the 1954 coup, but the events recreated for this chapter reveal that the Guatemalan military was the final arbiter of power, even during the revolutionary period. In forcing Arbenz to resign, these supposedly loyal military officers implicitly allied themselves with the United States, and some were rewarded during the counterrevolution that followed. The role of the armed forces within the Guatemalan government increased steadily after 1954, but their power over the state remained contested. The officer corps still retained a remnant of revolutionary nationalism that chafed against US interference, evidenced by the revolt of nearly one-third of the military in 1960—an event that concludes the first chapter.

The second chapter begins the in-depth analysis of the Alliance for Progress Era. Its central purpose is to illustrate the initial impact of the Alliance for Progress on US-Guatemalan relations. The evidence explored in this chapter reveals that the Kennedy

administration looked to the Guatemalan military as the core of the state when the government of Miguel Ydigoras proved corrupt, unreliable, and destabilizing. The US ambassador appointed by Kennedy, John Bell, actively courted influential officers and advocated for increased assistance for the Guatemalan military. Moreover, the Guatemalan Armed Forces became a major conduit for developmental projects sponsored by the Alliance for Progress. These programs were largely insignificant initially, but soon proved crucial for the militarization of Guatemalan society. When country-wide protests threatened to topple the government in 1962, ambitious officers took the opportunity to amplify their power and forced President Ydigoras to replace most of his civilian cabinet with colonels. Ambassador Bell, and the Kennedy administration as a whole, encouraged this critical step in the ascendancy of the Guatemalan military. They viewed the largely conservative officer corps as Guatemala's best defense against communism in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. Even in the early, heady days of the Alliance for Progress, fear of communism overrode the promise of bringing democracy and reform to Guatemala.

The crux of this study, Chapter Three, unravels one of the most consequential, yet virtually unexplored, moments of the Cold War in Guatemala: the overthrow of President Ydigoras. In the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the prospect of the re-election of Guatemala's first revolutionary president Juan José Arévalo, solidified the alliance between Washington and conservative Guatemalan officers. Ambassador John Bell, reflecting President Kennedy's own views, made it his personal mission to prevent Arévalo from becoming president because of the belief that he might follow the same trajectory as Fidel Castro. Similarly, major figures within the Guatemalan military,

namely Defense Minister Enrique Peralta, vowed that they would never allow Arévalo to return to Guatemala. Publicly, they stated he would open the doors to communism, but the high-command feared that it would lose the considerable power it had accumulated since 1954 when it deposed Arévalo's successor, Jacobo Arbenz. In pursuit of their shared mission to stop Arévalo, the Kennedy administration and the upper echelons of the Guatemalan military resolved to cancel the presidential election. When President Ydigoras, whose presidency continued to disintegrate even after he accepted a military cabinet, routinely refused to block Arévalo from entering Guatemala or cancel elections, segments of the military began to rise up in open rebellion. Once Arévalo finally returned to Guatemala at the end of March 1963, Defense Minister Peralta dealt the final blow to the decrepit Ydigoras administration and took control of the country.

Ambassador Bell had long prepared his colleagues in the State Department for this eventuality. Despite limited protests from some members of his inner circle, President Kennedy took the advice of Ambassador Bell and consented to the 1963 coup. For the second time in less than a decade, the United States contributed to the overthrow of a duly-elected civilian government in Guatemala. This coup, however, resulted in a direct military dictatorship. From this position of unchallenged authority, Defense Minister Peralta and his fellow officers made the Guatemalan Armed Forces the de facto rulers of the country for decades to come. For his complicity in facilitating the military's seizure of power, President Kennedy bears some responsibility for the atrocities that they would soon begin to commit in the name of anticommunism.

The immediate consequences of the 1963 coup and the changes initiated under the new heads-of-state, Johnson and Peralta, occupy the narrative of Chapter Four. In

reaction to Peralta's military regime, the relatively small insurrection that began at the end of 1960 emerged as a country-wide revolutionary movement. Moreover, many of its leaders ascribed to Marxism, and some fostered close relations with Castro's Cuba. Faced with a communist guerrilla movement, US officials learned too late that Defense Minister Peralta would not blindly follow directives from Washington. Peralta's defiant streak revealed that even within its sphere of influence, the power of the United States had serious limits; doubly so for a regime who illegal seizure of power had been condoned by President Kennedy himself. Initially, Peralta was slow to respond to the guerrilla threat, causing consternation among US policymakers who feared a repeat of the Cuban Revolution in Guatemala. Peralta's military dictatorship was a far cry from the vision of democracy projected by the Alliance for Progress. When the Johnson administration inherited the presidency, its policies further distorted the stated intentions of Alliance. Hoping to fend off the growing insurgency while gaining favor with the obstinate Peralta regime, the Johnson administration increasingly directed Alliance for Progress funding into the hands of the military, often under the guise of Civic Action and public safety programs. While Peralta still did not fully embrace foreign aid initially, he eagerly swallowed up resources for the counterinsurgency apparatus his government was building with help from the United States. With a popular guerrilla movement threatening communist revolution, the Johnson administration continued along the path set by his predecessor and used the Alliance for Progress to further amplify the power of Guatemala's military leaders in order to maintain US hegemony.

Chapter Five, the final installment of this study, posits that the most significant outcome of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala was the transformation of the country

into a counterinsurgency state. Outwardly, the Johnson administration appeared to achieve some of the goals of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala. John Gordon Mein, the new ambassador to Guatemala appointed by Johnson, helped convince Defense Minister Peralta to allow free and fair democratic elections. The resulting civilian government of Julio César Méndez Montenegro, a left-leaning reformer, seemed like a perfect fit for the Alliance for Progress. He welcomed international aid and embraced the United States in combatting the insurgency. Behind the exterior of his progressive presidency, Méndez Montenegro was essentially held captive by the military high-command. Forced to sign an agreement that nullified civilian control over the military, President Méndez Montenegro's administration proved to be an effective cover for colonels committing atrocities in the renewed, US-sponsored campaign against insurgents, dissidents, and leftist politicians. During this period, the Guatemalan Armed Forces introduced horrific new tactics that would be adopted by authoritarian regimes throughout Cold War Latin America. Commanders employed death-squads, engaged in forced-disappearance, and conducted scorched-earth campaigns that turned entire communities into smoking ruins. The use of state-terror proved effective in dismantling the armed resistance, but the excessive violence meted out by security forces even alarmed some US policymakers. The military-machine the United States had helped build in Guatemala, however, could not be so easily controlled by Washington, and calls to halt illegal operations made no discernable impact on US policy or the behavior of counterinsurgency forces. When the desperate rebels began targeting and killing high-ranking US personnel, support for the murderous counterinsurgency state only increased. The assassination of Ambassador Mein served as the final keystone for ensuring that the

leaders of the Guatemalan Armed Forces would rule the country with an iron fist for decades to come. For Guatemala, the Alliance for Progress, already a tattered and disfigured inversion of its creators' original intentions, ended with a murdered American ambassador and a war-criminal colonel poised to take the Guatemalan presidency.

CHAPTER I: BAD BLOOD

The Foundations of US-Guatemalan Relations

In 1961, the same year that John F. Kennedy became the President of the United States and announced the Alliance for Progress, Juan José Arévalo published his magnum opus: *La Fábula del Tiburón y las Sardinas* (The Fable of the Shark and the Sardines). Arévalo had the honor of being Guatemala's first democratically-elected president after the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944 ended over a century of dictatorial rule. Ten years after the triumph of the revolution, a covert CIA operation forced his successor, President Jacobo Arbenz, to resign. Over forty years of US-sponsored repression, state-terror, and civil war followed. When Arévalo published his work, a mesmerizing combination of political history and allegorical fantasy, seven years had passed since the United States invoked the specter of communism to bulldoze his efforts at moderate economic and political reform. In his winding tale, the United States plays the role of the voracious shark, while vulnerable Latin American countries, particularly those in Central America and the Caribbean, are the sardines that it devours. The 1954 coup and the anticommunism crusade were merely manifestations of the same impulse that saw the United States repeatedly occupy Nicaragua, partition Panama to build a canal, and the numerous interventions that characterized US-Latin American relations since the Mexican-American War. Arévalo lamented that the American Republic, once a collection of colonial possessions, had abandoned its ideals of "individual freedom, collective well-being, and national sovereignty" and transformed into an empire driven by an insatiable

appetite for commercial expansion.⁴⁵ Willing to cause suffering on a global scale to feed its economic growth, Arévalo likened American politicians, government functionaries, and businessmen to the ancient Carthaginians who sacrificed foreign children to appease their bloodthirsty god, Moloch.⁴⁶

This chapter surveys a broad stretch of US-Guatemalan relations from its beginnings to the year that Kennedy announced the Alliance for Progress and Arévalo published his scathing critique. Spanning centuries of Guatemalan history, the information presented here relays the nature of the relationship between the Guatemalan Armed Forces and the country's government. It also traces the development of US-Guatemalan relations—from their origins through the onset of the Cold War. Establishing the Guatemalan military's role within the state before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the 1954 coup is necessary for understanding how the leaders of the armed forces advanced their institution's influence over the civilian government. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, their power continued to grow until, with the assistance of the United States, Guatemala transformed into a counterinsurgency state.

Many of the topics covered here—the rise of the United Fruit Company, the Guatemalan Revolution, and the Counterrevolution that followed the 1954 coup—enjoy a wealth of excellent scholarship, but their relation to subsequent developments in the 1960s is imperative for understanding how these processes unfolded. Additionally, because of a relatively robust body of literature covers these topics that serve as a

⁴⁵ Juan José Arévalo, *The Shark and the Sardines* (New York: Lyle Stuart Publishing, 1961) 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 251.

background to the research presented here, this chapter is largely derived from these secondary sources.

This chapter addresses why the United States intervened in Guatemala in 1954, but more importantly, it explains how. Chief among these factors is the relationship between the United States government and conservative Guatemalan military officers. The close partnership between the Guatemalan Armed Forces and the United States did not fully manifest until the 1960s, but the events portrayed here represent the early exchanges between these entities that had a major impact on the trajectory of governance in Guatemala and US policy. This legacy of interventionism, militarism, and anticommunism inspired President Kennedy's attempt to overhaul US-Latin American relations through the Alliance for Progress, but it also prevented the ambitious program from fulfilling its idyllic aspirations.

Perhaps most important of all, the research in this chapter suggests that high ranking officers advanced the power and prestige of the armed forces gradually, but implacably, well before the military assumed direct control over Guatemala. Ambitious military men had long vied for control over the presidency, but the struggle remained a conflict between elites. The onset of the Guatemalan Revolution in 1944 enhanced the abilities, and aspirations, of many commanding officers. When Guatemalan society was upended by the 1954 coup and the counterrevolution that followed, the officer corps remained largely intact and appeared as a bastion of stability and order. Conservative, anticommunist officers rose through the ranks as the United States influence over the Guatemalan Armed Forces increased. These developments were crucial steps on Guatemala path to militarization, war, and genocide.

The Backyard: Guatemala and the United States before the Revolution

The tapering isthmus of Central America has been subjected to violent political conflict for nearly as long as humans have occupied the region. The leaders of a warrior-class, from the ancient Mayan *nacoms* to the officers of the modern Guatemalan Armed Forces, have always held an important position in society. The Mayan Confederation, the first empire to lay claim to what would become Guatemala, was wracked with internecine wars between rival city-states and within rigid social hierarchies.⁴⁷ After the Spanish Conquest in 1524, power and influence overwhelmingly hinged on the individual's relationship to Iberia: Spanish *peninsulares* and their American-born progeny, *criollos*, formed the landed elite and dominated political and economic life in the colony. Spanish authorities imposed a racialized caste system in an attempt to create an ideal hierarchy, but the reality of power sharing was far more complicated. Within these *castas*, which detailed all possible permutations of racial mixing, European stock granted opportunities for social advancement, while African and indigenous heritage could condemn a person to a life of inescapable peonage. The *castas* were far from immutable and new identities emerged and coalesced over time based on regional differences. In Guatemala, the Ladino, a broad category that initially denoted a person of mixed Spanish heritage, would develop into an identity based on contrast to the majority population: *los indios*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Levensom, and Elizabeth Oglesby, eds. *The Guatemala Reader*. (London: Duke University Press, 2011) 12.

⁴⁸ Severo Martinez Pelaez. "The Ladino." *The Guatemala Reader*. (London: Duke University Press, 2011) 131-132

On the eve of Guatemalan independence, the division between indigenous and Ladino correlated along the lines of battle. Indigenous groups revolted against increased taxation and changes in status brought on by the Bourbon Reforms. While some Ladinos joined the Indian rebellions, most sided with Spain and filled the ranks of the colonial militia. In 1820, a massive Indian uprising attempted to form a regional government and crowned its leader, Atanasio Tzul, as its Indian King.⁴⁹ Though Liberal Ladinos would join the rest of Central America in declaring independence from Spain the following year, they could not abide an Indian ruler and feared militant solidarity amongst the indigenous majority. One thousand Spanish and Ladino militiamen finally quelled the uprising, but the failed attempt at indigenous governance bolstered Indian claims to municipal power against Ladinos following independence.⁵⁰

Post-independence conflicts between Conservatives and Liberals were waged between elite Ladino cliques and the largely indigenous peasants they managed to dragoon into their service. Landowners and urban bourgeoisie excluded the Maya from political participation. Liberal reforms aimed at dismantling Spanish institutions allied the Catholic Church and their Indian subjects in defense of former rights and privileges. These reforms opened the Guatemalan economy to the world market, but the lack of investment in infrastructure and development, the sharp disparity in wealth, and the incursions of foreign capital made Guatemala an export-driven backwater. The Liberal ideals of free-trade and nationalism were to propel Guatemala into modernity, but in practice, they simply maintained the status quo. Setting a pattern that would pervade

⁴⁹ Aaron Pollack. "An Indian King on the Eve of Independence." *The Guatemala Reader*. (London: Duke University Press, 2011) 104.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 106.

throughout Guatemalan history, the investments of foreign capitalists lined the pockets of the political elites who protected their privileges and status by co-opting the military through patronage.⁵¹ The resistance against these policies would spawn another common motif in the history of Guatemala: the rule of the *caudillo*.

In 1837, Rafael Carrera seized control of a growing insurrectionary movement that opposed the Liberal Guatemalan regime. A Ladino swineherd, Carrera combined the personal charisma, military acumen, and political cunning shared by many other Latin American *caudillos* and became the first of Guatemala's many dictators.⁵² Carrera and his fellow Conservatives promoted limited economic protectionism, restored some of the colonial privileges of the Catholic Church, and centralized state power. Ironically, indigenous communities gained greater benefits from nineteenth century Conservative regimes, which recognized communal landholdings and allowed greater indigenous participation in local government.⁵³ Liberals regained power in 1871 when Justo Rufino Barrios led a military revolt that began Guatemala's "Liberal Revolution."⁵⁴ Barrios exercised considerable personal power during his twelve years as president and pushed Liberal reforms that increased freedom of press, attacked the Catholic Church, and, most significantly, reoriented Guatemala's mono-export economy from cochineal dye to coffee and bananas.⁵⁵ Personal rule and *coup d'état* became staples of Guatemalan presidential

⁵¹ James Dunkerly. *Power in the Isthmus*. (New York: Verso, 1988) 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Susanne Jonas. *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*. (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991) 16.

⁵⁴ Dunkerly. *Power in the Isthmus*. 17.

⁵⁵ Paul Dosal. *Doing Business with Dictators*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1993) 32.

politics for the next century, and regardless of the president's political affiliation, power remained firmly in the hands of the landed oligarchs who best managed their relationship with the Army.

The United States began to take a more serious interest in Guatemalan affairs during this period of centralization under the *caudillos*. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States focused most of its diplomatic and economic energies on Europe. With the “closing of the frontier” at the end of the nineteenth century, the US looked to establish itself among the Great Powers and their quest for empire. Now capable of upholding the Monroe Doctrine that declared the Western Hemisphere off-limits to European empires, the United States had steadily displaced the European powers in Latin America at the turn of the twentieth-century. In Guatemala, this translated into a massive growth of US corporate investment in the country: from \$6 million in 1897 to \$47 million by 1924.⁵⁶ Some countries endured occupation under the infamous “Big Stick” gunboat diplomacy that characterized US-Latin American relations in the early twentieth century. Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti all faced major US military invasions – justified by the hemispheric policing powers claimed by the Roosevelt Corollary to Monroe’s venerable pledge to protect American republics from imperial predation. Guatemala, under the thumb of US-friendly strongmen, did not suffer the fate of neighboring Nicaragua. Nevertheless, many Guatemalan nationalists, including large segments of the army, sympathized with the legendary struggle of Augusto Sandino. Under the long reigns of Justo Barrios (1873-85) and Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) US investors came to dominate the Guatemalan economy, building railways,

⁵⁶ Stephen Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution: The United States and Guatemala, 1954-1961* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000). 8.

telegraphs, and infrastructure of major urban areas. Foreign corporations controlled nearly all modern amenities in Guatemala, and for their trouble they were granted century-long contracts and negligible tax responsibilities. Only Guatemalan presidents and their cronies could expect to benefit from these bargains and the bribes they accepted were a paltry sum compared to the enormous profits reaped by US corporations.

Militarization and corporate concessions passed for modernization in Guatemala at the turn of the century. During Manuel José Estrada Cabrera's twenty-two years in office, the Guatemalan government began its fateful partnership with the United Fruit Company (UFCo). Minor Keith, the American magnate and progenitor of UFCo, had already monopolized the construction and administration of Guatemala's railways and seaports by the time he signed an agreement with Estrada Cabrera that granted United Fruit massive tax exemptions, land concessions, and ninety-nine years of absolute commercial domination in 1904.⁵⁷ United Fruit stymied nationalist sentiments by providing Guatemala's political elites with bounteous gifts, exacerbating venality and corruption within the government. Under the *caudillos*, the military, long the protector of the oligarchy, steadily increased its power and prestige by becoming the praetorian gatekeepers to the office of the presidency in periods of succession. Successful Guatemalan leaders had literally seized the presidency since Rafael Carrera, and usually held an officer's rank in the Guatemalan Army. The rule of Guatemala's last Liberal dictator (1931-44), Jorge Ubico, marked a crescendo of social militarization, governmental corruption, and foreign economic domination.

⁵⁷ Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 67.

The quasi-fascist dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico was the most brutal and repressive regime to rule Guatemala before the country's civil war. Godson to former president Justo Rufino Barrios, an admirer of Mussolini, and beholden to the demands of U.S. corporate interests, Ubico saw Guatemala as his personal "village" and enriched himself and his followers to the detriment of key components of Guatemala's ruling class.⁵⁸ Born to a wealthy landowning family, Ubico chose military service as his vehicle into Guatemalan politics and rapidly rose to the rank of general. Ubico became the president of Guatemala in 1931 and sought authoritarian solutions for the economic and political crises that plagued Depression-Era Guatemala. He was the only candidate in the 1930 election, designed to provide the pretense of legitimacy for the will of the Guatemalan elite. Nonetheless, he came to power through a plebiscite of forced consensus, not a coup, unlike many of Guatemala's former and future military dictators.

Like his fascist idols in Europe, Ubico identified potential threats to his power as enemies that needed to be exterminated. Upon taking office, Ubico "wiped the political slate clean" by dismissing the Supreme Court, filling the legislature with presidential appointees, and purging the bureaucracy of non-*Ubiquistas*.⁵⁹ General Ubico simultaneously militarized all of Guatemalan society: school children drilled in combat exercises, army generals replaced regional governors, and even members of the national symphony orchestra were forced to wear military uniforms and perform pieces selected by the president.⁶⁰ The total concentration of state power in the dictator's hands instilled

⁵⁸ Walter Lafeber. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993) 78.

⁵⁹ Dosal. *Doing Business with Dictators*. 178.

⁶⁰ Richard H. Immerman. *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) 32.

an illusion of order in Guatemala that would be shattered by domestic and international changes that accompanied the Second World War.

Within Guatemala, President Ubico cultivated a loyal constituency outside of the traditional oligarchy in order to dilute their power and enhance his own. The prominence of the military rose to new heights during Ubico's years in office. The nepotism that characterized Ubico's government was mirrored within the military as the two institutions began to merge into an indistinguishable entity. Unquestioning obedience trumped initiative and skill and the "mindless automata" within the officer corps received better pay and greater opportunity.⁶¹ Ubico's military simultaneously reinforced racial divisions while providing the elusive promise of social mobility. The officer corps was exclusively Ladino, while most soldiers were indigenous peasants under forced conscription.⁶² Line officers, composed of lower and middle-class Ladinos, could rise through the ranks and improve their station in life. Similarly, the military attempted to imprint Ladino culture onto their indigenous conscripts. Ubico believed that military service could amend supposed Indian inferiority: "They arrive rude and brutish, but when they leave they are no longer like donkeys, they have good manners and are better equipped to face life."⁶³ Though Ubico's policies reflected the longstanding belief in Ladino supremacy, the dictator was relatively popular among the Maya population. Unlike any previous president, Ubico travelled to indigenous communities regularly and

⁶¹ Piero Gleijeses. *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 16.

⁶² Gleijeses. *Shattered Hope*. 15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

granted their leaders an audience and counsel.⁶⁴ This was a deliberate political strategy. These public appearances had the dual effect of awing these remote communities with military grandeur and shifting the blame for the hardships faced by rural peasants away from the state and onto local landowners. Ubico reconfigured the balance of power within Guatemala in order to concentrate his personal authority and weaken the oligarchy, but his most valuable ally came down from the north in its Great White Fleet.

The United Fruit Company, and through it the United States, served as Ubico's chief patron. United Fruit had a long and sordid history in Central America, and often acted as a proxy for the US government. In Guatemala, UFCo possessed the majority of the arable land, which it used almost exclusively for the production of bananas. The company liked to boast that its Guatemalan workers were among the best paid agricultural laborers in the country, but this disguised the fact that the wages they offered were not significant enough to maintain the lives of their workers beyond the level of subsistence. United Fruit crushed any attempt at collective organization among their workers, and encouraged regimes that used repressive measures to control the workforce. While they can be credited with developing roads, rail, and electrical infrastructure in Guatemala and other Central American countries, these assets remained tightly controlled by the company and designed to move their products to port as soon as possible. The executives at United Fruit gave little, if any, thought to how these infrastructure projects could meet the domestic needs of Guatemalans. Throughout Central America, United Fruit Company did not hesitate to prop up violent strongmen, induce massacres on unruly

⁶⁴ David Carey Jr. "A Democracy Born in Violence: Maya Perceptions of the 1944 Patzicia Massacre and the 1954 Coup" *After the Coup: An Ethnographic Reframing of Guatemala 1954*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011) 74.

plantations, and even bring countries to the brink of war as long as it served their profit margins. The dictatorship of Jorge Ubico seemed a perfect fit for implementing United Fruit's goals of dominating the market and maximizing their revenue in Guatemala.

Ubico slashed UFCo's already negligible taxes, reaffirmed their control over Guatemala's ports, and provided the company with more privileges than any previous Guatemalan ruler. Historian Paul Dosal characterized "the concession as one of the most harmful ever imposed on Guatemala."⁶⁵ Ubico fostered close relations with the growing segment of wealthy German coffee growers early in his reign, and the U.S. press condemned his sympathy with the Axis powers. His ideological leanings, however, did not cloud his political judgment, and Ubico deported several hundred German citizens and Guatemalans of German descent and seized their considerable assets at the behest of the FBI.⁶⁶ These maneuvers reversed American popular opinion with reporters declaring that Ubico "is the biggest man in Central America. Given local conditions, he has done a lot. Relations between the United States and Guatemala are in every way excellent, better than they have ever been before."⁶⁷ To further persuade the United States of Guatemala's loyalty, Ubico requested a U.S. officer to head the nation's premier military academy, the *Escuela Politécnica*.⁶⁸ The Guatemalan Army would remain under the mentorship of US officers throughout the Cold War. In return for his fealty, UFCo gave Ubico one million dollars, Guatemala received increased economic aid, and the United States turned a blind

⁶⁵ Dosal. 178.

⁶⁶ Gleijeses. 20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 21.

⁶⁸ Lafeber. *Inevitable Revolutions*. 79.

eye when Ubico changed the laws to preserve his presidency indefinitely.⁶⁹ Through Ubico's bald despotism, Guatemala became a genuine satellite of the United States.

Ubico's alliance with the United States did not guarantee the permanence of his power. Following the overthrow of El Salvador's authoritarian president Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez in 1944, Ubico relied on increasingly heavy-handed tactics that further isolated the dictator from the traditional power-elite. The warrantless arrests and summary executions by Ubico's secret police devolved into widespread state terror.⁷⁰ A fledgling urban middle-class had been growing in size and aspirations and demanded greater representation within the privileged confines of Guatemalan government. President Ubico considered any dissidence to be dangerous leftist subversion, so labor organizers, intellectuals, and nationalists soon found themselves persecuted as communists—a slander that would be repeated *ad nauseam* for the rest of the twentieth century. The looming defeat of fascism in Europe, the overthrow of neighboring dictators, and the narrowing beneficiaries of Ubico's regime inspired large segments of Guatemalan society to band together against their General-President.

Though President Ubico's brand of authoritarianism earned him many enemies, he still had near total control over the state. Ubico assuaged his fear of being overthrown with increased repression. He suspended the constitution and integrated military officials in the private and public sectors to act as his spies. The widespread discontent that had simmered for thirteen years finally boiled over on Teacher's Day, June 30, 1944. Formerly a parade held in honor of Guatemala's educators, the military took over the

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Gleijeses. 17.

celebration and relentlessly drilled teachers in marching and presenting colors. According to historian Piero Gleijeses, after hours of carrying heavy flags under a tropical sun without rest, the teachers began to boycott the exercises.⁷¹ Other professionals and students joined the boycott, which swelled into the first massive protest movement against Ubico in Guatemala City. Revealing his conceit and aloofness, President Ubico was shocked that his people did not love him. His despondency must have only increased when the United States, whose officials and executives he had spent his entire tenure in office courting, remained silent. Defending an avowedly fascist dictator had become relatively untenable for US policymakers as World War II drew to a close. Gleijeses notes that the State Department had come to view Ubico as an anachronism and that the new leaders of Guatemala would naturally ally with Washington.⁷² Only Guatemala City had shown resistance to the president, and the military remained loyal to his command, but the opposition to his rule seemed to wound Ubico on a personal level, and he resigned without spilling blood. According to Gleijeses account, neither Ubico or his closest associates offered a definitive explanation for his decision to step down. Beyond speculating that he may have been in poor health, and relying on the American ambassadors assessment that Ubico was “deeply disillusioned and hurt that the majority of the country was against him,” even Gleijeses formidable research could not uncover Ubico’s motivations.⁷³ Upon leaving the country, he placed the government in the hands of a military junta, dominated by his sycophant, General Federico Ponce. What had been

⁷¹ Ibid. 24.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ambassador Boaz Long to State Department, June 30, 1944; quoted in Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 26.

Guatemala's most militarized and totalitarian regime disintegrated when its dictator sulked away like a scorned lover.

Guatemala stood on the precipice of a new era. It seemed as though Jorge Ubico and all that he represented had been cast down by a united Guatemala. The following decade of reform inspired many Guatemalans to believe that they could overcome the forces of exploitation, repression, and poverty. Though Guatemalan society began to change, the old order persisted. Over a century of dictatorial rule had deeply ingrained Guatemalan politics with *caudillo*-style authoritarianism. The growing power of the military, both before and after the Revolution of 1944, complicated prospects for democratic reform even further. Moreover, the United States and its corporate entities retained enormous economic and political influence over Guatemala. As reformists began the long, hard journey towards egalitarianism, the reactionary forces of the Guatemalan oligarchy and US corporate interests fought to regain the power and privilege that appeared to be slipping through their fingers.

Decade of Spring: Arévalo and the Guatemalan Revolution

Guatemala presented the first challenge to the United States' dominance over its declared sphere of influence. In 1944, Juan José Arévalo became Guatemala's first popularly elected president after a group of young, military officers overthrew General Juan Federico Ponce, the last remnant of the Ubico Era. A philosophy professor of considerable charm, President Arévalo ushered in an era of reform known as the *Diez Años de Primavera* (Ten Years of Spring). During his term in office, Arévalo established

a social security system, legalized unions, set a minimum wage, rebuilt the education system, and reached out to indigenous communities by encouraging increased civil participation. His administration also crafted a new constitution that divided the power of the state into executive, legislative and judicial branches, and guaranteed basic human rights. The traditional Guatemalan oligarchy of landed elites and their allies in officer corps chafed at Arévalo's reforms, but lacked the popular base to challenge a president who had won eighty-five percent of the vote.⁷⁴ United Fruit Company, which owned a large percent of the arable land in Guatemala, also expressed concern about the motives of the reformer president. Arévalo's enemies pointed to his nebulous personal doctrine of "spiritual socialism" and claimed his vaguely defined ideology was thinly disguised communism. As Arévalo's term continued, conservative opposition united behind ambitious military men who stymied his attempts at reform and threatened his presidency with more than twenty failed coup attempts.⁷⁵ His successor, Jacobo Arbenz, would face even greater threats. The first indications that the Guatemalan Armed Forces might shift from defending the nation to controlling it appeared during this celebrated period of democracy and reform.

Following Ubico's abrupt departure from the Guatemalan presidency, General Federico Ponce quickly domineered the provisional junta and forced Congress to declare him president on July 4, 1944. Aware of the precarious circumstances that allowed him to commandeer the executive branch, Ponce presented a reformist façade. Political parties were allowed to form and assemble. Unions gained legal recognition. Above all, General

⁷⁴ Gleijeses, 36.

⁷⁵ Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 47.

Ponce swore that Guatemala would have free and fair democratic elections in the immediate future. Teachers and university students, the vanguard of the protests that unseated Ubico, soon formed the two most powerful political parties—*Frente Popular Libertador* and *Renovacion Nacional*—and selected Professor Juan José Arévalo as their candidate.⁷⁶ When it seemed likely that the academic would best the general in the upcoming elections, Ponce’s democratic pretenses were quickly unveiled.

General Ponce affirmed his status as a relic of Ubico by his lack of originality when dealing with his potential opposition. First, he attempted to stoke the ancient fear of Indian Rebellion. On September 15, Guatemala’s Independence Day, thousands of machete-wielding peasants marched on Guatemala City, shouting their support for President Ponce. The government had trucked them in and praised “the magnificent parade...[and] the sincerity of the peasantry.”⁷⁷ The opposition parties saw the display for what it was and condemned Ponce for his callous exploitation of *campesinos* in an attempt to manipulate the urban population with fear. Having failed at provoking racial tensions to his advantage, Ponce resorted to outright murder. On October 1, 1944, his government assassinated the editor of *El Imparcial*, the newspaper that most stridently supported opposition candidates. Ponce’s political opponents understood his message clearly, and scattered to the winds. Those that avoided arrest or direct deportation sought shelter in neighboring countries and foreign embassies. Another *caudillo* settled into the presidential palace.

⁷⁶ Glejeses, *Shattered Hope*, 27.

⁷⁷ “El día de la patria, los hijos del pueblo y el Ejército Nacional” *El Independiente*, Sept. 21, 1944 pg 2.; quoted in Glejese, *Shattered Hope*, 28.

Eighteen days later, a group of young Army officers overthrew General Ponce and ushered in the Guatemalan Revolution. Nearly the entire Guatemalan Army, outside Ubico's lackeys that had retained their positions of authority, resented General Ponce's attempts to reincarnate the quasi-fascist dictatorship. Captain Jacobo Arbenz had resigned his officer post in July in protest of Ponce seizing the presidency and had been organizing a rebellion from El Salvador. He conspired with Major Carlos Aldana Sandoval, a leader within the pivotal *Guardia de Honor*, the elite troops of Guatemala City. On the night of October 19, an unlikely ensemble of officers, soldiers, students, and union members launched their attack on the government.⁷⁸ Arbenz faced an immediate setback when his erstwhile ally, Major Sandoval, fled to El Salvador, but he was able to maintain the loyalty of the *Guardia de Honor* when another young, ambitious officer, Major Francisco Arana, joined Arbenz's revolt. The commander of the only twelve tanks stationed in the capital, Arana's contribution ensured the fight would be one-sided, and the entirety of the *Guardia de Honor* revolted against Ponce the following day. General Ponce surrendered promptly, and on October 20, 1944, Guatemalans rejoiced in the streets as a new provisional junta, headed by Captain Arbenz, Major Arana, and the attorney Jorge Toriello, assumed stewardship over the country. By overthrowing the Ponce government, military officers had saved the Guatemalan Revolution.

The Guatemalan Revolution shared many characteristics with previous presidential successions. Although its chief actors justified their cause in the name of democracy, it was yet another presidential coup carried out by a group of disgruntled

⁷⁸ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*. 42.

military leaders. Far from revolutionary, the removal of General Ponce reaffirmed that real power in Guatemala flowed from the ability to control the Army, or at least significant factions within it. The Arbenz-Arana junta immediately scheduled elections for December, but their willingness to concede executive power belied the ambitions of both men and the military as a whole. Only two days after Ponce surrendered, the junta firmly established that the authority of the military had been in no way diminished. Gleijeses' work describes an incident in Patrizia, a town fifty miles west of Guatemala City with a substantial indigenous majority, where over one-thousand peasants protested, demanding land and clamoring for the return of General Ponce.⁷⁹ Things turned violent when the crowd began to ransack homes and attack wealthier members of the community—soon over twenty Ladinos lay dead. The provisional revolutionary government gave the traditional military response: a massacre. Foreshadowing the scorched-earth tactics employed by the military throughout the Cold War, the soldiers killed any man, woman, or child they could find in the area. The Guatemalan Army Chief of Staff reported the slaughter “would act as a warning throughout the Republic for any other disorders of this nature.”⁸⁰ This early blemish on Arbenz's record is often overlooked by scholars who have generally provided a positive appraisal of the leader of the Guatemalan Revolution. This has been compounded by the fact that, within Guatemala, discussing the Patrizia Revolt is considered taboo.⁸¹ Regardless of these potential impediments to genuine revolutionary change, Guatemalans welcomed the

⁷⁹ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 31.

⁸⁰ Everado Jimenez de Leon to Secretario de Estado de Gobernacion y Justicia, Chimaltenango, Nov. 18. 1944; quoted in Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 31.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* in footnote 6.

chance to participate in their first free and fair election and expected that their interests would be served by a government chosen by the people.

The October Revolution of 1944, a coup led by junior military officers against the short lived government of General Federico Ponce, a shell of the Ubico regime, ushered in the Ten Years of Spring, a decade of social, political, and economic reform aimed at modernizing Guatemala. Reformers, though admirable in their aspirations, attempted to enact change without effectively countering institutionalized authoritarianism, militarism, and racism or the entrenched elites that benefitted from these oppressive systems. Allying with these reactionary elements, the United States dragged Guatemala into its global struggle—as it would do with so many Latin American countries throughout the Cold War. Swept up in a fever of McCarthyism at home and determined to contain Soviet expansion abroad, the United States government, under two presidents from opposing parties, perceived strong assertions of sovereignty and nationalism in Guatemala as the harbingers of communism.

* * *

Juan José Arévalo remains a near-mythical figure in Guatemala. His ascent to power is as captivating as it is unlikely. A teacher and an author, Arévalo's physical and intellectual presence was as intimidating as any *caudillo*.⁸² Numerous authors have attempted to unravel Guatemala's philosopher-president, but, as noted by the scholar Piero Gleijeses, a definitive account has yet to emerge as his "biographers lapse into

⁸² Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*. 32.

uncritical praise.”⁸³ This tendency might have arisen from a comparison to the authoritarian leaders that regularly ruled Guatemala, or perhaps his biographers admired a fellow academic. His own memoirs provide a picture of a man who believed he was destined to liberate his country from the ignorance and deprivation.⁸⁴ Born into Guatemala’s small middle class in 1904, Arévalo made his way as an educator. He taught at primary schools until 1927, when he set off for Argentina on scholarship to the University of La Plata. After six years of study, he earned his doctorate in education, becoming one of the few Guatemalans of his time who possessed a postgraduate degree.⁸⁵ He would soon find these credentials meant little in Ubico’s Guatemala.

When Arévalo returned to his home country in 1934, he believed that after showing due deference to the dictator, he would be made Secretary of Education. Proudly providing his president with a copy of his dissertation, Arévalo was deeply offended when Ubico showed no interest in his work and only offered him a petty bureaucratic position in the Ministry of Education. Arévalo clearly believed he deserved much more and wrote:

“Stunned...I offered my thanks. I would have only a typewriter and two chairs—no subordinates, not even a secretary...I felt humiliated. Ubico had dealt me a blow that was unexpected as it was undeserved...I was a Doctor of Philosophy of Education, I had studied abroad for six years, and I had been deemed unworthy to be the undersecretary of education.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Gleijeses, footnote 8, page 32.

⁸⁴ For Arévalo’s account of his time before 1927 see: *Memorias de aldea* and *La inquietude normalista*; For 1927-1944 see: *La Argentina*; For June 1944-March 1945 see: *El candidato*.

⁸⁵ Gleijeses, 32.

⁸⁶ Juan José Arévalo, *La Argentina*. (Mexico City: Costa-Amic, 1974) pg. 59-60.

Dissatisfied with the situation, Arévalo left Guatemala and returned to Argentina in 1936. Many scholars and biographers contend that Arévalo rejected the dictatorship and embarked on self-imposed exile to show his opposition to Ubico's dictatorial rule. Richard Immerman, whose study of the 1954 coup is a foundational work on US-Guatemalan relations, goes so far as to call Arévalo an "outspoken critic."⁸⁷ Despite this characterization, Arévalo never openly disparaged the Ubico regime after leaving for Argentina.⁸⁸ Those more critical of Arévalo have suggested that he abandoned his post in Ubico's government for more promising career opportunities. Both factors likely motivated the underappreciated academic, and he quickly settled into a position he found much more suitable at the University of Tucuman. There, he became a distinguished professor while developing his theories on political philosophy.

Professor Arévalo had not set foot in Guatemala for nearly a decade when he learned that Ubico stepped down in the face of overwhelming protests. In fact, he had become a citizen of Argentina and was ineligible to run for public office without official reinstatement of his Guatemalan citizenship.⁸⁹ If his ego remained bruised from the unfair treatment he had received from Ubico, it must have fully recuperated when the leaders of the various student and teacher groups who had initiated the dictator's downfall requested he return to his homeland to be their presidential candidate. In fact, he had made no efforts to enter Guatemala's political scene. According to Gleijeses, teachers and students had spearheaded the revolution, and a handful of respected educators who were familiar

⁸⁷ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 45.

⁸⁸ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 33.

⁸⁹ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*. 184.

with Arévalo's literary scholarship believed he could be the "new man," untainted by Ubico corruption, who could guide the Guatemalan Revolution.⁹⁰ He obliged his supporters and received a hero's welcome when he returned to Guatemala on September 3, 1944. Formerly known only in academic circles, Arévalo became a nationally celebrated figure in a few days. His time as a professor had made Arévalo a practiced orator and the forty-year old stood six feet tall, two-hundred pounds.⁹¹ He combined his physique, youth, and charisma to captivate his audiences, who saw him as the embodiment of the Guatemalan Revolution. Attempting to explain Arévalo's abrupt ascendancy, Piero Gleijeses states that after getting rid of Ubico, the Guatemalan revolution lacked direction and was "a movement in search of a soul." The highly-credentialed, affable Arévalo could "be all things to all people" because his absence from Guatemala made him a blank canvas politically, which his supporters painted with their own aspirations and ideals.⁹² General Ponce, realizing he could not combat the political dynamo by legitimate means, initiated the series of repressive measures that eventually led to his ouster as a direct attack on Arévalo's presidential ambitions. Notably, the United States did not provide General Ponce with requested assistance, implicitly supporting the emerging democratic movement broadly, although not extending that support to Arévalo specifically. The State Department likely understood that any candidate stained by service under Ubico could not prevail electorally in Guatemala's

⁹⁰ Gleijeses, 34.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹² *Ibid.* 34-35.

political climate, and decided to distance itself from presidential contenders so that the United States could more easily partner with whoever emerged victorious.

The provisional government that administered Guatemala after the Ponce coup graciously stepped aside when Arévalo won eighty-five percent of the vote.⁹³ Taking advantage of his physical appearance and practiced public speaking, Arévalo delivered thundering speeches to enthralled audiences as he travelled throughout Guatemala. A self-proclaimed “spiritual socialist”, Arévalo believed that freedom was foundational to human development, but that this freedom had to coincide with the democratic aspirations of a society.⁹⁴ He sought to build a *Nueva Guatemala*, under this vague, utopian vision of spiritual socialism that transcended the “mutilating” mistakes of fascism and communism and would “liberate men psychologically, to return to them all of the psychological and spiritual integrity that was denied them by conservatism and liberalism.”⁹⁵

Regardless of the unfortunate name he chose for his personal philosophy, Arévalo was both a nationalist and a capitalist: he rejected classical Marxism, and upheld individual property rights “as long as they are always subordinated to the social necessities and interests of the nation as a whole.”⁹⁶ President Arévalo’s consuming ambition and greatest achievement was enacting a new Guatemalan constitution that divided the powers of government into legislative, executive, and judicial branches; set a

⁹³ This junta consisted of the lawyer Jorge Toriello and the two military officers who led the revolt: Major Fransisco Arana and Captain Jacobo Arbenz.

⁹⁴ Gleijeses. 47.

⁹⁵ Juan José Arévalo. “A New Guatemala.” *The Guatemala Reader*. (London: Duke University Press, 2011) 208.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

single, six year term limit for the presidency; guaranteed individual rights and popular sovereignty; forbade censorship and discrimination based on race and gender; and banned active military personnel from occupying political positions.⁹⁷ The remarkable document signaled something new for Guatemala—a political system aimed at widespread equality and representation.

The impact of the Arévalo era reforms was undeniably revolutionary for Guatemala, but they could hardly be considered radical. In addition to the new constitution, President Arévalo legalized unions, rebuilt education and public health institutions, and established Guatemala's first social security system. Despite his magnanimity, Arévalo could not entirely escape the legacy of his predecessors. Arévalo sought to build a Guatemala that dispersed authority throughout the branches of the government, and Gleijeses notes that he “preferred to manipulate competing parties rather than confront only one.”⁹⁸ Key ministry positions, however, often went to unqualified allies: the directorship of the *Fincas Nacionales* (National Plantations) was given to Arévalo's inexperienced brother.⁹⁹ Arévalo favored waxing poetic on the vagaries of his spiritual socialism rather than directly confronting the exploitative land tenure system that held *campesinos* in bondage and his policies generally focused on the urban middle class. His administration succeeded in passing a law that forbade sharecropping and other exploitative labor practices that forced peasants to rent land, but it also preserved landowner control over rural labor by simply replacing outmoded vagrancy laws with

⁹⁷ Schlesinger and Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit*. 33.

⁹⁸ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 39.

⁹⁹ *ibid.* 44.

new regulations of the same effect.¹⁰⁰ Although contemporaries and scholars have described Arévalo as possessing greater sympathy for the rural poor than his predecessors, the professor-president often offered platitudes instead concrete changes in the land tenure system. Arévalo announced, “The problem is that the peasants have lost their desire to till the soil because of the attitudes and politics of the past. My government will motivate them”¹⁰¹ Trapped within the top-down, ethnocentric traditions of Ladino politics, Arévalo believed that there was “no agrarian problem; rather, the peasants are psychologically and politically constrained from working the land.”¹⁰²

The old alliance of the military and the landed elite posed the greatest threat to the integrity of the revolution. Arévalo, like the majority of his supporters, hailed from a middle class family, and his revolution steadily replaced the old landed gentry with urban bourgeoisie to form a new political leadership.¹⁰³ The upper class viewed the expanded freedoms of the Arévalo years as “intolerable excesses” and began to pine for the “social peace” of the Ubico years.¹⁰⁴ The conservative segments of the military opposed Arévalo much more directly. They viewed the ambitious academic as a potential threat to their venerable position as the guardians of the established social order. Though many viewed Arévalo’s lack of military experience as a welcome change, the new president quickly retained the military heroes of the October Revolution: Major Francisco Arana and

¹⁰⁰ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*. 185.

¹⁰¹ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 47.

¹⁰² Immerman. *The CIA in Guatemala*. 57.

¹⁰³ Gleijeses. *Shattered Hope*. 39.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 43.

Captain Jacobo Arbenz, as the military chief of staff and defense minister respectively.¹⁰⁵ Major Arana, who hoped to make the most of his status as a hero of the revolution, had coveted the presidency since the coup. He demanded that Arévalo make him the military's chief of staff after the election. Both men understood this was not a request, rather a concession granted in return for the loyalty of the troops under his sway. Historians Schlesinger and Kinzer claim that Arana, a moderate conservative, gained supporters from within the military and the aristocracy by using his considerable influence to block programs he found disagreeable.¹⁰⁶ When some Guatemalan congressmen implied that Arana's refusal to abide by the new constitution's demand that political figures abdicate their military titles should be investigated, Arana responded by threatening to declare martial law and dissolve the legislature.¹⁰⁷ The increasingly bold encroachments of Arana inspired President Arévalo to quip, "In Guatemala there are two presidents, and one of them has a machine gun with which he is always threatening the other."¹⁰⁸ Arévalo insisted that Captain Jacobo Arbenz, the other major military leader of the October Revolution, hold the position of Minister of Defense to act as a counter to Arana.

As Arévalo's term came to a close, it seemed Guatemala was destined to return to some form of military leadership. Arana and Arbenz were the only contenders for the presidency, and Arana's aggression suggested that he was poised to overthrow Arévalo before the 1950 presidential elections. The precise details of the conspiracy that unfolded

¹⁰⁵ Immerman. *The CIA in Guatemala*. 44.

¹⁰⁶ Schlesinger and Kinzer. 43.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

remain a matter of debate, but the most thorough scholarly investigations generally agree that Arévalo and Arbenz collaborated to stop Arana. To protect the gains of the revolution and ensure a democratic transition, Arévalo and Arbenz plotted to arrest Arana and fly him out of the country. On July 18, 1949, Arana was sent on a farcical mission to inspect an armaments cache outside of Guatemala City, his car was stopped by armed men who demanded his surrender. Arana refused and was killed in the ensuing gunfight. Claims implicating Arbenz's responsibility range from the direct participation of his personal assistants to the defense minister observing the battle from a nearby hill.¹⁰⁹ At the time of the incident, *Aranistas* quickly blamed Arévalo and Arbenz, while the government and its supporters claimed that Arana had been murdered by his conservative allies for failing to orchestrate a coup.¹¹⁰ An initial uprising by Arana loyalist within the military was quelled when Arbenz distributed weapons to union members, students, and other supporters, who bolstered the ranks of government troops. Minor coup attempts plagued the Arévalo administration until his term ended in 1950. The return of a conservative military dictatorship had been averted—through assassination. Arbenz's broad coalition of liberal army officers, union members, and peasant organizations won the election with sixty-five percent of the vote, but the illegitimate means used to secure the victory against Arana were a dire portent for the fate of his administration and the revolution. Nearly a decade later, the specter of the murdered Arana would return to haunt Arévalo in his attempt to return to the presidency and Guatemala.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 45.

¹¹⁰ Stephen Streeter, *Managing The Counterrevolution: The United States and Guatemala, 1954-1961*, (Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000). 17.

Arévalo left office warning that an “anonymous force” of international and domestic conservatism hovered over Guatemala and that his successor could either abandon the ideals of the revolution or incite their wrath by pushing it forward.¹¹¹ Arbenz built his career in the traditionally conservative military, but he belonged to a group of young, leftist officers who resented Ubico’s draconian discipline and demand for unconditional loyalty. Arévalo’s boisterous persona bestowed the outward appearance of a *caudillo*, but he pushed his agenda primarily through political manipulation and consensus. Arbenz resurrected a more direct style of rule to advance the revolution by decree. Unlike Arévalo, Arbenz understood that Guatemala could not modernize without fundamentally restructuring rural society, and the only way to accomplish this would be to institute significant agrarian reform. Two critical presidential directives sealed Arbenz’s fate: the legalization of the Guatemalan communist party and the expropriation and redistribution of fallow land owned by large landholders. The enemies of the revolution warped Arbenz’s decrees to fit a narrative that would attract the attention of powerful allies: Guatemala was turning Red.

Good Neighbors Gone Bad: The United States and the Guatemalan Revolution

It is no coincidence that the Guatemalan Revolution occurred just as the defeat of the Axis powers seemed inevitable. Although the United States still supported dictators throughout Latin America, Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy saw the United States retreat from its previous tendency toward armed intervention in Latin America. As

¹¹¹ Schlesinger and Kinser, *Bitter Fruit*. 47.

the war concluded, Guatemalans became emboldened by the momentous political shifts that seemed to be sweeping the globe. In particular, FDR's anti-colonialism and commitment to the 'Four Freedoms' likely inspired many members of the middle class who protested the fascistic government of Jorge Ubico. When threatened by a new adversary in the form of international communism, the United States proved it would sacrifice its ideals more readily than its control over its sphere of influence.

After World War II, international competition with the Soviet Union caused anticommunism to feature prominently in both the domestic and foreign policy of the United States. The chief component of the foreign policy was containment, an approach formulated by respected statesman George F. Kennan during the Truman administration. Taking the Soviet Union as his subject, Kennan argued that peaceful coexistence between capitalist and communist countries was impossible because of the expansionist ideology of communism.¹¹² In Kennan's view, preventing the spread of communism might cause it to collapse under its inherent economic dysfunction, or cause it to soften from exposure to capitalist markets. Kennan's theory found a receptive audience in the Truman administration, and it inspired the president to declare the Truman Doctrine in March, 1947. Stated plainly, the doctrine promised that the United States would commit political, economic, and military assistance to any government threatened by the forces of international communism. By 1949, the detonation of the first Soviet atomic weapon and Mao Zedong's victory in China seemed to prove that international communism was indeed an existential threat and Kennan's call to confront and contain the global menace dominated the actions of the United States and its allies for the next four decades.

¹¹² X (George F. Kennan). "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs* (July, 1947). <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/23331/x/the-sources-of-soviet-conduct>

After formulating a cornerstone of US-Cold War foreign policy, Truman's first Secretary of State, George Marshall, appointed Kennan to head the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. In 1950, he travelled throughout Latin America to meet with ambassadors and assess the United States' southern neighbors.¹¹³ Kennan felt that the geographical, cultural, and racial qualities of Latin America made the region and its people inherently backwards. Citing Catholicism, tropical climate, and racial mixing as the roots of Latin America's troubles, Kennan observed, "it seems to me unlikely that there could be any region on the earth in which nature and human behavior could have combined to produce a more unhappy and hopeless background for the conduct of human life than in Latin America."¹¹⁴ Even so, in the larger geopolitical struggle of the Cold War, Kennan maintained that Latin America must remain the United States' uncontested sphere of influence. The Truman administration, molded by Kennan's ethnocentric approach, pushed anticommunism as the preeminent feature of US policy in Latin America through military aid, support of dictatorial regimes, political repression, and, if the need arose, direct intervention. The Kennan Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, a term coined by historian Gaddis Smith, called for the United States to intervene in Latin American countries in order to save them from the communist threat that their leaders were incapable of handling.¹¹⁵ Echoing Theodore Roosevelt's "Big Stick" policies toward Latin America, the United States would rely on local dictators to maintain order and use its military might if its political and economic interests appeared to be at risk.

¹¹³ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22.

¹¹⁴ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 23

¹¹⁵ Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), 68.

In Guatemala, this approach became infused with the goals of corporate interests, namely those of United Fruit Company, whose operations dominated the country's economy. Before the Guatemalan Revolution in 1944, the United States support for a *caudillo* hinged on his relationship with United Fruit. For example, the Roosevelt administration overlooked Jorge Ubico's flagrant abuses of power and admiration for fascist governments, in part, because of the outrageous concessions he granted the fruit conglomerate. Yet, when Ubico, and his successor General Ponce, sought help from the US embassy as their regimes disintegrated, their subservience to United Fruit did not translate into support from the United States. Roosevelt's State Department, proponents of the Good Neighbor Policy, had tolerated the dictator, but hoped that his removal would usher in more palatable allies in Guatemala.¹¹⁶ As such, US officials did not view Arévalo with the scrutiny and suspicion that would characterize their later assessments, and his campaign and early presidential years went unopposed. These cordial relations would not last long.

Conservative Guatemalans had lashed liberals with charges of communism well before the revolution. Jorge Ubico made his military career out of crushing supposedly communist rebellions in El Salvador and within Guatemala, and after he became president, he used the label to destroy dissidents and arrest opponents. Arévalo faced similar accusations from both the oligarchy and the Catholic Church when he threatened their power by legalizing unions and nationalizing some Church property. By 1947, some members of the State Department suspected the Arévalo administration might be under communist influence and filed a complaint, on behalf of the United Fruit Company,

¹¹⁶ Gleijeses, 25

against the enactment of a labor code that granted plantation workers the right to unionize.¹¹⁷ In May of 1948, a State Department memorandum circulated on the topic, concluding that while they had no “proof of communism”, Arévalo’s reforms could very likely have “communist inspiration behind them.”¹¹⁸ When the dividends of US corporations were threatened, many Washington officials began to condemn even moderate reforms in Guatemala as creeping communist infiltration.

US-Guatemalan relations soured after the death of Francisco Arana when the US ambassador, Richard C. Patterson, began to threaten the Arévalo administration. Initially, the State Department supported Ambassador Patterson, who proclaimed that the United States would withhold economic assistance if the Guatemalan government persisted in its provocations. Described by one scholar as a “brash, dim former [businessman]... who couldn’t speak Spanish and was given to colorful outbursts on the menace of Soviet communism in Guatemala”, Ambassador Patterson recoiled at a series of perceived slights against the United States.¹¹⁹ These outrages included Arévalo’s support for the antifascist Caribbean Legion and encouraging Puerto Rican athletes to march with their own flag and music—instead of the Star-Spangled Banner—during the Central American and Caribbean Games inauguration ceremony in Guatemala City. Emboldened by Washington’s support, Patterson presented a list of seventeen officials, including several cabinet members, who he suspected were communists and demanded that President Arévalo fire them immediately. Such an audacious ultimatum, unaccompanied by

¹¹⁷ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*. 83

¹¹⁸ R. Wilson to Wise and Newbing, “State Department Memorandum” . May 6, 1948, Record Group 59, National Archives, quoted in Lafeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*. 115.

¹¹⁹ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*. 85

evidence, irked the Arévalo government. Furthermore, reports surfaced that Patterson was actively courting his contacts in anti-revolutionary circles to assist him in undermining the Guatemalan government.¹²⁰ It appeared that the ambassador overreached, however, and was recalled back to Washington when the Arévalo government prepared to declare him a *persona non-grata*.

When Patterson returned to the United States, he began a one-man campaign against the communist threat he perceived was taking over Guatemala. In his speeches that railed against the Guatemalan government, the expelled-ambassador developed the infamous “duck test” for determining if a government was communist. In painfully oversimplified terms, Patterson explained:

“Many times it is impossible to prove legally that a certain individual is a communist, but for cases of this sort I recommend a practical method of detection—the ‘duck test.’ The duck test works this way: suppose you see a bird walking around in a farm yard. This bird wears no label that says ‘duck.’ But the bird certainly looks like a duck. Also he goes to the pond and you notice he swims like a duck. Then he opens his beak and quacks like a duck. Well, by this time you have probably reached the conclusion that the bird is a duck, whether he’s wearing a label or not.”¹²¹

Patterson took his message across the United States, giving lectures throughout the country. His dire warnings of the Red Menace spreading into the Western Hemisphere resonated with Americans frightened by the incredible gains made by

¹²⁰ This remains a point of contention that deserves further investigation. Schlesinger and Kinzer concluded that Patterson was actively seeking the destruction of the Arévalo government, citing his private correspondence with UFCo CEO Sam Zemurray, urging the executive to lobby the US Congress for harsh actions against the Guatemalan government. Richard Immerman’s assessment is much more restrained, reporting that the United States categorically denied Patterson was guilty of intervening in Guatemalan affairs. However, Immerman does note that Patterson had close ties to the US corporate community and prominent Guatemalan conservatives, namely Miguel Ydígoras.

¹²¹ Richard C. Patterson, “Fifth draft of speech to the Rotary Club.” March 24, 1950, Patterson Papers; quoted in Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*. 101 and Lafeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*. 116.

communists by the end of the 1940s. In Europe, the Soviets had blockaded Berlin and successfully tested a nuclear bomb. In Asia, communism claimed the world's most populous country, China, and threatened to expand into Southeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula. Upon learning of the outbreak of the Korean War, President Arévalo pledged that Guatemala stood in "complete solidarity" with the United States. Countering Patterson's claims, Arévalo stated that "Guatemala has no connections whatsoever with any extra-continental power, either European or Asiatic."¹²² His administration was simply attempting to govern according to the vision of Franklin Roosevelt and that Guatemala "has one and only one loyalty geographically, politically, and militarily": The United States.¹²³ Events in Latin America, unfortunately, did not grab the amount of media attention as the Cold War hotspots flaring in Europe and Asia. Compared to Patterson's "duck-test" speaking tour, few Americans noticed Arévalo's pronouncement: most major press outlets ignored his message, and the few that carried the story only published brief accounts. Arévalo's plea proved he had actually failed Patterson's ridiculous "duck-test", but no one seemed to notice that Guatemala's nationalistic president was a follower of FDR instead of a communist quack.

The Good Neighbor policy hardly outlived President Franklin Roosevelt in Guatemala, and the incoming Truman administration quickly viewed the Guatemalan Revolution, and its leaders, as potential inroads for communist infiltration in the Western Hemisphere. As the confrontation between the capitalist West and communist East expanded around the globe, US officials grew more suspicious of President Arevalo,

¹²² Samuel Guy Inman, *A New Day in Guatemala: A Study of the Present Social Revolution*. (Wilton, Conn: Worldover Press, 1951.) Pg 36-37

¹²³ Ibid.

despite his proclamations of loyalty and friendship with the United States. Longstanding beliefs of racial and cultural superiority, and the desire to maintain hegemony over the Western Hemisphere, became infused with anticommunism as the United States evaluated the fitness of its Southern neighbors for the coming conflict against communism. An increasing number of US policymakers viewed Guatemala as a weakness in the continental defenses, and any advances in the revolutionary agenda could cause a breach.

The Successful Operation: President Arbenz and US Intervention

The ignominious end of the Arbenz administration stands as the first major collaboration between US officials and anticommunist Guatemalan military officers. Most scholars who have written on the coup have emphasized the role of the United States, particularly the coordinated roles of the State Department and the Central Intelligence agency, each helmed by one of the Dulles brothers. Although the United States' efforts to destroy Arbenz certainly applied enormous pressure on his government, the high command of the Guatemalan military ultimately decided their president's fate. While the military had often played a part in determining presidential succession, their refusal to defend their own government against an incursion clearly sponsored by the United States marked a significant transition. Formerly, political contests between Guatemalan elites might have been decided by who had the support of the Army, but the coup against Arbenz saw military officers side with a foreign power, the United States, over their commander in chief. The 1954 coup against Arbenz established the close

relationship between the United States and anticommunist officers of the Guatemalan Armed Forces that would eventually result in military rule, civil war, and genocide.

At the close of Arévalo's presidency, powerful individuals from United States, both public and private, had set in motion a campaign to discredit and even vilify the Guatemalan Revolution. As Guatemala prepared for presidential transitions, some hoped that the incoming administration, led by a respected military man, might reconcile with the United States and avert conflict. President Arbenz, however, leaned much further left than his predecessor.

Captain Jacobo Arbenz was the commanding officer who led the 1944 revolution that ended Guatemala's military dictatorship. Under Arévalo, he became Minister of Defense and the president's chosen successor. After winning the 1950 election, Arbenz decided he would push for more radical change. Shortly after taking office, Arbenz unified twenty-five radical peasant unions into the National Peasant Confederation of Guatemala (CNCG) and, in December 1952, he legalized the *Partido Guatemalteco Trabajadores* (PGT), the formerly underground communist party.¹²⁴ Historian Walter LaFeber remarked that Truman's State Department, already concerned by the leftist revolution, quickly changed their assessment of the Arbenz administration from pragmatic to following an "ascending curve of Communist influence."¹²⁵

The question of whether President Arbenz was a communist generated considerable debate during and after his administration, but a wide consensus of historical scholarship has generally agreed that the concerns of both the Truman and

¹²⁴ Lafeber. *Inevitable Revolutions*. 117

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Eisenhower administrations were unfounded at best and spurious at worst. Early reports on the Arbenz administration often echoed the anticommunist arguments of the Eisenhower administration, but every study derived from broad historical evidence has concluded that President Arbenz was neither a communist, nor did his government have ties with the Soviet Union. Richard Immerman explained that US officials fundamentally misunderstood, and perhaps misrepresented, the goals of the Arévalo and Arbenz governments. As a result, they exaggerated the threat of communist infiltration because of the accepted Cold War belief that Moscow had masterminded an international conspiracy to destroy the free world.¹²⁶

This is a view held by nearly all historians of US-Guatemalan relations with some variation. For example, Schlesinger and Kinzer place more emphasis on the role of the United Fruit Company and its connections with the Eisenhower administration as a crucial cause behind the myth of Arbenz the communist.¹²⁷ In his detailed study of the Guatemalan Revolution, Piero Gleijeses interviewed several Guatemalan politicians, military officers, and private citizens—including the only recorded interview with Arbenz’s wife—to get to the heart of this question. Gleijeses concluded that the communists did have considerable influence with the Guatemalan president. Arbenz frequently consulted with members of the communist party, and considered some of them to be his personal friends. Moreover, his wife, Maria Vilanova de Arbenz, deeply sympathized with the plight of peasants and pushed the young, nationalistic captain to read Marx. Gleijeses contends that no one had a greater political influence on Arbenz

¹²⁶ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*. 101

¹²⁷ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*.

than his wife, and that the pair jointly believed in the inevitability of a worldwide socialist community, but also that Guatemala was currently incapable of becoming a communist state.¹²⁸ He adds that near the end of Arbenz's tenure, the President relied on a "kitchen cabinet" of close advisors, largely drawn from the PGT leadership, to help him govern. Ultimately, Gleijeses reveals, "Perhaps Arbenz should not formally be called a communist, yet fellow traveler fails to convey the intensity of his commitment."¹²⁹ This account, based on extensive interviews with personal associates of Arbenz, is much more nuanced, and somewhat contradicts, the general refutation of Arbenz's communist connections that have become the standard line in studies of US-Guatemalan relations.

Arbenz was not an agent of the Soviet Union, but Marxist thought certainly influenced his political beliefs. He saw the feudalistic *finca* system, a plantation economy that shackled the Guatemalan economy to a few export crops and effectively enslaved much of the country's indigenous population, as the primary cause of economic and political underdevelopment. In order to foster greater participation in the free market, Arbenz believed that peasants needed a substantial increase in personal landholdings where they could cultivate crops on private plots to sell at a profit. The Guatemalan legislature fulfilled Arbenz's campaign promise of land reform when it passed the Agrarian Reform Bill in May, 1952. The new law called for the immediate expropriation large tracts of uncultivated land for redistribution to small Guatemalan farmers and peasants.¹³⁰ Five weeks later, on June 17, 1952, the president issued Decree 900, which

¹²⁸ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 147-148

¹²⁹ Ibid. 147

¹³⁰ Ibid. 146.

established the institutional framework that would implement the new law. Unlike the radical land reforms under Stalin and Mao, Arbenz's system was gradual and bureaucratic, with local agrarian committees having to push petitions through several layers of administrators before their claim to land could be considered.¹³¹ Instead of communal holdings, land was allotted to individual farmers who had incentive to sell excess crops in the open market. There were also numerous limitations on the law. For example, only landholdings exceeding 670 acres that left over 1/3 of the land unused were subject to expropriation.¹³² Far from the collective farms of the Soviet Union, Arbenz's Decree 900 sought to replace feudalistic land practices with productive capitalist competition. Nevertheless, when Arbenz realized his dream, he also sealed his fate.

The Agrarian Reform Law did not simply seize land for redistribution. Arbenz's decree only targeted large landholders who possessed swathes of uncultivated lands. Naturally, the United Fruit Company's vast tracts attracted greater attention than any other entity in the country. The Arbenz government offered to pay United Fruit the stated value the company had claimed on its tax records: \$1,185,000 for the 400,000 unused acres.¹³³ As such, the fruit conglomerate stood to lose an enormous investment—nearly one-seventh of all their landholdings in Guatemala and at an incredibly low cost. On behalf of United Fruit, the United States formally presented the Arbenz administration with a bill of over \$15.8 million, a sum the company found more appropriate. Their offer

¹³¹ Ibid., 151.

¹³² Rabe, *The Killing Zone*. 39

¹³³ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*. 80

exceeding ten-times the declared value of the land, United Fruit had no expectation of receiving the enormous amount for their property and immediately mobilized their lobbyists in Washington. Calling upon their numerous beneficiaries within the US government, United Fruit demanded a direct intervention in Guatemala. They joined the chorus of Arbenz's detractors within the landed oligarchy and their conservative military allies who had clamored for the United States to save their country from communism since the days of Arévalo. Arbenz's growing list of enemies found the receptive champions within the incoming Eisenhower administration.

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen Dulles, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, were two of the most ardent anticommunists of the Eisenhower administration. The brothers were also former partners in the international law firm, Sullivan & Cromwell that counted United Fruit among its most important clients.¹³⁴ John Foster Dulles had even been part of the team that negotiated UFCo's contracts in Guatemala. Along with other members of the Eisenhower administration, including the president himself, the Dulles brothers owned considerable stock in the company and Allen Dulles had served on UFCo's board of directors.¹³⁵ These close financial ties made the Eisenhower administration especially receptive to UFCo's requests, and they found the company's line convincing: "whenever you read 'United Fruit' in communist propaganda you may readily substitute 'United States.'¹³⁶ Whether

¹³⁴ Lafeber. *Inevitable Revolutions*. 120

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Edward L. Bernays quoted in: Nick Cullater, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operation in Guatemala 1952-1954*. (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006) 16

their motivations were more ideological or financial has been a matter of considerable debate among scholars of the US intervention in Guatemala, but both factors were clearly in play. The Dulles brothers immediately set about the task of destroying what they believed to be the first communist government in the Western Hemisphere.

The Truman administration had been making preparations to attack the Arbenz government before the Dulles brothers took the helm. After Arbenz issued Decree 900 in June, 1952 the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency regarded the Guatemalan president as a potential threat that would likely require direct intervention in the form of covert operations. Truman authorized the CIA to secretly train a band of mercenaries and exiles in Honduras under the command of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a conservative militarist who had been exiled after attempting to overthrow Arévalo in 1949. These castaways would coordinate with neighboring Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza and act as a 'liberation force' that would remove Arbenz. In preparing for the covert action, dubbed PBFORTUNE, the CIA composed a detailed manual on assassination, along with a list of at least 132 alleged communists in Guatemala that would be promptly murdered or imprisoned should the operation succeed.¹³⁷ Just as the CIA made final preparations to launch the invasion, the coup attempt fell apart when arms shipments failed to materialize.

There are different approaches to explaining why this first attempt to overthrow Arbenz failed to launch. Former CIA historian Nick Cullather blames Somoza for blowing the Agency's cover when he bragged to other Central America leaders about his

¹³⁷ Central Intelligence Agency "Training File of PBSUCCESS: A Study of Assassination" (c. 1952) and "Guatemalan Communist Personnel to be Disposed of During Military Operation of Calligeris" (September 1952), Death Squads, guerrilla war, covert operations, and genocide: Guatemala and the United States, 1954-1999, Digital National Security Archive.

role in the impending operations.¹³⁸ Gleijeses contends that the State Department was largely unaware of the extent of the operation. When Secretary of State Dean Acheson learned that the CIA and United Fruit were shipping weapons to Somoza, who would then arm Castillo Armas' war-band, he convinced President Truman that the poorly planned operation was doomed to failure.¹³⁹ In addition, such actions flagrantly disregarded the non-intervention agreement set forth in the Rio Pact of 1947, and the Organization of American States would rightly view this treaty violation as the death of the Good Neighbor Policy. Operational planners at the CIA were surprised how rapidly their designs fell apart, but set about salvaging their work, hoping to find more enthusiastic support in the incoming Eisenhower administration. They were rewarded for their efforts with Operation PBSUCCESS.

Scholars of the CIA coup that overthrew Arbenz in 1954 typically divide into two camps. Earlier treatments made a great deal out of the relationship between the Eisenhower administration and United Fruit, while subsequently published works tend to claim that Washington genuinely believed Guatemala was transforming into the first communist beachhead in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁴⁰ These contesting interpretations do agree, however, that the preponderance of evidence shows that Arbenz's ties to communism were tenuous, and that his economic policies were state-induced, capitalist

¹³⁸ Cullather, *Secret History*, 30-31

¹³⁹ Gleijeses, 231.

¹⁴⁰ Kinzer and Schlesinger present the most outspoken argument for the significance of the relationship between the Eisenhower administration and United Fruit. Lafeber, Jonas, and Grandin privilege the primacy of anticommunism over corporate interests. Immerman and Gleijeses strike a balance between these positions, with the former suggesting that Washington exaggerated the depth of Arbenz's communist connections, and the latter providing ample evidence of a close relationship between Arbenz and the communist party (PGT).

reforms designed to dismantle the feudalistic oligarchy. Ultimately, the Eisenhower administration decided to intervene in Guatemala because they believed such action served both their political and economic interests. In order to protect US assets and maintain Guatemala as a staunch anticommunist ally, the Eisenhower administration launched the first of many Cold War covert actions designed to overthrow a Latin American government.

Unlike the Truman administration, the Dulles brothers' plans to depose Arbenz would not suffer from internal struggles within the US government. Allen Dulles, who had worked closely on PBFORTUNE as the deputy director of the CIA, was elevated to full director of the Agency. He successfully convinced President Eisenhower that a "communist infection" in Guatemala threatened the security of the Western Hemisphere.¹⁴¹ There would be no pushback from the State Department this time. The new Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, ensured total cooperation between the Agency and State by making all matters pertaining to potential covert action in Guatemala the exclusive domain of his office. The Eisenhower administration formally committed to overthrowing Arbenz on August 12, 1953, allotting three-million dollars to the CIA operations already underway. To prepare the way for the CIA's plans, the Dulles brothers needed a new ambassador who would help facilitate the newfound fraternity between the Agency and State Department. They selected John Peurifoy, who had acquired a reputation of being an anticommunist troubleshooter. A red-hunting rival of Joseph McCarthy, Peurifoy played a crucial role in the prosecution of Alger Hiss, the first major State Department official accused of espionage for the Soviet Union. While

¹⁴¹ Stephen Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 31-32.

serving as ambassador to Greece, Peurifoy meddled in governmental affairs to bolster anticommunist factions. Peurifoy preferred firmness and frankness over subtlety and sensitivity, and after a brusque initial meeting with President Arbenz, concluded; “I am definitely convinced that if the President is not a Communist, he will certainly do until one comes along.”¹⁴²

The details of Operation PBSUCCESS and the resultant coup of 1954 fill volumes. The words “watershed”, “cardinal”, “seminal”, and “momentous” are but a few ways scholars have described the significance of the event in the history of Guatemala, US-Latin American relations, and the Cold War. This focus of this study has its roots in this singular moment, but because of the impressive existing scholarship, only a brief account of the downfall of Jacobo Arbenz will be provided here. In broad strokes, the CIA launched a multi-prong attack against the Arbenz government. The small force of exiles and mercenaries under the command of the exiled colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, who had received training and supplies from the CIA during its abortive Operation PBFORTUNE, would serve as an invading “liberation” force. They received further support in the form of an experimental psychological campaign that combined international sanctions, relentless propaganda, and aerial bombing runs. As part of the “nerve war”, the CIA broadcast false reports of a triumphant conquest by the “liberation” force through *La Voz de la Liberacion*, a radio program designed and operated by the Agency. The reactionary Archbishop of Guatemala, Mariano Rossell y Arellano, teamed with CIA agents to publicly condemn the Arbenz administration for its agrarian reform despite the fact that Pope Pious XII had declared Decree 900 acceptable to the Catholic

¹⁴² John Peurifoy, memorandum of conversation, December 17, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954 4: 1091-93. Quoted in Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 181 ; Rabe, *The Killing Zone*. 46

Church.¹⁴³ CIA planes airdropped thousands of copies of the Archbishop's speech throughout the country. The message was clear that if the people of Guatemala continued to support President Arbenz, the aircraft flying overhead would soon be dropping explosives instead of leaflets. The effect of the CIA's psychological warfare on the general public is debatable, but these efforts were clearly aimed at the segment of society that had long determined the fate of Guatemalan presidents: the Army.

Colonel Castillo Armas' military campaign proved only that the United States had chosen an incompetent commander, but he was spared destruction when the Guatemalan Army refused to confront his mercenaries. When the invasion force first entered Guatemala, President Arbenz dismissed the attack. He believed that "The invasion is a farce. We can shoo them away with our hats. What I am afraid of... is that if we defeat them right on the border, the Honduran government will manufacture a border incident, declare war on us, and the United States will invade."¹⁴⁴ As such, Castillo Armas and his forces, numbering no more than 250 men, were allowed to advance within Guatemalan territory. Arbenz, however, had been losing support within the more conservative segments of the middle class and the military, especially after Decree 900 and the legalization of the PGT.

While it is unlikely that many officers believed the CIA propaganda that claimed Arbenz had made secret pacts with the Soviet Union and that the military would soon be purged and rebuilt in the image of the Red Army, their faith in their commander-in-chief had been shaken. Ambassador Peurifoy all but confirmed the openly-secret involvement

¹⁴³ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 47.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with José Manuel Fortuny quoted in Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 324

of the United States when he threatened Guatemalan officials and cut off communication with President Arbenz.¹⁴⁵ The military brass, fearing a full-scale invasion and occupation by the US Marine Corps, refused to risk their status for a president that many of them viewed with growing unease. Despite numerous opportunities to eliminate the invasion force, commanders at the Zacapa barracks, the major military base positioned closest to Castillo Armas' forces, never launched the offensive they repeatedly promised their president was forthcoming. When the rebels seized Chiquimula without a fight, the only major town between their Honduran entry point and the Zacapa base, Arbenz finally had to accept that his officers would not defend their country. The capture of Chiquimula would be the only military success the *Liberacionistas* could claim, but it would ultimately prove sufficient to topple the Guatemalan president.

Until the loss at Chiquimula, President Arbenz had full confidence in the loyalty of his military officers and their ability to crush Castillo Armas at will. He had refused to arm civilians in the face of the invasion not only to demonstrate his faith in Guatemala's armed forces, but also to ensure that the military would continue to support his presidency. Passing out guns to peasants and partisans would add credence to the CIA's propaganda: that Red Jacobo was forming a People's Army out of radical workers and communists. Following the treasonous insubordination of the forces stationed at the Zacapa base, Arbenz had no other choice but to turn to his civilian supporters to defend Guatemala. Predictably, when Arbenz attempted to arm worker and peasant militias to

¹⁴⁵ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 336

stop Castillo Armas' petty band, most of the remaining loyalists in the officer corps betrayed their president.¹⁴⁶

None of Arbenz's many foes should rightly claim the full credit for having ousted the besieged president from office. The fuming American ambassador, the incompetent renegade colonel, the crusading brothers in Washington, and the vengeful fruit company executives all certainly relished in Arbenz's defeat, but none of them delivered the death blow to his administration. It was Arbenz's most trusted allies within the Guatemalan Army that ultimately coerced the president to step down. On June 27, 1954 the five colonels who composed Arbenz's senior military staff met to discuss the current crisis. The nominal head of the Guatemalan military, Chief of the Armed Forces Carlos Enrique Diaz summoned the Defense Minister, the Army Chief of Staff, the Air Force Chief, and the commander of the *Consejo Superior de la Defensa* to his home. All of the men were considered loyal to the president, and Colonel Diaz and Arbenz were good friends, but they unanimously agreed that "Jacobo must go"¹⁴⁷ After coming to this conclusion, the five colonels sought out Ambassador Peurifoy in hopes of negotiating an end to the staged invasion. Setting a precedent that would accompany most presidential transitions in Cold War Guatemala, the most powerful officers of the armed forces met with US officials to discuss the future leadership of the country.

The military leaders had a single, overriding concern when they met with the American ambassador. With the support of his fellow colonels, Diaz told Peurifoy "that direct negotiations with Castillo [Armas] were out of the question; they would rather die

¹⁴⁶ Lafeber. 126

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Army Chief of Staff Parinello quoted in Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 345.

than talk with him.”¹⁴⁸ Most Guatemalan officers, regardless of their political leanings, despised Castillo Armas as a renegade, a traitor, and a puppet of the United States. Ambassador Peurifoy promised he would arrange a truce with the *Liberacionistas* as soon as Arbenz was deposed, but he remained silent on what role Castillo Armas might play in Guatemala’s future.¹⁴⁹ Diaz departed the meeting and headed for the presidential palace, where he presented his case before Arbenz. The offer was stark. The PGT would be outlawed and its leaders would be imprisoned or exiled. Worst of all, Colonel Diaz admitted he would have to bring an end to agrarian reform, but that he planned on preserving the lands already distributed under Decree 900.¹⁵⁰ Arbenz had a single demand—Colonel Diaz would not negotiate with Castillo Armas. To treat with a pawn of foreign conspirators would be a national disgrace, undermining Guatemalan sovereignty. Hoping to preserve some scrap of the revolution, Arbenz agreed to announce his resignation that evening and ceded power to Diaz. At 9 p.m. on June 27, 1954, Jacobo Arbenz broadcast his parting words to his country:

“I say goodbye to you, my friends, with bitterness and pain, but firm in my convictions...[with] eyes on the welfare of the people...with the hope of saving the democratic gains of the October revolution...[with] a government, although different from mine, is still inspired by our October revolution is preferable to twenty years of bloody tyranny under men whom Castillo Armas has brought to this country.”¹⁵¹

None of Jacobo Arbenz’s last, desperate hopes for his country would come to fruition.

¹⁴⁸ Peurifoy to Secretary of State, June 27, 1954, FRUS: 1189

¹⁴⁹ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 345.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 349

¹⁵¹ Guillermo Putzeys Rojas, *Asi se hizo la Liberacion*. (Guatemala City: Tipografia Nacional, 1976) 297-300.

President Arbenz capitulated to nominally loyal members of his own military in an effort to spare Guatemala the fate of invasion, occupation, and bloodshed. He and his colonels held deep nationalist sensibilities, evidenced by their fierce rejection of Castillo Armas. For these military officers, and many to follow, their dedication to their country gave way to their career ambitions and desire for self-preservation. Arbenz's decision to resign was technically a matter decided internally by actors within the legitimate Guatemalan government, but it would be misleading to suggest that the actions of the United States were not significant in determining this outcome. Operation PBSUCCESS was a military failure, but the pressure placed on the Arbenz administration by the unrelenting propaganda churned out by the CIA, international sanctions imposed by the United States, and the presence of a hostile, albeit ineffective, military force within Guatemala ultimately whittled down the resolve of the revolutionary government. The defeat of the Guatemalan revolution sent a clear message to reformers and revolutionaries throughout Latin America that the United States would not tolerate any challenge to its rule within its sphere of influence.

The Ten Years of Spring transformed Guatemala. In the end, these changes would sharply contrast with the intentions of the revolutionary Guatemalans who deposed their military dictator in 1944. The CIA-backed intervention had succeeded, and the Guatemalan military, through inaction, proved that a decade of popular, liberal reform had done little to change who truly ruled Guatemala. While many of the reforms were truly remarkable, they failed to overcome, and occasionally reinforced, the underlying causes of Guatemala's problems. Land, and the wealth it provided, remained concentrated in the hands of a few rich families and foreign corporations. Those

corporations, namely United Fruit, wielded enormous political influence and used it to undermine Guatemalan sovereignty. The indigenous majority were still generally viewed with contempt: Arévalo disregarded and patronized them; Arbenz doomed the revolution by trying to assist them. Moreover, both Arévalo and Arbenz, despite their efforts at institution building, retained a resemblance to the same *caudillo*-style archetype that was emblematic of the Guatemalan presidency. Neither were genuine strongmen, however, evinced by the fact that both presidents remained locked in an existential struggle with their own military during their tenure in office. The foundational structures of Guatemalan society remained largely unchanged and the reforms of Arévalo and Arbenz dissolved as conservative elites regained power.

The sum of the Ten Years of Spring was the legitimization of military rule in the face of a potential communist threat. The overthrow of Arbenz accelerated the Guatemalan military's encroachments into civilian governance and the United States began to look to anticommunist officers to advance its agenda in Guatemala. Many left-leaning regimes in Latin America would come to suffer a similar fate throughout the Cold War. Yet, despite the best efforts of the United States and its clients in Guatemala, the revolution of 1944 left a legacy of pervasive nationalism, defined by resistance to the United States, that spread from the small Central America republic throughout the hemisphere.

The Chaos of Counterrevolution: Post-Revolutionary Governance in Guatemala

The United States had succeeded in its first Cold War covert operation designed to overthrow a Latin American government. Voicing the views of likeminded anticommunists in the Eisenhower administration, Vice President Richard Nixon noted, “This is the first instance in history where a Communist government has been replaced by a free one. The whole world is watching to see which does the better job.”¹⁵² Nixon, Secretary Dulles, and other members of the administration claimed that the United States would help Castillo Armas transform Guatemala into a “showcase for democracy.” Instead, they steadily constructed a counterrevolution designed to rollback reforms, destroy dissidence, and firmly secure Guatemala within the US sphere of influence. The United States had long wielded considerable influence over Guatemala, but it was in the years of the counterrevolution that Washington’s close relationship with the Guatemalan military’s high-command helped propel the officers corps into becoming the dominant political force in the country.

The mad scramble for power that followed Arbenz’s departure hardly resembled “glorious victory” claimed by John Foster Dulles in the immediate aftermath of Operation PBSUCCESS.¹⁵³ The deceit and deal-making is better represented by Diego Rivera’s famous mural of the same name. At the center of Rivera’s work, John Foster Dulles accepts a supplicating handshake from a bowing Castillo Armas. Each man is accompanied by his subordinates, and between the two parties sits a large, gleaming-

¹⁵² Richard Nixon, “What I Learned in Latin America” *This Week*. August 7, 1955 ;quoted in Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, eds. Guatemala. (New York: NACLA, 1974) 74-75

¹⁵³ Jonas and Tobis, eds. Guatemala. 74.

white, aerial bomb with the face of Dwight Eisenhower. The Guatemalan people resist, weep, and die behind Castillo Armas, while those behind the American entourage load bananas into UFCo ships under armed guard. The details of this masterpiece reveal truths about the 1954 coup that cannot be adequately transcribed into words, but the greater message is clear—Castillo Armas' Liberation meant Guatemala had surrendered its sovereignty.

Any hopes that Guatemalans had for preserving their revolution proved very short-lived. Although Colonel Diaz had convinced Arbenz to resign with the stipulation that the Guatemalan government would not negotiate with Castillo Armas, Washington had no intention of abandoning its loyal lackey in the moment of triumph. Ambassador Peurifoy succeeded in using Diaz's close relationship with Arbenz to force the president to resign with minimal conflict. With this goal achieved, the Eisenhower administration no longer had any use for Diaz, and anyone with ties to the Arbenz administration quickly became a pariah. Only hours after he permitted President Arbenz his farewell address to the nation, CIA agents burst into Diaz's private quarters and informed him; "Colonel, you're just not convenient for the requirements of American foreign policy." When Diaz replied he had received assurances from Ambassador Peurifoy, the agent shot back; "Well colonel, there is reality and there is diplomacy. Our ambassador represents diplomacy. I represent reality. And the reality is we don't want you."¹⁵⁴ The dialogue between the American spy and the Guatemalan colonel reflected the core dynamic of US-Guatemalan relations. Behind the diplomatic niceties proclaiming good neighbors and non-intervention treaties, the reality was unvarnished imperialism.

¹⁵⁴ Agent Enno Hobbing quoted in; Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*. 207

Despite the colonel's best efforts to appeal to American officials with promises of arresting communists and ending agrarian reform, Guatemalan officers deemed more pliable by the Dulles brothers forced Diaz to resign in a matter of days. No fewer than five provisional juntas, each staffed with a rotating carousel of military-men desirous of the presidency, rose and fell in the eleven days that followed Arbenz's departure. With each iteration, Castillo Armas became a more central figure. Aggressive exchanges with US diplomats and nighttime visits from CIA agents quickly weeded out opposing officers in the Guatemalan military. Having received permission from Secretary Dulles to "crack some heads together," Ambassador Peurifoy dominated the negotiations between Castillo Armas and members of the various juntas.¹⁵⁵ The gun-toting ambassador succeeded, and brokered an arrangement that would allow Castillo Armas to formally become the president by September. On July 7, 1954, ten days after the "glorious victory" of the Liberation forces, Castillo paraded into Guatemala City and began the counterrevolution.

Many leaders within the Guatemalan military still hated Castillo Armas, who they saw as a traitor and a stooge. The fact that the Army had lost to his band of raiders without putting up a fight only compounded the humiliation. Those closely associated with Arbenz were purged from the ranks, but as it became increasingly obvious that the United States was going to ensure a Castillo Armas presidency, most officers abandoned their scruples and pledged fealty to the new government. Nonetheless, nationalist pride still smoldered within the corps. On August 2, just shy of a month into Castillo Armas' reign, roughly one-hundred cadets of the officer training school, *Escuela Politécnica*, attacked *Liberacionistas* who had taken up residence in Guatemala City to prepare for the

¹⁵⁵ Telephone call to Amb. Peurifoy in El Salvador, 1 July 1954 quoted in: Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 176; Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*. 214

inaugural parade. Although the dispute allegedly originated from an incident between cadets and *Liberacionistas* at a local brothel, the young officers-in-training took up arms to reassert the primacy of Guatemala's 'legitimate' military institutions. During the brief battle, the cadets broadcasted their intentions. They were not Arbenz loyalist, rather they were fighting "to vindicate the honor of the army" and to put an "end to insults" from *Liberacionistas*.¹⁵⁶ Outnumbered seven-to-one, the cadets nonetheless prevailed and secured a surrender in a matter of hours. The cadets forced the *Liberacionistas* to rip off all military insignia and were "marched as prisoners of war through the city and loaded onto trains" that shipped them back to the Zacapa barracks.¹⁵⁷ Feeling vindicated, the cadets surrendered the next day with assurances that that they would not be punished. The stunt resulted in a major victory for the Guatemalan Armed Forces when Castillo Armas, under pressure from Ambassador Peurifoy, disbanded the 'Liberation Army.' Over one hundred Guatemalans, many of them innocent civilians, were killed or wounded as the cadets desperately tried to salvage a scrap of dignity for the Army.¹⁵⁸

With the military's injured pride temporarily bandaged by the cadet revolt, the Castillo Armas regime, and its backers in Washington, set about their first order of business: the eradication of communism from Guatemala. In practice, this meant mass-exile, mass-arrest, and mass-murder. In late-July, President Castillo Armas, under the direction of the CIA, formed the *Comite de Defensa Nacional Contra el Comunismo* (Committee for National Defense against Communism/CDNCC), a tripartite board of

¹⁵⁶ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 358, 359.

¹⁵⁷ Santa Cruz Morales, "Secuela" pg. 9 quoted in: Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 359.

¹⁵⁸ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 360

designated red-hunters. The US embassy estimated that, during the initial months of Castillo Armas' regime, the CDNCC arrested an average of two-hundred people per week and held them without formal charges.¹⁵⁹ An era of repression and violence in the name of anticommunism had begun.

Initially, Castillo Armas proved to be as inept at hunting down his enemies as he was at leading his liberation force, and most prominent Arbenz officials and leaders of the PGT escaped Guatemala and found asylum. Frustrated by Castillo Armas' fumbling, the CIA worked with the Guatemalan government to produce a blacklist of subversive citizens—labor leaders, peasant organizers, and anyone sympathetic to the Arbenz and Arévalo administrations. According to historian Stephen Streeter's calculations, the list already contained 70,000 names by August 1954.¹⁶⁰ In late September, embassy officials estimated that around 2,000 Guatemalans remained imprisoned.¹⁶¹ Scholars would later conclude that at least 9,000 people were arrested during Castillo Armas' purge and that the vast majority had no relationship with communism.¹⁶² Jailed without charge by the revived *Guardia Judicial*, the secret political police headed by a notorious Ubico-era chief, many prisoners were beaten, tortured, and murdered with impunity. These arrests certainly didn't bode well for showcasing democracy, but it was the violence in the countryside that served as an omen of things to come.

¹⁵⁹ John Calvin Hill Jr. "Political Arrests in Guatemala" September 24, 1954. DNSA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives. 1

¹⁶⁰ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 39

¹⁶¹ Hill Jr. "Political Arrests in Guatemala" 1

¹⁶² Jonas and Tobis. Guatemala. 75.

In tandem with incarcerating anyone with political loyalties to the revolution, the Castillo Armas regime, encouraged by the Eisenhower administration, quickly dismantled the reforms of the Ten Years of Spring. Agrarian reform and its beneficiaries were the primary target of “The Liberator” and his American patrons. Castillo Armas abolished Decree 900 and returned expropriated land United Fruit and other large plantation owners. Rural workers on those lands, regardless of their political orientation—or lack thereof—were driven off their property at gunpoint. Parallel to setting up the CDNCC, Castillo Armas also announced the Preventive Penal Law against Communism. The law essentially classified any popular peasant organization as a form of communist sabotage, and the penalty for violating this law was death. Massacres of peasants throughout rural Guatemala were the result. Casualties are difficult to calculate for this chaotic period, but Stephen Streeter’s research offers some insight into the scale of the bloodshed. In Tiquisate, a prized UFCo plantation and largest mechanical farm in Latin America, local *campesinos* had received over 55,000 acres of expropriated land.¹⁶³ At least one-thousand of those peasants that received parcels of the Tiquisate plantation were gunned down when the forces of the counterrevolution reclaimed the land for United Fruit.¹⁶⁴ For every plantation bloodbath recorded, countless mass-killings faded into the din of the Counterrevolution. Massacres of peasants had occurred throughout Guatemalan history, but the indiscriminate and total nature of these killings, where entire population centers were wiped out because of their perceived links with communism, would become the hallmark of the Guatemalan military’s Cold War strategies. These

¹⁶³ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*. 73,80.

¹⁶⁴ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 41

kinds of mass-murders would become systematic during the Alliance for Progress era and evolve into full-scale genocide after decades of military rule.

The Counterrevolutionary regime proved capable of dismantling the reforms of the Ten Years of Spring and persecuting its beneficiaries, but the most serious threat to Castillo Armas came from fellow conservatives within the military leadership. Washington, by this point, was well aware that the Guatemalan Army was the final arbiter of state power, and that its leaders must be placated in order for any presidential administration to survive. After the brief cadet rebellion in August, the Eisenhower administration redoubled its efforts at courting commanders who controlled powerful cliques within the Guatemalan Armed Forces. Acting on the advice of CIA field agents in Guatemala, John Foster Dulles convinced Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson that a massive military aid package from the United States would “gain for us the friendship and cooperation of the Guatemalan Army and orient it toward the U.S. and its policies” and grant it “the ability to maintain order.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, by outfitting and funding the Guatemalan security forces, the United States could mold these armed organizations and cultivate future contenders for the Guatemalan presidency and other leadership positions.

By mid-1955, the Eisenhower administration had approved a major military assistance grant, established a mutual defense treaty, and added numerous advisors to the military mission in Guatemala. Having expelled the revolutionary government, the Eisenhower team replaced the threat of Soviet penetration of the Western Hemisphere with a fear of internal communist insurrection as the prime threat to Guatemala. The goal,

¹⁶⁵ Holland memo to Secretary of State, 25 October, 1954. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State. National Archives; John Foster Dulles to Charles E. Wilson, 27 October, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, 4:1235; quoted in Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*, 43.

however remained the same: US control over Guatemala. As such, the United States government would, “through military training missions, foster the concept that Guatemala’s primary emphasis should be given to the maintenance of internal security.”¹⁶⁶ In order to achieve this aim, the United States would do more than provide the Guatemalan military with updated armaments and equipment; it would oversee the development of professionalization and specialization within the ranks.

As part of its efforts to integrate the Guatemalan Armed Forces into its larger Cold War strategy, the military mission would “foster visits of important Guatemalan military officials to the U.S. of to the Panama Canal Zone and, when appropriate, have ranking U.S. officers make good will visits to Guatemala” and “encourage requests for training in U.S. Service Schools and academies.”¹⁶⁷ The National Security Council planners believed that they would “utilize the good will normally generated by the training in U.S. schools to further our objectives”—namely the promotion of “standardization along U.S. lines of equipment, organization, training, and doctrine.”¹⁶⁸ At this time, the highest members of the US embassy staff rarely spoke fluent Spanish, but the “U.S. Military Services will assign personnel to Guatemala who are proficient in the Spanish language and who are the most effective personnel available for such assignments.”¹⁶⁹ Several Guatemalan officers eagerly embraced the new opportunities

¹⁶⁶ United States National Security Council—Operations Coordinating Board, “Outline Plan of Operations for Guatemala”, June 1, 1955. DNSA. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. National Archives. 11

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 12-13

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 13.

offered by the United States and, in doing so, laid the foundation of the counterinsurgency state that would fully emerge during the Alliance for Progress era.

The United States bought the loyalty of the Guatemalan officers with money, munitions, and membership in its elite military academies, but the greater Guatemalan public also needed to be convinced of Castillo Armas' counterrevolution. Even in the face of being blacklisted, beaten, or outright murdered, public protests staged by students continued sporadically in Guatemala City. Security forces retaliated with violence, which only added fuel to what the US embassy described as the "slowly smoldering and politically dangerous" protests against Castillo Armas.¹⁷⁰ The United States Information Service (USIS), in coordination with the US embassy, launched a public relations blitz, hoping to persuade some Guatemalan citizens that their government protected them from Soviet slavery. Generally, these efforts followed a predictable pattern: condemning the Arbenz administration as a minion of Moscow and characterizing any domestic dissidence as being the work of communist insurgents.

Hoping to bolster the prestige of Castillo Armas, John Foster Dulles directed the State Department to sponsor press tours of Guatemala and arranged for Castillo Armas to visit the United States.¹⁷¹ Stephen Streeter argues that the attempt to improve public perception of Castillo Armas proved relatively ineffective. While he gained supporters within the US government, news publications in both countries criticized the colonel-president. Guatemala's most esteemed newspaper, *El Imparcial*, criticized the violence

¹⁷⁰ United States Embassy in Guatemala, "Joint Weeka 12" March 24, 1955. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. National Archives; quoted in Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*, 45.

¹⁷¹ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 48.

and incompetence of the Castillo Armas regime.¹⁷² The New York Times characterized the Guatemalan government as authoritarian, and Time magazine correspondent Robert Rosenhouse faced regular threats from CIA agents and US embassy personnel for his coverage of the student protests. When the US government's smear campaign against the American journalist failed to persuade him to desist, the Guatemalan government assured the US embassy that it would take care of the matter. Four unidentified assailants beat Rosenhouse unconscious at his Guatemalan residence nine months later.¹⁷³

Direct economic aid to the Guatemalan government proved much more prolific than public relations and military support in the US policy playbook. Initially, the Eisenhower administration favored a “trade not aid” policy in foreign assistance, but the need to make Guatemalan a democratic showcase reversed the administration's parsimony. Between 1954 and 1960, the United States facilitated over \$130 million in foreign economic assistance for Guatemala.¹⁷⁴ By injecting massive amounts of capital into the Guatemalan economy, the United States embarked in one of its earliest developmentalist projects for Latin America—a practice that would feature prominently in the Alliance for Progress during the 1960s. The United States financed the Castillo Armas regime, and insulated it from the sharp economic downturn that followed the overthrow of Arbenz. It also effectively placed the Guatemalan government under the direct control of US advisors who constructed what the political scientist Susanne Jonas described as a “parallel government” structure.¹⁷⁵ Foreign aid continued to flow as long

¹⁷² Ibid. 50

¹⁷³ Ibid. 49.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 108

¹⁷⁵ Jonas and Tobis, Guatemala 77-78

as the developmental projects suited the desires of Washington and the World Bank. This translated into unsurprising economic policies from the Castillo Armas government. Negligible taxes, generous subsidies, and the promise of a docile, cheap labor force enticed new prospective private investors while legal disputes with corporations with an established presence in Guatemala, like United Fruit, were nullified and their former privileges largely restored.

The United States dispersed an unprecedented amount of foreign aid money to suit its own purposes in Guatemala, but this early effort at developmentalism also attempted to improve the mono-export agricultural economy. Large US corporations still had a distinct advantage in Guatemala, but the United States began to pursue greater diversification in the raw materials Guatemala provided for the world. Susanne Jonas reveals that the petroleum and nickel industries found incredible opportunities in counterrevolutionary Guatemala when its government granted generous forty-year contracts for subsoil rights. Even though no company successfully found significant oil reserves in Guatemala, petroleum corporations bought the mining rights to over one-half of the total area of Guatemala within a year.¹⁷⁶ The very ground Guatemalans walked upon was all but stamped with the seal of the United States.

Infrastructural projects and social services also received some economic assistance, although it was largely in the context of improving conditions for further foreign investment. Building better roads to facilitate the transfer of raw materials from the country's interior to its major ports had been a perennial project desired by both the United States and Guatemalan governments. When the World Bank granted a \$75 million

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 79

loan for the construction of new highways, however, a stipulation in the deal guaranteed that private US construction firms, not the Guatemalan government, would receive the money.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, social services funded by foreign aid were singularly designed to support the US-sponsored counterrevolution. The powerful unions of the Arbenz years were crushed, their leaders often imprisoned, while the US supported neutered labor federations that, due to intentional neglect, eventually collapsed on their own. American educators, paid with US economic aid, replaced Guatemalan teachers thought to be pro-Arbenz, and the threat of communism became a key feature in the education of the students who could afford it. Disguised as generosity, economic assistance served only to cement US hegemony in counterrevolutionary Guatemala. Leaders in Washington strove to maintain this mirage through the 1960s.

The years of President Carlos Castillo Armas' counterrevolutionary government marked the height of the United States' power in Guatemala. His 'glorious revolution' an accomplishment of the CIA and his 'liberation government' a golem of Washington's design, the regime's persistent weakness centered around its legitimacy. When an ever-widening segment of Guatemalans called for Castillo Armas to drop his emergency dictatorial powers and restore some semblance of democracy to the country, the US embassy actually concurred.¹⁷⁸ To disguise his dictatorship, Castillo Armas formed the *Movimiento Democrático Nacionalista* (MDN), a personalized political party comprised of *liberacionistas* he had installed in the government and military, along with

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 79-80

¹⁷⁸ John Calvin Hill Jr. "The New Phase in Guatemalan Political Life and Its Relation to U.S. Policy," June 24, 1955, DNSA, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives, 1.

anticommunist youth organizations.¹⁷⁹ At its conception, the MDN was little more than a collection of Castillo Armas cronies, but it gradually took on a quasi-fascist political philosophy of militant, centralized power that was reminiscent of the Ubico era. Having done its part to establish the counterrevolutionary government, political scientist Roland Ebel suggests that the Eisenhower administration new approach was to support Castillo Armas financially as he formed a loyal political party, while also cultivating potential opponents of the president: men who the US mission considered politically reliable.¹⁸⁰

The Dulles State Department still believed that there was a potential danger in adopting the electoral approach. An unfriendly, left-leaning government could return to power as a result of increased democratization, but that possibility did not prevent the Eisenhower administration from supporting the return of elections.¹⁸¹ After all, the overthrow of Arbenz had sent a clear message to revolutionaries and radicals, while the counterrevolution had successfully neutralized leftist political organizations. With a firm grip on the Guatemalan economy, government, and military, the Eisenhower administration began to consider the possibility of elections in its “showcase for democracy.”

All attempts at normalizing the counterrevolutionary government came to an abrupt halt when an assassin ended Castillo Armas’s presidency. On July 26, 1957, Castillo Armas accompanied his wife for an evening stroll through the presidential palace, *la Casa Crema*. As they approached the dining hall, a member of the presidential

¹⁷⁹ The anticommunist youth groups consisted of two organizations: the Committee of Anticommunist University Students (CEUA) and the Young Anticommunist Alliance (AJA); Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 46

¹⁸⁰ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 9.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

guard, Romeo Vasquez Sanchez, walked up to the couple, fired two rounds into Castillo Armas, and fled. The nearby guards pursued the assassin upstairs where they found him dead, reportedly a suicide. A provisional government, composed of *liberacionistas* under the banner of their newly founded political party (MDN), immediately declared a state of siege, condemned the assassin as a communist, and initiated mass arrests.¹⁸² Although their leader had been murdered by his own guard in the confines of the presidential palace, the MDN-led provisional government made little effort to investigate the assassination beyond its knee-jerk claim of a communist conspiracy. This prompted the US embassy to conclude that forces within the Guatemalan government, military, or both may have been responsible. Some US officials, later backed by scholarly investigations, believed that the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, ordered the assassination after he and Castillo Armas, once close friends and allies, had a falling out.¹⁸³ Others argue that a power struggle within the MDN resulted in the Guatemalan president's death.¹⁸⁴ One of the more fantastic claims suggests that mobsters from the United States might have orchestrated the killing after being denied permission to establish casinos.¹⁸⁵ Regardless of the real culprit, the United States had lost its puppet-president in Guatemala.

¹⁸² Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 55

¹⁸³ In his comprehensive biography of Trujillo, historian Robert Crasweller revealed that Trujillo had given Castillo Armas between \$60,000 to \$150,000 dollars to sponsor his liberation-invasion force and he expected to wield inordinate influence in Guatemala in return. After taking power, Castillo Armas attempted to mitigate Trujillo's influence in Guatemala in order to improve his own government's reputation. Rumors, especially within Guatemala, swirled around the poorly investigated assassination and some saw Trujillo's hand in the killing. Crasweller provides a complex web of actors related to both dictators and their suspicious activities before and after the assassination. For a more detailed explanation see: Robert Crasweller, *Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator*. (New York, MacMillan Company, 1966) 334-340; and Jonas and Tobis, *Guatemala*. 81

¹⁸⁴ Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984) 152

¹⁸⁵ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*. 236.

The motive behind the Castillo Armas' assassination remains unresolved, but one thing is certain: the Guatemalan president had no shortage of enemies. His regime had weathered four major coup attempts originating from disgruntled military officers. While the military was still the preeminent power in Guatemala, the Castillo Armas years diminished the standing of officers and cadets who had not taken part in the 'Liberation.' Additionally, while their relationship with the United States provided an increase in prestige, equipment, and training, the pervasive nationalist streak within the ranks often ruffled at American advice and directives. The masterminds behind the killing of President Carlos Castillo Armas may forever be shrouded in secrecy, but the officers of the Guatemalan Armed Forces gained the most from his demise. In the instability of the years that followed, military leaders capitalized on every crisis to expand their control over the state.

The Return of Revolution: President Miguel Ydígoras and the Nationalist Army Uprising

The gunfire that ended the Castillo Armas presidency rang out like a starter pistol for the frenzied race to fill Guatemala's highest office. Initially, the United States favored *continuismo*, in the form of MDN leader Miguel Ortiz Passarelli, who partnered with Defense Minister Juan Francisco Oliva to gain support within the army. Washington did not want to relinquish the unprecedented control it enjoyed over the counterrevolutionary government of Guatemala, and believed it could maintain proxy rule if faithful MDN candidates obtained the legitimacy granted by an election. Regardless of the control it exerted over Castillo Armas' counterrevolutionary government, the United States soon

discovered it could not dictate electoral outcomes in Guatemala. This reduction of US influence made ample room for military officers seeking to fulfill their own ambitions and expand the power of their institution within the Guatemalan government.

A myriad of presidential aspirants proliferated with the announcement of impending elections, but the race would narrow down to three major contending parties and their candidates. Positioning itself as the ideological adversary to the MDN, the *Partido Revolucionario* (PR) formed from the remains of Arévalo-Arbenz era leftist political parties to uphold the legacy of the Guatemalan Revolution and the Ten Years of Spring. They selected Mario Méndez Montenegro as their leader. An attorney by training and a politician by practice, Mario Méndez Montenegro had taken part in the Guatemalan Revolution and held several significant offices during the Arévalo Presidency. He and President Arévalo parted ways when the confrontation between Arbenz and Arana appeared inevitable. Méndez Montenegro even sided with Arana supporters against Arévalo's government in the short-lived rebellion that followed the colonel's suspicious murder.¹⁸⁶ The Eisenhower administration, particularly the Dulles brothers, viewed Méndez Montenegro as a possible communist regardless of his record.

The *Partido Revolucionario* and Méndez Montenegro opposed the Castillo Armas government, which they characterized as oppressive and illegitimate, but they also rejected major policies of the Arévalo and Arbenz administrations. They claimed the revolutionary governments had committed “whopping errors” in legalizing the communist party, aggravating foreign corporations, and implementing an “unsound

¹⁸⁶ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 62

agrarian program.”¹⁸⁷ The PR still embraced the populist spirit and democratic reforms of the Guatemalan Revolution, but condemned its more controversial aspects in order to appeal to a broader political base and avoid the ire of the United States. Méndez Montenegro welcomed assistance from the United States, but he criticized the corruption within the Guatemalan government that resulted from the opaque nature of international aid transactions. In short, Méndez Montenegro and the *Partido Revolucionario* were a political party rooted in nationalism, sovereignty, and a discerning interpretation of the Guatemalan Revolution.

This was sufficient for Secretary Dulles to brand Méndez Montenegro and his party as part of the radical left. Dulles informed the US embassy staff to engage all of their Guatemalan contacts and “impress upon them the serious problem which is now posed for Guatemala by [the] return of certain key extreme leftist and communist leaders who threaten to reinstall a vulnerable, ostensibly Liberal Government which will then proceed through [the] same insidious cycle as turned [the] country over to communist during [the] Arévalo-Arbenz period.”¹⁸⁸ Dulles assured US officials that the message would be “crystal clear” to all “thinking Guatemalans” that they must find a candidate “who can solidify center political groups and [the] bulk of the Army in up-coming elections.”¹⁸⁹ Concluding with a veiled threat, Dulles remarked, “This is the responsibility of Guatemalan people to themselves and to their country and unless quickly assumed, their country faces threat of utter ruin...US public and US Congress

¹⁸⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸⁸ John Foster Dulles to US Embassy, “[Danger Posed by Lack of Moderate Center in Guatemala].” November 26, 1957. DNSA: Guatemalan and the US, Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives 1-2

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 1, 2.

simply would not tolerate supporting a government tainted with communism.”¹⁹⁰ In the eyes of the Eisenhower administration, Méndez Montenegro’s association with the Guatemalan Revolution amounted to collusion with communism. When the Guatemalan provisional government, largely composed of Castillo Armas’ MDN, blocked the PR from legally registering as a political party, the United States remained silent. Into this void rushed one of Guatemala’s most complicated and contradictory politicians: General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes.

The fifth of seven children, José Miguel Ramon Ydígoras Fuentes was born on October 17, 1895. His prosperous, landowning family proudly traced its ancestry to Basque nobility. The young Ydígoras showed considerable academic acumen, and his success on examinations, along with the status and wealth of his family, afforded him the opportunity to join some of Guatemala’s elite schools. In 1912, the *Academia Militar* accepted Ydígoras, who had the highest examination scores of his cohort, and he graduated at the top of his class three years later.¹⁹¹ President Manuel Estrada Cabrera personally bestowed the rank of second lieutenant upon Ydígoras in recognition for his achievements at the academy, and the young officer quickly rose through the ranks. He served in prestigious international posts, including the Guatemalan delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference. Upon his return from France, he joined the Army General Staff under several Guatemalan presidents and pursued an advanced degree in engineering.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 2

¹⁹¹ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 2

In October of 1927, Ydígoras assumed his first major political appointment when President Chacon requested he become the governor-general of Guatemala's undeveloped frontier department, El Petén. Equally adept at administering developmental projects and putting down unruly mobs, Ydígoras continued to advance his career when he was appointed governor of Jalapa, and later, under President Ubico, the governor of San Marcos. In fact, his biographer Roland Ebel claims that Ubico became a mentor of sorts to Ydígoras, often protecting him from his rivals within the military hierarchy, and eventually bestowing the rank of general as a reward for his loyalty. When Ubico was overthrown, Ydígoras avoided complete political death, but was informally exiled as Guatemala's ambassador to the United Kingdom. Tainted by his close association with the despised dictator, the forty-eight year old general expected that his career in the new revolutionary government had plateaued. When Colonel Francisco Arana began antagonizing Arévalo's government, and was subsequently murdered, General Miguel Ydígoras found a new foothold for his political ambitions.

While serving in London, Ydígoras had attempted to join Arana's inner circle with pledges of support and flattery. Before he could succeed, Arana was dead, leaving no real competitor against Jacobo Arbenz in the impending presidential election. Ydígoras secretly returned to Guatemala from his diplomatic-exile in London and, one week later, announced the formation of his new political party *Reconciliacion Democratica Nacional (Redencion/RDN)* in advertisements in the major newspapers *La Hora* and *El Imparcial*.¹⁹² His party held a "vague social democratic ideology" of respecting individual and property rights, tolerance, and freedom of the press, but it also

¹⁹² Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 20.

promised to defend the October Revolution by embracing nationalism and democratic reform.¹⁹³ For one of Ubico's old generals, no amount of ambition, creativity, or patriotism seemed sufficient to counter the distinctive advantages of the widely popular Arbenz, a government candidate with a sophisticated political machine.

Set against a backdrop of the assassination of Colonel Arana, the 1950 presidential campaign brimmed with falsehoods, intimidation, bribery, and extortion on all sides. When Arbenz's victory seemed inevitable, a disgruntled military officer who had been discharged for taking part in the *Aranista* rebellion, lieutenant-colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, launched a failed assault on a military base. Castillo Armas had previously sought Ydígoras' support for the takeover, and the General promised he would welcome a military coup, but only if "the government refused to honor his victory. A coup, he stressed, should only be undertaken to secure his claim to the presidency."¹⁹⁴ The treasonous lieutenant-colonel barely survived the botched operation, escaped prison, and fled to Colombia where he would continue to plot against Arbenz until he succeeded in ousting his nemesis with the help of the CIA during the 1954 coup. He also added Ydígoras to his list of enemies as he stewed in exile.

General Ydígoras, like Castillo Armas and several other conservative military officers, also returned to exile when Arbenz won the presidential election. Almost immediately, he began courting members of the Guatemalan military, the US government, and Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza in an effort to organize a

¹⁹³ Ibid. 20-21.

¹⁹⁴ Eduardo Taracena de la Cerda quoted in: Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*. 82. Taracena was involved in this plot.

rebellion two weeks before the inauguration of Arbenz.¹⁹⁵ The exiled general's implausible plot failed to convince anyone, but Ydígoras continued to develop an intelligence network within Guatemala and remained in contact with US officials. As the Eisenhower administration began its search for prominent Guatemalans who might lead their intervention against Arbenz, Ydígoras and Castillo Armas topped the list. To smooth out tensions between the rightist opposition to Arbenz, the two men signed a secret *Pacto de Caballeros* that allowed Castillo Armas to control the counterrevolutionary military campaign and the resultant provisional government. In exchange, Ydígoras would become the political figurehead of the counterrevolution, and would run as its candidate in the first scheduled elections. Additionally, Ydígoras promised that Castillo Armas and his followers would be incorporated into his administration.¹⁹⁶ When the Eisenhower government chose Castillo Armas to lead PBSUCCESS, and subsequently shoehorned him into the presidency, they disregarded the pact and Ydígoras remained exiled. Castillo Armas may have taken his revenge for Ydígoras' previous refusal of support, but any satisfaction he may have enjoyed was short-lived.

Upon learning of the assassination of Castillo Armas, Ydígoras sprang into action and set about reestablishing *Redencion* (RDN), his political party from the 1950 election against Arbenz. When the provisional government announced it would hold elections on October 20, 1957—the thirteenth anniversary of the Guatemalan Revolution—Miguel Ydígoras revealed he would return to his home country to run for president in the election

¹⁹⁵ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 33

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 36

of 1957.¹⁹⁷ The leaders of the MDN, knowing the conservative vote would now split between their party and the RDN, hoped to prevent Ydígoras from running. They nearly succeeded when a crewmember of the plane carrying Ydígoras back to Guatemala informed the General that a lynch mob awaited him at the airport and that the pilot would have to land the plane in El Salvador. The wily Ydígoras refused to believe the report and headed for the cockpit. After closing the door behind him, he put his pistol against the pilot's head and shouted "You son of a bitch. We go to Guatemala or we all die."¹⁹⁸ When they landed in Aurora Airport, a crowd had indeed gathered, but most were supporters of Ydígoras. The prodigal Guatemalan general had returned home.

Having successfully blocked the registration of the center-left *Partido Revolucionario* and its candidate, Mario Méndez Montenegro, the MDN leadership now turned its attention to the much more significant threat to retaining the presidency: General Miguel Ydígoras and his *Redencion* party. Unable to slander the Ubico-era general with claims of communism, attempts to block the RDN from registering as a political party failed. When the MDN-led government began firing *ydígorista* employees, Ydígoras used the incident challenge the impartiality of electoral commission and called for all MDN party members to abdicate their government posts. On election day, Guatemala City and other urban centers began to run out of ballots before noon, and the MDN candidate, Ortiz Pasarelli, declared himself the victor when early returns showed he had a lead by 70,000 votes.¹⁹⁹ Ydígoras would not be denied the presidency for a third

¹⁹⁷ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*. 236.

¹⁹⁸ Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes interview quoted in Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 237. And Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 69.

¹⁹⁹ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 85

time, and he staged a massive protest that decried the 1957 presidential election as a sham and demanded a new, fair contest take place.

Most Guatemalans seemed to have agreed with Ydígoras. The other legal opposition parties supported the protest and echoed the call for new elections. The PR, denied a chance to participate in the election, added their partisans to the growing ranks of demonstrators. Railroad workers went on strike, bringing commerce in the capital to a screeching halt. Desperate to salvage its “showcase of democracy” the United States government demanded a return to constitutional government, sending a clear message that a continued MDN junta would be unacceptable. After intense wrangling at a meeting between US officials, Pasarelli, and Ydígoras, the parties agreed that a new election would take place on January 19, 1958.

The subsequent 1958 contest, although it had its share of electoral shenanigans, appeared much more free and fair than the previous attempt. Mario Méndez Montenegro joined the fray as the *Partido Revolucionario* gained recognition by the Guatemalan Electoral Tribunal, which was now under considerably greater international scrutiny. The contest would be close. The MDN still maintained the advantage of government funding, and after the disgraced Pasarelli was replaced with José Luis Cruz Salazar as their presidential candidate, the party received at least \$97,000 from the CIA.²⁰⁰

Before the annulled 1957 election, most Guatemalan officers remained aloof, although many found the growing militarism of the MDN appealing. Securing strong segments of support within the military was a necessity for any aspiring Guatemalan president, and although he held the rank of general under Ubico, Ydígoras lacked allies in

²⁰⁰ Kinzer and Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit*. 237

the security forces shaped by the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary governments. This changed abruptly when the respected colonel, Enrique Peralta, abandoned his own presidential ambitions and joined the RDN, bringing his considerable following into the Ydígoras camp.²⁰¹ The alliance with Peralta tipped the scales in Ydígoras' favor more than any other factor. Bringing Colonel Peralta within his inner circle would later prove to be Ydígoras' most consequential decision.

Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes won the presidential election of 1958 with a plurality of roughly 42% of the vote. The MDN came in a close second, and retained a majority of congressional deputies. After a series of backroom deals, and the Army patrolling the streets of Guatemala City, the Congress confirmed Ydígoras' presidential victory with a vote of 40-18. The "Old Fox" of Guatemala had finally achieved the goal that had eluded him for seventeen years.

The victory, however, could not be savored. President Ydígoras inherited a country fractured at every level. He partly lacked a legislative majority, he faced opposition from the political right and left, and the United States viewed him with suspicion and doubt. Ydígoras had campaigned on two major issues: anticommunism and economic development. Even before swearing into office, Ydígoras set out on an international trip to the other Central American republics and Washington DC to promote the Central American Common Market (CACM). In Ydígoras' long-term political vision, regional economic integration would serve the dual purpose of fighting poverty and communism in Guatemala and Central America.

²⁰¹ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 98

In Washington, Ydígoras received an unenthusiastic reception. According to Ebel's biographical account, Ydígoras managed to appease Secretary of State John Foster Dulles with a pledge to build a staunchly anticommunist government that supported US policies in the Cold War and entertained President Eisenhower with tales of his wartime association with General George C. Marshall.²⁰² They were also encouraged when Ydígoras promised he would protect the interest of United Fruit. Eisenhower officials were less impressed, however, with Ydígoras' suggestion of creating an integrated political-military organization to defend Central America from communism and his desire to repatriate Guatemalan political exiles. In the following decade, the Johnson administration would embrace the idea of regional defense with the Central American Defense Council (CONDECA), whereas the return of exiled Guatemalans prompted the Kennedy administration to accept Ydígoras' overthrow. President-elect Ydígoras left the United States without much to show for it, but a more pressing crisis in Latin America would see the Eisenhower administration change their attitude toward the eccentric Guatemalan general: the Cuban Revolution.

When Ydígoras returned from his international tour, he began to build his administration. His cabinet consisted of a collection of leaders from nearly every political party, along with a healthy amount of military officers in key positions. Internal disputes frequently arose in his mixed cabinet, a result of the political brokering that allowed him to take office, and Ydígoras spent much of his first years in office contending with his own government. Disputes with unions and students, a perineal thorn in the side of conservative Guatemalan leaders, and a lack of legislative majority made it all the more

²⁰² Ibid. 121

difficult for his administration to implement significant policy changes. The military high command remained divided according to Ebel, but publicly maintained its support for the president who honored his campaign promise to increase officer salaries and benefits.²⁰³

When his critics charged he was soft on communism for considering the repatriation of political exiles, Ydígoras reacted swiftly to maintain his anticommunist credentials with the military and the United States. President Ydígoras defaulted to the time-honored practice of labeling any opposition to his government as being communist. When the 1959 mayoral race for Guatemala City went to the PR candidate, Ydígoras threatened to annul the election with a series of specious legal maneuvers. The attempt to subvert the contest for mayor of Guatemala City failed, but he soon found a new opportunity to attack his leftist opponents after bombs detonated at the US embassy, the residence of the archbishop, and throughout Guatemala City. President Ydígoras blamed communist saboteurs for the bombings and declared a state of siege. He used the incident to arrest students, labor leaders, and members of the *Partido Revolucionario*.

Although support from the PR had helped him nullify the 1957 election, Ydígoras soon turned on his former allies, declared them a communist front, and attempted to return the party to an illegal status. The Electoral Commission denied Ydígoras' request, but his attack splintered the PR into factions along the issue of communist sympathy.²⁰⁴ The president's professed reverence for democracy seemed downright deceitful when, during the 1959 congressional elections, he used imprisonment, kidnapping, and

²⁰³ Ibid. 119

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 156

dragooned plantation workers to secure a legislative majority for his RDN.²⁰⁵ Popular opinion soured as the Ydígoras regime resorted to martial law and blatant authoritarianism, and protests and sporadic bombings continued to plague the capital. As public pressure increased, Ydígoras continued to blame the insidiously intangible forces of communism for Guatemala's woes. In Fidel Castro, Ydígoras would find an indispensable enemy whose connections with communism were uncontested.

The threat of a pro-communist seizure of power in Guatemala seemed more concrete after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and, few, if any, events had greater impact on US Cold War policies in Latin America. Fidel Castro, doctor-turned-revolutionary, after suffering military defeat, imprisonment, and exile, toppled the corrupt dictator and US ally, Fulgencio Batista. Castro led his July 26 movement, named after his failed assault on the Moncada barracks in 1953, into Havana after six years of building the small group of political dissidents into a guerilla army. The Eisenhower administration was suspicious of the popular revolutionary leader despite Castro's emphatic assurances that he and his government were not communists.²⁰⁶ Initially, Moscow also had difficulty discerning the aims of Cuba's new leader and worked closely with his brother Raul Castro to gain influence within the new regime. After Castro's agrarian reform law of 1959 expropriated over one thousand acres of farmland for redistribution, the already troubled relations between the United States and Cuba rapidly deteriorated.²⁰⁷ The Eisenhower administration made little effort to win over the Cuban government.

²⁰⁵ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*, 91. And Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 175-176.

²⁰⁶ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 10.

²⁰⁷ Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 63.

Likewise, Castro and his followers often denounced the United States for its neocolonial rule of Cuba. By 1961, the Cuban revolutionary government nationalized US property, and Fidel Castro announced: “I am a Marxist-Leninist, and I will continue to be a Marxist-Leninist until the last days of my life.”²⁰⁸ Communism had claimed its first country within the Western Hemisphere.

The Cuban Revolution likely salvaged the tattered relationship between the Ydígoras and Eisenhower governments. Washington officials had never been keen on the unpredictable Guatemalan president, who was far more difficult to manage than their minion, Castillo Armas. Nonetheless, the Eisenhower administration tolerated Ydígoras because he was an avowed Cold Warrior. Stephen Streeter’s work reveals that many US officials, including Ambassador Lester Mallory, believed that either the Guatemalan military, or worse, left-leaning parties and their protestors, would remove Ydígoras from office before 1960.²⁰⁹

Although frustrated with some of Ydígoras’ actions, the United States continued to pour money into Guatemalan security forces. In 1959 alone, the Guatemalan National Police received three US advisers and over \$700,000 for training and equipment.²¹⁰ Additionally, through the Mutual Security Program, the Army and Air Missions in Guatemala dispersed at least \$1.3 million in funds from 1957-1960.²¹¹ By becoming the

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 90

²¹⁰ Robert L. Rupard. “Guatemala Evaluation Report”, May 13, 1959. DNSA: US and Guatemala. Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development. Records of the Office of Public Safety. National Archives. 2.

²¹¹ Lestor D. Mallory. “Mutual Security Program in Guatemala” September 21, 1959. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. National Archives. 1

chief patron of the Guatemalan Armed Forces, the Eisenhower administration hoped it had safeguarded its alliance against communist incursion. Should Ydígoras fall, Washington would still have strong ties to whichever military officer emerged from the inevitable power struggle. President Ydígoras, however, surpassed expectations. In a remarkable gamble, Ydígoras struck a fateful bargain with the Eisenhower administration that solidified him as the preeminent foe of Castro, but simultaneously initiated one of the largest military insurrections in Guatemalan history.

In his memoirs, President Ydígoras claimed that he knew that Cuban Revolution represented a communist invasion of the Western Hemisphere nearly two years before Castro declared he was a follower of Marx. Moreover, Castro was a direct threat to Guatemala: “Through our intelligence we learned that politicians, students, and others, were arriving in Cuba in ever-increasing numbers to receive military training for the purpose of forming guerrilla groups and making secret landings in Guatemala.”²¹² With opposition against his government growing more emboldened by the day, Ydígoras feared that Arévalo, Arbenz, and their supporters could return to Guatemala, backed by Cuban revolutionaries, and topple his unpopular regime. The grand communist conspiracy was confirmed in Ydígoras’ mind on May 20, 1959 when his intelligence contacts reported that Jacobo Arbenz arrived in Cuba, where “he was immediately received by Prime Minister Fidel Castro and taken to the Sierra of Escambray by Raul Castro, head of the Cuban Armed Forces, to visit the training camps where the legions were being prepared for the strike against Guatemala.”²¹³ Welcoming a foreign

²¹² Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*. 83.

²¹³ *Ibid.* 121

distraction from his domestic woes, Ydígoras mobilized the Air Force and Army to respond to the rumored presence of Cuban infiltrators in Panama. Believing that an expeditionary force of Guatemalan soldiers was incoming, the band of four-hundred insurgents surrendered to Panamanian authorities without a fight.²¹⁴ Projecting himself as Castro's chief opponent, Ydígoras basked in this early victory and touted that he was the first leader in the Western Hemisphere to confront the Castro-Communist menace for years to come.

The Eisenhower administration soon adopted a matching hostility toward Castro's Cuba, and prepared to dispose of the revolutionary leader as just as they had done to Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. In May 1959, the same month that Arbenz arrived in Cuba, the CIA armed a small contingent of anti-Castro guerrillas already inside Cuba, which failed to gain traction against the revolutionary regime.²¹⁵ As the Eisenhower administration began to lay more extensive plans, Ydígoras, facing continued strikes and domestic unrest he claimed were Castro-inspired, pressured Washington to act against Cuba. On March 17, 1960, President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to initiate a major covert action to eliminate Castro's government. The operation reunited many of the key planners who had designed Operation PBSUCCESS, and they used the overthrow of Arbenz as a model for removing Castro.

It is not entirely clear when representatives of the United States and Guatemala first began to discuss cooperating in the operation against Castro. As early as the late summer of 1959, Ydígoras sent his wealthy confidant, Roberto Alejos, to convince the

²¹⁴ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 182

²¹⁵ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 216

Dulles brothers to launch an attack on Cuba.²¹⁶ Planning shifted to action by early April 1960 when CIA station chief Robert Davis contacted Alejos, and suggested that he should arrange a meeting with the Guatemalan president to discuss his role in the impending operation. Finally appreciated for his anticommunist efforts by the United States, President Ydígoras struck a deal with the Central Intelligence Agency.

In his own version of events, Ydígoras was uncharacteristically terse about his role in the initial plans, although he did claim credit for coming up with the idea:

“Castro-Communist influence became stronger every day, especially in the capital... The attack was so dangerous that I was obliged to take the offensive. I had talks with groups of Cuban exiles and with nations that were friendly towards them. We drew up a plan of action against those who had transformed Cuba into a detention camp and a base to corrupt America. Representatives of the United States came to see me about training the Cuban anti-Castro forces and we came to a spoken agreement. My government granted permission for the training of Cuban contingents and for the massing of arms and planes on Guatemalan soil.”²¹⁷

The details of the “spoken agreement” remain unknown, but scholars have speculated that it may have been debt cancellation, a personal bribe, increased economic and military aid, Washington’s support for Guatemala’s claim to Belize, or a combination of these incentives.²¹⁸ In exchange, the Guatemalan government would secretly permit the CIA to construct a training camp, Base Trax, on one of Roberto Alejos’ remote plantations in Retalhuleu. The \$1.8 million compound boasted a mile-long airstrip, housed over five-hundred Cuban exiles, and between twenty and thirty US instructors. Ramping up the rhetoric against Castro, Ydígoras closed the Guatemalan embassy in

²¹⁶ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 195

²¹⁷ Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*. 159.

²¹⁸ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 96, 196; Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*, 217

Havana and broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba on April 28, 1960. In July, Jacobo Arbenz proclaimed that very soon he would be “back in Guatemala’s government palace speaking to his beloved people”²¹⁹ The announcement seemed to confirm Ydígoras’ most explosive accusations against Cuba, and after allegedly receiving word of an assassination plot against him, the president declared a state of siege that lasted over two months.²²⁰ As he attempted to convince his country of curse of Castroism, President Ydígoras failed to anticipate that his actions would give rise to a much more immediate threat within his own military.

“Guatemala, like all other countries, is receptive to rumors and the weapon of the whispering campaign was constantly used with success,” Ydígoras opined as he reflected on the obstacles he faced in his presidency.²²¹ The details of Ydígoras’ deal with the CIA may still remain obscured, but word of a US training camp for a Cuban invasion force spread relatively quickly in Guatemala. The newspaper *Prensa Libre* published the first report of a US military base in Guatemala in early September, 1960. President Ydígoras attempted to counter the story by claiming that the airstrip was purely commercial, and he even staged a public dedication of Guatemala’s newest “airport,” although he could not explain where his government acquired the funds for the facility, or how it had been completed in a mere twenty-six days.²²²

²¹⁹ Jacobo Arbenz July 26, 1960 speech, quoted in Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 193

²²⁰ A “state of siege” is almost indistinguishable from martial law. Military units patrol the streets, strict curfews are enforced, police powers are expanded, and many civil rights are suspended..

²²¹ Ydígoras, *My War with Communism* 125

²²² Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 194

Unable to convince the press, Ydígoras tried to whip up anti-Cuban hysteria when he ordered an airstrike on a Cuban schooner off the Yucatan Peninsula. He justified the attack by revealing that Guatemalan intelligence had uncovered a large cache of Cuban weapons on Guatemala's Pacific Coast. The historian Stephen Streeter speculates that these weapons were planted by Ydígoras as a false-flag operation.²²³ This seems a likely explanation, especially given that the ship targeted by the Guatemalan Air Force was in the Atlantic Ocean, whereas the arms were discovered on the Pacific coastline. Regardless of this inconsistency, the American and Guatemalan media, along with the US government, accepted that Cubans were attempting bring violent revolution to Guatemala. American foreign service officers in Havana reported that Castro, sensing that his enemies were gathering momentum, prepped the Cuban Air Force to be "ready [to] annihilate attacking force as [the] element [of] surprise [is] now lacking."²²⁴

While Ydígoras presented a convincing case for Cuban hostility, he failed in squelching the story of US bases in Guatemala. Through October, an explosion of articles in the Guatemalan and American press revealed the full extent of the training facility and its purpose. Protestors gathered around the American Embassy shouting "Cuba Si, Yanqui No!" and threw stones through the building's windows.²²⁵ The leading student organization, *Asociacion de Estudiantes Universitarios* levied the charge of high treason against President Ydígoras and the Army for allowing such a gross violation of

²²³ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 219

²²⁴ Daniel McCoy Braddock, "[Cuban Air Force Prepared for Attack from Guatemala]", October 29, 1960. DNSA: US and Guatemala, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives. 1.

²²⁵ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*, 220

Guatemalan sovereignty.²²⁶ Faced with such overwhelming evidence and public vitriol, Ydígoras reluctantly admitted that military training bases did exist in the region. Lying to the public, he swore that their purpose was to prepare Guatemalan soldiers for a Cuban invasion of Guatemala, which the president predicted would occur in early November. President Ydígoras believed he had sufficiently countered the charges of treason, but he did not realize that the accusation greatly pained a military preoccupied with its lost honor.

Several factors contributed to the decision of nearly one-third of the Guatemalan officer corps to revolt against the Ydígoras government. Factionalism within the Guatemalan military was hardly a new development. Divisions ran deep between line officers, typically older, conservative men who earned their rank through patronage and long years of service, and school officers, who had been trained in Guatemala's military academy, *Escuela Politecnica*. The school officers tended to be younger and more left-leaning. President Ydígoras exacerbated this divide when he promoted the aging line officers and bestowed military ranks on his civilian sycophants. According to Streeter's research, many of the school officers attended special training courses at American bases in the region and the United States, and upon returning to Guatemala, resented the relative squalor, poor pay, and lack of medical facilities they had to endure. They blamed Ydígoras, whose campaign promise of better salaries and benefits for officers only found its way into the hands of his loyalists in the military.²²⁷ Such favoritism presented yet another example of the rampant corruption in the Ydígoras government that the fiery

²²⁶ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 194

²²⁷ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 223

young officers believed was opening the door for communist agitation and Yankee imperialism.

The most flagrant sin of the Ydígoras government, however, had been the violation of Guatemala's national sovereignty. The number of Arbenz and Arévalo supporters was relatively small in the Guatemalan Armed Forces, but a strong sense of nationalist pride stemming from the Guatemalan Revolution remained a core principle that cut across the factional divides. The severity of opposition to the presence of the Cuban-exile training camp in Guatemala varied, but the majority of officers, excepting those who owed their careers to Ydígoras, rejected the American presence as undermining the authority of the Guatemalan Armed Forces and the sovereignty of the nation. Some certainly must have chafed at the lack of consultation and not being cut in on the deal Ydígoras brokered with the CIA. Whatever concessions Ydígoras and Alejos might have secured for themselves, it was clearly not for the betterment of the Guatemalan state.²²⁸ Others, especially those fervent nationalists that took up arms against the regime, reviled the "puppet" government of Ydígoras whose greed resulted in yet another "shameful violation of our national sovereignty."²²⁹ President Ydígoras speculated that his officers fell victim to Cuban propaganda that stated the General "was building up a mercenary army to replace and substitute the national army. Such a fiction could only convince those who had never renounced their allegiance to communism."²³⁰ Regardless of their individual motivations, as many as four hundred of these angry

²²⁸ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*. 261

²²⁹ Luis Augusto Turcios Lima quoted in Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*, 224.

²³⁰ Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*. 160

officers formed a secret society, *el Organización del Niño Jesús*, that conspired to overthrow Ydígoras, install a military junta, and reorganize the military hierarchy along more equitable and merit-based lines.²³¹ After nearly a year of preparing for the right moment to launch their attack, the nationalist firebrands of the Guatemalan officer corps staged a revolt that fired the opening salvo of the Guatemalan Civil War.

At 2 A.M. on Sunday November 13, 1960, a group of five officers and roughly one-hundred of their men seized control of the Matamoros barracks in Guatemala City, raided it for armaments, and retreated to the Zacapa region with several jeeps and a small tank.²³² When fellow conspirators failed to materialize as anticipated at the nearby Mariscal Zavala base, the rebel group cut phone lines and fled further into the countryside. The last minute abandonment of the revolt became endemic, and seven of the nine military cliques that had pledged to join the cause broke their promise when the attack began. This depleted the expected ranks by at least two-thirds, although the two remaining rebel contingents that honored the pact had sufficient numbers to overtake the important military bases at Zacapa and Puerto Barrios. Any sense of victory the rebel forces felt would not last long.

“We knew and we were prepared for the offensive” bragged President Ydígoras as he recalled one of the most triumphant episodes of his presidency.²³³ A conspiracy of such magnitude, plotted for over a year, could not stay secret for long within the bubble of the Guatemalan military. Eventually, word reached the Army Chief of Staff, Ricardo

²³¹ Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*, 224

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*. 160.

Peralta Méndez, who reported the information to his uncle, Colonel Enrique Peralta. Awarded the position of Minister of Agriculture for his decisive allegiance during the 1958 presidential election, Colonel Peralta promptly brought news of the plot to President Ydígoras. Government loyalist within the high command subsequently placed many of the suspected organizers under house arrest, disrupting the leadership of the rebellion and convincing the vast majority of the wayward officer corps to reconsider their recalcitrance.

When the attack began, President Ydígoras was reportedly in Quetzaltenango for a ceremony, but renowned sociologist Richard Adams suggests that he was likely soliciting help from the CIA at the nearby Retalhuleu base that had been the source of officer malcontent.²³⁴ President Ydígoras returned to Guatemala City hours later and took personal command of the military operations against the rebel forces. In conjunction with CIA and Cuban mercenary pilots, Ydígoras launched a devastating aerial assault on the rebel-held Zacapa and Puerto Barrios bases. Confident that victory over the rebels was assured, President Ydígoras returned to the presidential palace for a “leisurely lunch with his family.”²³⁵

The public, however, required an explanation for why the Guatemalan military appeared to be tearing itself apart. After his lunch, Ydígoras called an emergency session of Congress to declare martial law. He followed the session with a press conference, where he blamed Cuba, Mario Méndez Montenegro and the *Partido Revolucionario*, and boasted that the revolt was a good thing because it proved that his warnings of

²³⁴ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*. 261

²³⁵ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 198.

widespread leftist subversion had been accurate.²³⁶ The military brass knew, and US officials suspected, that Ydígoras' claims of a Cuban connection were a fabrication. Embassy officials worried that "this kind of situation [is] of course ideal for exploitation by extremist both right and left" and "that military are loath to fight brother military."²³⁷ Perched precariously "atop a murmuring volcano," the US embassy worried that Ydígoras remained vulnerable because his military "now refuse to believe, in spite of [the government's] protestations and exhortations, that rebels are really Castro agents"²³⁸ As a precaution, Ydígoras ordered that the airstrips at the rebel bases be destroyed immediately to prevent Cubans forces from supporting the revolt and requested that the United States assist in preventing such a possibility.²³⁹ Eisenhower's response team, headed by CIA director Allen Dulles, after conferring with intelligence analysts that concluded that the Guatemalan communist party had been unaware of the revolt and that they could find "no direct evidence of Cuban participation in the uprising," but nonetheless reported to President Eisenhower that "it looks as if the Cubans have a hand in this."²⁴⁰ Such speculation appears reckless, but the Eisenhower administration dared not risk revolution in Guatemala. Eisenhower ordered an aircraft carrier, loaded with US

²³⁶ John J. Muccio. [Insurrection in Zacapa], November 14, 1960. DNSA: Guatemala and the United States. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. National Archives.

²³⁷ John J. Muccio. "[Military Revolt Continues]" November 14, 1960. DNSA: Guatemala and the United States. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. National Archives. 1-2

²³⁸ Ibid. 2

²³⁹ Muccio. "[Insurrection in Zacapa]"

²⁴⁰ Christain Herter, "Memtelcon", November 14, 1960. FRUS 1958-1960, 5:GT-34, 84-1171 and; Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 228

marines and aircraft, to head for Guatemala to assist in interdiction against the predicted Cuban invasion.

Unsurprisingly, an attack from Castro or communist infiltrators within Guatemala never transpired. The rebels found themselves in an increasingly hopeless situation. Bombing runs pounded the rebels at Zacapa, and forced them to flee to the surrounding hills under heavy fire from strafing aircraft. Colonel Peralta personally led a massive force of three-thousand infantrymen to retake the Zacapa barracks, scattering the rebel forces nearby and isolating those that remained in Puerto Barrios.²⁴¹ President Ydígoras then concentrated the full might of Guatemalan and CIA air assets on the lone rebel holdout. Bombing runs from CIA B-26 Marauders detonated gasoline storage tanks, partially destroying the Puerto Barrios base, and after eight hours of continuous bombardment, the remaining rebel officers fled for the border.²⁴² By November 16, the nationalist revolt of the Guatemalan military was over and Ydígoras stood triumphant.

President Ydígoras reveled in his good fortune: a catastrophe had turned into a triumph. He paraded through Guatemala City in an open car, basking in the cheers of his citizens. The widely-despised, old general would not enjoy such adulation ever again. Seeking to restore some domestic normalcy, President Ydígoras granted amnesty to most military personnel and refrained from prosecuting civilians like Mario Méndez Montenegro and other members of *Partido Revolucionario*.²⁴³ The surviving leaders of the revolt fled for Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico. Three of these officers—

²⁴¹ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 199

²⁴² Streeter, *Managing the Counterrevolution*. 230

²⁴³ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 201. There is no reason to believe that anyone in the PR had knowledge of the revolt, although Ydígoras charged they were in league with Castro and fomented the rebellion.

Alejandro de Leon, Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, and Luis Turcios Lima—radicalized during their exile. When they returned to Guatemala four months later, they began a guerrilla insurgency that lasted for thirty-six years. In an equally fateful decision, Ydígoras elevated Colonel Enrique Peralta to Minister of Defense: a just reward for the man who had twice saved the General’s presidency. From his position, Defense Minister Peralta consolidated power within the military, recently purged of its more radical elements, and fostered greater unity within the fractious armed forces under his leadership. The Eisenhower administration, with only a month left in its tenure, breathed a short sigh of relief. Guatemala had not gone red under their watch. Their “showcase for democracy” hardly lived up to its name, but the crisis-ridden country and its peculiar president were now the problem of the incoming Kennedy administration.

* * *

Once the guardians of the landed-elite, Guatemala’s military leaders steadily accumulated enormous political clout after the 1944 revolution. Despite the tumult of sixteen years of revolution and counterrevolution, the Guatemalan Armed Forces emerged from a wild range of governments as the backbone of the state. Although the dominant factions within the military changed with the political leanings of the civilian government, the institution as a whole steadily increased its power, especially in times of crisis. Military officers ushered in the Guatemalan Revolution, clashed to control the movement’s direction, and ultimately brought the Ten Years of Spring to an abrupt end. Although the CIA’s 1954 intervention greatly contributed to overthrowing Jacobo Arbenz, it was his most trusted colonels that convinced the besieged president to resign. In pre-revolutionary Guatemala, ranking officers often played a role in presidential

politics, but they were only one of many players who had influence over who occupied the Presidential Palace. After the overthrow of Arbenz, military leaders still vied with civilians for political power, but the real competitors increasingly came from within the officer corps. The Counterrevolution of Castillo Armas and the fumbling, early years of the Ydigoras regime only enhanced the standing of the officer corps. Persecution of the left and the rise of militarized political parties like the MDN contributed to the image of the officer corps as Guatemala's last bastion of order.

Despite these advantages, the Guatemalan Armed Forces had not yet become the absolute masters of the Guatemalan state. While many officers loathed Colonel Castillo Armas and his Liberation Army, they successfully survived the chaos of the counterrevolution's early years, ejected many *Liberacionistas* from their ranks, and began to make independent contacts with patrons within the United States government. Likewise, American officials quickly began to realize the importance of creating close ties to prominent members of the Guatemalan military. The bond between Washington and their willing supplicants within the Guatemalan officer corps solidified as the United States funneled aid to the armed forces and began training a new generation of military leaders. As mentioned above, the intrusion of the United States offended the nationalist impulses that many officers had inherited from the Guatemalan Revolution, and some revolted against their government for allowing the US to use Guatemala as the staging ground for the invasion of Cuba. Instead of asserting Guatemala's national sovereignty, the defeat of the rebellion largely purged the ranks of left-leaning officers and set the stage for the military's political ascendancy.

With a new US president, John F. Kennedy, arriving in office and a major rebellion quelled, it appeared that stability might return to Guatemala. The objectives of the US mission in Guatemala shifted: uncovering “the international Soviet Communist conspiracy” remained the order of the day, but policymakers wanted to counter communist influence with developmental projects and media manipulation, not the suspension of elections or direct military rule.²⁴⁴ These less bellicose methods would not last long, and instead supplemented the armed forces control over the state. Once the relatively inexperienced Kennedy administration confronted problems that required immediate responses, the long-term goals of development and democratization were undermined by defaulting to military solutions.

²⁴⁴ Frederick J. Barcroft, “Country Assessment Report – Guatemala,” February 3, 1961, Digital National Security Archives. United States Information Service, Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1, 5, 16.

CHAPTER II: NEW ALLIANCES

The Alliance For Progress Comes to Guatemala

Two years after Castro greeted cheering crowds as he rolled into Havana atop a tank, John F. Kennedy became the thirty-fifth president of the United States. Ambitious, dynamic, and the youngest president to date, Kennedy embodied the potential and energy of the 1960s for his supporters. Throughout his campaign for the presidency, Kennedy criticized the Eisenhower administration for not waging the Cold War effectively. Although the most well-known accusation Kennedy made was the baseless claim of a growing “missile-gap” created by the rapid increase in the Soviet nuclear arsenal, Kennedy also blamed the Eisenhower administration for mishandling Cuba.²⁴⁵ Kennedy had his own bold, new plan for winning the Cold War in Latin America: the Alliance for Progress.

This chapter examines the early interactions between the Ydígoras and Kennedy administrations. The evidence presented here reveals how Kennedy’s team quickly began to see the Guatemalan Armed Forces as the most reliable bulwark against communist revolution as public protests and guerrilla groups began to assail the Ydígoras administration. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion exacerbated the Kennedy administration’s reliance on military control over civilian governance, especially after former Guatemalan officers-turned-rebels looked to Castro’s Cuba for inspiration and support as they began their own insurrection. The preference for military men only

²⁴⁵ John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, “Debating Cuba and Castro” October 21, 1960 in *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*, eds. Robert Holden and Eric Zolov, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). 221.

increased with the arrival of Kennedy's new ambassador to Guatemala—John Bell. Seeing Castro-Communists behind every public protest and dissident politician, Ambassador Bell helped clear the way for the Guatemalan military's seizure of power. When guerrilla groups began to assail the Ydígoras regime, the “enlightened anticommunism” of the Alliance for Progress became another tool for the Guatemalan officer corps to expand their power and influence throughout the country.

An Alliance Announced: The New Face of US-Guatemalan Relations

The initial impact of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala was limited. Kennedy's team had noble ambitions, but lacked knowledgeable specialists who could guide the enormous aid program through the local conditions that would impede its advancement. In Guatemala, conservatives rejected President Ydigoras' attempts to modernize tax laws and implement a degree of land reform. The Civic Action program proved one of the few early successes of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala. Controlled by military officers, the public works project became a way for individuals to improve their station while promoting Guatemala's armed forces. In time, it would provide the Guatemalan military with access to enormous resources and laid the foundations for counterinsurgency state.

On March 13, 1961, two-hundred fifty guests, selected from the diplomatic corps of the nations of Latin America and the United States Congress, gathered in the White House for a lavish event.²⁴⁶ At his inaugural address months before, the young American

²⁴⁶ Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communism in Latin America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) 9.

President had vowed “to our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge – to convert our good words into good deeds – in a new alliance for progress – to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty.”²⁴⁷ The United States had rebuilt Western Europe from the ashes of World War II, and many Latin Americans hoped for a similar investment for the nations of the Western Hemisphere. Kennedy had long held that strong relations with Latin America were vital to US success in the Cold War, and he wasted little time unveiling his plans. Addressing the crowd of dignitaries and politicians, President Kennedy announced a renewed partnership between the United States and Latin America that would “complete the revolution of the Americas, to build a hemisphere where all men can hope for a suitable standard of living, and all can live out their lives in dignity and in freedom.”²⁴⁸ The speech, broadcast live in the major languages of the Western Hemisphere by Voice of America, resonated with millions of Latin Americans who hoped that the first Catholic President of the United States could amend the often-troubled relationship amongst the family of American Republics.

The Alliance for Progress, in spirit, was a quasi-Marshall Plan for Latin America that promised to help fund economic and social development in the region. Kennedy championed education, public health, and most significantly, tax and land reform. After the passage of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, a new organization, the Agency for International Development (USAID) emerged to administer international assistance

²⁴⁷ John F. Kennedy. Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

²⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy. “The Alliance for Progress” March 13, 1961, reprinted in *Latin America and the United States*, 227.

programs.²⁴⁹ Although Kennedy invoked the revolutions that had liberated much of the Western Hemisphere from colonial rule in his speech, the President and his advisors feared that the region was vulnerable to radical social forces.²⁵⁰ A product of the modernization theory postulate that material improvement would induce social and political progress, the Alliance for Progress offered an alternative to the road to revolution. Some scholars, such as Lars Schoultz, have asserted that the Alliance for Progress was little more than Dollar Diplomacy with “social science window dressing.”²⁵¹ At the time, however, many Latin American governments embraced the Alliance because it seemed to mark a significant shift in US policy toward the region. For Guatemala, the Alliance for Progress acted as a vehicle for the advance of repressive militarism.

For all the idealism and potential of the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy administration faced significant hurdles of implementation. No member of Kennedy’s cabinet or White House staff had extensive experience or expertise in Latin American affairs. Although some influential aides, such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., provided advice on the region and supported the Alliance, most major policy decisions on Latin America fell to the president alone.²⁵² He got little help—Secretary of State Dean Rusk had little interest in the region and viewed it as peripheral to concerns in Europe and Asia. One of Rusk’s staffers complained that the Secretary of State gave as much attention to Western

²⁴⁹ Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 357.

²⁵⁰ Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 10.

²⁵¹ Schoultz, *Beneath the United States*, 357.

²⁵² Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 16.

New Guinea as he did Latin America.²⁵³ Most officials, including Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Edwin Martin, lacked fluency in Spanish. Kennedy's appointed Ambassador to Guatemala, John Bell, was no exception to the rule and came to his office with little experience in Latin America beyond infrequent travel and minimal "classroom" Spanish.²⁵⁴ Without knowledgeable, skilled officials, Kennedy's ambitious project lacked a crucial component necessary for a major policy shift.

Teodoro Moscoso, the man chosen to lead the Alliance for Progress, was an exception to this rule. Born in Puerto Rico, Moscoso had considerable experience managing large-scale developmental projects directed by state bureaucracies. After a successful career as the Executive Director of Puerto Rico's nationalized industrial and economic development agency, *Compania de Fomento Industrial*, Moscoso headed *Operacion Manos a la Obra* (Operation Bootstrap). Under his guidance, the program boosted Puerto Rico's industrial economy and attracted considerable international investment. Beyond his experience, Moscoso passionately articulated his beliefs that massive developmental projects could produce social justice and widespread prosperity—they had the power to reshape society. Moscoso caught the attention of the Kennedy administration, but he was initially tapped as the Ambassador to Venezuela in May 1961. His term ended abruptly: a month after he had arrived in Venezuela, he was captured by rioting students who burned his car and seized sensitive diplomatic documents in his

²⁵³ Ibid., 15.

²⁵⁴ John Bell, interview by Arthur L. Lowrie, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. June 17, 1988.
<http://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mssmisc/mfdip/2005%20txt%20files/2004bel02.txt>

possession. Kennedy recalled Moscoso to Washington in the Fall, but for a promotion rather than punishment.

The Alliance for Progress needed capable leadership, and Kennedy was short on men with experience in Latin America. Recalling the meeting, Moscoso stated that Kennedy summoned him to the second-floor living room of the White House and “more or less, gave me no alternative. He just said that I had to take this job and that he had discussed it with several people and that he felt that I was the obvious choice and more or less implied that there was no use arguing with him.”²⁵⁵ On November 3, 1961, Teodoro Moscoso became the first Coordinator for the Alliance for Progress. An exemplar of the ambitions of the developmental program, Moscoso pledged that “within a decade, the direction and results of Latin American history is to be changed.”²⁵⁶ Although the new Coordinator of the Alliance for Progress admitted the task would be difficult, he could not foresee the monumental challenges ahead.

The United States’ legacy of militarism in both its historic relationship with Latin America and the prosecution of the Cold War proved to be the greatest challenge the Alliance for Progress needed to overcome. Kennedy wanted to avoid the mistakes of the recent past by cutting ties with dictators who carried the United States’ favor by professing their anti-communist credentials.²⁵⁷ At the same time, Kennedy recognized that military aid was necessary for maintaining influence over Latin American armed forces. As a result, USAID did not restrict its funding to developmental projects and often

²⁵⁵ Teodoro Moscoso, “Oral History Interview” JFK Interview #1, May 18 1964. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. 20.

²⁵⁶ Teodoro Moscoso to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions, 1962*. 14:429 ; Found in Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*. 149

²⁵⁷ Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 24.

contributed to police and military forces. In Guatemala, as we shall see, security forces not only received the bulk of US foreign aid, but also became responsible for implementing Alliance for Progress initiatives ranging from building schools to reforestation projects. The Guatemalan Army, which shouldered most of these new responsibilities, used the funds to indoctrinate youths, control vital resources like clean water and medicine, and to gain greater control over civil society. In the case of Guatemala, Kennedy's high-minded rhetoric failed to match his actions, as the power of authoritarian military leaders swelled with the patronage of the United States in the name of anti-communism.

* * *

Four months had passed since the November 13 rebellion threatened to topple the Ydígoras government when Kennedy announced the Alliance for Progress would usher in a new era of hemispheric cooperation. Instead of unseating the Guatemalan president, the revolt actually had a somewhat stabilizing effect on the Ydígoras regime. President Ydígoras had seized the opportunity to personally lead the defense of his government, bolstering his public image. The fractious Guatemalan military had been purged of its more leftist elements, and the majority of the officers who remained in positions of authority greatly respected the new Minister of Defense, Colonel Enrique Peralta. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations shared a lack of enthusiasm for the Ydígoras government. The haphazard *caudillo* was far from the "decent democrat" that the Kennedy team hoped would lead Guatemala into the Alliance for Progress, but he did have some crucial credentials: he was an avowed anticommunist and self-proclaimed enemy of Fidel Castro. Although he had publicly blamed Cuba for the uprising in

November, Ydígoras understood that the insurrection resulted from offending the nationalist pride of segments of the Army that opposed the use of Guatemala as a training center for Cuban exiles and mercenaries. Moreover, it proved that ambitious military men were becoming bolder. Ydígoras needed to bolster his popular support, and the dynamic new project proposed by the Kennedy administration could be the lifeline that sustained his presidency. The Alliance for Progress presented an opportunity for the two radically different presidents to achieve their goals.

The Guatemalan military had been a relatively solid base of support that Ydígoras counted on since his election to the presidency in 1958. Already dominated by conservative, anticommunist factions, the revolt in November 1960 had the effect of homogenizing the political outlook of the Army, although fissures remained between the cliques of aspiring officers and their loyal subordinates. Furthermore, the Guatemalan Armed Forces, as a whole, had generally remained aloof from the general public, especially in rural areas dominated by indigenous populations. Their most common form of contact had been the *comisionado*—provincial officers who rounded up conscripts and acted as informants to their commanding officers.²⁵⁸ The Alliance for Progress presented an opportunity for President Ydígoras to reward officers who supported him, improve military-civilian relations, and make headway into Kennedy's developmental objectives through Civic Action programs

The Ydígoras government had encouraged the use of military resources for national development projects before Kennedy assumed the Office of the Presidency. On December 1, 1960, the Inter-American Defense Board had passed a resolution that

²⁵⁸ Adams, *Crucifixion By Power*. 270

allowed the Guatemalan Army to engage in a number of civic duties.²⁵⁹ President Ydígoras personally supported the program, but only a few individual officers initially reached out to communities where they were stationed. The US Embassy in Guatemala quickly identified the burgeoning Civic Action programs as a conduit for Alliance for Progress projects. After launching an investigation, they concluded that the Guatemalan military, with proper organization and coordination, could administer and implement major public works projects and would reap major benefits.

State Department planners had considerable goals for the Civic Action programs. Public outreach could greatly enhance the reputation of the military, and the government it represented, and as a result, military service would gain more prestige. Furthermore, US embassy staff noted that the Guatemalan military engaged in building “a better citizenship” where recruits would learn valuable skills through vocational training they could put to use after their enlistment.²⁶⁰ A testament to the aspirational tone of the Alliance for Progress, planners projected that even the cultural gulf between *ladinos* and *indigenas* could be spanned by officer-administrators who committed the men under their command to improving living conditions for residents, especially village leaders, in their region of operation. The Civic Action programs, driven by the cooperative, concerted, centralized efforts of the government and military could produce a profound

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 273

²⁶⁰ Robert Corrigan. “Military-Civic Action “ February 6, 1961. DNSA: Guatemalan and the US. Record group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives. 11.

“psychological impact on local people [that] will be inescapable within one year” and, better still, was “easy to propagandize.”²⁶¹

The Civic Action programs in Guatemala would be one of the most enduring aspects of the Alliance for Progress. The Guatemalan government and US State Department had a broad vision for the numerous areas where the military could intervene with Civic Action projects. Moreover, it seemed to offer something to all the parties involved. By doling out lucrative contracts for civil projects, President Ydígoras could curry favor with military officers and hopefully impress Washington with the results. The Kennedy administration could jumpstart the Alliance for Progress by piggybacking on the existing Civic Action program in Guatemala, while assuring themselves that the Guatemalan military was the most reliable vehicle for modernization in the country. Officers who participated in the program could expect increased earnings, prestige, and opportunities to advance their careers while improving the reputation of their cherished institution. Ostensibly, the people of Guatemala, especially the rural poor, were to be the greatest beneficiaries. The Guatemalan Army would march through the countryside and leave schools, hospitals, and housing in their wake as they built a road to the next village. The officers of the Guatemalan military already had a firm grip on the right to dispense death where they saw fit, and now, under the banner of the Alliance for Progress, they could now offer to improve the lives of those who proved loyal. In accumulating these responsibilities, Guatemala’s armed forces gained enormous power over any area benefitting from Civic Action.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 5—Corrigan gives an example in his report describing how providing indigenous villagers with access to various stud animals could open the door to more meaningful exchanges, cooperation, and even trust between the military/government and rural people who usually are on the margins of official attention.

Putting soldiers to work building schools, wells, and roads would not be enough to develop Guatemala into a robust capitalist democracy. While the Guatemalan economy had stabilized somewhat since the disarray that followed the 1954 coup, most Guatemalans were still crushed under poverty, hunger, and exploitative labor practices and land tenure. Taking a cue from Kennedy's inaugural hints of sponsoring developmental projects in Latin America, Ydígoras announced in his New Year's Eve radio address that his government would focus on economic recovery in 1961 by diversifying agricultural exports and industrial production while using funds previously granted by the Eisenhower administration to expand infrastructure and bring electricity to rural areas.²⁶²

The Guatemalan President was renowned for his bombast, but he immediately set out to achieve his promise to improve economic conditions with an ambitious legislative agenda. His administration introduced bills that would guarantee investments from private corporations and help Guatemala meet requirements for increased US aid. The two most significant, and politically dangerous, economic problems the Ydígoras administration sought to address were agrarian and tax reform. Debates over land rights and ownership had been at the core of Guatemala's political upheavals, and President Ydígoras knew he had to walk a narrow path to avoid being maligned by both sides of this perennial issue. While he could not be described as visionary in his evaluation of Guatemala's agrarian situation, Ydígoras recognized that an economy overwhelmingly based on a few cash crops whose prices were determined by a global market would never sustain stability. The 1954 coup made the possibility of expropriating land owned by

²⁶² Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 213.

private individuals or corporations anathema, but Ydígoras reasoned that selling state-owned lands to small-scale farmers and their families would improve the production of domestically consumed goods.

Since coming to office, Ydígoras strove to pass an income tax law for Guatemala. His efforts had met stiff resistance. In March 1960, the Ydígoras administration had introduced the *Ley del Impuesto Sobre La Renta*, a rather generous income tax law.²⁶³ It had languished in the Guatemalan Congress for over a year with little sign of passage. The Guatemalan government, however, desperately needed revenue to service outstanding debts, compensate an increasing backlog of unpaid government employees, and implement an increased salary scale for teachers in public institutions.

Despite the energy and ambition of Ydígoras' legislation in 1961, it gained little traction in the legislative assembly. His efforts at land reform found opposition on both sides—conservatives saw it as state-redistribution while the left called for expanded expropriation and minimizing the amount *campesinos* would have to pay for their new land. By way of legislation, little was accomplished, but the Ydígoras administration did manage to redistribute some land. During his five years in office, the Ydígoras government granted over forty-five thousand *campesinos* land, although this was considerably fewer than those who received land under Arbenz, and even Castillo Armas.²⁶⁴ Resorting to executive orders, Ydígoras managed to ram through approval of a

²⁶³ The graduated income tax ranged from a mere 5% on the first 1,000 Q, up to 39% on incomes over 500,000 Q. It also included numerous deductibles for business expensive, charitable giving, and medical costs. Found in: Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 218.

²⁶⁴ It is estimated that as many as 100,000 people benefitted from Decree 900 under Arbenz. Using figures from the Guatemalan sociologist Mario Monteforte Toledo, Richard Adams extrapolates that as many as 76,965 individuals benefitted from land redistribution under Castillo Armas. A detailed breakdown and discussion of these figures can be found in: Richard Adams, *Crucifixion By Power*. 396-403.

salary increase for teachers, but the income tax law that would pay for it and other amenities remained dead in Congress. Worse still, Ydígoras' renewed campaign to pass the income tax generated enormous opposition. A few years later, Ydígoras' commitment to pushing the income tax law would set his downfall in motion, but in early 1961 his efforts spurred plots and protests that continued almost unabated throughout the remainder of his presidency.

Miguel Ydígoras earned a reputation as a skilled politician and this praise stemmed from his ability to divide his enemies rather than brokering compromises between opposing factions. Just as he was attempting to revive Guatemala's income tax law, the Constitutional provision that had been passed during Castillo Armas' presidency that had exiled many leftist leaders expired. Hoping to dilute the coherency of his opponents on the political left, Ydígoras replaced the strict provision with one that allowed political exiles to return. He believed that the return of former supporters of the Arbenz and Arévalo administrations would multiply factions on the left, rendering them incapable of mounting a serious political challenge. President Ydígoras undoubtedly expected that enacting such a law would provide more substance to his claims that he respected democratic values. If Kennedy wanted Latin American leaders to embody the principles of the Alliance for Progress, the old general would at least attempt to play the part.

Repatriating political exiles and attempts at tax reform united Ydígoras' rivals on the right and left in an unprecedented manner that would herald sustained protest movements and widespread opposition to the regime. The most vehement protestations came from a broad section of conservative Guatemalans. On the far-right, the *Movimiento*

Nacional Liberacion (MLN), a splinter party of the MDN that laid claim to the legacy of “the Liberator” Carlos Castillo Armas, led the charge against Ydígoras. They believed Ydígoras paved the way for the return of dangerous subversives that their slain leader, President Castillo Armas, had banished from the country because of their association with the communist party or the Arbenz and Arévalo administrations. It was opposition to the income tax law, however, that drew together the most powerful conservative coalition against the Ydígoras government.

The *Comité de Acción Económica y Social* (CAES) brought together urban professionals, business elites, conservative students, and wealthy landowners who decried the income tax as a road to economic ruin and yet another way for the government to enrich itself at the expense of its citizens. On February 22, CAES ran advertisements in the major newspaper, *Prensa Libre*, which denounced Ydígoras as a corrupt dictator and lackey of foreign corporate interests. In order to save the country, CAES called for Guatemalans to take to the streets on February 28 in a show of united opposition to the Ydígoras regime.²⁶⁵

Guatemala’s political left was generally hostile to Ydígoras and the counterrevolutionary conservatism that he represented. On the issue of land reform and taxation, however, the mainstream leftist parties did not have as severe a reaction to the legislative push as their conservative counterparts. Nevertheless, many wanted to capitalize on the chance to destabilize the Ydígoras government. When the crowd of four-thousand angry protestors began to gather on February 28 in *Parque Central* in Guatemala City, many members of the *Partido Revolucionario* (PR) were among their

²⁶⁵ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 219

ranks. Initially, Guatemalan reporters marveled that such a gathering of extremist and moderates, both from the right and left, had come together to attack Ydígoras, but fighting soon broke out between the various factions and the rally dispersed.²⁶⁶

The CAES and MLN protestors claimed that communists had subverted the rally, but President Ydígoras privately took credit for undermining the demonstrations. In a conversation with the former US ambassador, Lester Mallory, Ydígoras revealed that he had seeded the crowd with his own supporters who began agitating the crowd with cries of “Viva Castro!”²⁶⁷ They even managed to provoke members of the crowd into attacking the US embassy, who threw stones through several windows. Ydígoras was apparently quite pleased with himself, and reported that his furtive ploy had been successful in making those who opposed his tax and land reform look like Castro-sympathizers. Once again, Ydígoras had averted disaster by deftly turning his enemies against one another.

Having momentarily disrupted his domestic opponents, Ydígoras quickly pivoted to the international stage to shore up further support for his regime abroad. Immediately after the demonstrations on February 28, President Ydígoras wrote to President Kennedy urging him to take immediate military action against Cuba. He reiterated his claims that Cuba was ultimately responsible for the November 13 officer uprising, but also labor strikes and the recent organized protests in Guatemala. “Castro has struck hard at Guatemala”, he informed his American counterpart, and that as “a military man” he had deduced that if Guatemala remained on the defensive, Castro-communists would

²⁶⁶ John Muccio, “Joint Weeka, No. 9.” March 2, 1961. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives.

²⁶⁷ Lester D. Mallory, “Despatch No. 520: Memorandum of Conversation” March 18, 1961. Department of State, National Archives.

prevail.²⁶⁸ The time for offensive action against Cuba had arrived, but other Latin American countries hesitated to attack Castro “because they fear that communists will rise against them.”²⁶⁹ If Kennedy postponed the invasion of Cuba, the other countries of Latin America would “lose faith and hope in their liberation”, their governments would collapse, and Castro’s revolution would spread like a blight through the Western Hemisphere. Just as he had been an early anti-Castro crusader, Ydígoras boasted that by ending the November 13 revolt he had proven that such uprisings could be defeated. Ydígoras was keen to remind the young American president that he had “provided space in various parts of our national territory for the training of Cuban land and air forces” and facilitated numerous air raids from these bases to drop food, armaments, and propaganda.²⁷⁰ He concluded his missive with an assurance that his policies toward Cuba were in line with those Kennedy had professed on the campaign trail—on the matter of Castro’s Cuba there was a “necessity for prompt and conclusive action.”²⁷¹

In his memoirs, Ydígoras proudly pronounced his longstanding rivalry with Castro:

“I fought Castro-communism from the outset and from the first days of 1959 I was the victim of Fidel Castro’s aggression. I frustrated his invasion of Panama in March, 1959; I broke off relations with his government in April, 1960; I withstood two military uprisings inspired by his money and his agents; I operated with anti-Castro groups to train two thousand Cubans and launched them against the Soviet bastion in the

²⁶⁸ Miguel Ydígoras, “Letter to President Kennedy” February 28 1961. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 3.

²⁶⁹ *ibid*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Caribbean...Perhaps no other Latin American President faced more, and unceasing danger.”²⁷²

His animosity toward Castro notwithstanding, the Guatemalan President had other motivations for urgently pressing his case for immediate action against Cuba. President Ydígoras had paid a hefty political price for allowing Guatemala to become the staging ground for US operations against Castro and he hoped to reap additional rewards for the risks he endured for Washington’s machinations. If the new American President decided to scrap the operation, Ydígoras would have sacrificed a great deal with little to show for it. By emphasizing his role as the region’s farsighted guardian against Castro’s revolution, Ydígoras displayed his potential value to the Kennedy administration. He also needed the economic, political, and military support of the United States to endure domestic opposition. Although his government had survived a major military uprising, Ydígoras was surrounded by enemies. Kennedy clearly had a new vision for Latin America, and the “Old Fox” of Guatemala did not want to be swept aside.

The Alliance for Progress faced considerable hurdles even before its official implementation in Guatemala. The Kennedy administration lacked officials with experience with Latin America, and their broad plans for development and modernization did not always consider regional and local factors. In Guatemala, updated tax codes and agrarian reform measures met with stiff resistance from conservatives, and Ydígoras’ early attempt to align his policies with the Alliance for Progress generated public protests from the entire political spectrum. One area where developmental initiatives successfully gained traction was the Civic Action program. Controlled and implemented by the Guatemalan military, Civic Action granted ambitious officers another avenue to expand

²⁷² Miguel Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963) 1.

their personal wealth, improve the reputation of the armed forces, and provide the military with another crucial access point to resources typically reserved for the civilian government. Within six years, the Alliance for Progress' longest-lasting and most impactful program created an avenue for the militarization of Guatemalan society.

Bay of Pigs: Countering Communism in Guatemala

The impediments to the Alliance for Progress became magnified by the emergence of potential revolution in Guatemala. The Kennedy administration's failure to oust Castro in the Bay of Pigs fueled anti-American sentiment in Guatemala and throughout Latin America. Opposition movements began to take up arms against the Ydigoras regime, and a fledgling guerrilla movement began to take shape. Causing further alarm, Juan Jose Arevalo, the first president of the Guatemalan Revolution, announced he would end his exile and return to Guatemalan politics. These challenges encouraged the United States to look to the officer corps as their most valuable ally in Guatemala.

On April 17, 1961, Kennedy granted President Ydígoras' wish when his administration sent Brigade 2506, a paramilitary force of Cuban exiles, to secure the beachhead at *Playa Giron* within the Bay of Pigs. Dubbed "Operation Zapata", it was one of the most embarrassing diplomatic and military blunders of the Cold War. Kennedy had inherited the plan to invade Cuba from the Eisenhower administration. In fact, according to the research of Fursenko and Naftali, Eisenhower had cautioned Kennedy that the Soviets and their allies were on the offensive and that hemispheric security rested

on removing Castro from power.²⁷³ Hoping to win a clear victory and establish his credentials as a Cold Warrior, Kennedy moved ahead with Eisenhower's operation.

The invasion, modeled largely on the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala, did not enjoy the success of its predecessor. Historian Thomas Wright explains that Castro had anticipated an invasion, and built a two-hundred thousand man militia to support the regular army, and had arrested one-hundred thousand Cubans with questionable loyalty to prevent a potential uprising.²⁷⁴ On April 17, the fifteen-hundred strong force of CIA-trained exiles landed at the isolated bay and met heavy resistance. Faced with an unfolding disaster, Kennedy withheld vital air support to avoid the direct involvement of the United States. The invasion force became stranded along the beach as Cuba's Soviet-made tanks and aircraft routed the would-be attackers and cut off their supply lines. Kennedy took personal responsibility for the botched mission and the humiliation significantly affected his administration's work in Latin America.²⁷⁵ Moreover, such an overt display of aggression by the United States against Cuba compounded the weaknesses and contradictions within the Kennedy administration's plans for US-Latin American relations and critically undermined the goals of the Alliance for Progress.

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion dealt a serious blow to the United States. The small island nation defied the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere and proved that the power of the United States had limitations even within its sphere of influence. Fidel

²⁷³ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 77-78.

²⁷⁴ Thomas C. Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 32.

²⁷⁵ Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 97

Castro now had a unifying symbol to rally the Cuban people to his socialist revolution and his partnership with the Soviet Union became much stronger. Kennedy felt personally disgraced by the failed invasion, and the president waged a clandestine war against Cuba, utilizing sabotage, terrorism, and assassination, in an attempt to bring down Castro's regime. The Kennedy administration became fixated on the need to prevent another Cuba, and this obsession shaped US policies in Guatemala for the remainder of the decade.

Although Ydígoras had succeeded in turning protestors against each other in February, renewed demonstrations took place in response to the Bay of Pigs invasion and were proving more difficult to subdue. On April 18, the day after the invasion began, an angry mob supposedly led by communists, attacked the US chancery building, prompting the government to declare further demonstrations illegal. Many ignored the ban, but sustained protests failed to materialize after counter-demonstrators, likely organized by the government, fired on the crowd killing three.²⁷⁶ Ydígoras trucked in roughly two thousand pro-government peasants to support police numbers in an effort to quash further protests in Guatemala City. This proved to be a limited remedy and opposition to the Ydígoras government from the right and left continued apace. Student protests cropped up throughout the country, and when law students in Quetzaltenango burned Ydígoras in effigy, the Guatemalan president offered "to pay a one-way passage to Cuba for all who wanted to defend Castro" where such civil disobedience would be rewarded with a firing squad.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 224

²⁷⁷ El Imparcial, May 2, 1961. Archivo Historical, CIRMA.

While Ydígoras had obviously earned the enmity of Guatemalan leftists, conservatives were also growing increasingly concerned that the government failed to adequately protect the country from various communist threats. Some officers grumbled that Ydígoras needed to crack down on leftist opposition, lest Castro press his advantage. One concerned colonel, Antonio Batres, a commanding officer of the Air Force, ominously warned the US air attaché that the Guatemalan Armed Forces would use any means necessary to prevent communists from seizing power.²⁷⁸ It was neither the first, nor the last time officers within Ydígoras' own military implied that they would remove their president if his actions could lead to communist influence over the government of Guatemala.

Indeed, before the year was over, Ydígoras foiled numerous coup plots, most of which incorporated one or more military officers of significant standing. Across the political spectrum, retired and active officers, student leaders, union organizers, and police chiefs concocted schemes to rid themselves of the mutually despised president. Ydígoras attempted to rebuff claims he was soft on communism by ordering military exercises along the Guatemalan-Mexican border. Minister of Defense Enrique Peralta announced that the maneuvers were to dissuade the exiled Jacobo Arbenz and any of his supporters from attempting to enter Guatemala. Few, if any, disgruntled anticommunist found the show of force convincing. Even Mario Monterroso Armas, the nephew of the slain "liberator" President Carlos Castillo Armas, was implicated in an attempt to unseat Ydígoras.²⁷⁹ The US embassy reported that these right-wing plotters, which included two

²⁷⁸ John J. Muccio, "Joint Weeka No. 17" April 27, 1961. Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

²⁷⁹ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 227.

army colonels, a major, the former chief of the national police, several congressional deputies, and a slew of enterprising civilians, intended to assassinate Ydígoras, distribute hidden weapons to their supporters, and seize Guatemala City.²⁸⁰ At least sixty people involved in the plot were arrested on July 11 as they arrived in the capital, and Ydígoras issued warrants for a further one-hundred fifty people suspected of playing a role in the thwarted coup.²⁸¹ Although the jailed plotters plainly stated their purpose was to overthrow Ydígoras because of his leniency toward communists, the Guatemalan president returned to an old routine: he blamed Cuba. When the US embassy queried if the attack had originated from the extreme right or the extreme left, presidential aide Colonel Monzon replied, “neither, extreme ambition.”²⁸²

In the aftermath of this coup attempt, Ydígoras declared a state of siege and the Guatemalan Congress quickly ratified the decree. With expanded emergency powers and Guatemala’s security forces patrolling the streets, Ydígoras hoped to restore some order before the impending Congressional elections. For a time, this was relatively successful, and the conservative coalition of political parties that loosely supported Ydígoras secured a plurality (nearly 42%) in the Guatemalan legislature, likely through illicit means.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ John Muccio, “Embassy Telegram 14”. July 13, 1961. Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Amendment to Article 58, Decreto 1069, *Recopilacion de las leyes de Guatemala, 1960-1961*; found in Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 231, 235: In 1960, the Guatemalan Congress had changed electoral laws so that when a coalition of political parties ran a single candidate, the sum total of their votes were counted for representation, rather than votes for the separate and distinct parties. Formerly, a candidate with more votes from a single party would win over a candidate who had more votes, but spread throughout several parties. This gave the Ydígoras’ coalition a distinct advantage. Furthermore, votes counted in Guatemala City, which were considered more difficult to tamper with, showed Ydígoras’ coalition with only 14.6% of the vote.

There were large demonstrations protesting the elections as a sham, but nothing that seriously threatened the regime. By December, when the new American Ambassador, John O. Bell, arrived in Guatemala to assume his post, it seemed as though the Ydígoras administration might bring the country closer to meeting Alliance for Progress goals in 1962. Yet, the Ydígoras government secured this stability through force and fraud; it would prove to be short-lived.

Both the Kennedy and Ydígoras administrations feared that Guatemala was particularly susceptible to the lure of Castro's revolution, especially after the Bay of Pigs debacle. Guatemala's revolutionary recent-past perpetually threatened the legitimacy of the hardline anticommunist governments that followed the ouster of Arbenz. Guatemala's major socioeconomic problems—the sharp racial, social, and economic divide between Ladino elites and the indigenous poor—had only become worse following the 1954 coup and provided fertile ground for communist propaganda. Opposition to the corrupt, authoritarian government was widespread across a broad section of Guatemalan society. Yet—with the exception of the November 13 rebellion in 1960—organized, armed, revolutionary opposition to the Ydígoras government had failed to materialize in any meaningful way. From their safehouses throughout Guatemala, several survivors of the ill-fated rebellion began to prepare for sustained conflict with the Guatemalan government and its patron, the United States.

Two figures of renown stand out in the leadership of the emerging revolutionary guerrilla movements that coalesced in the aftermath of the officer revolt of 1960: Luis Augusto Turcios Lima and Marco Antonio Yon Sosa. Both men were very young—Turcios Lima being only nineteen at the time of the uprising, while Yon Sosa was merely

three years older—when they found themselves leading a revolution.²⁸⁴ The two lieutenants of the Guatemalan Army had excelled at *Escuela Politécnica*, the premier academy for military officers, and had received extensive training from US special forces. In the Panama Canal Zone, Yon Sosa learned advanced counterinsurgency tactics, while Turcios Lima received US Army Ranger training and took courses on military intelligence from the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia²⁸⁵ Following the collapse of the 1960 revolt, the rebel officers found refuge among the peasants of rural Guatemala, where they experienced a political awakening. Lieutenant Yon Sosa, who was particularly struck by the plight of the rural poor, believed his initial revolt had failed because “At the time the [MR-13 group] had no distinct ideology. That is why we talked with people on the right and left—anyone who was in agreement with toppling the Ydígoras government... [the rebellion] would not in the least have solved any of the urgent problems facing the Guatemalan masses, and surely the event would have passed into history as just another coup, very similar to one carried out later by Enrique Peralta Azurdia and his henchmen.”²⁸⁶ As they gathered their strength in hiding, the remaining rebel officers began to view Cuba, *campesinos*, and the communists who remained underground in Guatemala as their natural allies.

While Lieutenant Turcios Lima favored partnership with the more traditionally-oriented communist party, Yon Sosa gravitated toward the peasantry as the foundation of

²⁸⁴ Richard Gott, *Rural Guerrillas in Latin America*. (Penguin Books, England, 1970) pg. 74-75.

²⁸⁵ Thomas L. Hughes to Dean Rusk, “Communism in Guatemala” February 9, 1966, DNSA: Guatemala and the United States. Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, 3.; Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 239.

²⁸⁶ Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, “Breves Apuntes Sobre el Movimiento Revolucionario 13 de Noviembre” *Pensamiento Crítico*. Vol. 15, April 1968, 133. Archivo Historical. CIRMA.

revolutionary success. Nicknamed “El Chino” because his father was a Chinese merchant, Yon Sosa developed a decidedly more Maoist approach the revolutionary struggle in Guatemala. As he sought asylum in the aftermath of his failed revolt, Yon Sosa had been awestruck:

“In the most difficult days for us...we felt very near the solidarity of those barefoot people dressed in rags who arrived in large numbers to make us presents of fruit, coffee, food, encouraging words, and even once in a while a five cent piece. This great experience that we lived through together with the attitudes of the Guatemalan peasants, who also provided us with food and showed us the best routes, guiding us to safe places, made us think seriously about that attitude and led us to the conclusion that these people behaved as they did because they were trying to win us over to their cause; they wanted leaders to lead their struggle.”²⁸⁷

As the former officers faced mounting persecution from the military they once served, they became increasingly radicalized and determined to lead the Guatemalan masses into a protracted struggle for a more just society.

Lieutenants Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa had good reason to believe the rural poor of Guatemala would flock to their armed insurrection. Reportedly, while the rebel officers were in hiding after the government forces put down the revolt, over eight hundred *campesinos* came forward and pledged they would fight under their command against government forces. According to Adolfo Gilly, a Yon Sosa partisan and self-appointed chronicler of his guerrilla band, at the time, the officers refused the assistance because they lacked the strategic, political, and economic resources to organize an uprising.²⁸⁸ Unable to find allies in Guatemala’s legal political entities, the emerging leaders of the insurgency turned to the *Partido Guatemalteco Trabajo* (PGT), the

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Adolfo Gilly, “The Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala, Part I” *Monthly Review*, Vol. 17 (1), May 1965, pg. 14

Communist Party of Guatemala. Formed in 1949, the latter days of the Arévalo presidency, the party was legalized by Jacobo Arbenz and became a significant political contender during his tenure in office—a fact often touted by Eisenhower administration officials to justify the 1954 intervention. The US-backed Castillo Armas government swiftly declared the PGT illegal and it returned to its underground operations. The PGT championed electoral politics as its preferred method of bringing about a socialist revolution—focusing on strengthening unions and agrarian reform. Now locked out of legitimate political participation, the PGT began to shift toward a more radical revolutionary model. In 1960, the year of the Guatemalan officers rose in revolt, the PGT endorsed “all forms of struggle” at its annual Congress.²⁸⁹

While Yon Sosa looked to the peasantry as a source of revolutionary strength, Turcios Lima worked to align the rebel forces with the more urbane politicians of the PGT. In July 1961, Turcios Lima met with PGT leaders and determined “they were different from the others...they really cared about the people,” and he began to negotiate an alliance between his forces and the communist party.²⁹⁰ Richard Gott, a prominent historian of Latin American guerrilla movements, argues that at this time, the PGT did not dominate or control the actions of what would come to be known as the MR-13 front. He cites the guerrilla leader, Camilo Sanchez, who claimed the initial rebels included “sincere revolutionaries, Catholics, Communists, and people whose only aspiration was to overthrow the regime in order to replace it by something more equitable.”²⁹¹ Gott is

²⁸⁹ Jonas and Tobis, *Guatemala*, 180.

²⁹⁰ Turcios Lima interview quoted in; Gott, *Rural Guerrillas in Latin America*, 75.

²⁹¹ Camilo Castano, “Aver les guerilles du Guatemala”, *Partisans* No. 38, July-September 1967, pg. 150; quoted in Gott, *Rural Guerrillas in Latin America*, 76.

certainly correct that the coalition of forces that opposed the government were far from homogenous, a fact that would later lead to fragmentation. In the early years of the 1960s, however, these parties would find common ground in their mutual desire to end the Ydígoras presidency and they would jointly sanction revolutionary violence as the means to secure this end.

Just as Turcios Lima made terms with the PGT, the national police captured Alejandro de Leon, an original leading member of the officers' uprising. To this point, security forces had treated the rebellious officers with irritated apathy, especially because Guatemalan military culture discouraged outside interference with what it viewed as internal discipline issues and officers were reluctant to punish their former brothers-in-arms.²⁹² This changed abruptly when Chief of Police Ranulfo Gonzalez Ovalle summarily executed Alejandro de Leon shortly after his capture. Reflecting on the event, Adolfo Gilly remarked that "The shock produced by the death of Alejandro de Leon...acted as a powerful stimulus in leading the movement to put an end to its negotiations with the opposition parties and to decide to launch guerrilla warfare."²⁹³ In August, Yon Sosa, Turcios Lima, and their subordinates officially designated their armed struggle the *Movimiento Revolucionario de Noviembre* (MR-13), wedding the initial officer revolt to the new revolutionary movement. They remained in alliance with the PGT, but largely separated from the world of "bourgeois politicians and took to the hills"

²⁹² Officers had strong fraternal bonds with members of their *promocion*, the cohorts from their days in officer training. Also, each officer is mentored by a cadet of the cohort of the previous year—the *centenario*. This set a cultural norm of extreme loyalty to one's *promocion* and *centenario* that supposedly transcended politics. One particularly evocative, although unsubstantiated, example of this loyalty holds that Lt. Yon Sosa attended a party with fellow members of his *promocion* although they were technically enemies. For a more detailed explanation of this practice see; Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 255-259

²⁹³ Adolfo Gilly, "The Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala, Part I", *Monthly Review*, Vol. 17 (1), May 1965 p. 17.

of the Izabal department to begin the armed struggle in earnest.²⁹⁴ Although there remained a clear distinction between the politician and the guerrilla, the PGT adopted a more pronounced and radical agenda in solidarity with their armed comrades. After the official creation of the MR-13, the Central Committee of the PGT passed a special resolution that defined armed struggle as the chosen path of the Guatemalan Revolution.²⁹⁵ The PGT and MR-13 guerrillas would continue to have a separate, but symbiotic relationship. In the following years, the guerrilla leaders became more deeply enmeshed in Marxist ideology and traveled to Cuba to bolster the training they had received from the United States. Similarly, the PGT would soon develop its own armed-wing and join the MR-13 guerrillas in their assault on government forces.

All three groups, the former military officers, the downtrodden peasants, and the communist politicians had been hesitant to embrace armed struggle, having experienced major defeats and setbacks in the counterrevolutionary period, but the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion established that the United States and its clients in Latin America were not invulnerable. They could be resisted, even defeated, by dedicated revolutionaries and inspired leadership. Guatemala's revolution predated Cuba's, and Castro had learned valuable lessons from its defeat and dismantling by the CIA and its proxies. Castro's success in repelling the Bay of Pigs invasion applied these lessons and proved revolutionary governments in Latin America could successfully defend themselves against US-backed invasions. Armed with this knowledge and a renewed faith in the inevitability of communist victory, many discontented Guatemalans began to believe they

²⁹⁴ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 40.

²⁹⁵ Jonas and Tobis, *Guatemala*, 180.

could restore their revolutionary past. While the governments of Guatemalan and the United States fretted over Cuban infiltration, a native-born guerrilla movement was taking root.

* * *

For the moment, neither Ydígoras nor US officials were greatly troubled about rebel officers, angry peasants, or clandestine political parties. The powers-that-be reasoned the most likely source of communist revolution would come from without—Cuban infiltrators sewing domestic discontent—and from within—rival contenders for the office of the president. Fending off political rivals from all sides was nothing new to Ydígoras, a man who had risen to power by pitting his many enemies against one another. Although these perennial plotters perturbed US officials, one particular politician caused increasing concern: former president Juan José Arévalo.

Following the coup that removed President Arbenz from office in 1954, Arévalo, his predecessor, had traveled throughout Latin America, but had not returned to his native Guatemala. The first president of the Guatemalan Revolution had resumed his academic career, writing scathing, albeit meandering, indictments of US foreign policy. His most notable work, *Fabula del tiburón y las sardinas* (Fable of the Shark and the Sardines) lambasted *Yanqui* economic imperialism and condemned the United Fruit Company, the CIA, and John Foster Dulles, among many others. Despite his loud opposition to past actions of the United States and its corporate entities, Arévalo also distanced himself from his more radical successor, the deposed Jacobo Arbenz. He widely praised John F. Kennedy and the Alliance for Progress. Moreover, in 1961, he condemned Fidel Castro and repeatedly disavowed communism and the choices made by Arbenz, his former

friend and chosen heir.²⁹⁶ Arévalo explained his shifting opinion of the United States by proclaiming, “There has been a changing of the guard. The dinosaurs have been defeated, and the Great Republic is ruled by new men—men who studied at Harvard.”²⁹⁷

Regardless of the praise he heaped on Kennedy and his programs, most members of the administration viewed Arévalo as dangerous for US interests in Guatemala. Many agreed that although he might not be a communist, Arévalo’s fierce nationalism and his relationship with Arbenz tainted the former president. After all, at the onset of his struggle against Batista, several US officials had once viewed Castro as essentially a nationalist. As a result of this miscalculation, the Cuban Revolution had successfully defeated a US-backed invasion and now stood poised to export communism throughout the Western Hemisphere.

In the closing months of 1961, despite numerous challenges, the strength and stability of the Ydígoras government reached its peak. It had crushed a military rebellion, coup attempts, and protest movements while managing to cobble together a political alliance that, in theory, had the power to enact Ydígoras’ legislative agenda. While support from the US remained tepid, the Guatemalan president had reason to believe that he had rightly earned the grudging support from the Kennedy administration for his steadfast commitment to destroying Fidel Castro and his revolution. While his authoritarian streak and notoriety for corruption failed to mesh with the ideals of the Alliance for Progress, President Ydígoras fought hard to bring Guatemala in line with the

²⁹⁶ Juan Jose Arévalo, *Escritos complementarios*. Guatemala City: Jose de Pineda Ibarra, 1988. Archivo Historical, CIRMA. pgs. 71-73, 76-77, 100-101.

²⁹⁷ Juan Jose Arévalo, “*Carta politica al pueblo de Guatemala*. El Imparcial. Guatemala City, 1963., Archivo Historical, CIRMA. Pg 10.

economic goals of the program and his regime could claim that it adhered to the norms of a democratic society, with some notable exceptions.²⁹⁸ Just before his political coalition took control of the Guatemalan Congress and pushed the Ydígoras administration to its apex, former president Juan José Arévalo definitively ended the rumors that swirled around his political future by announcing he would soon return to Guatemala to run in the 1963 presidential election. Arévalo's presidential pronouncement marked the beginning of the precipitous decline of the Ydígoras administration.

In late November 1961, major newspapers *El Imparcial* and *La Hora* published an interview with Arévalo conducted by the Mexican reporter, Armando Fischer.²⁹⁹ After months of suspense, Arévalo declared, "I will return to Guatemala in a political capacity at the insistence of the Arevalistas. I will return as a leader of the popular forces... My only desire is that the Presidential candidacy fall in the hands of a Guatemalan who is intimately a friend of the popular masses and who respects the law... I will resolve to do what the people of Guatemala wish."³⁰⁰ Notably, Arévalo did not take the opportunity to mend fences with the United States. He repeatedly proclaimed he was not a communist and attempted to distance himself from Arbenz, yet he also noted, "I am against the Communists although this does not say that I am anti-Communists."³⁰¹ Further fueling

²⁹⁸ For example, all major newspapers regularly printed criticism of the regime and many protests and demonstrations were permitted by the government. During the Ydígoras administration, Guatemala was undeniably a democratic republic. Of course declarations of martial law, arrest of opposition leaders without cause, and strongly supported claims of electoral fraud contradict notions of 'normality'.

²⁹⁹ *El Imparcial* printed their interview on November 28 and *La Hora* followed on November 30. The account in *La Hora* is a more complete interview and is the one most directly examined by the US embassy and this scholarship.

³⁰⁰ English translation of interview that appeared in *La Hora* (conducted Nov 4, 1961, printed Nov. 30, 1961 found in: Francis J. McNeil, "Embassy Telegram 317 - Expression of Arévalo's Views in Caracas" December 14, 1961. Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, Box 1517, pg. 3

³⁰¹ English translation of interview that appeared in *El Imparcial* found in: Ibid. 4.

fears of the Kennedy administration, when asked his view on capitalism, Arévalo replied, “Capitalism as a monstrous accumulation of money is a sickness which can be cured easily in a country without the necessity of destroying democracy. The normal democratic system supposes the legitimacy of private property conditioned solely by its social utility”.³⁰² The ex-president also maligned the US State Department, the United Fruit Company, and remarked that unless the Kennedy administration amended its policies, the Alliance for Progress should rightfully be named “*El Alianza para el Progreso para el Estados Unidos*” (The Alliance for Progress for/of the United States).³⁰³ For all of his issues with the United States, Arévalo also repeatedly repudiated Fidel Castro for aligning the Cuban Revolution with international communism, which had “prostituted the revolution and betrayed popular ideas.”³⁰⁴ If elected president, Arévalo would affirm Guatemala’s national sovereignty, break relations with dictators in Latin America, and establish “an absolute alliance with the democratic powers.”³⁰⁵ When asked his opinion on the Ydígoras administration, Arévalo showed surprise restraint for a man so practiced in rhetorical ornamentation. He flatly replied, “For me it is a constitutional government freely elected by the people of Guatemala and it has the right to live through its period of six years.”³⁰⁶ Unsurprisingly, neither the Kennedy nor the Ydígoras administrations found comfort in Arévalo’s sensational announcement.

³⁰² Ibid. 3.

³⁰³ Ibid. 2-4 Translates to the Alliance for Progress for the United States.

³⁰⁴ Robert F. Corrigan, “US Embassy Telegram 291 – Juan Jose Arévalo, Former President of Guatemala: His Role in the Future.” December 1, 1961, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, Box 1517. Pg. 1.

³⁰⁵ Francis J. McNeil, “US Embassy Telegram 317.” Pg. 4

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

The Kennedy administration failed to remove Castro and it could not afford to risk other Latin American countries following the Cuban example. Now more than ever, the reformist leaders of Latin America seemed to be a potential threat. Historian Stephen Rabe notes that Juan Jose Arévalo, along with his Argentinian and Brazilian contemporaries, Arturo Frondizi and Joao Goulart, respected constitutional processes and supported the Alliance for Progress.³⁰⁷ Nonetheless, the Cuban victory at the Bay of Pigs solidified the United States' hostility toward leftist reform and recast potential allies of the Alliance for Progress as subversive agents of the Soviet Union.

New challenges arose that further hampered the governments of the United States and Guatemala from adhering to the ideals of the Alliance for Progress. The successful defense of the Cuban Revolution against the Bay of Pigs invasion hardened the Kennedy's outlook on Latin America and his administration would increasingly look to anticommunist hardliners in the Guatemalan military to maintain the status quo. While Ydigoras and Kennedy fretted over Castro's growing influence, an insurgency was taking root within Guatemala, led by the remnants of the officer revolt of 1960. In this tense political atmosphere, former Guatemalan president Juan Jose Arévalo announced he would return from exile to run in the next presidential election. The United States would have viewed Arevalo suspiciously on any account due to his past, but within the context of the Bay of Pigs and the emergence of armed opposition within Guatemala, the former president appeared as a likely conduit for communist subversion. The Guatemalan Armed Forces used the threat of Castro, Arevalo, and the fledgling guerrilla movement to portray

³⁰⁷ Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 197.

themselves as a bastion of anticommunism that could help the United States stem the rising red tide.

The New Ambassador: Kennedy's Man in Guatemala

John O. Bell drove down the Inter-American highway to assume his position as Ambassador to Guatemala in December of 1961. Becoming ambassador was his most prominent achievement in a rapid climb through the State Department bureaucracy. The problems that plagued Guatemala would prove far different from those he faced on his previous assignment in Copenhagen, but the ambassador embraced a broad, if not fully developed, Cold War policy that could be applied in Latin America as well as Western Europe: preventing the spread communism at all costs. In Guatemala, Bell established the primacy of this overriding goal in his earliest reports, and though he felt that the Red Menace had to be defeated in the political, social, and economic arenas, he relied on fostering a close ties between the United States and the Guatemalan military in building a strong US-Guatemalan relationship.

John Bell began a lifelong career in government service in 1928 at the age of sixteen. Initially a messenger boy for the Agriculture Department, Bell became a clerk after two years, while attending night classes at George Washington University. Bell then learned that the State Department was offering an entry position that paid twenty dollars more a month than he was making.³⁰⁸ He took the job as a clerk, but quickly advanced to the Passport Office, where he continued to work through the decade as he finished his

³⁰⁸ John Bell, interview by Arthur L. Lowrie, June 17, 1988.
<http://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mssmisc/mfdip/2005%20txt%20files/2004bel02.txt>

bachelor's and law degrees. The young Bell displayed a strong work ethic and a drive for professional advancement that characterized his life in government service.

At the outset of the Second World War in Europe, Bell spent most of his time preventing German and Spanish communists from entering the United States.³⁰⁹ Bell worked on a new initiative to “replace all passports in existence” with redesigned documents that were difficult to forge because of a growing fear that foreign agents could easily produce counterfeits.³¹⁰ When the United States entered the war, Bell shifted to the Aviation Division where he continued to build his career and developed a sense of admiration for the nascent United States Air Force.

After the war, Bell, now a self-declared “State Department man,” took advantage of the National War College's invitation to Foreign Service personnel to attend classes at Fort McNair in Washington D.C.³¹¹ From 1946 to 1948, Bell acquired international management skills while attending lectures from General Leslie Groves, Robert Oppenheimer, and Dwight Eisenhower.³¹² His time at the National War College was a period of immense personal growth, and he acquired a lasting respect for the intellectual prowess of the top brass of the US military. Bell returned to the State Department in late 1948, receiving his first foreign posting with the European Division.

Stationed in Copenhagen, Bell began to climb the ladder of the State Department's bureaucracy with almost annual promotions between 1948 and 1954. An emerging Cold Warrior, Bell believed that the United States had irresponsibly

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

demobilized in Europe at the end of World War II because “the concept of the Russians as enemies hadn’t really percolated thoroughly.”³¹³ Though Bell had concerns about European security, he was not entirely hawkish. He disapproved of missile deployments in Greece and Turkey in 1953 because he believed they would be an unnecessary provocation of the Soviets that would not reap long-term strategic dividends.³¹⁴ He also convinced Dean Acheson to oppose military support for Dutch efforts at reestablishing colonial rule in Indonesia.³¹⁵ Reflecting later on the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the rapid expansion of America’s global power, Bell felt that his years in Europe were “the golden age of American foreign policy.”³¹⁶ In European matters, Bell was comfortable with the approach favoring patient containment espoused by George Kennan over aggressive confrontation with the Soviets.

After a brief assignment in Washington D.C., Bell became Deputy Chief of Mission to Pakistan in 1955. Although he had no experience in Middle Eastern affairs, his growing reputation within the State Department made him a key figure in John Foster Dulles’s plan to “build a wall against Sino-Soviet Imperialism.”³¹⁷ Bell claimed that the greatest difficulty he had in Pakistan was cultural adjustment: he compared the “sophistication” of the Dutch with the “primitiveness” of the Pakistanis. In a country of “80-some million,” he stated, “there were perhaps 2,500 who were politically

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ John O. Bell. “IRBMs,” January 26, 1953, DNSA. Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives, 2.

³¹⁵ John Bell, interview by Arthur Lowrie.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

articulate.”³¹⁸ These observations smacked of ethnocentrism, or at least, extreme cultural insensitivity. It is clear, in any event, that the assignment was not to Bell’s liking.

During the two years he served in Pakistan, Bell was rarely content with the situation. He believed that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was attempting to transplant the Marshall Plan to underdeveloped countries, but that fostering economic recovery in Europe was not the same thing as developing a modern economy in the Third World.³¹⁹ Bell did not, however, offer a viable alternative. Bell’s discontent in Pakistan shaped his worldview as much as his time in Europe. He learned that developing nations required something more than piles of money to protect themselves from communism, and he linked this observation with a demeaning attitude toward the inhabitants of the Third World. These prejudices would follow him to his post in Guatemala.

In 1957, Bell took the first opportunity to leave Pakistan and returned to Washington D.C. He became the International Regional Director for Near East and South Asia.³²⁰ Bell also cultivated political connections with an eye on the 1960 election. At this point, most of Bell’s work for the State Department consisted of facilitating international aid, and he quickly gained the confidence of Kennedy’s man in charge of consolidating America’s foreign-aid agencies into the Agency for International Development (USAID), George Ball. After Kennedy’s election, he was asked if he was interested in becoming Under Secretary of Administration. Bell rejected the offer because, as he later put it, the Kennedy team wanted him to help “clean out the State

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid.

Department and get rid of all the dumb jerks.”³²¹ Against the advice of George Ball and Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, Bell told Kennedy that the USAID program did not need reorganization. Bell suggested that all that was needed was “two good men for each country in Washington and two good men for each country abroad” for a total of over six hundred able and honest Foreign Service personnel.³²² Kennedy retorted, “Hell, that’s more good men than I’ll get in the whole administration.”³²³ Despite his occasional sparring sessions with the president’s advisers, Bell collaborated with the Kennedy team in writing up a legislative proposal for the reorganization of foreign aid offices, which passed as the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

The passage of the Foreign Assistance Act earned Bell some powerful new allies in Washington. Bell caught the attention of his former law professor, Senator J. William Fulbright, who was impressed by Bell’s work on foreign aid and spoke highly of him, boosting his status in the State Department. A few months after the Foreign Assistance Act passed, Bell received several promising offers. John Galbraith, Ambassador to India, wanted Bell as Deputy Chief of Mission. Chester Bowles made a pitch for Bell in Iran.³²⁴ Ultimately, Bell turned both offers down citing financial reasons and a desire to remain relatively close to his family. Instead, he chose a posting as ambassador to Guatemala.

In thirty-three years of government service, Bell proved to be a capable, dedicated diplomat with respectable anticommunist credentials. Although Bell voiced his disagreements with various policies of three presidential administrations, he preferred to

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

follow prevailing trends in Cold War thought. Like many US officials, he believed that winning the Cold War necessitated a brand of anticommunism where economic and political strategies played a supporting role to a show of military strength. Despite his commitment to the State Department's goals, Bell lacked a clear, distinctive vision of anticommunism beyond defeating what he had been told was a rival, destructive ideology. Bell was a State Department man, but within that context, a career man. His previous assignments did not require a nuanced approach to communism, but Guatemala presented an unfamiliar and volatile situation that demanded immediate, effective response. It was Bell's job to prevent communists from gaining influence in Guatemala, and so he committed to that goal with little strategic thinking beyond the conviction that his course was correct.

When John Bell chose Guatemala, he was granted the ambassadorship on the condition that he drive to his new office to emphasize the importance of completing the missing link of the Inter-American highway in Guatemala.³²⁵ After driving through forty miles of dusty country roads without air conditioning, the new ambassador was surprised when the mayor of Huehuetenango greeted him at the border with a party of local dignitaries. Wearing old clothes that were stained by sweat and "oozing dust", Bell attended a reception where he gave his first speech in broken Spanish. He joked that he was probably "the dirtiest ambassador they had ever seen."³²⁶

Bell arrived at the United States embassy in Guatemala City at the end of December, 1961. Guatemalan politics were experiencing a period of heightened tension

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

and turbulence at the time and the US diplomatic mission faced numerous challenges. While President Ydígoras initially proved to be a moderately effective ally for the United States in Guatemala due to his pragmatism, lack of ideological convictions, and singular devotion to his own survival, support for his regime was fading fast.³²⁷ Reminiscent of the dictators that ruled Guatemala before the Revolution of 1944, Ydígoras and his sycophants plundered public coffers and blamed ever-elusive communists for the country's problems. The United States found Ydígoras' claims of a communist threat credible—particularly after a large contingent of military officers and cadets rebelled against government in 1960—and supported the Guatemalan president despite Kennedy's anti-dictatorial proclamations. As his tenure in office continued, however, the corruption and cronyism within his regime inspired popular protests and a revolt within his own military. Although the Ydígoras administration survived the attempted overthrow in 1960, many rebel officers fled to the countryside to continue their fight against the government. It was the beginning of Guatemala's thirty-six year civil war. By the time Ambassador Bell assumed control of his post, the Ydígoras administration was becoming more of a liability than an asset to the United States.

At a highpoint in a career marked by regular promotion, Bell came to Guatemala determined to succeed. The new ambassador observed that most Guatemalan institutions were weak, corrupt, and lacked popular support. Governmental agencies, including the presidency, were more practiced in graft and repression than public administration. President Ydígoras exemplified the dysfunctional state, and Bell predicted that the president would not finish his term in office—a self-fulfilling prophecy the ambassador

³²⁷ John O. Bell. "Guidelines for Policy and Operations: Guatemala," 11

would help come to fruition.³²⁸ The unpopularity of the Ydígoras administration resulted in sharp political divisiveness, which led Bell to a conclusion that mirrored his assessment of the US efforts in the Middle East: “a developmental program is probably impossible.”³²⁹ Compounding his rote dismissal of Guatemala’s capacity for development, Bell saw communist agitators behind every public protest and student demonstration, and stated that they had enjoyed a “splendid year” as anticommunists divided and formed opposition groups against Ydígoras throughout 1961.³³⁰ Ignoring the genuine social and political concerns that the opposition, both communist and anticommunist, may have had, Bell claimed that these groups believed Ydígoras had “exceeded the bounds of permissible graft” and was not sharing the spoils beyond his “sycophants and fellow grafters.”³³¹ Even if Alliance for Progress initiatives were attempted, Bell feared that the funding would not leave the hands of Guatemalan administrators loyal to Ydígoras. Above all, Guatemala needed stability in order to overcome the challenge of communism and the perpetual plots and problems of the Ydígoras administration failed to impress the new ambassador from the United States.

Bell exempted the Guatemalan military from his criticism of the country’s leadership. The ambassador complained that the mission he inherited lacked information on the aspirations and attitudes of military officers and that the embassy needed to foster a closer relationship with what he believed were the natural allies of the United States.

³²⁸ John O. Bell, “U.S Interests and the Guatemalan Political Scene,” March 30, 1962, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives, 5.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

The Guatemalan military was vehemently anticommunist, and Bell speculated, “in all likelihood there are less crass motivations also present among the military, such as devotion to constitutional government, [and] intellectual conviction as to the merits of democracy.”³³² Unwilling to rely on the civilian government, doubtful of the prospects for development, and threatened by domestic and international subversion, only the Guatemalan military could establish the order necessary for Bell’s anticommunist vision.

In his earliest cables to Washington, Bell favored the Guatemalan Armed Forces as the most effective partner for advancing US interests in the region. He petitioned Washington relentlessly to support the Guatemalan military. On February 9, 1962, he urged the State Department to expedite shipments of F-51 Mustang fighter planes to reinforce the Guatemalan Air Force.³³³ On the following day, while asserting that there was no evidence that Guatemala was in immediate danger of being overthrown by force, he emphasized that the army had an immediate need for communications equipment and T-33 jet fighters.³³⁴ Though he viewed the remnants of the 1960 rebellion as little more than a nuisance, Bell believed there was a high probability that they would follow the Cuban example and begin protracted guerilla warfare in the countryside. Aiding the Guatemalan military in its efforts to eliminate the potential guerilla threat was an absolute necessity because “the US has nothing to gain and much to lose by [the] success [of]

³³² Ibid., 2.

³³³ John O. Bell, “[Guatemala Seeks Replacements for Planes Lost in Clash with Guerillas],” February 9, 1962, DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

³³⁴ John O. Bell “[Military Assistance Program Delivery for Guatemala],” February 10, 1962, DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives..

rebel elements.”³³⁵ For Bell, military aid served a dual purpose of building a relationship with the armed forces while safeguarding the country against the fledgling insurgency.

Along with his advocacy of a military buildup, Bell devoted his efforts to preventing, at any cost, a communist seizure of power. The Cuban Revolution, and the subsequent failure of the US invasion at the Bay of Pigs, gave a new urgency to maintaining US hegemony in Latin America, and Bell was not unusual in his enthusiastic red-hunting. He scoured intelligence briefs and after-action reports on guerilla operations seeking a clear Cuban connection. Both the Guatemalan Army’s intelligence units and the American ambassador sought to link Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, a prominent member of the 1960 military uprising and guerilla leader of growing acclaim, to Castro. In the Zacapa department, an MR-13 raiding unit, allegedly commanded by Yon Sosa, stole a company payroll totaling some 18,000 quetzales (roughly \$2,100) from a United Fruit office on the same day that Guatemalan Army units were ambushed by a second group of MR-13 insurgents fifty miles from Guatemala City. Bell reported that the G-2, Guatemala’s military intelligence division, believed that Fidel Castro had coordinated these attacks with Yon Sosa. The G-2 informed its US contacts to expect a massive strike on Guatemalan soil from Cuban MIG jets.³³⁶ Unsurprisingly, this aerial assault never materialized. The warning from the G-2 seems less convincing today, but Bell found the threat credible enough to report to the Secretary of State. The Kennedy administration would not tolerate another Cuba, and every US official understood that presiding over

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ John O. Bell “[Cuban Connection to Guerilla Raid in Bananera Feared],” February 7, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State. Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives, 1.

such a setback would likely end their career. To both fulfill his duties and preserve his profession, Bell pursued any potential communist threat without hesitation.

Despite their considerable efforts, neither the US embassy nor the G-2 could find solid evidence of an elaborate communist conspiracy in Guatemala. In fact, the purges and arrests of suspected communists during the Castillo Armas and Ydígoras years had brought the Communist Party (PGT) and affiliated organizations to a nadir point at the turn of the decade. This hardly hampered Bell, whose militant solutions to Guatemala's communist problem found a new avenue. The persistent rumors that Juan José Arévalo, the former president and popular reformer, planned to return to Guatemala to campaign for the 1963 presidential election became a fact the month before Ambassador Bell arrived in Guatemala. Now the ambassador confronted a mission of significance. Conflating Arévalo's reformism with Castro's radicalism, Bell dedicated the next two years to doing everything within his power to ensure that Arévalo would not become the president of Guatemala.

During Kennedy's administration, Guatemala again became a harbinger of US-policy in Latin America. Ambassador John Bell immediately decided Arévalo represented a threat that United States could not tolerate even though a majority of Guatemalans apparently wanted him to return to the presidency.³³⁷ Ignoring the former president's repeated avowals of anticommunism, Bell preferred a military seizure of power over the risk of letting the popular reformist return to governance. Though Bell conceded that civilian leaders were preferable to a military regime, he doubted whether it would be possible to find a Guatemalan politician suitable for US interests who could

³³⁷ John O. Bell. "[Guidelines for Policy and Operations: Guatemala]," September 11, 1962, DNSA: Guatemalan and the US. Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives, 7

also defeat Arévalo in a fair election. As a result, Ambassador Bell began to direct US policy in Guatemala to make collaboration with the military leadership more palatable. His most significant contribution to US policy was to establish that the “primary and overriding objective of US policy in Guatemala should be to prevent it from becoming a Communist State.”³³⁸ He would use the Alliance for Progress and its initiatives—particularly Civic Action programs—to see this accomplished. While this goal was not unusual for Cold War policy in Latin America, Bell specifically pushed for the primacy of anticommunism over genuine political or economic development. Moreover, he believed the Guatemalan military was the only organization capable of achieving these ends. The result was antithetical to what Kennedy had promised with the Alliance for Progress: a repressive military regime that rejected democracy and the rule of law.

Presidency under Pressure: The Spring Protests and the Revival of the Revolution

Domestic unrest proliferated in Guatemala City and exposed the weakness and instability of the Ydigoras government. When guerrilla movements joined the fray, Guatemala seemed to teeter on the edge of revolution. Unable to defend his government from its own people, Ydigoras’ attempts to preserve his presidency only reinforced the notion that his civilian government was inept and that the Guatemalan Armed Forces stood as the most reliable partner for the United States in the country. Fearing that Guatemala was about to become the next Cuba, the Kennedy administration quickly abandoned its pledges of nonintervention and prepared to invade Guatemala.

³³⁸Bell, “[Guidelines for Policy and Operations: Guatemala],” 3.

When President Ydígoras extended a warm welcome to John Bell, he had much larger concerns than the proclivities of the new ambassador from the United States. After months of tense bargaining, Ydígoras successfully aligned his *Redencion* (RDN) party with other center-right blocs and retained a legislative majority, likely through electoral fraud, in the 1962 congressional elections.³³⁹ Despite this win, Ydígoras still faced stiff resistance against desperately needed tax reform. Even more troubling was a marked increase in public protests.

Protests over the December congressional elections had carried over into the new year and showed signs of dramatic escalation. Bombs began to explode throughout Guatemala City. On January 24, Ranulfo Gonzalez Ovalle, the chief of the Judicial Police, was assassinated, allegedly an act of revenge by Yon Sosa for the death of one of his fellow rebel officers, Major Alejandro de Leon.³⁴⁰ From their initial stronghold in the Sierra de las Minas, in the Izabel department, MR-13 issued its opening manifesto:

“Democracy vanished from our country long ago. No people can live in a country where there is no democracy. That is why the demand for changes is mounting in our country. We can no longer carry on in this way. We must overthrow the Ydígoras government and set up a government which respects human rights, seeks ways and means to save our country from its hardships, and pursues a serious self-respecting foreign policy.”³⁴¹

The statement lacked any direct link with Castro, communism, or even revolution and seemed to align with democratic nationalism. The actions of the MR-13 would prove

³³⁹ Ydígoras' coalition only won 14.6% of the vote in Guatemala City and there were voting irregularities reported in several provinces. The Chairman of the Electoral Tribunal, Jose Maria Moscoso, resigned as a result of protests against the election outcome. For more detailed figures see: Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 231-232.

³⁴⁰ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. Pg 242.

³⁴¹³⁴¹ Quoted in Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 41: Gott notes that the only source where he could find this declaration was Hsinhua News Agency on February 20, 1962.

more evocative than their rhetoric. Less than two-weeks later, a squad of insurgents, once again allegedly under Yon Sosa's command, coordinated several attacks and stole the payroll from United Fruit Company offices, sending Ambassador Bell and the Guatemalan Intelligence Services on the aforementioned frenzied and fruitless search for a connection between the guerrilla raids and an imagined Cuban invasion force that never showed up. Later that month, on February 27, a guerrilla commando unit seized control of *Radio Mariscos* and called upon the Guatemalan Army to rise up and overturn the government.³⁴² While these hostile actions had little effect on the Ydígoras regime, these early battles heralded a prolonged insurgency that spanned four decades. The Guatemalan Civil War had begun in earnest.

At first, President Ydígoras showed little concern for the emerging insurgency. A far cry from Ambassador Bell's dire forecast of an impending Cuban invasion, Ydígoras retorted that he was more troubled by the international price of coffee than by the rebel attacks.³⁴³ Despite his apparent lack of caution, Ydígoras declared another state of siege, censored and shut down radio stations, and sent his soldiers on an unsuccessful hunt for the guerrillas. From a military standpoint, Ydígoras, a retired general, was correct that the group of roughly one hundred insurgents posed no direct threat to the Guatemalan government and its powerful military. Yet, because the regime already struggled to manage the major social, political, and economic pressures Guatemala already faced, these attacks caused existing fissures to crack and threatened to shatter the Ydígoras presidency.

³⁴² Ibid., 245

³⁴³ Ibid., 243

The opening of the new congress on March 1, 1962 should have been a celebratory moment for Ydígoras and the powerful coalition he had recently cobbled together in the Guatemalan legislature. Instead, it marked the beginning of the largest public protests since the triumphant days of the Guatemalan Revolution. As in 1944, it began with the students.

In his memoirs, Ydígoras remembered well the day that one hundred university students, members of the *Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios* (AEU), dressed in mourning black, marched in a procession to the doors of the National Congress where they laid a huge funerary wreath—symbolizing “the death of legality in Guatemala” resulting from the recent congressional elections.³⁴⁴ They demanded that Ydígoras must immediately disband the Congress and call for new elections. The following day the secondary-school counterpart of the AEU, the *Frente Unida Estudiantil Guatemalteco* (FUEGO) joined in the protest and marched on the British Embassy before convening in the Central Plaza of Guatemala City. Soon after, the teachers union, the *Frente Unida de Magisterio Nacional* (FUMN), joined with the student protestors and on March 6, the AEU and their allies called for a general strike for all academic personnel employed by the government. The Minister of Government, Luis Gonzalez Batres, declared the demonstrations illegal and that they would be put down promptly, but the majority of universities and secondary schools closed down for the strike.³⁴⁵ More importantly, the success of the strike emboldened workers in other sectors who began to support, and even join, the students in the streets.

³⁴⁴ Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, *My War with Communism.*, 191-192

³⁴⁵ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 245.

Initially, the Guatemalan press reacted negatively to the student protests. As the demonstrations continued into March, the number of violent and dangerous incidents increased rapidly. Bombs continued to explode throughout the city and there were several exchanges of gunfire. On at least two occasions, journalists from the major newspapers *El Imparcial* and *Prensa Libre* were injured while trying to cover the protests. As a result, the papers chastised the student movement and lamented that communists and unscrupulous politicians had manipulated school-children into becoming their “shock troopers.”³⁴⁶ Ambassador Bell wrote to Secretary of State Dean Rusk claiming that the general public had “widespread apathy and disgust [for] student shenanigans” and that “unless [the] starch was taken out [of the] demonstrators by government’s action today, [the] situation could appreciably worsen encouraging plotters.”³⁴⁷

The American ambassador proved correct and the situation spiraled out of the Ydígoras administration’s control as the strike grew exponentially. The AEU, having gathered momentum from their success, declared a general strike for the thirteenth of March. The following day the most powerful union in Guatemala, *el Sindicato de Accion y Mejoramiento Ferrocarrilero* (SAMF) sent the railroad workers to join in solidarity with the student protests in Guatemala City. The masses of striking workers, teachers, and students filled the main arteries of the capital, blocked the urban workforce from the

³⁴⁶ Original Spanish is “*una fuerza del choque*”: *El Imparcial*, Marzo 12, 1963. Archivo Historical, CIRMA.

³⁴⁷ John O. Bell, “Embassy Telegram 407.” March 13, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library

central train station, and engaged in sporadic shootouts with police forces. The US embassy estimated that at least thirty people had been shot in the day's events.³⁴⁸

President Ydígoras hoped he could rely on his personal political acumen to smooth over rising tension, and against the objections of his retainers, conducted an *audiencia publica* in the midst of striking SAMF workers without personal protection.³⁴⁹ He listened to the gathering of protestors and agreed to meet with their leaders, but concluded these talks by promising that he would use the Army, supplemented by loyal peasants, to end the strikes. The protesters were, unsurprisingly, displeased with Ydígoras' reaction and refused to disband. In fact, the number of protesters only swelled as bus drivers joined the strike, effectively shutting down civilian transit in and out of Guatemala City. As he had promised, Ydígoras called upon the Army to put down the protest and began to bring in "truckloads [of] machete-armed farm workers into the city" to act as reserves.³⁵⁰ Pitched battles between security forces and the demonstrators erupted throughout Guatemala City. Even Ambassador Bell seemed taken aback by the "violent and indiscriminate bloodletting by [the Guatemalan] government", which failed to end the demonstrations and aroused sympathy for the movement.³⁵¹

President Ydígoras, however, had few allies and even fewer options in dealing with a protest that seemed to be on the verge of a genuine revolution. The Guatemalan economy continued to sputter with a significant drop in coffee prices. A longtime

³⁴⁸ John O. Bell, "Embassy Telegram 409" March 15, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL. Pg 1.

³⁴⁹ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 245.

³⁵⁰ John O. Bell, "US Embassy Telegram 411" March 15, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Box 101. JFKL pg. 2.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

champion of import-substitution industrialization and regional economic integration in the form of the Central American Common Market, Ydígoras' policies had aggravated existing fiscal problems by relying on international loans as Guatemala diversified agricultural production and invested in new industries. As a result, the Guatemalan government "suffered from a serious balance of payments" that necessitated the passage of the income tax law.³⁵² The back pay owed to government workers, notably teachers, had inspired many to join the protests in March, but the prospect of an income tax law made the business community reluctant to support Ydígoras. While the protests of March have been largely characterized as far-left, conservatives were divided in their support of the government, with the extreme rightwing parties like the MLN remaining steadfast in their opposition to the current regime. Within Guatemala, Ydígoras could only tacitly count on the Army and dragooned peasants to do its bidding when faced with massive urban unrest. The United States, however, remained committed to preserving the Ydígoras government and began to mobilize for war.

The protests in Guatemala City transformed the capital into a warzone. Ambassador Bell initially requested that Washington send riot control equipment and tanker trucks armed with water cannons to help combat the masses while mitigating casualties.³⁵³ The day after making the request, the US embassy learned that guerrillas clashed with military units in the hills surrounding Guatemala City and that they were working in collaboration with protest leaders. For Ambassador Bell, this proved that the

³⁵² Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 240.

³⁵³ John O. Bell, "US Embassy Telegram 410" March 14, 1962. Record Group 59, Department of State. Decimal Files 1960-1969, National Archives. pg. 1-2.

demonstrators in the streets and the rebels in the countryside were part of a larger communist conspiracy.³⁵⁴

To his credit, Ambassador Bell correctly assessed the situation, although he did not possess a full command of the facts. Sensing that Ydígoras' days were numbered, the PGT decided to join the MR-13 in waging guerrilla warfare and hastily assembled and armed untrained student radicals and PGT cadre.³⁵⁵ Under the command of Colonel Carlos Paz Tejada, the former Minister of Defense under both Arévalo and Arbenz, the new guerrilla organization dubbed themselves the "October 20th Front" seizing upon the similarities between the current upheaval and victory of Guatemalan Revolution over Ubico on that day in 1944. Echoing the demands of the protestors in Guatemalan City, Col. Paz Tejada issued a statement that rejected the legitimacy of the current Congress and the Ydígoras administration as a whole. Moreover, the colonel made his intentions known:

"The only road left is the road of uprising. The only way to end the calamities torturing our country is to overthrow the despotic rule of Ydígoras and set up a government which proves by deeds that it is worthy of the people's trust...the motive of our movement is that which spurred the patriotic officers of [MR-13] to engage in struggle. Our purposes are the same as those of these young officers. On our side are university students, workers, peasants, patriotic professionals, and upright soldiers in the army and security forces"³⁵⁶

Revolution had returned to Guatemala. Riots flared in other cities throughout the country. Torn asunder by protests-turned-battles and seemingly surrounded by guerrillas in the hills, Guatemala City was in peril.

³⁵⁴ John O. Bell, "US Embassy Telegram 411." March 15, 1962. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101. JFKL

³⁵⁵ Jonas and Tobis, *Guatemala*. 180

³⁵⁶ Carlos Paz Tejada statement reprinted in: Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 45.

Ambassador Bell's quest for uncovering communist networks in Guatemala gained new, urgent credibility and the Kennedy administration leapt into action. A nearby US battle group of roughly 1,400 men went on alert, and while Washington began to mobilize and deploy other military assets, Under Secretary of State George Ball began preparing "various possible OAS and other justifications for such intervention if necessary."³⁵⁷ At least two destroyers and six C-130 aircraft began to make their way to Guatemala, under the guise of "a normal training exercise."³⁵⁸ The Kennedy administration stood ready to launch a full-scale military intervention, slated for March 16, in order to prevent Guatemala City from sharing the same fate as Havana.

It was an absolute necessity for Guatemala to remain a staunch US ally. The United States celebrated the 1954 coup as an early Cold War victory. The reversal of the counterrevolution in Guatemala would deal a tremendous blow to US prestige, especially in the wake of Castro's successful defense of the Cuban Revolution. For US policy makers, the threat of another Cuba far outweighed the potential political cost of military intervention. The rhetoric of the Alliance for Progress and the non-intervention compact of the Organization of American States mattered little when compared to the prospect of a Red Guatemala. The mobilization of a considerable US invasion force to counter civilian protestors revealed the lengths the Kennedy administration was willing to go to ensure communists did not gain a foothold in Guatemala. Ambassador Bell knew that his steady climb through the State Department hierarchy would end abruptly if Guatemala

³⁵⁷ George Ball to US Embassy, March 15, 1962. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL. Pg. 1

³⁵⁸ Herbert D. Riley to USAF/POTUS, March 15, 1962. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL.; Joseph H. Wellings to US Atlantic Command, Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 15, 1962. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101 JFKL.

went the way of Cuba. What little faith the US ambassador had in Guatemala's political leaders, especially Ydígoras, rapidly diminished as the domestic crisis deepened, leaving him few viable partners in the country. Just as he had dismissed such efforts toward 'primitives' during his assignment in Pakistan, Bell decided development programs through the Alliance for Progress were too slow and risky in Guatemala's corrupt political environment to effectively manage the perpetual crises that plagued the country. Unsurprisingly, Bell cast his lot with the most reliable, anticommunist institution: the Guatemalan military.

The Kennedy administration proved that the values it expressed through the Alliance for Progress mattered little in the face of potential upheaval in Guatemala. As protests rocked Guatemala City and guerrilla fighters surrounded the capital, it appeared that the Ydígoras administration was about to collapse. President Ydígoras' efforts amounted to little more than fuel for the red flame of revolution. A testament to the enduring legacy of US militarism in Latin America, Kennedy and his team defaulted to direct intervention when it seemed Guatemala might join Castro's Cuba.

Army of Progress: The First Steps Toward a Military Government

At ten in the morning, on the very day US intervention forces converged on Guatemala, Ambassador Bell phoned the White House with a brief, but impactful message: "Military has taken over internal security responsibilities from police but this action was taken with complete loyalty to the President (this action was not a coup)"³⁵⁹

³⁵⁹ John O. Bell to President John F. Kennedy, March 16, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL.

Casualties mounted as Army units attacked gatherings of students, workers, and other civilian demonstrators. The violence diminished the protests, but they did not completely abate. It appeared that the Guatemalan military would inevitably retake the city, so the American intervention force stood down. Yet, even though the Guatemalan military professed its loyalty to President Ydígoras, indications of internal division within the security forces surfaced as the soldiers gunned down their fellow countrymen. Nonetheless, the military high-command used their timely assistance to extract major concessions from the Ydígoras government, and began the process of formally taking over the Guatemalan state.

The Army had not been deployed on the streets of Guatemala City before March 16 because Defense Minister Peralta himself had resisted President Ydígoras' commands for several days until internal pressure, and whispers of a scheme to replace the reluctant Minister of Defense, forced him to act.³⁶⁰ When the Army did come to Guatemala City, casualties among the protesters skyrocketed as soldiers indiscriminately fired into large crowds. Army units also mounted an expedition in the surrounding highlands to confront the October 20th Front. The guerrillas under Col. Paz Tejada were full of revolutionary zeal and confident in their ideals, but being largely comprised of students and political operatives, lacked military experience. The result of the confrontation between the trained soldiers and untested guerrillas was a massacre, and the political scientist Louisa Frank concluded that the defeat of the October 20th Front demoralized the demonstrators

³⁶⁰ US Embassy Air Attache to Department of State, March 17, 1962, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files, 1960-1963, National Archives. pg. 1-2

in Guatemala City.³⁶¹ What had, days before, seemed like an immanent revolutionary takeover buckled quickly as the military mopped up pockets of sporadic protests over the last weeks of March and into April. The government took control of the bus lines, radio stations, and the electrical company in the name of restoring order. Military leaders fully realized they alone had saved the Ydígoras administration. Contacts within the Guatemalan military reported to the US embassy that “Communists are lurking on [the] sidelines and are awaiting the right moment to take over.” However, they reassured the US embassy that “If anything should happen to Ydígoras, [the] Guatemalan Armed Forces would continue to uphold the constitution,” while they took provisional control of the government.³⁶²

Ydígoras managed to survive the wave of spring protests by suppressing the demonstrations with the combined strength of the Guatemalan Army and police forces. By the end of April, more than five-hundred Guatemalan civilians had been killed to end the protests.³⁶³ Indicative of the precariousness of Ydígoras’ rule, military leaders, tired of the president’s schemes, demanded power in exchange for loyalty. The Guatemalan Armed Forces continued to support Ydígoras on the condition that he share executive power with a military cabinet.³⁶⁴ It was a significant first step taken by leading officers in the Guatemalan military’s seizure of power. Unable to protest the demands of his vital

³⁶¹ Louisa Frank, “Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Resistance in Guatemala”, Jonas and Tobis, eds. *Guatemala*. 180.

³⁶² US Embassy Air Attache to Department of State, March 16, 1962, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives. pg. 2

³⁶³ Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 72.

³⁶⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “Effort of Nonpolitical Leaders to Reach an Agreement with President Ydígoras through Which They Can Cooperate with Him,” May 4, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

ally, Ydígoras accepted the terms and staffed his entire presidential cabinet, with the exception of the Foreign Minister, with military officers. The State Department, particularly Secretary Rusk, welcomed the idea of joint rule, believing the officers could bring stability and credibility to the dissolving Ydígoras regime.³⁶⁵ Bell predicted that the military would try to oust Ydígoras before his presidential term expired and began to prepare the way for accepting military rule in Guatemala.

By late April 1962, three months after becoming ambassador, Bell's preoccupation with the threat of a growing communist threat in Guatemala had gained serious credibility. The list of President Ydígoras' allies grew shorter by the day, as the "Old Fox" alienated elites with his insistence on tax reform and perceived softness on ex-president Arévalo. The Guatemalan President enraged the urban classes with violent repression of student demonstrators and labor organizers.³⁶⁶ After the unrest, Ydígoras still refused to bar Arévalo from running for office, which deeply troubled the State Department and the Guatemalan military. Guatemalan military leaders vowed that they would never allow Arévalo to enter the country, implying that they would remove President Ydígoras if such action was necessary to fulfill their promise. Ambassador Bell echoed the military's position, viewing Arévalo as another potential Castro. The Spring protests were but a taste of what might come should Arévalo return to Guatemala and run for the presidency. Fearing that the conditions for a communist uprising remained ripe, Bell alerted Washington that Guatemala stood at the precipice of disaster.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ Dean Rusk, "[New Military Cabinet and U.S. Interests after Fall of President Ydígoras]," April 28, 1962, , National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 3.

³⁶⁶ John O. Bell, "[Military and Political Opposition in Guatemala]," April 30, 1962, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives, 4

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Following the protests of March and April, the ambassador was not the only State Department official who viewed the Guatemalan military as the United States' most important ally in the country. Secretary of State Dean Rusk approved Bell's close collaboration with the Guatemalan military as an effective means to preventing another Cuba. In fact, during Bell's time as ambassador to Guatemala, he seemed to have no greater supporter than Rusk.³⁶⁸ As the protest movement reached its peak in mid-march and the US prepared an invasion force, Rusk personally drafted the resolution for committing US ground forces to Guatemala that would have been presented to the Organization of American States. Bending the non-intervention agreement of the OAS charter, if the beleaguered President Ydígoras presented evidence of "international communist involvement" and requested assistance, the United States would urge member states to join it in taking action against communist aggression and subversion.³⁶⁹ Regardless of the decision of OAS member states, Rusk prepared for the United States to act unilaterally in Guatemala if the protests and guerrillas threatened to topple the government. It was, perhaps, the most attention Rusk paid to Guatemala during his eight years as Secretary of State.

After the military forced Ydígoras to rule jointly with a cabinet staffed by ranking officers, Rusk wrote Bell that the cabinet would serve as "one of first tests whether energetic military action can be effective" in governance and that the military ministers

³⁶⁸ In his 1988 interview with Arthur Lowrie, Bell claimed that he was often at odds with Secretary Rusk. The documentary record reveals quite the opposite and suggests that Bell may have been trying to distance himself with the failed policies of Johnson and Rusk in Vietnam.

³⁶⁹ Dean Rusk, "[Justifying Military Intervention in Guatemala before the Organization of American States]," DNSA: Guatemala and the US. March 26, 1962, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

might generate more popular appeal by cleaning up the Ydígoras administration.³⁷⁰ Moreover, Rusk suggested his openness to removing Ydígoras and advised the embassy that things might be better without him.³⁷¹ Secretary Rusk acknowledged it was unlikely that President Ydígoras would remain in office until his term expired in 1964. He provided Bell with a list of potential parties, both allies and adversaries of US interests, who might unseat Ydígoras. Bell's list noted the strengths and weaknesses of these groups and hypothesized what actions the United States might have to take should one of them overthrow the government. Unsurprisingly, conservative army officers were branded the most stable, US-friendly group, and Rusk requested the ambassador's input in drawing up contingency plans for a military coup.³⁷² In short, Rusk told Bell that the United States would recognize any usurper, civilian or military, who was committed to stamping out communism in Guatemala.

Over the next few months, Bell became increasingly sympathetic to the Guatemalan military. In August 1962, he wrote of the virtues of military rule in Guatemala and Latin America in general. Bell saw the Guatemalan military as the bedrock of the state and believed the cooperation between the US military and the Guatemalan Army would develop "respect for democratic and progressive policies," whereas individuals within the private and political sectors would plunder US

³⁷⁰ Dean Rusk, "[New Military Cabinet and U.S. Interests after Fall of Ydígoras]," April 28, 1962, DNSA: Guatemala and the US, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives, 1.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 3.

developmental aid to add to their personal wealth.³⁷³ The Kennedy administration allocated twenty-seven million dollars in Alliance funds for Guatemala from 1961 to 1963, despite their belief that Ydígoras' only concern was maintaining his personal power by bribing the oligarchy.³⁷⁴ Should the military take charge, Ambassador Bell anticipated that those funds would finally be put to proper use.

Unwilling to wait for this ideal military regency, Bell steered funding from the Alliance for Progress and USAID into programs administered by the military. After witnessing the Guatemalan police struggle to combat angry crowds, Ambassador Bell focused on rectifying the inadequacies he perceived in the non-military security forces. For example, Bell heaped praise upon an initiative that offered advanced riot control training courses for police officers—paid for by USAID.³⁷⁵ The Civic Action programs, however, presented the most visible application of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala, and they were inextricably linked to the Guatemalan military. As mentioned previously, the Civic Action programs funded developmental projects, such as building rural schools and providing health services, which were directly administered, and often completed, by the Guatemalan Armed Forces. While this projects supplied remote regions with medical, educational, and economic opportunities that had been previously unavailable, the primary purpose of Civic Action was improving the image of the Guatemalan military and rural pacification. Furthermore, it placed the control of these vital resources squarely in the hands of the officers overseeing the various projects. As

³⁷³ John O. Bell, “[Comments on U.S. Military Assistance Plan],” August 13, 1962, DNSA: Guatemala and the US, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

³⁷⁴ Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 72

³⁷⁵ John O. Bell “Riot Control Training Course sponsored by USAID”, June 8, 1962, DNSA: Guatemala and the US. File Origin: United States Embassy, Guatemala.

originally conceived, Civic Action would supplement, not replace, “projects which are the responsibility of regular civilian agencies” and “should not divert Guatemalan budgetary and other resources in significant amounts from other government ministries or civilian agencies charged with the responsibility of performing functions as might be performed by the Civic Action Program.”³⁷⁶ Under Ydígoras, the Civic Action program slowly gained momentum, but they expanded far beyond the confines of their intended scope under the governments of Colonel Enrique Peralta and Julio César Méndez Montenegro.

Few officers showed interest in developmental projects when the Inter-American Defense Board approved President Ydígoras’ resolution to use “military personnel and equipment for purposes of economic development, education, and highway settlement work” on December 1, 1960.³⁷⁷ The old general-president tried to rally the troops around their new duties, but elevating Civic Action to a program of pride seems to be the work of Defense Minister Peralta, who assumed his position shortly before the resolution passed. Under his guidance, the Guatemalan Army created a distinct Civic Action Corps led by hand-picked officers who worked closely with counterparts in the US military. In September 1962, the military began publishing an internal circular, *Boletín Ejército*, (later simply *Ejército*) that covered a variety of topics deemed of interest to all those serving in the Guatemalan Armed Forces. Articles included laudatory historical biographies of past officers, social calendars, interviews with common soldiers, and

³⁷⁶ Bureau of Inter American Affairs, “Guatemala: Comments on Military Assistance Plan: FY 63-FY 68”, August 10, 1962. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. File Origin: Department of State-Bureau of Inter-American Affairs. pg. 2-3.

³⁷⁷ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 273.

editorials that typically countered negative press from the major newspapers *Prensa Libre* and *El Imparcial*. Every issue featured a section wholly dedicated to the most recent initiatives of the Civic Action program. The projects on display varied—digging wells, inoculating peasants, laying road, and building facilities all featured heavily—but the common purpose was to instill a sense of pride in the military for developing and modeling a “better citizenship” that emphasized the nobility of sacrifice and love of country.³⁷⁸ As the Guatemalan military took over more responsibilities from the civilian government, the Civic Action programs expanded and absorbed the majority of Alliance for Progress funds.

Combined with the already considerable military defense budget provided by the United States, Guatemala’s armed forces gradually funneled the vast majority of all US financial aid into their coffers. Ambassador Bell regularly praised the military’s efforts as a means to foster development through cooperation between the armed forces and the civilian population.³⁷⁹ Soon, the military used these programs to conscript peasants and extend its presence into village life. Bell continued to channel aid money into the military as it expanded its grasp through so-called developmental projects.

* * *

Guatemala weathered a fearsome storm in 1962 and the wily President Ydígoras had survived along with it. The General-turned-President greeted Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress with much more enthusiasm than the new US administration had shown him,

³⁷⁸ “Guatemala: Memoria de Labores del Gobierno Militar (1964-65), Ministerio de la Defensa Nacional, Coleccion Ejercito, Archivo HistoRico, CIRMA. Pg. 5

³⁷⁹ John O. Bell, “Policy and Operational Guidance for US Activities in Guatemala.” October 16, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL, 7

and Ydígoras made considerable efforts at adhering, at least in appearance, to the program's spirit of modernization and reform. In fact, his attempts to achieve Alliance for Progress goals through tax reform and regional economic integration caused considerable damage to his popularity. Given the suspicious results of the 1961 congressional elections, it would be a stretch to consider Ydígoras a champion of democracy. Nonetheless, his stubborn refusal to bar Juan José Arévalo from running for the presidency showed that Ydígoras at least desired the legitimacy of a democratic system. When confronted with widespread civil unrest, isolated Ydígoras could only turn to his military, and they demanded a considerable toll for preserving the unpopular president. The United States, represented by the new ambassador, John Bell, stood ready to root out communists and prevent a hostile takeover of the government, but proved a lukewarm ally to what they perceived as a doomed administration. Instead, under Bell's direction, the Kennedy administration fostered close connections with the only organization deemed sufficiently stable and anticommunist: the Guatemalan Armed Forces.

The choices made by the Kennedy administration and its emissaries were hardly original, and certainly far from "enlightened," when it came to confronting communism in Guatemala. The Alliance for Progress had promised a new era in US-Latin American relations. His policies, especially after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, more often resembled the machinations of the Dulles brothers and the long tradition of "big stick" diplomacy. Instead of fulfilling the professed goal of spreading freedom and democracy, key Alliance programs came to serve the interests of the officer corps. With the emergence of a leftist guerrilla threat, the leaders of the Guatemalan Armed Forces pressed their advantage during the Spring protests to gain a major foothold within the

highest levels of the civilian government. In a matter of years, the Alliance for Progress would largely serve as another supplement to the military aid that the United States sent to Guatemala. Kennedy had wooed many hopeful Latin Americans with his pledges to favor democracy over dictatorship, but even at the beginning of his presidency, his actions in Guatemala indicated that the alleged course change in US foreign policy was superficial.

CHAPTER III: CRISIS MANAGEMENT

A Decisive Shift in US-Guatemalan Relations

On a balmy afternoon in October 1962, Ambassador John Bell sat down to compose a draft of the US policy and operational guidelines in Guatemala. The widespread protests and strikes that threatened to derail the government throughout 1962 had finally been tamped down under army boots and tank treads. In exchange for their support of the Ydígoras government, leading figures in the Guatemalan Armed Forces now occupied key posts in the executive branch. The creeping militarization of the Guatemalan government did not disturb the American ambassador—the Spring riots had proven that the country was ripe for widespread communist subversion. Should a leader emerge in the mold of Castro, the next inevitable wave of public discontent might result in a successful revolution. As such, the ambassador came to see Juan José Arévalo's presidential bid as the primary threat to US interests, and his own career, in Guatemala. Arévalo had presided over the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944; the ambassador, his superiors in Washington, and their allies within Guatemala's military conspired to ensure he would not initiate another.

As Ambassador Bell doled out responsibilities to US agencies, he reaffirmed the primacy of anti-communism in his approach to US-Guatemalan relations. In this atmosphere, protecting US interests would require a concerted effort where all political, economic, and military goals, were oriented to eliminate the communist threat to Guatemala. USAID needed to provide financial support to the government to prevent

instability; USIS would intensify anti-communist propaganda and destroy communist influence in schools; and the US military group was to continue training its Guatemalan counterparts in counterinsurgency warfare and riot control.³⁸⁰ All three agencies would collaborate in order to encourage the Guatemalan military to engage in more Civic Action programs. Bell assigned himself, the embassy staff, and “all elements as directed” the task of assuring the installation of an anti-communist government that would support both Alliance for Progress initiatives and US foreign policy abroad.³⁸¹ By two in the afternoon, Bell finished the task, but his superiors were far too busy to read it. That very morning in Washington, Kennedy was looking at black-and-white aerial photographs of indistinguishable clumps of trees and tiny rectangular buildings—nuclear missiles in Cuba.

Soviet warheads in Cuba demonstrated that a new threat had emerged in the region. The Cuban Missile Crisis seemed to validate Ambassador Bell’s brand of uncompromising anti-communism. The collaboration between Soviets and the Cubans all but proved that communist expansion in Latin America posed an immediate, existential danger to the United States. Although the US-Soviet confrontation in the Caribbean ended without a nuclear exchange, Cold War fears ran high. The crisis disturbed President Kennedy and his administration’s obsession with destroying Castro deepened. Washington’s worst projections of revolutionary Cuba had been affirmed. During this apex of Castro’s revolutionary appeal, the United States perceived charismatic, left-

³⁸⁰ John O. Bell, “[Policy and Operational Guidance for U.S. Activities in Guatemala],” October 23, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library, 4,8.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

leaning reformers like former-president Arévalo as harbingers of communist revolution. In this anxiety-ridden environment, the only thing that remained certain was the staunch anticommunism of the Guatemalan military leadership. With the approval of the President of the United States, Ambassador Bell continued to foster close relations with the Guatemalan military and empowered its leaders, enabling their takeover of the state. The Kennedy administration preferred stability through force over the uncertainties of democracy. Instead of embracing the spirit of the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy administration returned to the interventionist rationale of his predecessors in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Once again, Guatemala would be a litmus test for US policy toward Latin America.

The political ascension of the Guatemalan military leadership unfolded gradually since the revolution in 1944, but there are several key moments when the officer corps seized the opportunity to amplify their power within the government. The most widely known occurred during and after the 1954 coup, when the high command forced Arbenz to resign and subsequently launched the counterrevolution. In the aftermath of the Spring protests of 1962, covered in the previous chapter, military officers took another crucial step toward establishing a military government when they took over President Ydígoras' cabinet and elevated Colonel Enrique Peralta to Minister of Defense. The turning point, however, came in March 1963 when Defense Minister Peralta ousted President Ydígoras, setting the stage for decades of direct military rule. This chapter uncovers the details of the precise moment when Guatemala transitioned from a constitutional republic to a military dictatorship. The overthrow of President Ydígoras was as consequential to Guatemalan history as the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944 and the CIA-backed coup of

1954, but it has never been subjected to close historical examination. In unravelling the events that unfolded in the months surrounding the 1963 coup, this chapter reveals that, despite alternatives, the Kennedy administration encouraged the military takeover of Guatemala because they believed it was the best way to counter communist influence in the country. As a result, the partnership between Washington and the Guatemalan Armed Forces deepened dramatically as Defense Minister Enrique Peralta and the officer corps formally helmed the state.

Portentous Plots: The Air Force Attacks the Presidency

Guatemala's military leaders had greatly advanced their control over the state when they forced President Ydigoras to replace his cabinet members with military officers, but they did not yet have total control. As unpopular as Ydigoras was, he remained head of state and continued to resist some of the demands made by his armed forces chiefs and the United States. When Ydigoras attempted to pass an unpopular taxation bill that would make Guatemala eligible for a massive increase in Alliance for Progress funding, some eager officers and their civilian allies saw an opportunity to strike down the ailing administration and install a military junta. The dramatic aerial attack on the Presidential Palace failed when vital military assets did not lend their promised support. When the dust settled, Ydigoras celebrated a victory, but it was Defense Minister Enrique Peralta who had, for the moment, decided Ydigoras' fate.

In the days that followed the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Miguel Ydígoras was quick to pledge his full support for immediate retaliation against Cuba while heaping

encomiums on President Kennedy. The Guatemalan president thanked Kennedy for addressing the “danger [to the] American continent of [the] Communist, de facto government of Fidel Castro.”³⁸² Ydígoras had viewed Castro as a threat since the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, and he touted the fact that his longstanding demands for intervention against Cuba no longer seemed overzealous. In a sense, the Cuban Missile Crisis partially redeemed Ydígoras for allowing the United States to train Cuban exiles on Guatemalan soil. In 1960, this decision cost him nearly a third of his officer corps in the nationalist uprising, but now Ydígoras could claim his leadership made Guatemala a cornerstone of hemispheric defense against communist incursion. While Ydígoras’ anti-Castro credentials cannot be doubted, the insecurity produced by the Cuban Revolution, exacerbated by the Missile Crisis, made the old general vulnerable to a new foe: hardline anticommunists within Guatemalan military and their patrons from the United States.

By the end of November 1962, Ydígoras’ indifference toward Juan José Arévalo’s pending presidential campaign and return from exile provoked another open revolt within officer corps. The ongoing domestic crisis and general opposition to the Ydígoras regime continued even after the military put down major public protests in the Spring of 1962. Despite the crackdown, several nascent guerrilla bands began to organize against the government in earnest. The Communist Party of Guatemala, *El Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (PGT), broke with its institutionalist traditions and, on October 20, established its ill-fated guerrilla front in the mountains that surrounded Guatemala City. Although this hastily formed band of Arbenzistas, students, and PGT cadre were largely untrained

³⁸² John O. Bell, “Translation of Letter from President Ydígoras to President Kennedy,” October 23, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files : Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1,2.

and poorly equipped, the audacity of launching attacks so close to the capital represented a direct challenge to Ydígoras.³⁸³ While tensions remained between military factions and *La Casa Crema* over Arévalo's repatriation, the army upheld its commitment to being Guatemala's bulwark against communism by massacring the PGT insurgents. The operation was successful in its primary objective, but the very fact that guerrillas were attempting to establish bases of operations outside of Guatemala City must have seemed like yet another failing of the Ydígoras regime to disgruntled, ambitious officers.

The Guatemalan Air Force, the most prestigious branch of the military, transformed its discontent with the Ydígoras government into action on November 25, 1962 when a significant contingent of its personnel attempted to remove their unpopular president. For the second time, Ydígoras faced a rebellion from within his own military. Compared to the previous revolt of junior officers in 1960, this uprising had fewer participants and a fundamentally conservative agenda. Whereas the uprising in 1960 was a nationalistic reaction against Ydígoras allowing the US to train Cuban exiles in Guatemala, the Air Force plotters maintained they were defending Guatemala from potential communist subversion in the form of an Arévalo presidency. In both cases, friction between branches of the Guatemalan military and personal rivalries between individual officers prevented a successful coup. Unlike the revolt of 1960, however, this insurrection signaled the beginning of the end for the Ydígoras presidency. It would be, in the words of political scientist Roland Ebel, "a dress rehearsal for the overthrow."³⁸⁴

³⁸³ Susanne Jonas and David Tobis (eds), "Guatemala" (California: North American Congress on Latin America, 1974). 180.

³⁸⁴ Roland H. Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo: Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes and the Failure of Democracy in Guatemala*. (University Press of America, New York, 1998). Chapter 7 Title

Both the US embassy and the Central Intelligence Agency had long been aware of persistent rumors of a “preventative coup.” Two weeks before the attack, Francis McNeal, a secretary of the embassy, informed the ambassador that Guatemalan contacts were abuzz with talk of Ydígoras’ imminent overthrow. It was now common knowledge that the typically fractious Guatemalan military stood united behind its pledge to prevent Arévalo from entering the country and participating in the elections even if it meant removing Ydígoras from office and establishing a junta. The embassy was apprehensive about these dire warnings: “Guatemala is a land of rumors, and plotting—for the most part more froth than substance.”³⁸⁵ The CIA reported a day before the attempted coup that a small faction of air force officers planned an imminent assault on the loyalist command center at the Ciprisales military base in Guatemala City and would proceed to assume control of the government.³⁸⁶ To aid in their takeover of the capital, the rebelling officers secured an alliance with an army brigade stationed at a key military base, Mariscal Zavala, on the outskirts of Guatemala City and twenty-two members of the *Guardia de Honor*, the praetorian force that guarded President Ydígoras and his ministers. Central Intelligence Agency memos described the rebel officers as non-leftist, anti-Arévalo, and friendly to the United States.³⁸⁷ While the coup attempt received no endorsement by the US government, the CIA did not inform Ydígoras. This inaction suggests that the Kennedy administration was more than willing to see Ydígoras removed

³⁸⁵ Francis McNeal, “The Possibility of a ‘Preventive Coup’”, National Archives. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. Decimal Files, 1960-1963. Box 1517, page 1

³⁸⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “Possible Attempt to Overthrow the Guatemalan Government,” November 24, 1962, National Security Files, Box 101, Country Files: Guatemala, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

from office. Fully aware of the situation, the United States government watched and waited.

Early in the morning of November 25, renegade aircraft blasted the presidential palace with a barrage of missiles and machine gun fire. Ydígoras' own grandchildren were nearly killed as .50 caliber rounds tore through the bedrooms of the presidential residence.³⁸⁸ Nonetheless, most of the military remained loyal to the “Old Fox” of Guatemala and thwarted the attack on the Ciprisales base and the presidential palace.³⁸⁹ The uprising faltered quickly when plotters in the Army failed to fulfill their promise to storm *La Casa Crema* with ground forces. In fact, Ydígoras seized the initiative and personally led the defense against the air attack by directing anti-aircraft fire from the barracks of his honor guard. A barrage from Ydígoras loyalists downed one of the P-51 fighters, and the insurrectionist airmen attempted to fly their planes out of the country when they realized their co-conspirators on the ground had abandoned them.³⁹⁰ The attack dissipated around noon, mere hours after it had begun. A few dozen people were wounded, including the wife of a US embassy attaché, and three Guatemalan civilians were killed.³⁹¹ President Ydígoras, however, remained standing and addressed the public that very afternoon. Apparently, Ydígoras' informants had fortuitously forewarned the president of impending threat and his regime staggered on.³⁹²

³⁸⁸ Roland H. Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 262

³⁸⁹ Robert F. Corrigan, “[President Ydígoras Cracks Down on Air Force following Unsuccessful Coup],” November 28, 1962. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives, 1.

³⁹⁰ Robert F. Corrigan, “[Aftermath of Coup Attempt]” November 26, 1962 National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 5, John F. Kennedy Library. 1

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Roland H. Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 262

President Ydígoras likened the event to a boil bursting to relieve a festering sore.³⁹³ In his public address, he promised that he would “root out the defectors” in the military, but he attributed the uprising to Cuban subversion, not the military’s widely known opposition to Arévalo. According to Paul Kennedy, a reporter for the New York Times, neither the Guatemalan people nor the US embassy, put stock in Ydígoras’s claims of a Cuban connection.³⁹⁴ That the oftentimes rabidly anti-Arévalo, Castro-fearing US embassy staff did not join Ydígoras in blaming Cuba in their internal communications or dispatches to Washington suggests that this explanation was utterly untenable. Nonetheless, President Ydígoras hoped to obscure the growing rift between his office and the military, and claimed that his intelligence agents had revealed that Cuban communists paid several air force officers \$30,000 to launch the attack.³⁹⁵ The reality behind the insurrection was far more complicated.

In Guatemala, talk of land reform is the only thing more politically dangerous than proposing tax legislation. The agri-export businessmen who dominated the Guatemalan economy protected their privileges, always at the cost of the majority of their fellow citizens. Since 1959, President Ydígoras sought to pass an income tax, the first of its kind in Guatemala, hoping to generate desperately needed revenue for the state. Unpaid government workers played a major role in the protests of 1962, with teachers, contractors, and even hospital workers staging walkouts and demonstrations.³⁹⁶

³⁹³ Robert F. Corrigan, “[President Ydígoras Cracks Down on Air Force following Unsuccessful Coup],” November 28, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library. 3.

³⁹⁴ Paul P. Kennedy. “Hundreds Seized by Guatemalans”. The New York Times, November 27, 1962

³⁹⁵Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes. *My War with Communism*. (Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1963). 242.

³⁹⁶ Ebel, 261

Moreover, the United States used preconditions for increased Alliance for Progress aid to convince Ydígoras that “passage by Congress of income tax and land tax modernization is essential to enable Guatemala to be included in [a] list of approved aid clients.”³⁹⁷ At the behest of US officials, Ydígoras even sought out OAS experts to help his administration draft the law.³⁹⁸ In an effort to gain support from the private sector, Ydígoras had submitted the law for review to the *Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras* (CACIF), the league of Guatemala’s major industry moguls. Unsurprisingly, they repeatedly rejected the law and its numerous revisions. In an apology letter to unpaid hospital workers, Ydígoras blamed these economic elites and their unwillingness to pay taxes for most of fiscal Guatemala’s problems: “In all the countries of the world the citizens pay taxes. In Guatemala they do not do that and when the rich see that the state may obligate them to do so, they unite with the communists to overthrow the government as occurred in March and April of this year.”³⁹⁹ The likelihood of collaboration between communists and the major capitalist leaders of Guatemala was as far-fetched as any of Ydígoras’ more fanciful declarations, but it did show that the entrenched president was facing growing opposition from all segments of society. Condemning communists, who would never be satisfied with Ydígoras’ government, carried no risks. Losing the support of CACIF and the economic and political power its members’ wielded, however, was a dangerous move even for one so experienced in Guatemalan politics.

³⁹⁷ John O. Bell. [Incoming Telegram to Secretary of State], November 9, 1962 National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 5. Page 1.

³⁹⁸ Ibid

³⁹⁹ Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, untitled article in *El Imparcial*. September, 1962; referenced in Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 261.

After years of revision, negotiation, and compromise, the Guatemalan Congress passed Ydígoras' income tax law on November 24, 1962. The Air Force insurrection occurred the very next day. Many of the conspirators had been plotting Ydígoras' overthrow since he first proposed an income tax in 1959 and had been carefully cultivating a network of supporters among political, business, and military leaders. The US embassy questioned his credibility because of his status as a "perennial plotter and...person who may become involved in plots and intrigue for the sheer pleasure", but the account Eduardo Taracena de la Cerda provided a rare glimpse into the cloak and dagger of Guatemalan presidential politics.

Taracena was a leader of the remnant of Carlos Castillo Armas' crypto-fascist political party, *Movimiento Liberacion Nacional* (MLN), and considered himself the chief civilian architect of the failed Air Force insurrection. On November 5, twenty days before the attack, Taracena contacted a political officer of the US embassy to present the case for the impending coup. He claimed the loyalty of "over 100 military officers in strategic posts throughout the armed forces, [who have] decided that a coup is now necessary if the country is to be kept from falling into the arms of the extreme left."⁴⁰⁰ Arévalo, not taxation, was the focus of Taracena's stated rationale for the overthrow of Ydígoras, but this contradicted his boast that he and his allies had been plotting since 1959; years before Arévalo announced his presidential bid. The coup, Taracena claimed, was an immediate necessity because his men had infiltrated Arevalista organizations and uncovered a letter from Arévalo calling on his supporters "to begin the development of a subversive organization that would work toward a coup" that would presumably lead to a

⁴⁰⁰ John T. Dreyfuss, [Memorandum of conversation between Eduardo Taracena and John T. Dreyfuss]. November 5, 1962. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 5. Page 1

leftist, Castro-friendly government.⁴⁰¹ The US embassy, usually quick to tarnish Arévalo, noted that this was a dubious claim because he had consistently dissuaded his followers from such tactics.⁴⁰² Taracena confidently projected “that his group does not need ‘one cent or cartridge’ since everything is prepared and planned” because of the political and business interests that allegedly supported the overthrow.⁴⁰³

The failure of the Air Force insurrection proved that Taracena and his co-conspirators were less unified than he suggested. Although most of the Guatemalan military fervently opposed the return of Juan José Arévalo, the longstanding rivalry between the Air Force and Army, and divisions within the Army itself, factored significantly in the coup’s failure. Ex-major and aspiring presidential contender, Abundio Maldonado, told the US embassy that at least fourteen Army officers at the Mariscal Zavala base and within the *Guardia de Honor* received substantial bribes in exchange for promises to begin a ground assault on the capital in coordination with the air strikes on the presidential palace.⁴⁰⁴ When the time came to strike, the compromised Army units remained loyal and defended the regime. Infighting between the key military plotters over the composition of the junta that would assume control over the government caused key army officers to withhold their forces at the last moment.⁴⁰⁵ Also, having learned from the fall of Arbenz in the 1954 CIA coup, Ydígoras had implemented “Operation:

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. 2.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid. 3.

⁴⁰⁴ John T. Dreyfuss. [Memorandum of conversation between Abundio Maldonado and John Dreyfuss]. November 25, 1962. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 5. JFKL. Page 2.

⁴⁰⁵ Robert F. Corrigan. “Embassy Telegram 332”. November 27, 1962. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 5. JKFL. Page 2.

Whip” and installed anti-aircraft guns near the presidential palace that were instrumental in repelling the air force attack.⁴⁰⁶ The most important factor, however, was the refusal of Defense Minister Enrique Peralta to participate in the attack.

Enrique Peralta Azurdia entered into the elite army officer training school, *Escuela Politecnica*, in 1926 at the age of eighteen. In his steady climb through the ranks of the military, he earned a reputation for honesty and loyalty. During the 1944 revolution, a group of leading military officers and business elites approached Peralta with the possibility of becoming the new president of Guatemala.⁴⁰⁷ He refused. As the civilian and military posts within the Guatemalan government became increasingly indistinguishable following the overthrow of Arbenz, Peralta held numerous positions. He served several ambassadorships, headed the *Escuela Politecnica*, and became Minister of Agriculture by 1959. When nearly a third of the army rose up in rebellion against Ydígoras in 1960, it was Peralta who convinced the majority of the officers to remain loyal to the President.⁴⁰⁸ He was rewarded with a promotion to Minister of Defense.

When the conspiring officers launched their attack in 1962, they did so without the support of Defense Minister Peralta. The military, as a whole, was unified behind blocking Arévalo’s presidency, and the Defense Minister had publicly announced on several occasions the Army would fulfill this promise. Factions within the ranks differed on how this would be achieved. Although Peralta had secured his cabinet position by the

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid. 1.

⁴⁰⁷ Richard Adams. *Crucifixion By Power*. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1970) 276.

⁴⁰⁸ Jim Handy, *The Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*. (Toronto, Between the Lines, 1984) 153.

consent of the leaders of the Guatemalan military, contention between the branches and factions remained an issue. According to US embassy reports, Peralta had visited the commanding officers of the “big three” military institutions involved in the 1962 uprising—the Air Force and the Mariscal Zavala and Guardia Honor Brigades—to reaffirm his commitment to preventing the return of Arévalo, but some, particularly Air Force officers, were suspicious of the decorated Army colonel.⁴⁰⁹ These concerns were likely rooted in the professional rivalry between the Army and the Air Force. Despite their agreement to jointly storm the presidential palace, the Army remained loyal to the Defense Minister, while the Air Force proceeded with the attack. Officials in the US embassy believed that several officers involved in the plot also had presidential ambitions, and saw Peralta as a strong contender for the office, and a potential obstacle for their own aspirations.⁴¹⁰ By attacking Ydígoras without Peralta’s support, these officers were likely trying to circumvent the presumed presidential succession should the Defense Minister be forced to make good on his promise of barring Arévalo from country. By this point in time, talk of Ydígoras’ overthrow had become so widespread within the military, that many assumed Peralta would soon become the de facto president of Guatemala. With Peralta as the head of state, these presidential hopefuls, particularly those in the Air Force, felt that their political potential would be greatly diminished.

Although Peralta left no record indicating his reasoning for not participating in the brief 1962 uprising, there are several calculations that probably contributed to his decision. Foremost, the Defense Minister was already in a position of formidable power.

⁴⁰⁹ Francis McNeil, “The Possibility of a ‘Preventive Coup’”, National Archives. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. Decimal Files, 1960-1963. Box 1517,2.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. 3

During his tenure as chief representative of the Guatemalan Armed Forces, most presidential cabinet positions became filled with his allies in the military. This solidified his popularity across most of the factions within the various security forces. By 1963, the Ydígoras administration had been battered by near-constant civil protest, two military uprisings, and a growing guerrilla insurgency. To endure these crises, President Ydígoras relied on the loyal elements of the military to maintain some degree of order. In exchange for personal and political survival, Ydígoras whittled away his own power while enhancing the role of the military in civilian affairs. Defense Minister Peralta, though his brother Arturo, had also been developing strong relationship with the US Embassy, and enjoyed a rather favorable assessment from Ambassador Bell and his staff. Participating in a risky coup attempt would likely have damaged his good standing with US officials, especially if that coup would have ended in failure. Likewise, the botched uprising eliminated several contentious officers, each a potential rival of the Defense Minister. Peralta was keen to preserve his outstanding reputation. As a member of a government notorious for its corruption, Peralta stood out as a relative paragon. Both American and Guatemalan officials believed that Peralta did not engage in graft and only took on positions of power with reluctance. Some, like anthropologist Richard Adams, have pointed to his rejection of the presidency in 1944 and subsequent refusal of the title of president in 1963 as evidence for this characterization.⁴¹¹ Whatever calculus Peralta used to guide his ascent to power, he concluded that November 1962 was not the right time to dispose of President Ydígoras.

⁴¹¹ Adams. *Crucifixion By Power*. 276.

The Air Force attack of 1962 demonstrated that while the Guatemalan military had developed a unified front against an Arévalo presidency, the organization, as a whole, remained factionalized and mutinous. Despite the failure of the coup attempt, the armed forces, and particularly Defense Minister Peralta, increased their leverage over President Ydígoras. The deeply unpopular president had nowhere to turn except his steadfast Minister of Defense. For its part, the United States appeared unable to act against the coup attempt. Even had it been able to do so, the ties that Ambassador Bell and others had established with Guatemalan military officers likely encouraged Washington to withhold its' intelligence and wait for the conflict to play out. The Air Force attack proved that the last vestiges of a civilian regime were extremely vulnerable, but only if the commanding officers could set aside their squabbles and act in concert under a single leader.

Narrowed Possibilities: New Approaches Following the Failed Coup

The failure of the Air Force coup attempt momentarily halted the momentum of the Guatemalan officer corps steady accumulation of control over the state. The United States was prepared to accept military rule in Guatemala: Washington's silence before and during the Air Force attack suggested that Ambassador Bell's campaign to ally with the Guatemalan officer corps was an acceptable approach for the Kennedy administration. President Ydigoras was surrounded by people, even within his own cabinet, who wanted to destroy him, yet he survived nonetheless. Military rule was not a forgone conclusion, although many Guatemalans and US officials still believed it was an

inevitability. For the moment, however, new options appeared in the realm of political possibility that might preserve Guatemalan democracy.

President Ydígoras, used to being backed into a corner, tried to make the most of the attempt on his life. He took advantage of the situation and purged the armed forces, particularly the Air Force, of disloyal elements, arresting hundreds of military personnel. The chief plotters, along with many of the Air Force pilots who participated in the attack, had already fled to El Salvador to escape retribution.⁴¹² Having lavished special privileges on the Air Force since the 1960 uprising, predominately an Army affair, Ydígoras felt betrayed and was determined to reorganize the entire branch of the military. He complained that special treatment had led these “Hollywood Glamour Boys” to develop a “disdain for ordinary army personnel” and the government at large.⁴¹³ With the exception of a handful of dismissals of the most offensive plotters, nearly all of the arrested military men did not stay imprisoned for very long. The Guatemalan Armed Forces may have suffered from petty internecine struggles between cliques and personalities, but they universally resolved to discipline personnel internally. Punishments might result in checked ambitions through diplomatic exile or demotion, but infractions committed by military officers rarely resulted in formal charges, much less an arrest.⁴¹⁴ His reprisals largely ineffective, the Ydígoras presidency exposed just how little control the civilian government had over the military. In fact, when Ydígoras diminished

⁴¹² Robert Corrigan, [Memo 332 to State Department], November 26, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 5. 1.

⁴¹³ Robert Corrigan, “[President Ydígoras Cracks Down on Air Force following Unsuccessful Coup], November 28, 1962, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, Folder 5. 2.

⁴¹⁴ General exemption from being prosecuted in civil court was considered a significant perk of the profession among officers in the Guatemalan military. Even those officers who took part in the November 13 uprising were not punished after they surrendered. Adams, *Crucifixion By Power*. 244-245

some of the perquisites enjoyed by Air Force, it placed them on a more equal footing with their Army counterparts and likely reduced the adversarial tension between these branches.⁴¹⁵ This would be a small, but significant step in developing a stronger sense of shared identity among the military branches and security forces.

Not one to miss an opportunity for political gain, Ydígoras also ordered the arrest of numerous political opponents following the abortive coup. Determined to serve his full term in office and preside over the first genuinely democratic transition of power since 1950, President Ydígoras hoped to press every political advantage he could muster. Jailings only delayed political adversaries for a brief time, as they were released shortly after being apprehended, and soon Ydígoras found himself facing an insurmountable quandary. After four years of alleged corruption, intermittent martial law, and economic malfeasance, the Guatemalan president had earned the enmity of nearly every political constituency. Only the unenthusiastic support of the military kept his regime afloat, and their chief demand was preventing Arévalo from running for the presidency. Ydígoras faced a stark choice: survive the remaining year of his presidential term or allow a genuinely open election. If he chose the latter, military leaders, including Defense Minister Peralta, had made it clear there would be no election. The failed Air Force attack on the presidential palace confirmed the willingness of officers to act on their words. However, to the dismay of his loyal commanders and US officials, Ydígoras still refused to bar Arévalo from the country. In an odd turn of events, general-turned-president—who

⁴¹⁵ As noted in the introduction, Air Force personnel had more opportunities to make additional income after the Ydígoras government granted pilots special licenses that allowed them to engage in commercial flights for agricultural and transportation purposes. Additionally, they had been granted better pay and equipment than their Army counterparts. Additionally, they were granted distinctive blue uniforms. See Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*. 249.

was at one time a protégé of the fascist dictator Jorge Ubico—stood as one of the final defenders of the democratic legacy of the Guatemalan Revolution.

While the archconservative Ydígoras tried to preserve the last vestiges of Guatemalan democracy, the Kennedy administration and its representatives continued to develop their relationship with the officer corps. Having spent considerable time and energy over the past year procuring military hardware for Guatemala, especially aircraft, Ambassador John Bell was concerned about Ydígoras' crackdown on the Air Force. A few days after the revolt, the ambassador and President Ydígoras met, and Bell expressed his worries. At the Air Force's request, Bell had secured T-33 fighter jets for Guatemala, which were slated for imminent arrival. Ydígoras promised Bell that the Air Force would experience some reorganization, but it would remain intact and that the jets were still a modernizing necessity.⁴¹⁶ Despite the president's assurances and the brevity of internment, Bell believed that the arrests and expulsions of treasonous officers were too harsh because the ailing Ydígoras government needed to maintain a close alliance with the military in order to manage the impending election crisis. In an attempt to bandage the fissures appearing between the armed forces and the government, Bell approved the delivery of jet fighters, claiming they were a symbol of the United States' commitment to the Guatemalan military.⁴¹⁷ This action would have clearly signaled to the Guatemalan officers, even those in the Air Force, that they remained in the good graces of the United States despite recent difficulties. For Bell, the most significant threat to US interests, and his own career, was the return of Arévalo. Seeing the former Guatemalan president as

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁴¹⁷ John O. Bell, "[Delivery of T-33 Aircraft for Guatemalan Air Force]," December 17, 1962, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives, 5.

another Castro in the making, Ambassador Bell believed that the United States could not afford to lose ground within its sphere of influence because of squabbling within the Guatemalan elite. Ydígoras had weathered waves of civilian protests and military uprisings so far, but Ambassador Bell would not risk the possibility that the unpopular president would become another Fulgencio Batista.

While Bell strategized how to save Guatemala from communism, his superiors in the United States seemed content to let the ambassador control the situation as he saw fit. The upper echelons of the State Department had several priorities outside of Guatemala in the early 1960s. The standoff in Europe had cooled after the Berlin Crisis in 1961, but the Old World still loomed large in Cold War geopolitics. In Vietnam, escalation continued unchecked and the recalcitrant Ngo Dinh Diem frustrated the Kennedy administration. In Latin America, the State Department devoted the preponderance of their attention on the issue of Cuba. President Kennedy's personal grudge against Castro bordered on obsession. The Cuban Missile Crisis dramatically demonstrated that communist infiltration of Latin America posed an immediate and existential threat to the United States. As such, Guatemala clearly mattered, and Bell, as ambassador, wielded considerable influence over US policy in Guatemala. There is no indication that Secretary Rusk or other State Department officials questioned Bell's initiatives and approach. One of the only members of JFK's administration who actively voiced a more nuanced interpretation was Arthur Schlesinger Jr, Camelot's court historian.

Schlesinger occupied a unique position as Special Assistant to the President. While not a major maker of policy, Schlesinger did have influence within Kennedy's inner circle. Unlike Bell, Schlesinger did not see Arévalo as a nascent communist threat,

and in January 1963, Schlesinger circulated a telegram through the State Department that challenged the accepted thinking on the popular Guatemalan reformer. Schlesinger conceded that open association with Arévalo should be avoided, but he postulated that the United States might be “missing a bet if we do not assign some non-official people to cultivate Arévalo quietly, explore his views, and see whether he can be steered in sensible directions.”⁴¹⁸ Furthermore, he felt that Arévalo’s professions of anti-communism and his expressed desire to work with the United States should be taken more seriously; he found no reason for the former president to have any ties to Castro or the communist world. Schlesinger concluded with a warning: “The present line is one of those self-fulfilling prophecies: if we persist in acting as if Arévalo were beyond all hope of salvation, he will certainly end up that way.”⁴¹⁹

Schlesinger’s appraisal of Arévalo developed from his optimistic view of how the United States could bring positive change to Latin America through democracy and building up the middle class. An avid proponent of Alliance for Progress reforms, Schlesinger’s opinion was rooted in modernization theory. Prominent academics in the social sciences held that education, social welfare, and competitive political parties could uplift traditional societies out of the hierarchical, economically stagnant systems, while undermining radical political movements in the process.⁴²⁰ The military and socioeconomic elite often rejected forms of modernization as a challenge to their privileged position, which encouraged radicalization among marginalized groups. This

⁴¹⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, “State Department Circular Telegram on Arévalo,” January 8, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 394, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Place in the World*, 26.

approach toward Third World countries led Schlesinger to favor economic development and democracy as cornerstones of successful anticommunist doctrine. To Schlesinger, Arévalo's politics aligned more closely with the ideals of the Alliance for Progress than those of the reactionaries, militarists, and radicals that competed for power in Guatemala.

Unlike other members of the Kennedy administration, Schlesinger seemed receptive to Arévalo's public praise for the Alliance for Progress and his denunciations of Castro. A fellow academic with democratic credentials and a history of moderate reform, Arévalo fit Schlesinger's ideal for a Latin American leader. Considering the alternatives—a pseudo-civilian kleptocracy or a military dictatorship--Arévalo had more potential. The current breed of political and military elites in Guatemala would only use Alliance funding to preserve their own narrow interests under the guise of modernization. If properly cultivated and controlled, Schlesinger believed that an Arévalo presidency could advance Alliance for Progress programs while sapping the momentum of leftist radicals. Schlesinger's telegram received no formal response. Most likely, the officials who received the telegram, including President Kennedy, had decided that Arévalo was, at best, a "menace" and that his links to Arbenz were evidence enough that he would encourage communism in Guatemala.⁴²¹ This decision reflects the enduring antipathy toward revolution in US foreign relations. As identified by historian Michael Hunt, opposition to radical movements is a cornerstone of the United States' diplomatic ideology.⁴²² Kennedy's determination to "win" Cold War conflicts against any

⁴²¹ Dean Rusk, "[Excerpt from Memorandum of Conversation between Presidents Kennedy and Ydígoras on Juan Jose Arévalo]," March 26, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

⁴²² Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) 18, Chapter 4.

communist challenge pushed the likelihood of working with someone who had criticized US actions in Guatemala even further away from the realm of possibility. In the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the fear that an avowed reformist could quickly transition to a radical revolutionary remained too great a risk for Kennedy and Ambassador Bell to even consider the prospect of Arévalo's return to presidency.

Furthermore, Schlesinger's assessment glazed over an important fact: Defense Minister Peralta had repeatedly and publicly stated that Arévalo would never be allowed to run, and the Guatemalan Armed Forces stood united behind this pledge. The conservative leaders of Guatemala's military proclaimed that their opposition to Arévalo stemmed from their stalwart determination to protect the country from communist influence, but most officers likely assumed that Arevalo would halt the steady accumulation of power and prestige that the armed forces had experienced since the counterrevolution. Many remembered the conflict between the Arévalo government and the conservative elements of the military that resulted in the assassination of their champion, Major Francisco Arana. Political scientist Roland Ebel reveals that many anti-Arevalo officers demanded criminal prosecution of the former president for the murder of Arana.⁴²³ Even in the event of Arévalo's successful election to the presidency, he would face constant internal threats from both his own military and the majority of Guatemala's economic and political elite. As it would do in 1966 to President Mendez Montenegro, the armed forces would have, at best, made Arévalo a hostage-president, while military leaders controlled the real mechanisms of power. Schlesinger's idealistic proposal was

⁴²³ Arevalo replied to this accusation that his government had fully investigated the death of Major Arana, but that he would present himself to an independent court regarding the matter. Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 277,281-282.

incompatible with the reality of the increasingly pervasive presence of the Guatemalan military in all levels of the government. The United States would not disrupt its longstanding relationship with the leaders of Guatemala's armed forces for the wishful-thinking of an academic.

In January 1963, with the Air Force coup attempt behind him, Ambassador Bell could once again focus on Arévalo and the upcoming elections. Though he admitted that Ydígoras had considerable political skill, evidenced by his survival, Bell reported, "there is widespread feeling in Guatemala favoring a military coup to oust Ydígoras and [to] arrange for elections which would exclude the participation of Arévalo."⁴²⁴ The accuracy of this statement is highly suspect, given that both Washington and the Guatemalan Armed Forces acted as though they anticipated Arévalo's electoral victory. Furthermore, despite the alleged "widespread" opposition to Arévalo, Bell claimed that the other political parties lacked the unity necessary to produce a significant challenger for the presidency. Contradicting his earlier characterizations of Arévalo, Bell admitted that the former president was not a communist, but that "his confused, ill-balanced, political philosophy of 'spiritual socialism,' fed by deep prejudice against the United States, served the Communist purpose well during his administration" and was a precursor to the "Communist dominated Arbenz administration."⁴²⁵ Bell also suggested that Ydígoras might be conspiring with Arévalo: a rumor that had long circulated in Guatemalan political circles. He noted that Ydígoras continued to withhold his endorsement of any

⁴²⁴ John O. Bell, "Guatemala," January 21, 1963, Presidential Office Files, Box 118, John F. Kennedy Papers, JFKL, 1.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

presidential candidate and speculated that the president might be in contact with Arévalo in order to secure a life of comfort in Guatemala after the election.⁴²⁶

Bell maintained his belief that forging strong ties with the military remained the best way to create a stable, anticommunist Guatemala. When US interests and international prestige appeared to be at risk, the high-minded rhetoric of the Alliance for Progress meant little, and the Kennedy administration opted for what it believed was its safest bet: the Guatemalan Armed Forces. High-ranking officers had already declared that they would not allow Arévalo into the country, and the Air Force coup attempt in November 1962 proved that they planned on keeping their word. Although Bell deemed it improbable, he maintained that finding an acceptable candidate who could beat Arévalo remained his priority.⁴²⁷ Failing that, he urged a concerted effort to assess Arévalo's popularity outside of the capital, covertly reduce the former president's prestige, and dissuade him from running in the election. That option, however, seemed unlikely to succeed. In the event that Ydígoras was displaced before the election, Bell suggested grooming military men suitable for governance.⁴²⁸ The ambassador promised another interagency appraisal of Guatemala in March, but given Bell's growing preference for the military, the likelihood of a change in approach seemed minimal.

Although it appeared that Bell had already cast his lot with the military, the ambassador scheduled a meeting with the intractable Guatemalan president. The discussion focused almost entirely on Arévalo's return. Ydígoras waited patiently as Bell

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 2.

expressed his concern that Arévalo would win the election if he were allowed to run for president. When the ambassador finished, President Ydígoras presented a convincing defense of his actions. He explained that Guatemala's borders made it practically impossible to prevent a determined individual from entering the country. If Arévalo were arrested after entry, Guatemalans would view him as a hero, or martyr, and the Americans' worst fears of a Castro-figure emerging in Central America would become a reality.⁴²⁹ An arrest would lead to court appeals, public disorder, and a spectacle that would only increase his stature and renown. If killed by overzealous military-men, the ranks of radicals and guerrillas would swell. Moreover, there was no legal basis for keeping Arévalo out of the country and Ydígoras, "like his friends in the United States," respected the rule of law.⁴³⁰ The wisest course of action, the president explained, would be to allow Arévalo to run for office, which Ydígoras believed would divide and weaken all of the leftist parties.

The meeting between Ydígoras and Bell presented new possibilities and challenged the assumptions of the Kennedy administration. Not only did Ydígoras assure Bell that Arévalo's popularity was overrated, he also revealed that his own relationship with the former president was misunderstood. Ydígoras admitted that among the "rich people" of Guatemala, rumors had circulated that he had "sold out" to Arévalo.⁴³¹ In fact, Ydígoras opposed Arévalo. He simply believed that the defeat of the former president required "cold and clear planning and not letting hate drive one into ill-considered and

⁴²⁹ John O. Bell. "Conversation with President Ydígoras" February 11, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library. 3

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Ibid. 4

hasty actions.”⁴³² The president’s argument apparently impressed Bell. In a report to the State Department summarizing the meeting, he stated that he was “inclined to agree with Ydígoras” that it would be a mistake for the Guatemalan government to keep Arévalo out of the country.⁴³³ Bell’s suddenly more favorable assessment of Ydígoras suggested that the ambassador might have been open to more subtle and creative solutions for safeguarding Guatemala against communist threats.

Despite the new possibilities that emerged from the failure of the Air Force coup attempt, the Kennedy administration continued to operate on the assumption of an eventual military takeover of the Guatemalan state. Arévalo’s impending arrival, the unrest within the armed forces, and the ambassador’s two years of cultivating a close relationship between the embassy and Guatemalan officers, however, all prevented Bell from changing the course of US policy at so late an hour. Even had he done so, the influence of the US embassy, while significant in Guatemala, had limits. The leaders of the Guatemalan military, including the powerful Defense Minister Peralta, had universally declared they would cancel elections if Arevalo entered the country. While the United States had few qualms of intervening against perceived communist infiltration, it would not directly confront its allies within the conservative officer corps to defend the Guatemala against anticommunist authoritarianism. As the ambassador’s options narrowed, the likelihood of a coup increased.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid., 6.

The Pitfalls of Presidential Politics: Guatemalan Democracy's Last Gasp

As the presidential campaign season neared, President Ydigoras faced political decisions that would determine his fate and could change the course of Guatemalan history. The single most important choice he needed to make as his term came to a natural close was choosing a candidate to endorse. If successful, his successor would rally the anticommunist vote and crush the factionalized left. As Ydigoras routinely opined, such a presidential contender could even defeat Juan Jose Arevalo in an open election and preserve Guatemalan democracy in the process. Although Ydigoras had proved himself a master of Guatemalan politics, he stumbled in one of the last and most significant decisions of his presidential tenure. This misstep was all that his opponents needed to recover from the disastrous Air Force attack. The military and its anticommunist civilian supporters, bolstered by the Kennedy administration's lack of enthusiasm for Ydigoras, made the final preparations for their seizure of the Guatemalan state.

President Ydígoras had much more to contend with than the concerns of the American Embassy. The already dire political situation was becoming increasingly untenable as Ydígoras tried to secure a legacy of democratic succession. Like sharks drawn to the bleeding regime, a proliferation of parties and candidates seeking presidential power began to encircle the President as the election year began. Leftist parties remained divided over the prospect of Arévalo's return. The great fear of the Guatemalan military and the United States was that Arévalo could unite the fragmented

groups that ranged from guerrilla fighters to moderate urban bureaucrats and businessmen, but this was an unlikely scenario.

Arevalo's reluctance to provide political guidance compounded the confusion on the left. After announcing his candidacy in November 1961, Arevalo had remained relatively quiet. His major work, *Fábula del Tiburón y las Sardinias* (Fable of the Shark and the Sardines), published the same year, had thoroughly condemned US foreign policy in Latin America, but his criticism ended with the Eisenhower administration. As noted in the previous chapter, Arévalo expressed cautious admiration for Kennedy's Alliance for Progress and hoped to foster good ties with the new president's administration. Arévalo's lack of public pronouncements likely reflected the difficult task that lay before him: he needed to maintain political support within the Guatemalan left and simultaneously not appear too radical to the Kennedy administration. In fact, Arevalo did not publicize his political platform until late January 1963, and only did so because two major *Arévalista* parties threatened to support a rival candidate, Francisco Villagrán Kramer, if he continued to withhold the formal announcement.⁴³⁴ Roland Ebel reports that Arevalo's supporters were disappointed by his "*Carta personal al Guatemaltecos*" because it failed to address specific political issues.⁴³⁵ Instead, Arevalo defaulted to repeating his nebulous personal philosophy of "spiritual socialism" and reiterated that he was neither a communist nor did he play a role in the murder of Major Francisco Arana.⁴³⁶ Of greater significance was Arevalo's insistence that he would embrace the

⁴³⁴ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 277

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Piero Gleijeses own research into this question concludes that Arevalo did order the assassination of Arana. See: Piero Gleijeses, "The Death of Francisco Arana: A Turning Point in the Guatemalan Revolution." *Journal of Latin American Studies*. Vol. 22, 1990. Pg 527-552.

Alliance for Progress and ally with the United States in international affairs.⁴³⁷ The announcement failed to make no discernable impact on US officials and did little to help Arevalo build a broader political coalition.

The *Partido Revolucionario*, which had long associated itself with the Guatemalan Revolution over which Arévalo had presided, had already selected a candidate, Mario Méndez Montenegro, a centrist who had wrested control of the party by expelling *Arévalistas*.⁴³⁸ Arévalo's rejected supporters, in turn, splintered into several political parties: *Partido de Unificación Revolucionaria* (PUR), *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR), and the *Partido Revolucionario Auténtico* (PRA). The highly factionalized nature of the political left formed the basis of Ydígoras' continued advocacy for allowing Arévalo to run for office. As he related to Ambassador Bell, Ydígoras believed that Arévalo would not be able to unite his own political base, much less the entire electorate, and would lose the presidency to whichever candidate emerged from the coalition of conservative, anticommunist parties on the right.⁴³⁹

Guatemala's political right, a loose confederation of major business interests, military officers, traditionalist peasants, and the anticommunist segments of the middle class should have been Ydígoras' natural ally. Instead, they were the greatest threat to the President and his hopes of overseeing the exchange of power from his regime to the next. CACIF, the league of Guatemala's most prominent businessmen, still begrudged Ydígoras for passing an income tax law. Many members were suspected to have been

⁴³⁷ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 277.

⁴³⁸ Ebel, 173

⁴³⁹ John O. Bell. "Conversation with President Ydígoras" February 11, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL. 2-3.

involved in the abortive Air Force attack that had occurred the morning after the law had passed. Following the failed coup attempt, CACIF purchased political ads in newspapers that announced the Ydígoras regime lacked the capacity, sincerity, and organization to govern and that “additional taxation would destroy productive capital, raise the cost of living, increase unemployment, and provide the government with more money to waste.”⁴⁴⁰ Instead of taxation, CACIF offered an alternative to generating much needed revenue for the state: reduce the salaries of top bureaucrats by twenty percent; a seventy-five percent cut to the presidential salary; bar and rescind all appointments of family members to government offices; and the elimination of *los confidentiales*—the private, discretionary funds the President used to grease the wheels of government.⁴⁴¹ When Ydígoras’ finance minister called a special meeting of Congress to come up with solutions to Guatemala’s financial woes, the members of CACIF undercut the proceedings by stating they would not pay taxes or invest in new businesses if any of the measures passed.⁴⁴² In the face of financial crisis, the impasse between the government and business leaders only created stagnation at a time where action was desperately needed to help stabilize an increasingly turbulent political atmosphere.

Unable to pay most of his own government’s workers and incapable of extracting funds from the wealthy, Ydígoras had become politically isolated and, for most candidates on the right, a liability to be avoided. Hoping to secure a candidate among the anti-communist right that could challenge Arévalo, Ydígoras called for a convention for

⁴⁴⁰ *Hispanic American Report*, 15:1, March 1963, pg. 23

⁴⁴¹ Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 279.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.* 278.

the conservative parties. Four major parties, along with the conservative wing of the *Partido Revolucionario* bridged the spectrum of the Guatemalan political right. The Christian Democrats and PR conservatives formed the center right. The MDN and MLN, remnants from the counterrevolutionary coalition government of Castillo Armas, comprised the far right-wing.⁴⁴³ Additionally, President Ydígoras had formed his own party, *Redención* (RDN), following his narrow electoral victory in 1958. When he called for a conference among the right-wing parties that would determine a single candidate to run against Arévalo, only the candidates of his own party and the leader of the MDN bothered to attend. There would be no unified anti-Arévalo coalition.

Instead, a new conservative organization emerged, the *Frente Unido Nacional Anticomunista* (FUNA), which condemned Ydígoras as a co-conspirator of Arévalo's. FUNA's leader, Luis Arenas, declared that the group was willing to resort to violence and coordinate with the Army in order to stop Arévalo. Defense Minister Peralta quickly rejected the notion of an alliance between the Army and FUNA. Desperate to create some unity within the political-right, Ydígoras tried to appeal to anti-*arevalistas* by permitting a FUNA rally on March 4, 1963. To rebut FUNA's Arévalo-Ydígoras conspiracy rumors, the President hardened his stance and announced that Arévalo would have to prove he was not a communist before he returned to Guatemala. This was not an outright ban, but it was certainly an indication that Ydígoras was beginning to feel intense pressure from every direction. Even the Central Intelligence Agency now entertained the possibility of an Arévalo-Ydígoras conspiracy, and generated its own list of speculative connections

⁴⁴³ MDN refers to *Movimiento Democrático Nacionalista*, the political party created around the presidency of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas by a coalition of ranking military officers and businessmen. The MLN, *Movimiento Liberación Nacional*, was a far-right splinter group of the MDN that grew in power throughout the 1960s.

between the two Guatemalan leaders. The fact that “Ydígoras and Arévalo together have attacked Liberationists and the Partido Revolucionario” and a handful of overlapping political associates was all the CIA could muster in its case for collusion between the Guatemalan leaders.⁴⁴⁴ While evidence of Ydígoras and Arévalo working together was sparse, the unpopularity of the Guatemalan president was undeniable.

Having failed to forge a conservative coalition that could present a feasible challenger to Arévalo, Ydígoras turned to his own diminished political party in his search for a successor. Yet even within *Redención*, there were factions competing for the nomination. Colonel Guillermo Flores Avendaño led the pack. He had served as interim president following the assassination of Carlos Castillo Armas and had proven vital to Ydígoras’ 1958 presidential victory by securing the support of the military.⁴⁴⁵ The US embassy also picked Avendaño as Ydígoras’ likely choice, although the President denied he had made up his mind when he discussed the issue with Ambassador Bell.⁴⁴⁶ Likewise, many of the chiefs of the Guatemalan government believed Ydígoras would pick Avendaño. Foreign Minister Unda Murillo told the US embassy that he was confident that Ydígoras would declare his support for Avendaño because the President “owed [him a] debt of gratitude from [the] past” alluding to military support Colonel Avendaño was able to drum up during Ydígoras’ 1958 campaign.⁴⁴⁷ Two pre-

⁴⁴⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “Plan for Coup Against the Government by Anti-Arévalo Army Officers” February 21, 1963, National Security Files. Country Files. Guatemala Box 101. JFKL. 2-3.

⁴⁴⁵ Ebel, 281

⁴⁴⁶ John O. Bell, “Conversation with President Ydígoras”. February 11, 1963, National Security Files. Country Files, Guatemala. Box 101. JFKL. 2, 6.

⁴⁴⁷ John O. Bell, “Foreign Minister Opposes Return of Arévalo” March 4, 1963, National Security Files. Country Files, Guatemala. Box 101. JFKL. 3

revolutionary relics of the Guatemalan military, it seemed likely that the Old General of Guatemala would select an old colonel to replace him as head of state.

The other major contender for the RDN nomination was longtime political crony, Roberto Alejos. The wealthy landowner and businessman, who had never held a major political office, had a sordid past that intertwined with Ydígoras' political career—neither man benefitted from their shared reputation of being the nexus of corruption within the Guatemalan government. Furthermore, military leaders despised Alejos. When Cuban exiles trained in Guatemala for the Bay of Pigs invasion, they had done so on Alejos' land. In furtively providing the United States with a base of operations, the military believed Alejos had undermined their command structure for his own personal gain. They blamed Alejos for the uprising that followed when nationalistic officers learned that Guatemala was being used as a staging area for the invasion of Cuba. Nonetheless, Alejos had some success in building political support and he used his ample means to campaign throughout the country and, allegedly, purchase political loyalty.⁴⁴⁸

In a move that seemed to defy logic, President Miguel Ydígoras endorsed Roberto Alejos as the official candidate of *Redención*. Even before Ydígoras made the official announcement on March 10, his party was in rebellion. Avendaño and other important RDN members refused to attend the convention and claimed that Alejos had subverted the selection process and had been stealing party funds. The RDN congressional deputy, Mario Sarmiento Castillo, resigned and claimed that support for Alejos was *continuismo*

⁴⁴⁸ Ebel, 282.

of Ydígoras' failing regime.⁴⁴⁹ In naming Alejos his heir-apparent, Ydígoras sundered his own party and doomed his chances for political survival.

It is difficult to determine exactly why President Ydígoras took such an enormous risk. He had skillfully navigated the rocky shoals of Guatemalan national politics for his entire adult life. Ydígoras had been characterized as eccentric and erratic by both allies and detractors, but a blunder of this magnitude when his administration was at a critical juncture remains baffling. Alejos was one of Ydígoras' first and foremost financial backers in 1958. When Ydígoras won the election, Alejos became the President's primary liaison to Washington, where the wealthy plantation owner and businessman cultivated close ties with the US government, particularly within the Central Intelligence Agency. His brother, Carlos Alejos, was made Ambassador to the United States. After the 1960 military revolt, Alejos was a *persona non grata* among the Guatemalan elite. Most believed the millionaire reaped enormous financial and political rewards for allowing the CIA to train Cuban exiles for the Bay of Pigs invasion—violating Guatemalan sovereignty and national dignity in the process.

Instead of distancing himself from the hated Alejos, Ydígoras kept him close and he remained one of the President's most trusted allies. It was not unswerving loyalty to an old friend, however, that caused the wily President to select Alejos. In an interview, 'Miguelito' Ydígoras Lappara, the son of the Guatemalan president, claimed that the two political allies had a complicated relationship. Apparently, Roberto Alejos had dealt Ydígoras a "stab in the back" when he threatened to publicize a letter criticizing the

⁴⁴⁹ *El Imparcial*, 8 Marzo, 1963. Archivo Historical, CIRMA.

President and his administration for corruption.⁴⁵⁰ These charges were ironic, considering Alejos was a renowned source of graft. Ydígoras told his son, “Roberto [Alejos] has the worm of ambition eating at him. If he wins he will someday receive a letter like that and that will be my revenge”.⁴⁵¹ Personal loyalty, then, cannot fully explain why Ydígoras chose Alejos. Yet, taking Ydígoras at his word and assuming that some sort of long-harbored revenge motivated the nomination is unsatisfactory considering the Guatemalan president had many other means at his disposal that would have been more effective.

Most of Ydígoras’ opponents saw the nomination of Alejos as being rooted in some form of corruption. Many on the right believed that Ydígoras had nominated Alejos to ensure Arévalo would win, feeding the existing rumors of collusion between these parties. FUNA and angered RDN members circulated fliers calling on Guatemalans to think carefully of the suspicious connections between Arévalo and Ydígoras, claiming that the latter had sheltered and assisted the former while simultaneously destroying the unity of the anticommunist parties.⁴⁵² They alleged that the only logical conclusion was that Ydígoras, Arévalo, and Alejos were going to deliver the country to Castro and communism.⁴⁵³ Others, like Ambassador Bell, maintained a less conspiratorial view, but believed that Ydígoras was trying to secure a life of comfort, preferably in Guatemala,

⁴⁵⁰ “Interview with Miguel Ydígoras Laparra, February 21, 1993”; Found in Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo* 283

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² “Pensad Guatemaltecos”, March 1963, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Guatemala, 1944-1963*, Folder 2587-2595 (1963), item 2589, Benson Latin America Library (Austin, TX).

⁴⁵³ Ibid. original Spanish: “Deducción Logica: Ydígoras, Arévalo y Alejos nos entregaran al Castro comunismo”

after his term expired.⁴⁵⁴ To this end, Ydígoras had made arrangements with Alejos, and possibly Arévalo in the event of his electoral victory, that ensured he would retire in dignity—and wealth. Ultimately, it is sensible to conclude that Ydígoras was making arrangements for his post-presidential life, but these machination took place in secret. In truth, Ydígoras’ motivations for nominating Alejos remain obscured. Regardless, the decision ensured his downfall.

* * *

The Guatemalan military remained unconvinced by Ydígoras’ political schemes. The endorsement of Alejos as the official government candidate pushed Defense Minister Enrique Peralta, who had avoided intrigue and averted plots to overthrow the president, to reconsider his position. Days before Ydígoras made his announcement, the US embassy reported that Peralta and other military chiefs met with their president to reiterate their opposition to Arévalo. In a thinly-veiled threat, Peralta told Ydígoras “that a united Army would never permit Arévalo or other extreme leftist...to take office even if prevention necessitated use [of] illegal force.”⁴⁵⁵ Banning Arévalo from entering the country was the only acceptable way to achieve this goal. The military leadership also opposed the candidacy of Roberto Alejos. Although the military had not forgiven Alejos for his role in hosting the Bay of Pigs invasion force, they were more concerned that his candidacy would ensure an Arévalo victory by dividing anticommunist voters. Peralta and his fellow officers suggested that Ydígoras abandon Alejos and support any of the

⁴⁵⁴ John O. Bell, “Guatemala,” January 21, 1963, Presidential Office Files, Box 118, John F. Kennedy Papers, JFKL. 1

⁴⁵⁵ John O. Bell. “Embassy Telegram 533”. March 4, 1963 National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Box 101a, John F. Kennedy Library. 2

other conservative candidates.⁴⁵⁶ In response, the President delivered the same lecture that he had given Ambassador Bell previously—barring Arévalo would “martyrize” him, whereas allowing him to compete against fellow leftist in the election would neutralize him.⁴⁵⁷ Yet the President recognized that he had been backed into a corner by the military’s ultimatum and agreed that he would impede Arévalo’s return. When the meeting concluded, Defense Minister Peralta believed that they had finally come to agreement. When Ydígoras nominated Alejos the following week, what little confidence Peralta had in Ydígoras withered. He could no longer hold back the mounting pressure from the military and business community to end the Ydígoras Presidency.

On March 12, four days after Ydígoras declared Alejos the official RDN candidate, the US Deputy Chief of Mission, Robert Corrigan, met secretly with Arturo Peralta, the brother and confidant of the Minister of Defense. Peralta’s brother told Corrigan that Ydígoras’ selection of Alejos, whose venality earned him enemies in all sectors of Guatemalan society, guaranteed that Arévalo would win the election.⁴⁵⁸ Furthermore, Arturo Peralta repeated the claim that Ydígoras was working with Arévalo and could not be trusted. While this notion at one time seemed ridiculous, the perplexing nomination of Alejos gave the rumor of Ydígoras-Arévalo collusion more merit.

Guatemala was, once more, on the brink.

⁴⁵⁶ John O. Bell. “Embassy Telegram 521”. February 28, 1963; referenced in Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 295

⁴⁵⁷ John O. Bell. “Embassy Telegram 533”

⁴⁵⁸ Robert F. Corrigan, “[Conversation with Defense Minister’s Brother on Plan to Overthrow President Ydígoras],” March 12, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a. John F. Kennedy Library, 1-2.

According to Corrigan, Arturo Peralta also explained the benefits of a military government headed by his brother, the Minister of Defense. The new military regime would immediately enact economic reforms, place capable men in the ministries, and bring much needed integrity and efficiency to the Guatemalan government.⁴⁵⁹ Peralta had considerable support within the armed forces, however the Army would not act until it was certain that the coup would succeed and that the United States would recognize the new government as legitimate. Corrigan gathered that the Defense Minister's brother sought some indication of how the United States would respond positively to Ydígoras' expulsion, but the diplomat refused to speculate on how the US might react to a coup. The silence in Corrigan's report was telling. The United States would give no open endorsement, but neither would it prevent Peralta from seizing control. In a later report to the ambassador, Corrigan revealed "that [the] Army, supported and impelled by various non-communist, anti-government political groups, is indeed disposed to find [a] bold, forceful solution. In our opinion, there is no doubt [the] President's blatant espousal of Roberto Alejos has catalyzed and almost electrified opposition to continuation in office of Ydígoras."⁴⁶⁰ Corrigan concluded that uncertainty over how the US would react seemed to be the only thing preventing military action against Ydígoras.⁴⁶¹ The gathering momentum behind a coup seemed unstoppable.

Guatemala's high-ranking military officers had long developed a close relationships with American officials through direct contact with the US diplomatic and

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶⁰ Robert F. Corrigan, "Telegram 553", March 13, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a. JFKL, 1.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.,2

military missions. Peralta was neither the first nor the last military leader to engage with American officials outside the auspices of the Guatemalan state. For nearly a year, the Defense Minister had been signaling that the military found an Arévalo candidacy unacceptable and was prepared to take action in order to prevent it. He had several discussions with President Ydígoras, Ambassador Bell, and had even given public press conferences where he declared that under his command, the Guatemalan Armed Forces would block Arévalo from returning to the country. Since the counterrevolution of 1954, the military defined itself as the bulwark against communism, and the return of Arévalo, the “spiritual-socialist”, presented an existential threat. If Peralta failed to deliver on his promise, not only would he lose all credibility within the armed forces, but both the purpose and the capabilities of the Guatemalan military would be called into question. To preserve the institution and its role in Guatemalan society, the Defense Minister was willing to sacrifice constitutional governance and the rule of law. All he needed was the tacit support of the Kennedy administration to legitimize the overthrow and resulting military-government. Backed by the United States, no political party or civil institution would be able to challenge the authority of the Guatemalan Armed Forces over the state.

President Ydígoras was not a fool. He calculated that the military would move against him with the quiet consent of the United States. To make matters worse for his administration, demonstrators across entire political spectrum took to the streets of Guatemala City to protest Ydígoras, Alejos, and the United States. With shouts of “Viva Arévalo”, “Viva Castro” and “Down with the US” demonstrators assailed the US embassy and the National Congress, breaking windows and damaging property.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶² Robert Corrigan “Telegram 559” March 15, 1963. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a. 1

Although united in their opposition of the Ydígoras government, the politically polarized participants also turned on each other when “several indignant anti-communist women hurled buckets of urine at heckling Arevalists”.⁴⁶³ After the police began arresting demonstrators, the protests turned into a full-scale riot. “Roving bands of youths” disrupted traffic and hurled rocks in minor skirmishes with police.⁴⁶⁴ The police responded by trapping roughly one-hundred students and some professors in a commercial night school and bombarding them with tear gas. Although the clashes claimed no lives, the capital was a scene of anarchy.

Seeking self-preservation above all, Ydígoras finally acceded to Peralta’s demands. The President had previously proclaimed that in order for Arévalo to enter the country, he must prove that he was not a communist. Now, Ydígoras claimed to have evidence that Arévalo was a communist and, therefore, ineligible for office. He also forbade the commercial airlines on the Mexico-Guatemala route from transporting Arévalo to Guatemala.⁴⁶⁵ Ydígoras reversed his previous stance on dividing the political left and now claimed that if Arévalo participated in the election, he would win by a substantial majority.⁴⁶⁶ Ydígoras also expressed his frustrations with the United States. He complained that President Kennedy and the US government had failed to deal with

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ John O. Bell, “Telegram 562” March 16, 1963. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, 1

⁴⁶⁵ John O. Bell, “Internal Defense Plan for Guatemala: Progress Report,” March 19, 1963, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Box 73, Record Group 286, National Archives, 2.

⁴⁶⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “Views of President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes on the Upcoming Meeting of Presidents,” March 16, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

him responsibly when his vigilance alone had warded off communism in Guatemala.⁴⁶⁷ President Ydígoras' sudden reversals and denunciations read like the last acts of a desperate man.

Most military leaders were skeptical of Ydígoras' about-face and continued to believe that the steps he had taken were simply political feints and they prepared for the coup they determined was inevitable. Ydígoras had long professed that Arévalo's participation in the election was necessary for Guatemalan democracy. Having sacrificed his goal of presiding over a fair and fully-democratic election, Ydígoras believed he had sufficiently placated the military and bought himself more room to maneuver. Roland Ebel's interviews with the president's son suggest that all that mattered to Ydígoras now was staying in office for the remainder of his term, and he hoped that his final meeting with President Kennedy would solidify his position.⁴⁶⁸

In San Jose, Costa Rica the presidents of Central America and the United States gathered together to discuss the most pressing issues of the turbulent region.⁴⁶⁹ Ydígoras would have the ear of President Kennedy for two days, and the cunning politician had crafted a plan to safeguard his office from the growing threat of a military coup. Guatemala had long laid claim to British Honduras (Belize), and Guatemalan leaders, including Ydígoras, had often rallied nationalist support, particularly in the military, with renewed demands that Britain return the territory. Roland Ebel maintains that Ydígoras thought that if he could secure US support for annexation, "it would be a great nationalist

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁶⁸ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 285, 296-297.

⁴⁶⁹ The meetings between the Central American presidents and President Kennedy took place March 18-20, 1963.

triumph that would neutralize the Army and most of his detractors.”⁴⁷⁰ To this end, Ydígoras had previously sent Ambassador Carlos Alejos to Washington D.C. to present the Kennedy administration with formative plans for Guatemala’s annexation of Belize. When the two presidents met in San Jose, Ydígoras presented Kennedy with favorable terms in exchange for helping Guatemala and Great Britain come to an agreement. If Kennedy promised to work with Ydígoras to secure Belize, he would grant US companies a monopoly on natural resource extraction in the region for up to ninety-nine years. To Ydígoras’ surprise, President Kennedy readily accepted the proposal without much discussion. Kennedy stated he would contact the British Foreign Office and arrange for a conference that would examine the issue of the sovereignty of Belize.⁴⁷¹ By the time Ydígoras returned to Guatemala, his Foreign Minister, Unzueta Murillo informed the president that the British had already contacted his office to request a delegation. Full of newfound confidence, Ydígoras told a reporter that he was “going to kick the British out of our lost Province of Belize” with the help of the United States, who he paradoxically dubbed “the Royal Knights of Liberty.”⁴⁷² For the moment, it appeared the wily Ydígoras had scored a major victory that would bring expansionist business interests and nationalistic military men back into the fold.

While Ydígoras focused on stitching a political parachute from promises of Guatemalan territorial growth, a different problem captured the attention of his American counterpart: the impending arrival of Juan José Arévalo. Kennedy grilled Ydígoras over

⁴⁷⁰ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 285.

⁴⁷¹ Interview of Miguel Ydígoras Laparra, February 21, 1993; found in Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 296-7.

⁴⁷² US Embassy in Belize to State Department, “Telegram 53”, March 23, 1963. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a. John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

“what measures might be taken [to] make it more difficult for Arévalo to win.”⁴⁷³ He lectured the Guatemalan president, warning him that “Arévalo would undoubtedly campaign as [an] anti-communist moderate but he would be dangerous if he won [the] election.”⁴⁷⁴ President Ydígoras tried to reassure Kennedy and admitted that Arévalo’s initial return would be disruptive, but that the former president’s popularity would evaporate quickly. Additionally, Ydígoras revealed his newest plot—he would publicly proclaim the “need for Arévaloism without Arévalo and for having [a] new man as candidate to carry [it] out.”⁴⁷⁵ If the plan worked, it would create further divisions within the leftist camp and prevent his presidency. If that failed, Ydígoras agreed with Kennedy that a communist would be able to steer the Arévalo administration, and that a “preventive coup might be called for” in the unlikely event of an Arévalo victory.⁴⁷⁶

Although it remained unapparent to Ydígoras, these answers did not soothe Kennedy’s Castro-induced anxieties. Notably missing from Ydígoras’ reply was his recent promise that Arévalo would not be allowed back into Guatemala. When he recounted his conversation with Kennedy in a meeting with Ambassador Bell, Ydígoras presented an overwhelmingly positive outlook on the future of US-Guatemalan relations, although he did note that the American president firmly opposed Arévalo. To the surprise of the ambassador, Ydígoras resurrected his previous position, “that to attempt illegal barring from [the] country was not sure of success and might make him (Arévalo) [a]

⁴⁷³ Dean Rusk to the American Embassy in Guatemala, “Excerpt from Memorandum of Conversation between Presidents Kennedy and Ydígoras on Juan Jose Arévalo”. March 26, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL. 1

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

martyr or lead to intolerable agitation.”⁴⁷⁷ He repeated that the best way to defeat Arévalo was through honest elections. Ambassador Bell agreed that free and fair elections would be ideal, but that “there was great danger that Arévalo might win [the] election.”⁴⁷⁸ When they had met the month before, Ydígoras’ argument for Arévalo’s political participation had briefly convinced Ambassador Bell, but now the diplomat stuck to the Kennedy administration’s position. President Ydígoras likely knew of, and certainly suspected, Bell’s close ties with Defense Minister Peralta, and warned the ambassador that “the extent and dependability of Army opposition to Arévalo” was suspect and could not guarantee a desirable political outcome for either the United States of Guatemala.⁴⁷⁹ In returning to his previous stance on Arévalo, Ydígoras did not inspire confidence in the ambassador. Bell was certainly not persuaded to disregard the military or its threat to take serious action should Arévalo enter the country. A final showdown between the President and his Minister of Defense loomed inevitable.

President Ydígoras’ questionable political choices following the botched Air Force attack revitalized his opponents within the conservative political parties and the military. Although Ydígoras perceived his meeting with Kennedy as a success, his efforts to mend fences through international deal-making with the Kennedy administration failed to secure the United States’ support because the Guatemalan president persisted in his refusal to bar Arévalo from the country. The Guatemalan Armed Forces stood united behind Defense Minister Peralta’s promise to prevent Arévalo from campaigning for the

⁴⁷⁷ John O. Bell, “Telegram 580” March 25, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, John F. Kennedy Library. 2

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

presidency even if it meant discarding democracy. Even if the United States had not actively pursued close ties with the Guatemalan high command, there is little doubt that it would have supported the anticommunist military over the besieged and friendless President Ydigoras. When the time came for Kennedy to make that decision, it was a hardly a choice at all.

A Cornered Fox: The Overthrow of Ydígoras

A conservative general from the Ubico era was an unlikely final thread to hold together the tatters of Guatemalan democracy, but his own military determined that President Ydigoras must be cut from the government in order to preserve their accumulated power. These military leaders had backing from conservative civilian politicians and had reason to believe that the United States would support their coup. President Ydigoras remained defiant until he could no longer maneuver and manipulate his way out of his perpetually precarious situation. Guatemalan democracy died as US-made tanks breached the doors of the *la Casa Crema*.

Violence and chaos erupted across Guatemala as speculation increased that Arévalo was about to return. Throughout late March, bombs exploded across Guatemala City. In his report sent on March 20, DCM Corrigan wrote that he believed the army had staged these bombings to justify an imposition of a state of siege.⁴⁸⁰ Five days later, Corrigan's suspicions of an army plot were confirmed when the government declared a state of siege because of a "vast plan [of] agitation and violence" by armed communist

⁴⁸⁰ Robert Corrigan, "Embassy Telegram 573" March 20, 1963. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101. JFKL. 1

groups.⁴⁸¹ Ambassador Bell noted that the government suspended Article 46, among other constitutional provisions, which guaranteed Guatemalans the right to enter or leave the country.⁴⁸² The military had initiated the process of blocking Juan Jose Arévalo from exercising his legal right to run for president.

Two days before the state of siege, on March 23, the Guatemalan Supreme Court declared that Arévalo had the right to enter the country and run for president.

Anticommunists took to the streets in huge numbers, and roughly thirty-thousand flooded Guatemala City to protest Arévalo, Ydígoras, and the decision of the Supreme Court. In response, leftists mobilized their own forces and added to the anarchic situation. Students vandalized the homes of right-wing politicians, guerrillas attacked Army installations, and armed raiders freed one of Arbenz's militant supporters, Victor Manuel Gutierrez, from prison.⁴⁸³ It was doubtful that the Arévalo question would be solved peacefully.

Defense Minister Peralta used the widespread civil unrest to set the stage for a coup. After the nomination of Alejos, the Minister of Defense had likely resolved to remove Ydígoras and was biding his time. While Kennedy and Ydígoras discussed Belize and Arévalo in Costa Rica, the chief of the presidential military staff, Colonel Catalino Chavez, told President Ydígoras' son that Peralta had requested his assistance in the impending overthrow of Ydígoras. In his interview with Roland Ebel, Miguel Ydígoras Jr. admitted he did not take the accusation seriously because he believed that the Minister of Defense would never make such a move, especially while Ydígoras was meeting with

⁴⁸¹ John O. Bell, "State of Siege Decreed in Guatemala," March 25, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, JFKL.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 287.

the other heads of state.⁴⁸⁴ In addition to restricting travel, the state of siege, essentially a declaration of martial law, enhanced Peralta's legal authority. He issued orders that prohibited gatherings with more than four people and forbade any political party activities. The police were placed under direct military control and all security forces were permitted to conduct searches and arrests of anyone they deemed suspect. Weapons permits for civilians were cancelled. Escalating his silent takeover of the state, Peralta consolidated all public relations functions of the government under the Ministry of Defense and took control of all radio and television broadcasts.⁴⁸⁵ For the moment, Peralta was satisfied and justified his actions to the US embassy as being sufficient to prevent Arévalo from returning. When asked what would happen should Arévalo return anyway the Defense Minister replied ominously: "We have other methods [for] handling him."⁴⁸⁶

When he had been president of Guatemala, Arévalo had refused to be intimidated by threats from the military, and he had not changed in the thirteen years since he had left office. He had survived dozens of coup attempts during his presidency and many of them originated from within his own military. To back down now would have been not only out of character for the charismatic politician, but it would have been viewed as cowardice and betrayal by his supporters. Ambassador Bell received word from "high Arevalist sources" that Arévalo was undeterred by the state of siege and would return on

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with Miguel Ydígoras Laparra, February 20, 1993: Found in Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*. 286

⁴⁸⁵ John O. Bell, "Telegram 583", March 26, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

March 31 at eleven in the morning.⁴⁸⁷ According to the source, Mexican president Adolfo Lopez Mateos had provided Arévalo with a private plane, and several important Mexican officials agreed to accompany him, as did twenty-four foreign journalists from the US, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.⁴⁸⁸ Meanwhile, Defense Minister Peralta reassured the embassy that he remained determined to prevent Arévalo's return to Guatemala.⁴⁸⁹ The moment that the American ambassador and Guatemala's Minister of Defense had prepared for was seemingly at hand.

In fact, Arévalo had already arrived in Guatemala alone on March 27 at a secluded farm airstrip. He drove to the outskirts of Guatemala City where he stayed with friends, changing his location at night.⁴⁹⁰ On March 29, Arévalo met with his principal followers to determine a course of action. The CIA learned of Arévalo's presence in Guatemala on March 29 and speculated that he might lead his followers in an uprising, but the former president managed to hold only a few quiet, clandestine meetings with peasants and supporters.⁴⁹¹ Arévalo knew that with the state of siege, he had be wary of major urban areas, so parading into Guatemala City and rallying partisans was out of the question. Instead, Arévalo held a private conference with journalists from major American news outlets—among them were Paul Kennedy of the *New York Times* and Dan Rather of CBS news. The gathered journalists heard Arévalo's final appeal to the

⁴⁸⁷ John O. Bell, “[Presidential Candidate Arévalo's Plans to Return to Guatemala],” March 28, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, Massachusetts, 1.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁹⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, “Arévalo's Return to Guatemala,” March 29, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 2.

people of Guatemala and the government of the United States. First and foremost, he tried to reach out to the Guatemalan Army by telling his followers to obey the restrictions set out by the state of siege. He wanted to avoid any potential “disagreeable” situations that might occur from public demonstrations.⁴⁹² He also promised he would not punish political opponents and that he sought a friendly relationship with the Kennedy administration. To facilitate a peaceful campaign and show respect for the military’s decrees, Arévalo announced he would spend time among the *campesinos* in the southern coast and avoid Guatemala City until the state of siege was lifted. The interview with Arévalo was published the following day, March 30, in *Prensa Libre*. The interview was only the third publicly announced political statement that Arévalo released regarding his 1963 presidential bid.⁴⁹³ That night, Defense Minister Peralta made his move against President Ydígoras.

At 11:00pm on March 30, 1963, a mass of troops and armor surrounded *la Casa Crema* under the cover of darkness.⁴⁹⁴ Nine-hundred soldiers, many of them from the President’s own *Guardia de Honor*, blocked the streets as Sherman tanks rumbled into position around the Presidential Palace. Such a show of overwhelming force was sure to deter the unpredictable Guatemalan president from resisting the inescapable. His six remaining loyal bodyguards conceded that come the morning, they could no longer

⁴⁹² *Prensa Libre*, 30 Marzo, 1963, CIRMA

⁴⁹³ The first was his announcement that he would run for office. The second, his ill-received “Carta política al pueblo de Guatemala” began its circulation in Guatemala in late January, 1963.

⁴⁹⁴ This account has been reconstructed from the following sources: Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, *My War with Communism*. (Prentice Hall: New Jersey, 1963), 1-7 ; *Chicago Tribune* April 1, 1963 ; Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 288-291.

protect President Ydígoras. The Old General of Guatemala was to make his final stand against his own military.

The long anticipated coup did not come as a complete shock. Arévalo's covert entry into Guatemala, despite Peralta's proclamations and precautions, humiliated the Defense Minister and made the competency of the Guatemalan Armed Forces seem highly questionable: an aging academic had confounded and circumvented the best efforts of the most powerful military in Central America. When Arévalo revealed himself through his press conference, the surprised President and the Defense Minister sprang into action. The following morning, March 30, Ydígoras caught wind that officers were planning to remove him from office that evening. He immediately contacted Peralta, who feigned ignorance and reported that all military bases remained loyal. Despite his assurances, Peralta was in the midst of making final preparations for usurping the President later that night. In a last-ditch effort to rally support for the constitutional government, Ydígoras called together his cabinet and the leaders of the major conservative parties.⁴⁹⁵ During the meeting, Ydígoras received word that Peralta was making rounds with his subordinates to discuss a solution to the Arévalo problem, and the Guatemalan president made one final plea to his political colleagues. If they publicly announced a united anti-Arévalo front, presumably by endorsing Roberto Alejos as their joint-candidate, Ydígoras hoped military action might still be forestalled. Ydígoras, however, had long spent his political capital and had alienated his potential allies in the room. The MDN and the MLN would not join with Ydígoras' rapidly crumbling government. President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes was on his own.

⁴⁹⁵ This included Roberto Alejos of RDN, Cruz Salazar of MDN, Luis Urrutia of MLN, Congressional president Miguel Angel Ortega Merida.

Late that night, after their forces had surrounded the presidential residence, three officers called upon Ydígoras to surrender. He refused and spat a challenge to his rebellious soldiers: “Lead me to the wall first.”⁴⁹⁶ He turned to his wife and announced, “Maria Teresa, this night you will become a widow” before returning inside the residence to play for more time.⁴⁹⁷ Scrambling for a miracle, Ydígoras contacted the Air Force chief, hoping the adversarial relationship between the branches might provide him with some room to maneuver. Although Ydígoras had punished the Air Force for their failed coup attempt months before, they professed loyalty and pledged they would do what they could to protect the president. With this glimmer of hope, the President immediately tried to contact the leaders of Congress and the Supreme Court. His efforts were in vain—the men that surrounded *la Casa Crema* had grown tired of Ydígoras’ stalling and cut all telephone cables to prevent the President from plotting. The situation was now hopeless. His bodyguards were growing nervous, and he knew further resistance would mean not only the end of his life, but the lives of his wife and the handful of men who remained with him to the end. Recalling the events that prematurely ended his presidency with his signature hyperbole, Ydígoras claimed, “I did not surrender until a tank crushed the weak doors of my home and aimed the canon at my very face. It was impossible to resist with six loyal officers armed with submachine guns; I would have died in defense of the Constitution but too much innocent blood would have been shed.”⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁶ Miguel Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*, 1.

⁴⁹⁷ Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 290

⁴⁹⁸ Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*, 1.

Ydígoras, still the constitutional president of Guatemala, boarded a transport provided by the Air Force at 9:00 AM the morning of March 31 and began his exile. He would never return to Guatemala. In contrast to his defiance in facing down his mutinous troops, Ydígoras told reporters, “What is going on in Guatemala is for her own good and for the good of the rest of Central America.”⁴⁹⁹ In the days that immediately followed his removal, Ydígoras decided to place the blame for the coup on unnamed communist agitators. The perpetual crises that surrounded his presidency were, according to Ydígoras, a concerted effort by Castro’s minions in Guatemala, and the coup was the culmination of their efforts. While he had requested that other governments recognize Peralta’s government as legitimate to impede communist gains in Guatemala, he also lamented that the military takeover could backfire “because every setback suffered by democratic representative government is a victory for communism.”⁵⁰⁰ His conciliatory tone, however, soon became embittered by the disloyalty of his former allies. Ydígoras later opined, “The mere fact that Arévalo was able to enter Guatemala and evade the security measure set up by Defense Minister [Peralta] Azurdia, and brazenly hold a press conference in a secret place, imperiled [his] prestige and political future.”⁵⁰¹ A week after being removed from office, Ydígoras reasoned that Peralta had needed “to find a scapegoat to cover up his inertia and weakness. Treason was the path he chose and I was

⁴⁹⁹ “Banish Guatemalan Leader, Army Seizes Power; Vows to Halt Reds” Chicago Tribune April 1, 1963, 1.

⁵⁰⁰ Ydígoras, *My War with Communism*, 7.

⁵⁰¹ Ydígoras, 5.

his victim”⁵⁰² While Ydígoras reflected on his downfall in exile, he came to believe that he had been betrayed by not only Defense Minister Peralta, but also by the United States.

A reformer and despot, modernizer and regressive, foreign puppet and ultranationalist—the contradictory, nebulous, and unpredictable nature of Miguel Ydígoras’ politics makes succinct and accurate descriptions of the Guatemalan president impossible. The period of his presidency, however, can be more definitively described. Guatemala briefly emerged from the chaos of the counterrevolution, only to be plunged back into internal strife as opposition to government policies mounted and eventually developed into armed insurrection. During the Ydígoras Presidency, the Guatemalan Civil War—one of the longest, bloodiest conflicts in the Western Hemisphere—began.

Miguel Ydígoras and Juan José Arévalo are both larger-than-life figures in Guatemalan political history, but whereas Arévalo received overwhelmingly positive coverage from biographers and scholars, Ydígoras’ reputation is much more mixed. Authors writing during or soon after his presidency often suggested Ydígoras was a democratic reformer who “lifted most of the repressive features of the Liberation (Castillo Armas) regime.”⁵⁰³ The most well-known works on US-Guatemalan relations often portray Ydígoras in a negative light.⁵⁰⁴ Cruel, despotic, manipulative, and avaricious are but a few of the unflattering descriptors scholars attribute to the man. They charge that Ydígoras ineptly ran a corrupt, heavy-handed quasi-dictatorship that paved

⁵⁰² Ibid., 6.

⁵⁰³ Jerry Weaver, “Political Style of the Guatemalan Military Elite.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol 5, No. 4, 1969-1970, p. 72; see also Franklin D. Parker, *The Central American Republics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 107

⁵⁰⁴ For examples of scholars that generally characterize the Ydígoras regime in negative terms see: Gleijeses; Handy; Immerman; Jonas.

the way for future military governments. Others focus on his fervent anticommunism, labelling him a reactionary, an archconservative, or even a fascist relic of the Ubico era.⁵⁰⁵ Paradoxically, some of Ydígoras' adversaries alleged he was secretly a communist supporter.⁵⁰⁶ Edelberto Torres-Rivas, the renowned Guatemalan sociologist, tempers these more severe characterizations, calling the Ydígoras period a “pseudo-democratic interregnum”⁵⁰⁷

Yet, still other scholars, particularly those who have focused extensively on Ydígoras and his time, present a more complicated picture. Stephen Streeter portrays Ydígoras as an embattled nationalist and savvy politician with a militarist streak who had to placate contradicting interests in Guatemala and abroad. In Ydígoras' only English-language biography, political scientist Roland Ebel provides the General with his most flattering portrayal, although the many faults and problems of his government are adequately covered. Here, Ydígoras appears as a tragic hero with mighty ambitions beset by implacable forces that eventually overwhelmed his best efforts. Ebel ultimately concludes that Ydígoras' removal from office resulted from his steadfast defense of modernization and Guatemalan democracy. His work addresses issues of violent repression and corruption, but these aspects fade behind Ebel's creation of Ydígoras the

⁵⁰⁵ For examples of Ydígoras as conservative see: Black; Jonas; Rabe

⁵⁰⁶ Originally, this seems to have stemmed from his rivalry with the staunchly anticommunist Archbishop of Guatemala, Mariano Rossell y Arellano, who supported Castillo Armas and his political party the MDN/MLN. The rumor of Ydígoras' ties to communism or communist sympathies gained more traction toward the end of his presidency when he resisted barring Arévalo from returning to Guatemala to campaign for the presidency.

⁵⁰⁷ Edelberto Torres Rivas, “Problems of Democracy and Counterrvolution in Guatemala” in Wolf Grabendorff, ed., *Political Change in Central America: Internal and External Dimensions* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1984), p.117

Political Dynamo. Certainly, General Ydígoras preferred Ebel's portrayal.⁵⁰⁸ Miguel Ydígoras' own extensive writings on his life most closely align with Ebel's: "I swore fealty to the Constitution and in my heart vowed that nothing would stand in the way of my earnest desire to see democracy a reality in Guatemala."⁵⁰⁹

After five years of skillfully maneuvering through the turbulent political situation in Guatemala and withstanding uncounted plots against his presidency, Miguel Ydígoras lost the battle against his many adversaries. Moreover, he had failed to secure a legacy of democracy for Guatemala, which only further tarnished his historical reputation. With his removal from office, Guatemala's fragile democracy shattered. Almost the entirety of Guatemala's political spectrum had reason to celebrate Ydígoras' downfall, but the commanding officers of the Guatemalan Armed Forces were the real victors. Defense Minister Peralta, now the head-of-state, began to dismantle the constitutional republic and replaced it with a military dictatorship. In the nine years since the 1954 coup against Arbenz, the Guatemalan officer corps had steadily accumulated power, but the ouster of Ydígoras was the singular moment where the country transitioned from civilian to military rule.

⁵⁰⁸ It is worth reiterating here that Roland Ebel had personal contacts with the Ydígoras family. He wrote his political biography of President Ydígoras, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, with the blessing of the family and access to the president's personal archives. Ebel was introduced to President Ydígoras' grandson at Tulane University, where Ebel taught and Mike Ydígoras attended college. President Ydígoras even granted Ebel the opportunity to record his oral history of his political life. Ebel preserved many of these documents, as well as some retrieved from the Ydígoras private collection, at Tulane University. This is also discussed in the introduction of this study.

⁵⁰⁹ Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, *My War With Communism*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963)74

Kennedy's Culpability: The United States' Role in the 1963 Coup

The overthrow of Ydigoras was executed by Guatemalans, but the United States played a significant role in the coup, and the subsequent development of a military dictatorship. When Peralta announced the military had overthrown Ydígoras, there was no sense of surprise or disapproval at the US embassy. In the year since Arévalo had announced his candidacy, Ambassador Bell and his staff had encouraged the idea that the rule of a military government was not only a likely outcome, but potentially a positive good for Guatemala. While the CIA knew of the plot before it was initiated, the US embassy did not confirm the coup until the following day, after receiving word from Peralta's brother, Arturo, that the defense minister had become the head of state and that all commanding officers of the various security forces supported the Colonel-President.⁵¹⁰ The American ambassador was relieved and proud of his accomplishment. Guided by Ambassador Bell, the Kennedy administration had successfully influenced regime-change in Guatemala without resorting to an overt display of aggression like the 1954 coup that toppled Arbenz. Nonetheless, for the second time in less than a decade, the United States had played a significant role in deposing a democratically elected president in Guatemala.

Scholars have agreed that Kennedy knew of the coup and must have given his approval because the Guatemalan military would not so easily sacrifice the close relationship it enjoyed with the United States. There has been scant evidence, however, to support this claim. The authors who have addressed this issue have relied primarily on a

⁵¹⁰ United States Embassy, "Conversation with Defense Minister's Brother," March 31, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, Massachusetts, 2.

single article from the Chicago Daily News, printed over three years after the events transpired.⁵¹¹ Georgie Anne Geyer reported that “top sources from the Kennedy administration” informed her that President Kennedy met with top advisors to discuss Guatemala’s presidential election two weeks before he met with President Ydígoras in Costa Rica.⁵¹² Kennedy chose four men to help him decide how to handle the problem of Arévalo – Teodoro Moscoso, coordinator for the Alliance for Progress; Edwin Martin, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, CIA chief Richard Helms, and Ambassador John Bell. Geyer asserted that Bell and Moscoso opposed each other at the meeting. “Ambassador Bell argued vehemently that Arévalo, who had been president from 1944 to 1950, was a Communist and that his election must be prevented at all costs”⁵¹³ Moscoso defended Arévalo and argued that the former president had “showed how, once in office, men of the non-Communist left developed [a] reform-minded, progressive administration”.⁵¹⁴ Kennedy was unsure how to proceed, and called upon his advisors to vote on what action to take. According to Geyer’s sources, only Moscoso opposed the coup against Ydígoras to prevent Arévalo’s candidacy. Geyer lamented the decision and provided an unflattering and accurate evaluation of the trajectory of Kennedy’s policies in Latin America.

⁵¹¹ Some notable works that have utilized Geyer’s article: George Black, *Garrison Guatemala*; Roland Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*; Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil*; Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*; Stephen Kinzer and Stephen Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit*; Stephen Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*

⁵¹² Georgie Anne Geyer, “Twists and Turns of our Guatemala Policy”, The Chicago Daily News, December 24, 1966; accessed via CIA FOIA online reading room.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

“The Ydígoras coup came at a time when the brilliance of the Kennedy administration’s early concern over pushing democracy in Latin America was dimming. The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the concomitant new reliance on military regimes against communism, ignited the change. The new policy was being formed that came to be known as a more pragmatic approach”.⁵¹⁵

After Geyer’s story broke, two participants denied that the meeting had ever taken place. Edwin Martin and Ambassador Bell both refuted the claim, and wrote personal letters to the exiled Ydígoras professing their innocence.⁵¹⁶ Bell’s denial was categorical. The ambassador announced that “This coup was not suggested by the US, it was not arranged, managed or supported by the US” although he did admit that he “did not find the military’s attitude surprising or illogical.”⁵¹⁷ Bell even went as far as to blame a disgruntled Moscoso, who he described as “not a bad fellow but very Latin,” for leaking the fabricated story to the Geyer.⁵¹⁸ Martin’s response was more telling: “I would guess that we may have decided not to try to stop the military if they moved to overthrow Ydígoras, a quite different thing than in initiating a coup”.⁵¹⁹ Kennedy’s advisors maintained a degree of secrecy, but their refutations hinted that something had indeed taken place.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Bell and Martin composed letters to Ydígoras dated Feb. 9, 1967 and May 11, 1967 respectively. They claimed that no such meeting took place. Geyer, in turn, wrote to Ydígoras to assure him that her sources were reliable in a letter dated Dec. 31, 1966. These letters can be found in the personal files of Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes held at Tulane University. Noted in Ebel, *Misunderstood Caudillo*, 297.

⁵¹⁷ Bell quoted in Kinzer and Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit*, 244

⁵¹⁸ Arthur L. Lowrie interview with John O. Bell, June 17, 1988. The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project.

⁵¹⁹ Martin quoted in Kinzer and Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit*. 244..

Recently declassified documents support the contention that President Kennedy assented to the military coup. In an oral history recorded in 1964, Teodoro Moscoso elaborated on the meeting he had with Kennedy the day the President decided to support the military coup. Moscoso's account roughly parallels the story reported by Geyer two years later, but there are some crucial differences that affect how Kennedy's decision should be evaluated.

According to Moscoso's interview, on March 25, five days before Ydígoras's ouster, President Kennedy called some of his most trusted advisors on Latin America into the Oval Office to discuss the problem of the Guatemalan elections. Present were Edwin Martin, Ambassador John Bell, CIA agent Cord Meyer, and Moscoso. Kennedy asked the men he had gathered a simple question about the complicated situation in Guatemala: "What do you think – what shall we do about this?"⁵²⁰ Moscoso told the president that a military coup was a bad idea, and that he did not believe that Arévalo was genuinely a communist. To add credence to his claim, he directly asked Agent Meyer if, as a representative of the CIA, he believed Arévalo was a communist. Meyer bluntly said, "No, I don't think so."⁵²¹ Emboldened by Meyer's support, Moscoso pushed further and told Kennedy "we should not condemn [Arévalo] this way" and, echoing Schlesinger's memo from a few months earlier, suggested that Arévalo was "impressionable" and that the United States could harness his popularity among Guatemalans while molding him with "aid and assistance, [to] try to conduct him to the right way."⁵²² Clearly frustrated

⁵²⁰ Teodoro Moscoso, Oral History Interview #2, May 25, 1964, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Page 127.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Ibid. 128

with Kennedy's willingness to accept military rule in Guatemala, Moscoso concluded his remarks to the president saying, "And, for heaven's sake, let's be careful how we treat democracy in these countries. Unless we nourish it, unless we promote it, unless we educate the people in ways of democracy, these people will never learn how to govern themselves."⁵²³

That Schlesinger and Moscoso shared this unique perspective on Arévalo within the Kennedy administration is no surprise. Both men were architects of the Alliance for Progress and major proponents of modernization theory. Together, they represented the idealistic ambitions of the Alliance. Likewise, both seem divorced from the political realities of small, underdeveloped nations and the impact of the Cold War on their deeply-rooted socioeconomic structures. Similarly, Moscoso and Schlesinger shared a conviction in the ability of the United States government to wield its influence and power to create positive change abroad. In his interview, Moscoso emphasized, "in a country such as Guatemala, in Central America, I assure you, that the influence of the United States is so preponderant that we could have democracy there."⁵²⁴ Ultimately, by his own admission, Moscoso, along with many other supporters of US developmentalist modernization theory, believed that Guatemalans were incapable of governing themselves in a democracy, and only the United States could bring light to this darkness. Within the Kennedy administration, even those most receptive to democratic, civilian rule in Guatemala clung to patronizing notions of the cultural and political inferiority of Latin America.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

After Moscoso had finished laying out his opposition, President Kennedy turned to Ambassador Bell and asked for his assessment. The ambassador flatly rejected Moscoso's plea stating, "Well, I think rather not to have an election than have Arévalo elected."⁵²⁵ In this moment, Moscoso claimed that "the decision was taken right then and there." President Kennedy "looked at the carpet, thought for a minute, and said, 'O.K. This is it,'" confirming that the United States would not stop the military coup.⁵²⁶ Reflecting on the meeting, Moscoso blamed Ambassador Bell, stating that he had gone too far and was actively encouraging the coup. He also reluctantly shared his disappointment in President Kennedy: "I had, perhaps foolishly, held the President on such a high pedestal that he came down at least a step or two when he made that decision."⁵²⁷ Moscoso regretfully concluded, "Now, were we willing to undertake the very, very difficult task of trying to hold on to someone who might be an ultranationalist, who might be leftwinger, who is not a Communist, in the right path? Apparently that takes a little more doing and we were not willing to do it. That is what I resented."⁵²⁸

The two most significant differences in these accounts revolve around who supported the coup and when the meeting took place. In Moscoso's account, CIA chief Richard Helms, who was soon after promoted to Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was not present. Instead, Agent Meyer represented the CIA and, contrary to the Geyer article, supported Moscoso in denying the links between Arévalo and communism. Geyer did note, "there is also some evidence that lower level CIA officials, who

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Ibid. 130

⁵²⁷ Ibid

⁵²⁸ Ibid. 129

appreciated Ydígoras' help in the Cuban invasion, were not in agreement with the decision."⁵²⁹ This could be a reference to Cord Meyer, although the nature of his opposition differs from Moscoso's recounting. Moscoso's version also presents a much more contentious debate—with Kennedy's advisors split down the middle, the choice still fell to the president. Alternatively, Geyer's story portrays a president who accepted the majority vote of his most knowledgeable officials. Moscoso's retelling places the full weight of the decision, and its consequences, on Kennedy.

The two sources also differ on the fixed date for this meeting. Geyer's sources claimed that the meeting had taken place early in 1963, at least two weeks before Ydígoras and Kennedy met in Costa Rica. Moscoso placed the meeting on March 25, five days after Kennedy and Ydígoras returned to their respective countries. It was also the same day that the Guatemalan government declared a state of siege to block Arévalo's impending arrival. Two separate meetings may have taken place, but this is unlikely given the parallels in purpose of the meeting, the people who attended it, and the general narrative of the events that transpired.

White House records reference a meeting between the President and Edwin Martin on the subject of Arévalo that took place on January 22, but it is unclear if anyone else attended.⁵³⁰ No minutes of the meeting or memoranda summaries record what was discussed exists for public viewing. Moreover, it is unlikely that the decision was made as early as January. In mid-February, Bell had met with Ydígoras to discuss the situation, and the Guatemalan president had impressed the ambassador with his strategy to defeat

⁵²⁹ Geyer, "Twists and Turns of Our Guatemala Policy"

⁵³⁰ McGeorge Bundy to Ralph Dungan, January 24, 1963. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, John F. Kennedy Library.

Arévalo in an open election. Moreover, if Geyer's estimated date is correct, Kennedy's meetings with Ydígoras in Costa Rica were a deceptive and callous maneuver. Drowning in a tide of popular discontent, Kennedy had provided the beleaguered Ydígoras a potential life-preserver by agreeing to work with Guatemala on negotiating the annexation of Belize. Also, Kennedy had harangued Ydígoras on the issue of Arévalo and tried to convince him that the former president was too dangerous a threat to allow him back into Guatemala. If Kennedy and his advisors had already sealed Ydígoras' fate weeks earlier, this encounter served little purpose other than to deceive Ydígoras and to undermine any efforts he would have otherwise made to preserve his presidency.

If Moscoso's date of March 25 is accurate, then Kennedy had used the meeting in Costa Rica to give Ydígoras a final chance to redeem himself. Unconvinced by Ydígoras' presentation and alarmed by the escalating chaos in Guatemala City, President Kennedy sided with Ambassador Bell. Yet, this date is also problematic. On the same day he was supposedly meeting with Kennedy, Moscoso, and the other advisors, Bell drafted at least two memos, ostensibly sent from the US embassy in Guatemala.⁵³¹ Although these could have been dictated or fabricated, the truth is likely much more mundane, although not any simpler.

It is possible that neither Geyer nor Moscoso were correct, rather the meeting took place somewhere in between the dates each proposed. In the days preceding Kennedy's trip to Costa Rica, DCM Corrigan composed the majority of daily communications

⁵³¹ John O. Bell, "Telegram 579" and "Telegram 580", March 25, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a. John F. Kennedy Library. Both sources are cited previously. Telegram 579 informs the State Department that the Guatemalan government has declared a state of siege. Telegram 580 summarizes a meeting held with President Ydígoras on March 22, where the president and ambassador discussed Ydígoras' recent trip to Costa Rica and conversations with President Kennedy.

coming out of the embassy.⁵³² During this time, Arturo Peralta, brother of the Defense Minister, tried to sound out the US position on the coup that he warned was imminent. This also followed Ydígoras' much maligned decision to endorse the candidacy of Roberto Alejos. That the vocal Ambassador Bell had nothing to say on these matters of importance is surprising, and might suggest that he was away in Washington at some point during this period. If true, Kennedy went to Costa Rica knowing that Ydígoras' days were numbered. This could explain why Kennedy so readily accepted Ydígoras' proposal for the annexation of Belize. On the other hand, why would President Kennedy bother contacting the British Foreign Ministry over the issue if he knew Ydígoras would be ousted in a matter of days? Ultimately, the precise details of the meeting, if they exist, remain under the shroud of classification. What is certain is that the United States wanted pliable and predictable anticommunist allies in the Western Hemisphere. Guatemala would join the growing family of Latin American military-dictatorships.

* * *

A series of crises encouraged the United States to take a hardline approach to anti-communism in Guatemala that resulted in the second overthrow of a democratically elected government in less than a decade. The idealism and promise of the Alliance for Progress's renewed relationship with Latin America crumbled as the Kennedy administration confronted Castro's Cuba. Under these circumstances, Bell's fixation on blocking Arévalo from running for president seemed rational and necessary for stymieing communist influence in Guatemala. Constitutionality and a commitment to democracy

⁵³² From March 12-19, Robert Corrigan drafted nearly all correspondence from the US embassy in Guatemala to the White House. Memos from Bell dated March 16 and March 19, 1963 are in the existing open records. President Kennedy met with President Ydígoras in Costa Rica from March 18-20.

were placed on the backburner because the Kennedy administration had come to believe that only the military could produce stability and defend against communism in Guatemala. The American ambassador held that development programs and modernizing initiatives were too slow and uncertain for the immediate problems he faced in Guatemala. Notably, this did not prevent the Kennedy administration from continuing its Civic Action programs that funneled Alliance dollars directly into the hands of the military. In fact, Ydígoras' efforts at genuine tax reform, a pre-condition for increased aid through the Alliance for Progress, severed the Guatemalan president from the upper class, induced a rebellion within the Air Force, and set the stage for a successful military coup.

Although alternative solutions arose, Ambassador Bell and his superiors never seriously considered anything but Arévalo's exclusion from Guatemalan politics as an option. Instead, Bell continued to advocate for the Guatemalan military. Although Ydígoras may have briefly convinced the ambassador that the best way to defeat Arévalo was through open elections, Bell quickly reverted to the stance shared by his superiors in Washington and his contacts in the Guatemalan military hierarchy. The elaborate fantasy of Arévalo's communist subversion and a dearth of acceptable political candidates ensured that the only plausible partner for the United States in Guatemala was its armed forces.

The Kennedy administration was complicit in the coup, but the role of American officials was secondary. The overthrow of Ydígoras was planned and executed by Guatemalans acting in ways they believed best served personal and national interests. After five years of perpetual crisis, Ydígoras and his government had become bywords for political turmoil, economic stagnation, and governmental malfeasance. Most

Guatemalans wanted Ydígoras gone, but the military coup prevented them from being able to express who they wanted to replace him as their president. As the Peralta's regime attempted to consolidate its position, the situation in Guatemala rapidly deteriorated as popular discontent transformed into widespread civil war.

The forced abdication of President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes marked a definitive moment in the transformation of Guatemala's security forces. The relationship between the military and the government had always been symbiotic, and the trend of officers serving in civilian posts pre-dated the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944. Despite the radical shifts in political culture, military leaders steadily improved their position in Guatemalan society and eroded distinctions in martial and civil authority throughout the "Ten Years of Spring" and the subsequent counterrevolution. When the Ydígoras regime was beset by various crises, the military offered its tepid allegiance in exchange for positions in the government. The capstone of this gradual assumption of regency over the Guatemalan state slid into place when Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia, the Minister of Defense, supplanted his commander-in-chief on March 31, 1963. The military and government of Guatemala had coalesced into a single, indistinguishable entity. Peralta assumed executive authority without firing a shot, but a bloody toll would be paid in decades of internecine warfare. The Guatemalan Armed Forces were now ascendant. Their long reign of terror would usher in an era unprecedented carnage and horror.

CHAPTER IV: CHANGED REGIMES

US-Guatemalan Relations under Johnson and Peralta

Although it receives considerably less attention than the coup that toppled Arbenz in 1954, Colonel Enrique Peralta's seizure of power rivals the infamous CIA operation in its impact on the development of the Guatemalan state. Elections returned to Guatemala by 1966, but the military's refusal to permit Juan Jose Arévalo from running for the presidency reduced democracy to a fiction in the country for decades. Military leaders had long wielded considerable influence over national politics, but after 1963, the officers of the Guatemalan Armed Forces began to transform into a distinct socio-economic group that ruled over the country, regardless of who held the civilian offices of government. Heaps of Alliance for Progress dollars fueled the evolution of the officer corps into the de facto power in Guatemala. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations, however, quickly learned that their investment in Defense Minister Enrique Peralta would not make him compliant.

Instead, the colonel proved he had his own convictions.⁵³³ Exhibiting the pervasive nationalism of his military's culture, the Guatemalan head-of-state often resisted Washington's demands, even as the ranks of the guerrilla fronts swelled with outraged citizens. In tandem with Peralta's partial rejection of American influence, the Johnson administration recalibrated the Alliance for Progress in a manner that benefitted private investment and military assistance at the expense of national civilian institutions.

⁵³³ As noted previously, Colonel Enrique Peralta never officially took the title of president. From 1963-66 he served as the head-of-state and retained his position of Minister of Defense. Most government publications refer to him as "El Jefe del Gobierno y Ministro de la Defensa Nacional."

When the Peralta regime finally relented and permitted severely constrained elections, it mattered little. The military government either prevented political parties from participating in elections or coopted them into its newly formed institutional party. Blocking Arévalo's candidacy had already proven that there would be no second chances for revolution and reform in Guatemala. The Alliance for Progress provided the political and economic means to develop the forces that sustained military rule in Guatemala for generations.

The aftermath of Peralta's coup is the focus of this chapter. The research presented here shows how the new Guatemalan head-of-state rapidly consolidated control and used his dictatorial powers to reconfigure the political landscape in a manner that ensured military domination over the state. The Kennedy administration had played a significant role in abrogating the democratic process in Guatemala and installing the military government, and the resulting confused and ineffectual attempts to mold Peralta and his regime by American policymakers is presented here as evidence of the limits of US power within its sphere of influence. Complicating US-Guatemalan relations further, Peralta's seizure of power infused the various oppositionist and revolutionary groups with newfound purpose, and bands of guerrilla fighters, communist politicians, and leftist student activists forged a united insurgency that posed a serious challenge to the military regime. In response to the unrest and desperate to exercise influence over Peralta, the United States all but abandoned the ideals of the Alliance for Progress and began to reconfigure its programs to support counterinsurgency efforts. Defense Minister Peralta's coup in March 1963 stands as the definitive moment that the military seized control over the state, but the actions taken by US officials and Peralta's high command in its

aftermath guaranteed that the officer corps of the Guatemalan Armed Forces would rule the country for decades to come.

Peralta in Power: The New Guatemalan Regime and the United States

Colonel Enrique Peralta's overthrow of President Ydigoras presented a decisive moment in Guatemalan history. The Guatemalan military had been steadily acquiring a greater role in governance since the revolution, but Peralta's actions following the 1963 coup established the country as a military dictatorship. Many American officials began to express anxiety over Peralta's consolidation of power into his position, but found themselves utterly unable to influence Guatemalan head-of-state to change course. Instead, Peralta began the process of solidifying the Guatemalan Armed Forces' hold over the state for the foreseeable future.

Arévalo acted bravely when he entered Guatemala, but after Peralta seized power, he had no choice but to leave his home country. The day after the coup, Arévalo fled to Mexico as Guatemalan security forces arrested scores of *Arévalista* leaders.⁵³⁴ Ambassador Bell reported, undoubtedly with some satisfaction, that the army would make use of the disorganization and lack of resources of Arévalo supporters to "make effective counteraction most unlikely."⁵³⁵ Whether the result of genuine optimism or self-interest, within the month Bell's glowing appraisal of the situation in Guatemala proved as rooted in reality as his association of communism with Arévalo.

⁵³⁴ John O. Bell, "Presidential Aspirant Arévalo Flees to Mexico," April 1, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

The ambassador wasted no time in praising Peralta. Two days after the coup, Bell defended the Peralta regime as having, through “honest convictions,” saved the country from communist control.⁵³⁶ Moreover, the new leadership pledged to restore honor and efficiency in governance. Should “leftist opponents of the new regime” threaten the military-government, it would be able to organize an effective response without requesting US assistance.⁵³⁷ The Peralta regime solidified its control over the Guatemalan state by immediately dissolving the constitution and cancelling the presidential elections. Once the State Department produced its “minimal requirements” for what it would consider a legitimate regime, Bell promised he would ask Peralta to commit to a timetable for elections.⁵³⁸ The ambassador suggested that the United States recognize the Peralta government within the week to maintain a friendly relationship with the new regime.

Four days after deposing Ydigoras, in an interview with the Miami Herald, Colonel Peralta announced that elections could probably be held “in more or less than two years.”⁵³⁹ Caught off-guard by the disconcerting interview, Ambassador Bell nonetheless defended the long delay of democracy in his communications with Washington. The American ambassador proposed that Peralta needed time to build up the private sector and develop a reputation for decency and honesty before plunging Guatemala into what would undoubtedly be another turbulent election. Sensing that

⁵³⁶ John O. Bell, “Recognition of Guatemalan Military Government,” April 1, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵³⁹ John O. Bell, “[U.S. Posture toward Colonel Peralta’s Government],” April 3, 1963, , National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

Peralta's indeterminate plans for elections might trouble both Guatemalan and US officials, Bell suggested that perhaps the comments were simply "off the cuff."⁵⁴⁰ The following three years of direct military rule indicated that they were not.

Despite Peralta's anti-democratic leanings, Bell maintained that the coup and the military government actually advanced the cause of freedom and democracy in Guatemala and the hemisphere. Had the elections gone forward, the ambassador argued, Arévalo would have taken advantage of the "naiveté and innocence of the Guatemalan people" and opened Guatemala to "communist infiltration and control."⁵⁴¹ Furthermore, Bell contended that the "responsible elements" of Guatemalan society showed courage, foresight, and had prevented civil war by overthrowing the government.⁵⁴² Suspending the constitution and the democratic process were the only viable courses of actions, and the ambassador believed it would be a mistake for Guatemalans to hold elections in the near future. "Right thinking Latin Americans," Bell declared, would agree with his assessment.⁵⁴³ If the United States fully supported the Peralta regime, his government would bring order and progress to the perpetually backward nation. Bell's patronizing rhetoric rarely, if ever, surpassed this early defense of the Peralta regime. His analysis would prove to be fatally wrong.

Not all members of the State Department shared Ambassador Bell's favorable assessment of Guatemala's military government. On April 4, Under-Secretary of State George Ball composed a partial response to the ambassador's vigorous defense of

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 1,2.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 1.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 2.

Peralta. Ball directed Ambassador Bell to approach Peralta with a proposal of forming a Council of State, led by Peralta and comprised of distinguished citizens, who would hold executive and legislative powers until the promised election. He further proposed that the council include mostly civilians who represented the leading political sectors of the country.⁵⁴⁴ With a broader political base provided by the council, the new government could fix a time for elections, carry out essential programs, encourage cooperation within the region, and obtain more widespread acceptance. Under-Secretary Ball stressed the importance of holding elections within a year and allowing all democratic parties to participate, especially considering that current acceptable presidential contenders were more likely to continue to work with the Peralta regime if it looked less like a dictatorship.

George Ball went on to lecture the ambassador on the inherent problems of military regimes. Ball's foremost concern was the vague, two-year projection of military rule. In his view, the Peralta regime would be able to deal with opposition, now sure to have communist support, only by infringing on civil liberties. This, in turn, would foster further resistance. Under-Secretary Ball observed that military regimes were not sensitive to popular reactions to authoritarianism and warned that opposition elements might be strengthened, "in will if not number," should Peralta prolong his rule.⁵⁴⁵ Often inflexible and deeply conservative, military governments were likely to find persuasive reasons to maintain their position of power and forgo needed reforms at the expense of the electorate. Military regimes, Ball added, had a "greater ability to remove a bad

⁵⁴⁴ George Ball, "[Provisional Rule of Military Government in Guatemala]," April 4, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

government than create a good one.”⁵⁴⁶ He concluded by stating that an early return to democratic practices and the restoration of constitutionality would better protect Guatemala from revolutionaries returning to power by reducing the development of dangerous political intrigue common in closed political systems.⁵⁴⁷ This mild chastisement by his superior had little apparent effect on the ambassador as he continued to support Peralta’s personal rule. George Ball’s caution had come too late for Guatemala.

The Under-Secretary of State’s criticism of Ambassador Bell’s approach in Guatemala likely reflected his own concerns about a concurrent foreign policy quagmire: Vietnam. George Ball had long advocated the adage of avoiding a land war in Asia and felt that the Kennedy team’s uncompromising commitment to “win” in Vietnam had obstructed alternative, more diplomatically oriented strategies in Southeast Asia.⁵⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in the final months of the Kennedy administration, George Ball found himself ensnared in troubling developments within the South Vietnamese leadership. Although the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem was not the military dictatorship Ball described to Ambassador Bell, Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu personally controlled South Vietnam’s security forces and used them to brutalize opponents and rivals.⁵⁴⁹ Ball lamented that the callousness of Diem’s leadership required the United States to distance itself from “Nhu’s noxious activities” even though the US “had in effect created him in

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 361, 368.

⁵⁴⁹ James A. Bill, *George Ball: Behind the Scenes in U.S. Foreign Policy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 154.

the first place.”⁵⁵⁰ In Peralta’s Guatemala, Ball saw a close enough parallel to caution the ambassador against following a similar path. Ironically, four months after challenging Ambassador Bell’s work in Guatemala, Under-Secretary Ball became one of the chief architects in the conspiracy that toppled the Diem government, installed a military regime, and resulted in the assassination of both President Diem and his brother, Nhu. In both Vietnam and Guatemala, the United States’ interference in the name of anti-communism intensified ongoing conflicts and brought disaster to the respective regions. As guerrilla warfare raged across the Southeast Asian peninsula and the Central American isthmus, the two countries became the United States’ testing-grounds for counterinsurgency strategy.

With Arévalo out of Guatemala and Ydigoras replaced by a military regime under Colonel Peralta, Ambassador Bell believed that that the most pressing communist threat to the Guatemalan government had ended. The Peralta regime laid out its agenda, proclaiming the eradication of extremist threats to the existing government as its main objective.⁵⁵¹ Promising a restoration of governmental honesty, the Peralta government vowed that it would implement Alliance for Progress initiatives, honor international commitments, and promote a democratic climate. The military would turn over power to an elected government after it had fulfilled these goals. Excepting George Ball’s warning to the ambassador, the harshest criticism US officials initially mustered against Peralta was that he might have been too “honest and upright” for Guatemalan politics.⁵⁵² His

⁵⁵⁰ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, 371.

⁵⁵¹ Thomas L. Hughes, “The New Guatemalan Regime and Implications of the Coup for U.S. Policy,” April 25, 1963. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, National Archives, 5.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

reputation, however, did not prevent the new Guatemalan head-of-state from appointing several family members and friends to key ministries in the government. Peralta rejected the internal political machinations that Ydigoras used to remain in power, and relied on family and trusted allies to maintain his rule. This new administration would be disciplined, persistent, and ruthless in the pursuit of its mission.

Although he expressed his misgivings, Ambassador Bell obeyed the order of Under-Secretary George Ball and approached Colonel Peralta with the prospect of forming the Council of State. The Guatemalan head-of-state, flanked by his brother Arturo Peralta and his loyal secretary and confidant, Colonel Jose Luis Aguilar, humored the American ambassador, but dismissed his proposal outright. Colonel Peralta claimed that his handpicked “Council of Ministers” already fulfilled this role.⁵⁵³ Beaming with confidence, Colonel Peralta reported that he had visited “the major outlying areas and military zone headquarters where he found absolute tranquility and determination on [the] part [of the] army and civilian elements [to] support his government.”⁵⁵⁴ If his government needed to broaden its base of support, Peralta suggested he might add members who would represent agriculture, labor, and education—those sectors most likely to oppose his rule—to the council.⁵⁵⁵ The existing council, however, was strictly advisory, and Colonel Peralta maintained his power to rule by decree.

This did not seem to trouble Ambassador Bell, who reported, “we foresee no difficulty in getting GOG [to] make satisfactory declaration concerning holding of

⁵⁵³ John O. Bell, “Telegram 646” April 6, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, JFKL. 1

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 2.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

elections within possibly 18-month period and no later than two years.”⁵⁵⁶ Furthermore, Ambassador Bell now unequivocally endorsed Peralta’s long electoral delay, claiming that “early elections [are] not desirable –a view shared by all sectors [of] Guatemalan political opinion except Arealists.”⁵⁵⁷ Striking a defiant tone toward his Washington superiors, Bell warned, “it is obvious that our capacity to negotiate “conditions” diminishes,” as a result of the State Department pushing for legislative councils and prompt elections.⁵⁵⁸ Although it appeared that Ambassador Bell had already detected a resistant streak in the Peralta government, he was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to admit that the crowning achievement of his diplomatic career might create serious problems for US-Guatemalan relations. State Department heads, however, were already growing concerned about the direction of the Peralta regime and its relationship with Ambassador Bell.

Edwin Martin, Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, soon joined George Ball in cautioning the Ambassador. He wrote directly to Bell that he wanted “to emphasize [the] importance [of] not being misled by current euphoria in Guatemala” and that he believed ‘it will be [a] miracle for this attitude to last any length of time.’⁵⁵⁹ In Washington, American businessmen with investments in Guatemala were beginning to express their alarm to government officials that two years of military rule might harm

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ John O. Bell “Telegram 648” April 8, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, JFKL.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ Edwin Martin to John Bell, April 9, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, JFKL. 1-2.

their interests.⁵⁶⁰ If corporate executives had their doubts about the Peralta regime, Bell's assertion that all Guatemalans, excepting communists and Arévalo supporters, favored the regime and a protracted moratorium on elections was patently absurd. When Peralta issued the decree establishing his Charter of Government, instead of restoring constitutional liberties or fixing a date for elections, the regime instated a military court system empowered by the new "law for defense of democracy" that doled out "very harsh penalties" for a "wide range of offenses."⁵⁶¹ Additionally, the charter "stated that public power would reside in the Army and [would] be exercised by the Minister of Defense (i.e. Peralta) as the Chief of Government. It provided that the Chief of Government would exercise all executive and legislative functions."⁵⁶² There would be no effort to disguise this military-dictatorship with a façade of civil government.

Following Peralta's defiant declaration, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who had previously endorsed Guatemalan officer's growing power in the government, wrote to Bell requesting that the ambassador "make clear to Peralta our extreme disappointment in [the] final wording of [the] charter of government and harsh decree law."⁵⁶³ Ultimately, even the extreme disappointment of the Secretary of State held little sway over a military government whose illegal seizure of power had been condoned by President Kennedy.

Two days after Rusk conveyed his qualms, the United States officially recognized the

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid. 1

⁵⁶¹ George Ball, "Circular 1750", April 11, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a JFKL. 1.

⁵⁶² Ralph A. Dungan. "Memorandum—The New Guatemalan Regime: Its First Three Weeks", April 27, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, JFKL. 2

⁵⁶³ Dean Rusk to John Bell, April 14, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, JFKL. 1

government of Colonel Enrique Peralta. That powerful members of the State Department voiced their concerns so soon after Peralta's takeover only compounds the tragedy of Kennedy's decision to accept military rule in Guatemala.

Despite mounting apprehension of the major figures of the Kennedy State Department, Ambassador Bell remained optimistic about the prospects of the Peralta regime. The government he had helped install, in his view, was proud, dedicated, and willing to take forceful action to eliminate potential threats. In his messages to his superiors, Bell suggested that a vast majority of Guatemalans supported the unconstitutional regime because it promised a modicum of social and economic progress; and if the regime made improvements, the population would tolerate an autocratic political system.⁵⁶⁴ Bell downplayed the ongoing guerilla activities and declared that Peralta's government faced no serious threat to its stability. The ambassador believed he had achieved his objective of preventing a communist seizure of power in Guatemala.

* * *

With the regime change in Guatemala, US policymakers began to reassess priorities and goals. The AID program remained unchanged as American officials hoped that Peralta would make good use of the existing thirty million dollars in unexpended funds that the Ydigoras government had failed to utilize.⁵⁶⁵ Both the State Department and the Department of Defense agreed that the interests of the United States would be served best by maintaining a close relationship with the Guatemalan Armed Forces and

⁵⁶⁴ John O. Bell, "Prospects for Peralta Regime," May 23, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

⁵⁶⁵ Ralph A. Dungan, "Report on Peralta Administration; Includes Memorandum Entitled "The New Guatemalan Regime: Its First Three Weeks"," April 27, 1963, Presidential Office Files, Countries, Box 118, John F. Kennedy Library, 4.

increasing military aid to Peralta's government. In its Military Assistance Program, the Department of Defense focused on the objective of establishing the Guatemalan military as the institution that would not only safeguard the government from communist penetration, but also act as the chief contributor to social and economic development through Civic Action programs. The Military Assistance Program allotted one million dollars to the Guatemalan Army for constructing roads, bridges, public buildings and schools, creating public water utilities, and initiating reforestation projects.⁵⁶⁶ This figure was dwarfed by the estimated twelve million dollars to fulfill standing Defense Department obligations to the Guatemalan military.⁵⁶⁷ Military Assistance Program planners projected that, by the end of the decade, Guatemalan security forces would have suitable hardware and funding to meet US goals, but that a potential shortfall existed in the number of adequately trained personnel.

The State Department's Internal Defense Plan echoed the position and goals of the Department of Defense. Referring to the prevention of Arévalo's candidacy, the report boasted that the "immediate primary objective of our IDP was effectively implemented."⁵⁶⁸ The plan reiterated Ambassador Bell's assertion that the Peralta regime faced no serious threat and that Guatemalans had apparently accepted military rule as a welcome change from Ydigoras. Nonetheless, the Guatemalan government needed to confront serious issues.

⁵⁶⁶ Robert J. Wood, "Military Assistance Plan, Guatemala," July 15, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Department of Defense, U.S. Army War College, 18.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁶⁸ Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, "Internal Defense Plan—Guatemala: Progress Report," May 28, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Record Group 286, Box 73, National Archives, 1.

The chief concern was the lack of proper training in security personnel, which was further complicated by the fact that Peralta's appointments to high-ranking positions in the police and military were based on patronage instead of merit. When selecting new heads of Guatemala's police forces, Peralta chose loyal military subordinates instead of police officers who had received extensive US training through the AID sponsored Public Safety Program. The rejection of US-trained security personnel marked the initial divide between the actions of the Peralta regime and the demands of the United States that would confound American officials for much of the colonel's time in office. Even Ambassador Bell, who had facilitated Peralta's seizure of power and acted as the regime's most vocal advocate within the State Department, began to feel a hint of doubt toward the new Guatemalan government.

On September 7, 1963, Bell compiled his progress report for the Internal Defense Plan. In the five months since the establishment of Peralta's military government, Bell's enthusiasm about the regime had shifted toward disappointment. The ambassador found that the Peralta government had become difficult to work with because of "its sensitivity and over developed sense of dignity with respect to 'sovereignty'"⁵⁶⁹ While Peralta's regime dealt with subversives severely, it had been slow, even unwilling, to implement measures and programs that addressed social and economic problems. More troubling were indications that the Peralta government was refining its strategies for shrugging off US influence. Whenever Peralta and his representatives were questioned about setting a timetable for elections, they became irritated and claimed that the country's "social

⁵⁶⁹ John O. Bell, "Internal Defense Plan for Guatemala: Progress Report," September 7, 1963, Records of the Agency for International Development, Record Group 286, Box 73, National Archives, 2.

problems” required a solution before a presidential election was feasible.⁵⁷⁰ Colonel Peralta successfully resurrected the perpetual ‘Belize Question’ as an effective riposte against the demands of the United States. Countering US proposals with his own requests for Washington to mediate the longstanding territorial dispute between Guatemalan and Great Britain, Peralta used the issue to bolster his nationalist credentials while occupying US officials with this intractable problem. Many Guatemalans viewed the previous colonel to come to power through a coup, Carlos Castillo Armas, as a puppet of Washington. Defense Minister Peralta did not want to share the reputation, or the fate, of the assassinated Castillo Armas. Throughout his tenure as Guatemala’s ruler, Peralta would routinely challenge, dismiss, and even rebuke the United States.

The American ambassador attempted to dismiss Peralta’s defiance as traditional military nationalism, although Bell admitted some apprehension. His frustration obvious, Bell vented that Peralta was “more stubborn, not as intelligent, nor possessor of as quick and facile mind and imagination as Ydigoras; he will not be easy to persuade of influence – primarily because he is slow of thought and stubborn of opinion.”⁵⁷¹ Despite the Peralta government’s continued resistance to US advice, Bell maintained that replacing Ydigoras with a military regime had achieved the United States’ immediate goals by blocking Arévalo’s return. Unwilling to accept that the military regime might prove as problematic as George Ball had cautioned, Ambassador Bell concluded that the United States should stay its course in Guatemala and continue to keep on good terms with influential figures in Peralta’s administration.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁷¹ John O. Bell, “Telegram 663” April, 15, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a JFKL. 2.

Other American policymakers were not as kind as Ambassador Bell towards the increasingly dictatorial and disobedient Peralta. Officials with the Agency for International Development met to determine whether a reduction in Public Safety Program funding might effectively chastise Peralta for ignoring needed reforms and appointing his own men to head Guatemalan police agencies over US recommendations for the posts.⁵⁷² Writing directly to Ambassador Bell, George Ball emphasized that his “central purpose” as the ambassador should be to cultivate greater influence over Peralta and to steer him away from personal dictatorship.⁵⁷³ George Ball cautioned that there was a growing alarm in Washington regarding Peralta’s refusal to address political and economic issues while rejecting help and advice from emissaries of the United States. Advocating the “slow and careful” courting of Peralta and his advisors, Under-Secretary Ball stressed that the ambassador deliver the message that continued political repression would drive the opposition underground and invite insurrection.⁵⁷⁴ Ambassador Bell had played a role in Peralta’s ascent, but the new head-of-state had secured his position and would prove difficult to persuade. For all of its supposed military and economic might, the United States found itself relatively powerless to control an allied government within its sphere of influence because it had committed itself to the regime by endorsing its subversion of democracy.

⁵⁷² Herbert O. Hardin, “Proposed Meeting on Program—Guatemala,” September 18, 1963, Digital National Security Archive: Guatemala and the US, Records of the Agency for International Development, Record Group 286, Box 65, National Archives, 1.

⁵⁷³ George Ball, “Dissatisfaction with Peralta Regime,” September 19, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

In Washington, George Ball was not alone in his unease with Peralta's uncooperative streak. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, after reviewing the AID proposal to reduce funding from the Public Safety Program, instructed the ambassador to present Peralta with an ultimatum. Peralta had already appointed loyal army officers to lead Guatemalan police forces against the advice of the United States, but now the regime was refusing to meet the minimum financial and staffing requirements set by the bilateral Public Safety Program.⁵⁷⁵ If the Guatemalan government failed to honor its commitments, Rusk warned, AID would reduce its contributions, including military equipment.⁵⁷⁶ Rusk believed that Peralta needed to a reminder that maintaining law and order through well-trained security forces was in the interest of both the United States and Guatemala. When the Guatemalan government remained unresponsive, Secretary Rusk followed through with his threat and roughly halved USAID assistance funds during Peralta's years in power.⁵⁷⁷ A spike in guerilla attacks would test Guatemalan security forces, the military government, and the US ambassador who had helped bring it to power.

From the onset of his reign over Guatemala, Colonel Peralta proved he was no creature of the United States. The Kennedy administration had played a role in Peralta's seizure of power, but unlike Castillo Armas, the Defense Minister and head-of-state had

⁵⁷⁵ Dean Rusk, "Public Safety Program," October 16, 1963, DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Record Group 286, Box 65, National Archives, 1.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁷⁷ For the fiscal year of 1963, USAID provided the Ydigoras government with \$2.6 million. In 1964, this was reduced to \$1.8 million in 1964 and to \$1.3 million in 1965 and 1966. Figures found in: Howard Sharckman, "The Vietnamization of Guatemala: U.S. Counterinsurgency Programs" in Jonas and Tobis, eds. Guatemala. 195

not completely relied on the United States to secure his position. Guatemalans, particularly anticommunist officers in the military, had brought Peralta to power—he did not require the air support, international pressure, or propaganda machine of the United States that had helped Colonel Castillo Armas topple Arbenz in 1954. American officials attempted to influence and direct Colonel Peralta, but they found they had little impact. Peralta rapidly consolidated power into his nebulous position and began dismantling the constitutional republic of Guatemala. With unchecked and unlimited power and the strong support of the Guatemalan Armed Forces and their civilian backers, Peralta reconfigured the Guatemalan state into a military dictatorship.

Resurgence of Revolution: Guatemalan Opposition to the Peralta Regime

While US officials wrangled with the surprisingly rigid regime in Guatemala, the assorted rebel and clandestine groups that opposed Peralta's rule began to gain momentum. Those who plotted the overthrow of the Guatemalan government ranged all along the political spectrum, but the most significant threat to the regime now came from the armed leftist groups and their supporters. Many of these organizations, especially the various guerrilla fronts, could be labeled as communist because their leaders and some members believed in Marxist principles and theory. Their connections to international communism and Moscow, however, were either weak or nonexistent. While some groups did receive some support from Havana, most of the insurgents were highly nationalistic in their outlook and fought primarily to bring sweeping change to Guatemala.

Nonetheless, the presence of a Marxist-inspired insurgency presented the perfect justification for the continued rule of Peralta's military dictatorship.

The caution expressed by some US officials in the aftermath of Peralta's coup diminished as the guerrilla threat revealed itself. As pressure from Washington decreased, Peralta's regime found it had plenty of space to expand the power of the military and its hold over the state. Instead of focusing on the local and regional conditions that created these movements, both the US embassy and the CIA devoted considerable attention to uncovering a Cuban connection to guerrilla activities in Guatemala. This critical error only exacerbated Guatemala's fundamental socioeconomic problems as USAID dollars meant for development filled armories instead of empty stomachs.

The miscalculation was not without purpose. Evidence of communist collusion on an international scale warranted an international response. Greater involvement and intervention by the United States in Guatemala seemed more palatable and prudent if hostile governments were attempting to subvert and destroy its allies. When a bomb prematurely exploded in Guatemala City, killing alleged PGT member Jose Ibarra Escobar, the embassy accepted the rumor that the deceased had been a "Cuban-trained technical expert in explosives" as fact.⁵⁷⁸ No investigation confirmed Escobar's Cuban connection. His supposed membership in Guatemala's communist party was sufficient for proving his ties to Castro. Similarly, the embassy suggested Cuban involvement when an unnamed fifteen-year-old student was killed in an attack on a police station because he

⁵⁷⁸ Robert F. Corrigan, "[Speculation on Cuban and Communist Involvement in Political Unrest]," October 31, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

was a member of a leftist youth organization.⁵⁷⁹ Though the relationship between Castro's Cuba and leftist opposition to the Peralta regime was often minimal at best, US officials exaggerated collaboration between these groups to fulfill the Cold War canon of international communist conspiracy. Paradoxically, Ambassador Bell, while hunting for Cuban influence in Guatemalan dissidence, initially dismissed the threat posed by the native insurgency. The delusion evaporated when an armed resistance reasserted its opposition to Peralta's regime.

With the uptick in guerrilla activity in 1963, the CIA began to take a more direct role in assisting the Guatemalan government with interrogation of captured guerrillas and touted the effectiveness of its techniques after its agents recruited a former member of Yon Sosa's MR-13 group.⁵⁸⁰ The information they extracted from the turncoat guerrilla alarmed the Agency. As April 1963 came to a close, the CIA learned that several guerrilla groups were preparing to wage war against the Peralta government. The *Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo* (PGT)—the Communist Party of Guatemala—claimed to speak for the various opposition groups now under its political guidance.⁵⁸¹ The assorted guerrilla fronts that had formed from the 1960 officer revolt and the 1962 Spring protests coalesced under a single banner of the *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (FAR) and began coordinating their operations against the government's security forces. The expulsion of Arévalo and subsequent seizure of power by the military provided the disparate

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Interdepartmental Coordinating Committee on Cuban Affairs, "Report on the Sub-committee on Cuban Subversion: Action Taken during September 1963 in Curbing Cuban Subversion in Latin America," November 13, 1963, DNSA Guatemalan and the US. 2.

⁵⁸¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Planned Declaration of War by Guerilla Units against the Government," April 24, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1-2.

opposition groups of student activists, political dissidents, and guerilla fighters with a common cause. Clashes between insurgents and army units increased over the following months, and it soon became undeniable that Guatemala was in the midst of a civil war.

The CIA was unimpressed with the Peralta government's tepid response to the growing insurgency. Its analysts believed that, in their current disorganized state, oppositionist forces did not yet have the ability to overthrow Peralta, but worried that they could develop into a serious problem in time if ignored. The major opposition groups within the FAR—*Arévalistas*, the PGT, and the MR-13 guerilla fighters— had apparently held meetings with representatives from leftist student groups to discuss the overthrow of Defense Minister Peralta. The factions remained divided on strategy.

Arévalistas and moderates within the PGT favored the suspension of subversive activity so that the government would lift the state of siege, allowing more room for political organization and protest. The radical wing of the PGT, its armed cadre, and the MR-13 guerillas favored robberies, bombings, and the assassination of key government leaders.⁵⁸² The CIA concluded that although these groups could not currently challenge the government, a unified insurgent movement could unleash another Cuban-style revolution in Guatemala. The CIA's evaluation may have been alarmist, but the FAR, still in its nascent phase, represented a much greater threat than an aging academic like Arévalo. Now, instead of compromising with the 'spiritual-socialist' former president, US officials and the leaders of the Guatemalan Armed Forces faced the very Marxist revolutionary movement they had sought to circumvent.

⁵⁸² Central Intelligence Agency, "Arevalist-Extremist Planning to Overthrow the Government," May 23, 1963, Presidential Office Files, Box 118, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

The Cuban Revolution had demonstrated the potential of a dedicated, rural insurgent group under the command of a charismatic leader. The *Movimiento Revolucionario 13 Noviembre* (MR-13) hoped to replicate Castro's success by mirroring aspects of his 26th of July Movement. The leadership of MR-13 boasted two figures of growing renown: Marco Antonio Yon Sosa and Luis Augusto Turcios Lima. Both men were former Guatemalan Army officers who had previously received training at the School of the Americas, and had survived the rebellion of the junior-officers against Ydigoras in 1960.⁵⁸³ In the aftermath of the failed officer uprising, they found refuge among indigenous peasants and came to believe that change would come to Guatemala only through popular armed struggle. The two guerilla leaders subsequently travelled to Cuba where they received further training and funding, and attracted the attention of the CIA. The Agency noted that Yon Sosa, in particular, was highly regarded within Castro's regime, which had provided him with fifty-thousand dollars to continue his guerilla campaign against the Guatemalan government.⁵⁸⁴ This relatively small sum was likely Cuba's single most significant material contribution to the Guatemalan guerrilla movements.

After returning from Cuba in November 1962, Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima worked closely with other oppositionist groups, namely Guatemala's communist party, the PGT. The PGT had formed its own armed wing, which merged with MR-13 in December 1962 to form a nominally united armed opposition, the *Fuerzas Armadas*

⁵⁸³ Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 66.

⁵⁸⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, "Make-up and Plans of the 13 November Guerilla Movement; Money Received from Cuba," August 23, 1963, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 3.

Rebeldes (FAR).⁵⁸⁵ The guerrilla fighters of the FAR organized into three fronts, each of which contained smaller cells organized along the *foco* model pioneered by Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution. Groups within FAR retained considerable autonomy, and members remained loyal primarily to their commanders rather than to the organization. Still, increased collaboration between these groups marked a significant period of rejuvenation for the leftist opposition. Washington had used the specter of communist infiltration to intervene in Guatemalan affairs for nearly two decades, and now it had arrived. A reaction against the military regime the Kennedy administration had helped to install, the long-feared, Cuban-backed, communist insurgency had emerged as a significant threat to US interests in Guatemala.

The guerrilla groups and their political allies had largely withdrawn to recuperate after taking heavy losses against the military offensives that ended the Spring protests of 1962. Sporadic raids and bombings occurred throughout 1962, but armed insurrectionary groups remained relatively quiet even as the military blocked Arévalo and deposed Ydigoras. Entire guerrilla fronts had been massacred by the Army, but a much more cohesive and collaborative revolutionary movement, united under the FAR, returned to the fray only a year after facing near-total annihilation.

The resurgence of the revolution began in April 1963. Just days after the US extended official recognition to Peralta's government, guerrillas attacked Army patrols in Northeast Guatemala and inflicted a greater number of casualties than they received in return.⁵⁸⁶ The Central Committee of the PGT, acting as the core political leadership of the

⁵⁸⁵ Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 67.

⁵⁸⁶ The CIA recorded that the guerrilla casualties did not exceed five persons and that the Army casualties were much higher, although "not numerous". The actual number of casualties has been redacted from the

FAR, announced that on April 25, the three major guerrilla fronts of the FAR would jointly issue a declaration of war against the Peralta government. Copies of the declaration bearing the signature of Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima flooded the streets of Guatemala City. It “called on the people to be alert for the overflight of a rose-colored airplane which would be the signal for the beginning of anti-government action in Guatemala City.”⁵⁸⁷ Blaring sirens in the night “would be the call to battle” as saboteurs destroyed dams, cut powerlines, blocked transportation, and kidnapped government leaders.⁵⁸⁸ Portraying themselves as “patriots and the people’s forces...[the FAR] are ready to lay down their lives for the noble and just cause of turning the fatherland into a land free from tyranny, poverty, capitulationism and corruption.”⁵⁸⁹ All Guatemalans, regardless of their political beliefs, needed to unite against “the criminals who are now enslaving the people” who would “certainly be punished” come the FAR’s inevitable victory.⁵⁹⁰ The clarion call to revolution never signaled the proposed mass-sabotage, but the announcement put security forces on alert and the population on edge.

The FAR’s battle-cry bulletins did not correspond with a major guerrilla offensive, rather, they suggest the opposition group was attempting to rally the public and draw in new recruits. Notably, the declaration specifically called upon military men to join in the movement. With Peralta in power and the military purged of oppositional

record; CIA, “Planned Declaration of War by Guerilla Units against the Government,” April 22, 1963. JFKL

⁵⁸⁷ Central Intelligence Agency. “Guerrilla Action and Other Planned Anti-Government Actions.” May 2, 1963. Natinal Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101a, JFKL. 2.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Translation of the FAR Declaration of War found in; Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 46.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

elements following two failed revolts and a successful coup, it seems unlikely that any remaining officers would defect to the decidedly disadvantaged guerrillas. This wishful-thinking likely reflects the influence of the officers-turned-rebels of the 1960 revolt, namely Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima, who still maintained a strong nationalist orientation and personal ties to some members of their former cohort that remained loyal to the Guatemalan government. It also reveals that insurgent leaders recognized that significant segments of the military had to be coopted if the revolutionary movement were to take control of the state.

The FAR propaganda swayed few, if any, members of the security forces. Instead, the ascendant Guatemalan Armed Forces retaliated. In July, Army units killed every member of a *foco* group operating in the Izabal department during a nighttime raid.⁵⁹¹ The bloody defeat exposed the naïve optimism and inexperience of the patchwork revolutionary movement. The members of the Guatemalan Armed Forces seemed unmoved by the professed patriotism of their former brothers-in-arms. Although cliques remained, the Guatemalan security forces showed a greater unity of purpose than ever before in opposing the FAR. Unable to win over any significant military factions, the groups within the FAR became more radical and began to embrace a variety of communist doctrines.

The forces under Marco Antonio Yon Sosa developed the most distinctive divergence, as the former Guatemalan officer grew frustrated with the lack of influence he exercised over the ideology of the FAR. In forming the rebel alliance, all parties had agreed that the *Frente Unido de Resistencia* (FUR)—the governing council dominated by

⁵⁹¹ Regis Debray, “Revolucion en la Revolucion?” *Casa de las Americas*, Cuadernos series, January 1977. 44.

PGT leaders—would direct and determine the political and military strategy of the groups within the FAR. Radicalized by his first-hand experience with indigenous peasants who had sheltered him after the failed officer revolt of 1960, Yon Sosa believed that the revolution could succeed only by mobilizing the exploited masses for armed struggle. The planners within the FUR, almost entirely drawn from the urban, middle-class PGT leadership, “kept open the possibility and the hope of eventual negotiations leading to a shift from armed to electoral struggle.”⁵⁹² Adolfo Gilly, the Yon Sosa partisan and self-appointed historian of the MR-13 guerrilla front, explained, “The guerrilla actions which MR13 planned to carry out were considered by FUR to be, not a means of toppling the system, but an instrument of pressure which could force the government to negotiate and yield on the electoral, democratic level. . . . While the political leadership of FUR committed to democratic negotiations, moved in the direction of conciliation, the leadership of the armed struggle moved in a revolutionary direction.”⁵⁹³ This discrepancy in the fundamental outlook of these two major factions portended future disunity within the opposition group that would lead to disaster and defeat.

Over the course of 1963-64, Yon Sosa gradually redefined the ideology of his MR-13 front. Anti-imperialism and nationalism once dominated the former officer’s thinking, but his experiences in rural Central America and Cuba led him to adopt a Trotskyist interpretation of socialist revolution. He rejected the Soviet bureaucracy of Stalinism, and set his movement upon “the path of the Socialist revolutions of China and Cuba, of a government of workers and peasants as the goal of the revolutionary

⁵⁹² Adolfo Gilly, “The Guerilla Movement in Guatemala (1)” *Monthly Review*. May 1965. Pg. 16

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

struggle.”⁵⁹⁴ The historian Richard Gott concludes that this ideological shift resulted when The Fourth International’s Latin America bureau sent Trotskyist doctrinaires to “fill the political vacuum” that signified the growing divide between Yon Sosa’s MR-13 and the rest of the FAR.⁵⁹⁵

Under the influence of the Trotskyists, Yon Sosa’s movement became the first guerrilla movement in Latin America to adopt an overt socialist programme.⁵⁹⁶ The groups under his command began to embrace armed propaganda—entering a village with guns in-hand to educate peasants and inspire them to join the struggle. The MR-13 movement began to build training camps and assembled peasant committees in friendly villages to help supply the guerrilla fighters and dispense ‘revolutionary justice’. By all accounts, this strategy was initially successful in generating a popular response, but its indiscreet nature drew the attention of the military. When the MR-13 left the village, Army units would simply kill any peasant suspected of collaborating with the insurgents. These vulnerable civilians, under pain of torture, occasionally revealed the whereabouts of nearby guerrilla cells. The aforementioned liquidation of an entire MR-13 *foco* in July 1963 by the Army resulted from the confession of a peasant-sentry who had been savaged by military interrogators. In addition to these setbacks, Yon Sosa’s radical shift also began to alienate some of his allies. The remnants of the initial 1960 officer revolt and other Army rebels—steeped in a nationalist, anti-imperialist tradition—split over the issue of communist influence. Some embraced Yon Sosa’s leftist swing, but many others

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.,19.

⁵⁹⁵ Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 50.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid. 56

remained highly suspicious and firmly declared themselves anticommunist. Even in the early, heady days of the FAR, fault lines appeared that would grievously fracture the movement in the coming years.

As Yon Sosa's movement developed idiosyncrasies that set it apart from the FAR, his comrade Luis Turcios Lima drew closer to the umbrella organization and its PGT dominated leadership. Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa shared a formative experience; the young men arose as the surviving leadership of the failed junior-officer revolt of 1960 and found refuge among poor, indigenous villages while fleeing the Guatemalan Army's retribution. Both men were products of the School of the Americas, through which they received counterinsurgency training during their time in the Guatemalan Army. The two rebel officers subsequently travelled together to Cuba where they added guerrilla warfare and political indoctrination to their repertoire. Turcios Lima, however, did not radicalize to the same extent as Yon Sosa.

In an interview with the New York Times, Turcios Lima declared, "I am not a Communist party member" although he admitted he agreed with most Marxist philosophy. Moreover, he established his movement was "supported neither by Moscow nor Peking, nor Havana" and that the FAR was "a nationalist movement."⁵⁹⁷ The political scientist Louisa Frank observed that although he professed his nationalist ideology and political independence, Turcios Lima collaborated closely with the PGT and relied on the communist party to help organize his front and select an area of operations.⁵⁹⁸ The

⁵⁹⁷ Luis Turcios Lima interview from New York Times March, 18, 1966 quoted in: Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 64.

⁵⁹⁸ Louisa Frank, "Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala." Tobis and Jonas, eds. Guatemala. 182.

guerrilla front under his command, named the *Frente Guerrilla Edgar Ibarra* (FGEI) consisted almost entirely of PGT cadre from the party's Communist Youth Organization along with an array of students, workers, and peasants.⁵⁹⁹ Within his guerrilla front, Turcios Lima was the only member of the original MR-13 uprising of 1960. While these attributes would appear to be major disadvantages in the military sphere, the FGEI was actually the most successful of the FAR guerrilla fronts. Whereas Yon Sosa advocated for immediate, persistent action aimed at destroying the Peralta government as quickly as possible, Turcios Lima prepared for a protracted struggle based on the strategies of North Vietnam. Turcios Lima lacked the personal charisma of Yon Sosa, but due to superior organization provided by the PGT and a more cautious, clandestine implementation of operations, the FGEI steadily expanded its territory and gained popularity.

Regardless of these early variations within its member groups, the FAR was united in its decision to wage war on the Peralta regime. Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima disagreed on some finer points of revolutionary theory, both men still saw the Guatemalan Armed Forces as the crucial institution capable of enacting change in Guatemala. The FAR had called on soldiers to join their cause when it issued its joint declaration of war against the government in April, and MR-13 propaganda continued to target members of the military for recruitment. One particularly stirring leaflet called upon the soldier to "Refuse to fire against your peasant brothers. Refuse to burn down villages, refuse to torture. Soldier: Turn your guns on those who plunder and persecute

⁵⁹⁹ The FGEI takes its name from Edgar Ibarra, a law student who had been murdered by the Army.

the peasantry. Our struggle is yours.”⁶⁰⁰ They also implored conscientious enlisted men to bring their commanding officers to trial for murder and torture.

These appeals not only reveal the barbarous tactics already being employed by the military, but they also indicate that the FAR hoped to exploit existing weaknesses within the structure of the Guatemalan Armed Forces. With the vast majority of its enlisted men hailing from an impoverished, indigenous background, this kind of propaganda played on the guilt and resentment many soldiers likely felt when they obeyed the sordid orders of their bourgeois, Ladino officers. The idea of bringing these officers to trial for their actions was preposterous, especially in the military tribunals that served as Peralta’s judicial branch. This very realization, however, might have further incensed soldiers, causing them to defect or, perhaps enact their own brand of justice upon their superiors.

It is unclear how many military men joined the ranks of the rebels, but their number would have been relatively small. By 1964, Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa both committed to the peasantry as a primary source for recruits and openly advocated a socialist ideology that would have offended the staunchly nationalist and increasingly anticommunist officer corps. The harsh discipline and firsthand experience with the brutal methods of the Guatemalan Army likely discouraged most of the common soldiery from turning against the chain of command. The FAR never convinced significant segments of the military to join their cause. There would be no repeat of the 1960 junior officer revolt. Rather, the emergence of a multi-front insurgency, led by communists and rebel officers who had received money from Castro himself, solidified the formerly fractious security forces against what they perceived to be an existential threat.

⁶⁰⁰ Leaflet translated in Gilly, “The Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala (1)” 31

The members of the FAR had several reasons to believe that their movement would succeed during the organization's formative years. Revolutionary movements, inspired by Cuba's continued geopolitical success, spread throughout Latin America during the early 1960s and Guatemala led the pack in many respects. The renowned socialist theorist and academic Regis Debray reported that in 1963-1964 the FAR garnered more popular support than any other guerrilla movement in Latin America.⁶⁰¹ It faced an illegitimate military dictatorship that had usurped a democratically elected president, suspended the constitution, and cancelled elections. Moreover, the alliance between the Peralta regime and the United States began to fray as the colonel ignored advice from Washington and US officials subsequently reduced economic and military aid. Even the red-hunting American ambassador, John Bell, initially dismissed the FAR and steered US resources elsewhere. The leaders of the FAR conceived themselves as the vanguard of an expansive, nationalist movement that would establish a popular government built on the legacy of Jacobo Arbenz and the Guatemalan Revolution. Yet, even as momentum and circumstance propelled the FAR to early victories, internal divisions and strategic disunity prevented the movement of realizing its ultimate goal of toppling the Peralta government. Moreover, the growing threat of a widespread, communist-led insurgency provided a rationale for the creation and preservation of a military regime in Guatemala. Peralta's officers now had a mission of great import, and American officials would prove reluctant to oppose the militarization of the Guatemalan

⁶⁰¹ Debray did note that Colombia might have achieved a similar level of mass-support: Regis Debray, *Les Espreuves du Feu, La Critique des Armes, Vol 2* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974) 322.

state as it faced off against Castro-inspired guerrilla movements. The FAR, like the Arbenz administration, would end in failure.

An Alliance Adjusted: Changes and Continuities in US-Guatemalan Relations

Colonel Enrique Peralta had his own plans for the nation he now headed. Preventing communist infiltration in the guise of Arévalo had been the chief justification for military rule, but Peralta's pledge to rid the government of rampant corruption and restore public faith was a mission most Guatemalans agreed was badly needed after the Ydigoras administration. Ambassador Bell frequently praised the honesty and integrity of Peralta and his followers, and his astonishment that an individual of such character had succeeded in Guatemala's political environment bordered on ethnocentrism. The quest to purge corruption from government, however, served as a convenient excuse for repression and an expansion of the military's control over Guatemalan society. With *Operación Honestidad*, Colonel Peralta extended military influence, annulled civil liberties, and reconfigured the Guatemalan political landscape.

Operación Honestidad functioned more as a sprawling governmental recalibration than the precision program that its name implies. Some of its most publicly promoted manifestations included halving the presidential salary, re-staffing government bureaucracies, and punishing officials who engaged in bribery, extortion, and nepotism. Peralta's government billed these measures as necessary to eradicate communist influence, but also as a means to rid Guatemala of malcontents and parasites, motivated by greed and personal power, who had wielded influence in the past. When implemented,

this aspect of *Operación Honestidad* often served as little more than a convenient excuse to remove individuals from the government bureaucracy and replace them with Peralta loyalists. Furthermore, the purification of Guatemala's body politic—the professed mission of *Operación Honestidad*—became the Peralta regime's primary excuse for delaying national elections. The regime regularly claimed that a presidential contest could not be held until pervasive corruption had been eliminated. The Peralta regime also used the aims of *Operación Honestidad* as a justification for suspending the constitution, dissolving the “corrupt” legislative and judicial bodies, and declaring a near-permanent state of siege. By 1965, Peralta's government used *Operación Honestidad* to severely restrict political participation and secured the military's dominance over the Guatemalan state for decades to come.

In the closing months of 1963, however, *Operación Honestidad* helped bridge the growing divide between the governments of Guatemala and the United States. Peralta had incorporated Alliance for Progress initiatives into the social outreach aspects of *Operación Honestidad*. At the same time that leading State Department officials complained that Colonel Peralta ignored their advice on security and fiscal policies, other US officials, namely embassy staff, countered Washington's concerns with effusive praise of Peralta's embrace of Civic Action as a pillar of *Operación Honestidad*. The “establishment of community relations councils, literacy training support, school lunch program...road and bridge construction (especially in the Petén), and medical missions, the latter in cooperation with the University of San Carlos Medical School” were just the opening act of the combined Alliance for Progress and *Operación Honestidad*.⁶⁰² The US

⁶⁰² Robert Corrigan, “Civic Action Assessment” October 8, 1963. DNSA: US and Guatemala. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State. Decimal Files, 1960-1963. Box 3724. National Archives. 1

embassy proudly noted: “In fact, while certain leftist but non-Communist sectors do criticize the U.S. for conventional military assistance, the Embassy has heard favorable comments from these same sectors regarding the utility of Civic Action as a means of having the Military do something “useful” and perhaps of giving the military establishment a more democratic orientation and integrating it more into the life stream of the nation.”⁶⁰³ Indeed, the Civic Action programs would succeed in enmeshing the military into nearly every facet of civil society, but failed to democratize the authoritarian institution. The implementation of Civic Action into *Operación Honestidad* shows that despite the rhetoric of the Alliance for Progress, its programs were compatible with military dictatorship.

The Peralta government joined the US embassy in promoting and praising the Civic Action programs. In addition to becoming head-of-state, Peralta retained his position as Minister of Defense, and stridently promoted Civic Action within the Defense Ministry’s internal circular *Ejército*. Editorials and articles heaped praise upon a military that had supposedly been cleansed of corruption by *Operación Honestidad* and now stood ready to help the people and build a better Guatemala. One laudatory article proclaimed that the soldier and the villager would now work together to improve the country. Soldiers would not remain isolated in their barracks. They would take to the street, not with guns slung over their shoulders, but instead engaging in their patriotic duty of developing the nation alongside fellow citizens.⁶⁰⁴ Other articles sang similar praises, highlighting the contributions of the military’s Civic Action programs to road-building,

⁶⁰³ Ibid. 2

⁶⁰⁴ “Proteccion y Ayuda Simultaneamente” *Ejército* July, 1963. Archivo Historical, CIRMA. 6.

domestic development, and public works projects. One author assured his presumably all-military audience that, far from abusing the power now at their disposal, the Guatemalan Army would use its forces to gain the respect and love of their citizens and the free nations of the Western Hemisphere.⁶⁰⁵ In this vision of Guatemala's future, the armed forces, inspired and funded by the Alliance for Progress, would lead the country to prosperity and order. It was the inexorable march of progress, and anyone who opposed its advance became an enemy of civilization itself.

Peralta's regime seemed to understand that construction projects alone would not win hearts and minds. Not only would the military help to provide the material needs of Guatemalan citizens, but it would benevolently cooperate in the "cultural and spiritual development of the Guatemalan people" as well.⁶⁰⁶ In practice, this amounted to the military controlling the curriculum of academic institutions, especially those schools supported or established through Civic Action programs. The military chain of command tightly controlled materials provided to schools and its broader literacy program. Only those "national authors" whose work the commanding officers regarded as dignified would be fit for Civic Action education initiatives. Unsurprisingly, these authorized publications tended to feature uncritical examinations of national heroes and triumphant portrayals of military endeavors.⁶⁰⁷ Additionally, the military signaled that it planned on using Civic Action programs to "cooperate" with institutions of higher learning by

⁶⁰⁵ "Efectos Reales de La Accion Civica" Ejercito, July, 1963. Archivo Historical, CIRMA 6.

⁶⁰⁶ Original Spanish is: "cooperar al desarrollo cultural y espiritual del pueblo guatemalteco."

"Accion Civica y la Cultura Nacional." Ejercito, October, 1963. Archivo Historical, CIRMA. 1.

⁶⁰⁷ The legendary Mayan hero Tecun Uman was a favorite subject in these publications. This likely reflected the military's attempt to appeal to indigenous people while highlighting the virtue of combat prowess.

inserting itself into a diverse “diffusion of works of instructive, academic, and scientific nature” including scholarly publications, periodicals, and even graduate theses.⁶⁰⁸ The abundant references to the honesty and integrity of the Guatemalan Armed Forces and their commitment to public works served as a thin veneer to cover their early attempts at social control.

Fulsome advocacy for Civic Action did not stop at Guatemalan borders. Colonel Peralta personally promoted the program in his interactions with other Central American heads-of-state. At the first annual conference for Civic Action of Central America, Peralta made his case for integrated regional adoption of Civic Action programs.⁶⁰⁹ According to Peralta, only national armies had the organizational capacity to defeat communism. These militaries, Peralta posited, possessed the power to crush subversive movements outright by killing off insurgents and their supporters, but this came at a steep political and human cost. Civic Action, however, was more effective than warfare because it robbed revolutionaries of their appeal by providing the services promised by communism. Peralta added that publicizing the projects completed by the military through Civic Action stimulated the public sector and encouraged citizens to cooperate with the government. Civic Action had so much potential that Peralta argued that it should be the foundation for the proposed integration of Central America’s armed forces, *El Consejo Nacional de Defensa Centroamericano* (CONDECA). Peralta’s impassioned speech can be considered a success. On December 14, 1963, in Guatemala City, the

⁶⁰⁸ Original Spanish is: El Plan establecido por Accion Civica del ejercito para cooperar en la diffusion de obras de indole instructive, academica, y cientifica...” Found in “Accion Civica y La cultura Nacional”. *Ejercito*. October, 1963. Archivo Historical, CIRMA. 1

⁶⁰⁹ The information in this paragraph is derived from Peralta’s speech to the Central American Civic Action Conference, reprinted in: “El Ejercito Cuenta con Elementos para Frenar la Subversion Comunista.” *Ejercito*. July, 1963. Archivo Historical, CIRMA. 3-4.

militaries of Central America signed a treaty forming CONDECA, and began to coordinate their efforts against leftist insurgencies in the region.

Paired with the public outreach projects of Civic Action, Peralta practiced another method of extending the military's control over the Guatemalan countryside through the *comisionados militares*. Traditionally a position granted to retired, non-commissioned officers, the *comisionados* had long served as a village-level military representative whose chief duty was to conscript peasants into the army. Under Peralta, the *comisionados* transformed into a pervasive spy network that actively rooted out local subversive elements. In his landmark study of the national social structure of Guatemala, Richard Adams reported that the Civic Action and counterinsurgency programs “were closely coupled activities.”⁶¹⁰ The conversion of the *comisionados militares* from a conscription service to a domestic espionage ring is an example of this intertwined response to revolutionary insurgency.

Comisionados often collaborated with officers conducting Civic Action programs in their regions, occasionally taking a leading role, and used the public outreach as a means of infiltration into the community. Guerrillas soon realized the threat posed by these domestic spies, pejoratively referred to as *orejas* (ears), and attempted to persuade allied villagers to eliminate their local *comisionado*.⁶¹¹ Failing that, the rebels would assassinate the *orejas* themselves and announce the killing as an act in “service to the *campesinos*.”⁶¹² Yet, in cases where the *comisionado* had effectively associated himself

⁶¹⁰ Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*. 273.

⁶¹¹ Ibid. 272.

⁶¹² Ibid.

with popular Civic Action initiatives or otherwise proved sympathetic to local concerns, rural Guatemalans cautiously approved of the new role of the military. Adams goes as far as to suggest that in some instances, the relationship between some *comisionados* and their assigned population outweighed their duty, and they presumably protected some individuals from persecution.⁶¹³ These postulated exceptions aside, the evolution of the *comisionados militares* and their partnership with Civic Action tainted one of the most successful, popular, and outwardly benign programs of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala by transforming it into a mechanism for domestic surveillance and control.

As much as *Operación Honestidad* and Peralta's embrace of the Civic Action programs seemed to bode well for the popularity of the military government, it could not disguise the fact that a repressive, authoritarian regime had seized the Guatemalan state and sought to extend the power of the armed forces over civil society. Although these efforts served as a point of agreement between American and Guatemalan officials, the relationship between the two countries remained strained as Peralta continued to ignore Washington's directives on security and economic matters. The United States, despite its frustrations with Guatemala's head-of-state, was willing to accept some resistance from the military regime as long as it maintained order and remained firmly dedicated to destroying communists and other subversives. All of the rhetorical niceties of the Alliance for Progress would be set aside when brute force appeared to be a quicker solution for countering communism. Here then, the real priorities of the United States were laid bare: whether by modernization, militarization, or some combination of the two, Guatemala must remain bound within the Northern Colossus' sphere of influence.

⁶¹³ Ibid.

Peralta proved he could use the Alliance for Progress to further his own ends, namely establishing the primacy of the military in all state affairs. The stubborn nationalist welcomed US dollars, but rejected foreign military advisors as the insurgency began its war against his government in earnest. As long as Peralta continued to serve its Cold War security interests, the United States would endure the Guatemalan leader's limited displays of defiance.

* * *

The notion that Alliance for Progress died with President Kennedy prevailed among many of the program's most ardent supporters. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. claimed, "The Alliance was never really tried. It lasted about a thousand days, not a sufficient test, and thereafter only the name remained."⁶¹⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, Schlesinger was champion of the Alliance for Progress and was one of the few members of the Kennedy administration who advocated for allowing Juan José Arévalo to run for the Guatemalan presidency. Schlesinger and other progressive policymakers in Latin American affairs soon found themselves relocated, or outright removed, from circles of influence and power in the Johnson administration. In their place stepped Thomas C. Mann, a longtime foreign-service official who had worked under the Eisenhower administration on Latin American policy. Mann occupied the two highest State Department positions concerning Latin America: the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America and the Coordinator of the Alliance for Progress. His appointment displaced two of Kennedy's most stalwart defenders of the social and political mission of the Alliance: Richard Goodwin and Teodoro Moscoso. It may be recalled that Moscoso,

⁶¹⁴ Schlesinger quoted in Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 174.

like Schlesinger, lent his support to an Arévalo candidacy and failed to convince President Kennedy to avert Peralta's coup.

A tough-talking, business-minded, anticommunist from Texas, Mann's relatively brief service in the Johnson administration reoriented the Alliance for Progress to focus on economic development through private investment rather than emphasizing social justice and political reform. His approach to Latin America's political problems was blunt—counterinsurgency efforts would be bolstered and the United States would openly accept dictatorial regimes, provided they were sufficiently committed to combatting communism. Protecting US financial interests in the region was paramount. Subsequently, his infamous acceptance of anticommunist authoritarianism in Latin America would be dubbed the Mann Doctrine, but its tenets were already at work in Kennedy's policies toward Guatemala.

Many scholars have widely criticized President Johnson and Thomas Mann for their handling of the Alliance for Progress. Even before Mann assumed his posts, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. lamented in his journal "that Mann was an able man, but he would be a "disaster"—that he was a free enterprise ideologist, that he did not really believe in the Alliance for Progress and that his appointment would mean a reversion to the days of John Foster Dulles."⁶¹⁵ Schlesinger's prolific writings shaped much of the literature surrounding the Alliance for Progress, and his antipathy toward Mann permeates many critical evaluations of the program. Records of Mann's ethnocentric outburst and remarks, public and private, suitably justify criticism of the policymaker's attitude toward Latin America. On matters of policy, however, Thomas Mann and the Johnson

⁶¹⁵ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. *Journals: 1952-2000*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2007) 213.

administration followed along the course set by Kennedy more often than they deviated from their predecessor's practices.

Some scholars, such as historian Stephen Rabe, have drawn attention to the continuities between the Kennedy and Johnson administration, and have provided much-needed nuance to the discussion of these presidents' relations with Latin America. The case of Guatemala during the Alliance for Progress era confirms much of Rabe's thinking. In Guatemala, the transition from Kennedy to Johnson appeared to have little impact initially. The most noticeable difference between the two presidents was that Kennedy directly involved himself in important Guatemalan issues, whereas Johnson preferred to leave the country, along with most Central American issues, to the State Department. In fact, over the course Johnson's years in office the Alliance for Progress looked to be working as intended in Guatemala: democracy returned, economic conditions improved, and the revolutionary movement was effectively tamped down. Behind the appearance of success, the military machine Kennedy set in motion gained extraordinary power, committed heinous atrocities, and acted with increased autonomy from Guatemalan civil authorities and its patrons in the United States.

For Ambassador John Bell, 1964 was a difficult year. Bell owed his ambassadorial appointment to his close connections with the Kennedy team, and the assassination of the American president in November 1963 dealt him a heavy blow. The new year with a new president began with problems that continued for the rest of the ambassador's term. Guerilla forces went on the offensive throughout Guatemala and established themselves as a persistent threat to the military regime. In responding to the insurgency, Bell was no longer the aggressive Cold Warrior who averted potential

communist threats. The ambassador went on the defensive and showed signs of being overwhelmed by the prospect of a genuine communist revolution.

The recent union of guerilla groups into the FAR revealed its potential through a series of coordinated attacks in January 1964. In the countryside, guerillas now regularly clashed with the army units in the Izabal and Alta Verapaz departments of eastern Guatemala. The influence of the guerrilla fronts in the predominantly rural region was growing and disrupted access to Guatemala's most important port, Puerto Barrios.⁶¹⁶ More troubling to the ambassador, insurgents began assaulting urban targets frequently, extending their reach from their rural strongholds. Mortar shells rained down on the Guatemala City airport on three occasions and then targeted a nearby Honor Guard compound. Bell observed that FAR pamphlets signed by Commandant Yon Sosa had been distributed in nearby neighborhoods warning people to stay away from the airport to avoid future attacks made "in retaliation for [the] military dictatorship's action against guerillas" in Izabal.⁶¹⁷ At the end of the month, the FAR assassinated Colonel Jose Oliva Valdez, an intelligence officer of the Puerto Barrios garrison, in a drive-by machine gun attack in Guatemala City.⁶¹⁸ In his monthly assessment, Bell admitted that the insurgency had escalated its attacks, but that the military, as a result of US training, was gradually

⁶¹⁶ John Bell, "[Guerilla Clash in Izabal]," January 9, 1964. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2253, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives, 1.

⁶¹⁷ John Bell, "Guerillas Attack Honor Guard Brigade," January 22, 1964, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

⁶¹⁸ John Bell, "[Intelligence Officer Shot]," January 24, 1964, DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2253, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives, 1

becoming a more efficient counterinsurgency force.⁶¹⁹ Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, Bell continued to claim that the guerilla forces could not seriously threaten the Peralta government.

Responding to the State Department's alarm and the increasing problems on the ground, Bell suggested a reorientation of US policy in Guatemala. The new policy objective emphasized greater cooperation with the Peralta regime to advance the economic and social goals of the Alliance for Progress and the reinstatement of a democratic, constitutional government.⁶²⁰ The ambassador also stated that long-term social and economic programs would undermine the insurgency over time, but that increased support for security forces was immediately necessary to maintain the current counterinsurgency efforts and exert influence over the military regime. The organization of these security forces, however, remained a contentious issue between Peralta's government and US officials.

State Department officials, CIA analysts, and US military advisors all agreed that the National Police and Guatemalan intelligence agencies needed to be professionalized and restructured in order to counter the growing insurgency effectively. Secretary Rusk's previous reduction in the funding of the Public Safety Program in an attempt to push Peralta into reforming the police and appointing US-trained officers to leadership positions failed to persuade the regime. With guerillas targeting urban areas with more frequency, Ambassador Bell reported that the need for an effective police force was now

⁶¹⁹ John Bell, "Guerilla Threat," January 15, 1964, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 1.

⁶²⁰ John O. Bell, "Internal Defense Plan for Guatemala: Progress Report and Prospects," March 6, 1964 National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 1.

Guatemala's most significant national security problem.⁶²¹ A collaborative effort between USAID and Guatemalan police officers produced a plan for reorganization that the US embassy would present to the Minister of Government, but Bell feared that the Peralta regime would once again reject these suggestions. Robert Corrigan, the Deputy Chief of Mission, presented the police reorganization plan to the Minister of Government, who agreed that the reforms were necessary, but the Peralta regime still refused to integrate more US advisers into the structure of his security forces.⁶²²

Despite Peralta's unwillingness to listen to its US allies on internal security matters, his regime inched toward a return to constitutionality. As part of his initial purge, Peralta had dissolved the Guatemalan Constitution. The government needed to articulate its foundational principles, and the military regime would gain increased legitimacy--and would likely reap benefits--if it oversaw the drafting of the new constitution. Following the American ambassador's failed attempts to prod Peralta into setting a definite timetable for the presidential election or forming a council of state, his superiors in Washington conceded Bell's original assessment had been correct: making overt demands on the Guatemalan government would not work. Instead, the careful courting of influential members of the regime had proven most effective. By building his relationship with Peralta's brother Arturo and other Guatemalan power brokers, Bell quietly encouraged elections for a constituent assembly. These representatives would, in theory, help Peralta's regime draft a new constitution to replace the one that had been nullified

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Robert F. Corrigan, "Police Reorganization: Visit to Minister of Government," March 10, 1964, Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Record Group 286, Box 65, National Archives, 2.

following the coup. His efforts met with some qualified success and, nearly a year after taking power, Colonel Peralta announced that elections for the constituent assembly would be held May or June.⁶²³

The election, however, came with several caveats. Since coming to office, Peralta had formed his own political party, *Partido Institucional Democrático* (PID), largely from his supporters in the upper echelons of the military, and the constituent assembly election would be its debut. According to historian Jim Handy, the PID looked to the Mexican PRI as its model and planned to control Guatemalan politics through its command over the state bureaucracy and by coopting moderate reform movements into the party.⁶²⁴ Unlike the PRI, the PID was essentially a military-political organization and ranking officers intended to maintain power over their party indefinitely. The formation of the PID institutionalized the military's decisive presence in Guatemalan politics and served as their vehicle for domination over the state for decades.

In order to ensure the PID would meet with success, Peralta's regime barred opposition parties from participating in the election. Only the extreme rightist MLN and center-left *Partido Revolucionario* registered for the election. Their candidates understood well that they served at the pleasure of the PID and joined in a coalition with Peralta's party for the election. This subservience to the PID became most apparent when the two parties presented nearly identical, government-selected, platforms; a bizarre phenomenon considering the stark political differences between the PR and the MLN.⁶²⁵

⁶²³ Bell, "Internal Defense Plan" March 6, 1964. 3.

⁶²⁴ Jim Handy, "Resurgent Democracy and the Guatemalan Military." Journal of Latin American Studies Vol. 18, No. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, November, 1986) 393.

⁶²⁵ George C. Denney Jr, "Guatemalan Elections Will Be in Effect a Plebiscite," May 7, 1964, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

The conservative political positions of the PID and MLN naturally converged on several issues, but the unlikely alliance between the *Partido Revolucionario* and Peralta's party defied logic. The most sensible explanation for the alliance, put forth by Jim Handy, argues that the leader of the PR, Mario Méndez Montenegro, saw an opportunity to legitimize his party and secure its position in future elections. His gambit succeeded. Although Mario Méndez Montenegro did not live to participate in the 1966 presidential election, the PR survived and won the contest.

The Guatemalan government announced that the vote for constituent assembly would take place on May 24, but Colonel Peralta's political tricks could not mask the electoral farce. State Department intelligence analysts considered the election a plebiscite, and estimated that "the failure of the military government to allow an opposition party to participate in the election has created a political issue that will be prominent in Guatemalan for months to come."⁶²⁶ After enduring over a year of pressure from Washington to broaden his political base and move toward elections, Colonel Peralta responded with a deeply undemocratic maneuver. The constituent assembly vote was merely the beginning: a test case for rigging future elections through procedural maneuvers, blocking party registrations, and dictating policies to the political parties that the military elite found acceptable. The brief prospect of political stability and progress in Guatemala rapidly dissolved.

A proliferation of coup plots against Defense Minister Peralta marked the immediate popular response to the announcement of the election. Opportunistic military leaders, political opponents, journalists, and students of all political identities conspired

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

to overthrow the government, but these self-interested splinter groups lacked the resources and political unity to make a serious attempt to topple the regime. Susanne Jonas' examination of the revolutionary movement reveals that ideological fissures within the FAR's tenuous alliance erupted between the PGT, which favored political participation, and the MR-13, which rejected the elections and demanded a continuation of armed struggle.⁶²⁷ Although the divisions within the FAR were not yet irreconcilable, they prevented the most formidable opposition group in Guatemala from taking definitive action during the constituent assembly elections. Participation in the elections was low, but May 24 came and went without a serious disruption. Facing no real resistance, a toothless, conservative constituent assembly formed and granted the pretense of some democratic progress to the Peralta regime. The divide within the left over the issue of elections, however, would prove fatefully enduring.

The Guatemalan military effectively swallowed the Alliance for Progress as Peralta advanced the armed forces control over the state. Although the lofty developmental program had been designed as a method for countering communism in Latin America, it's initiatives increasingly funded projects that enhanced security forces control over the civilian population. The Johnson administration largely followed the trajectory set by the Kennedy administration and maintained the idealistic rhetoric of the Alliance for Progress, but dispensed with much of the humanitarian principles expressed by the project's creators. Under the Mann doctrine, the US would offer little pushback against allied anticommunist dictators in Latin America and empty gestures toward democracy, like Peralta's constituent assembly election, passed as political progress.

⁶²⁷ Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 67.

Constraints on Peralta's militarization of politics and the state would not come from the United States. As the insurgency established itself as a genuine threat, Peralta needed little justification for sharply increasing repression, violence, and requests for US security assistance.

Through the summer of 1964, the US embassy continued to lament the inaction of the Peralta regime against the FAR, yet still discounted the danger posed by opposition forces. Bell recommended that the Public Safety Program officials delay their assessment of Guatemalan police forces because the government continued to rely on the army as both an urban and rural counterinsurgency force.⁶²⁸ Major guerilla engagements had subsided. They averaged, Bell noted, "one murder a month for the past five months," targeting plantation owners and a few army officers.⁶²⁹ Peralta's neglect of public security might be overlooked if the momentum of the insurgency continued to diminish. If it did not, perhaps it could finally push the colonel to cooperate with US security advisors. The optimistic assessments of the embassy and the arrogance of Peralta's government dissipated in the face of a sustained assault that began in the provincial village of Panzós. The attack on Panzós signaled that Guatemala's long, bloody civil war had only just begun as the country plunged into a decades-long descent into terror and violence.

⁶²⁸ John O. Bell, "The Threat of Violence in Guatemala," May 22, 1964, DNSA, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Record Group 286, Box 66, National Archives, 3.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.* 1.

The Gathering Storm: The Insurgency Tests the Peralta Regime

Dusk ushered in the heavy, cool evening air, mixing the humidity of the Polochic River valley with the refreshing currents that crept down from the highlands surrounding the village of Panzós, where nine soldiers manned the local Army outposts. Suddenly, at around 7:30pm, shots and shouts pierced the rising drone of crepuscular creatures in the jungle. A large group of ragged men, roughly twenty in number, burst from the shadowed tree-line and stormed the fortification. Surprised and outnumbered, the sentries stood little chance. By the end of the firefight, the Army squad surrendered—three had been killed, two wounded. The guerrillas sustained zero casualties and took three of the survivors captive. A single member of the Panzós outpost escaped and reported that the guerrillas had seized all of the arms and ammunition from his detachment. On October 16, 1964, after months of relative quiet, the FAR's raid at Panzós initiated a prolonged period of escalating attacks against the Guatemalan military government.

A commercial center along the railroad that connected the plantations of central-eastern Guatemala to the Atlantic port of Puerto Barrios, Panzós sat near the border of the Alta Verapaz and Izabal departments: the two regions where guerrillas had established strongholds and expanded their influence. Panzós was a microcosm of the broad power relationship that characterized traditional Guatemalan society. The vast majority of the region's inhabitants were Maya peasants who worked on land owned by Ladinos. The bounty reaped from peasant labor made its way through Panzós, where many wealthy local landowners resided, before being loaded onto ships owned by foreign corporations.

It was a fitting symbol for the disparities of wealth and power generated by extractive relationship Guatemala had with other countries, namely the United States.

Colonel Peralta reacted to the attack immediately by sending a swell of government troops into the region to hunt down the guerrilla band. Two platoons of paratroopers landed in nearby Puerto Barrios to secure the port city.⁶³⁰ Naval forces plied Lago Izabal while air assets surveilled the heavily forested regions for any sign of the insurgents. A full six infantry platoons, over two-hundred men, swept the area on foot.⁶³¹ Two days after the raid, an Army unit stopped a group of men driving a pickup truck and detained them, claiming that they were guerrilla fighters. After what can only be assumed was an intense and unpleasant interrogation, the accused told their captors that the group that carried out the attack on the Panzós outpost “had numerous guerrillas in the band up in the mountains” who were armed with high-quality machine guns and carbines manufactured in the United States.⁶³² The US Army attaché stationed at the embassy reported an “all-out effort was being made to locate and capture the culprits” and that the Guatemalan Armed Forces were “reacting vigorously to this attack.”⁶³³ Beyond arresting a handful of suspects, however, government forces failed to locate and eliminate the group that assaulted Panzós.

The US embassy deployed an investigative team to Puerto Barrios to survey the guerrilla-friendly regions, but before these officials even arrived in the town, Ambassador

⁶³⁰ US Army Attaché, “Memo to Defense Intelligence Agency and Department of the Army” October 19, 1964, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Vol 1. Box 54. LBJL. 2.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ *ibid*

John Bell tried to downplay the Panzós raid. Repeating the mantra he had developed since Peralta came to power, the ambassador insisted that the guerrillas were not a threat to the government and that there were “no indications that the subversive groups are gaining in strength.”⁶³⁴ Bell assured his superiors that the US military mission “received reports that over the past several months the Government has quietly but with apparently increasing efficiency kept pressure on guerrilla bands...Guatemalan military units have, without fanfare, “eliminated” some 30 guerrillas and police in the capital have arrested several terrorist leaders, serving to disrupt guerrilla and terrorist plans.”⁶³⁵ Despite the efforts of security forces, the ambassador admitted, “it will be difficult to eliminate the guerrillas and terrorist entirely.” While insurgents lacked the capacity to unseat the military-government, “perhaps the biggest threat,” Bell cautioned, “is the possibility of the assassination of Chief of Government Peralta by communist-backed guerrillas.”⁶³⁶ Such an event would spell disaster for Guatemala and the United States.

The headstrong Guatemalan leader had caused consternation among high-ranking State Department officials, but Ambassador Bell believed he remained the only individual capable of producing stability in Guatemala. Reaffirming this point, Bell reported that the Peralta regime showed promise in several areas. Civic Action continued to receive “strong support” and the government had extended its outreach initiatives by introducing sponsorship and training programs “to identify and support promising labor

⁶³⁴ John Bell. “Internal Defense Plan Progress Report (Incorporating Third Monthly Guerrilla Report.” October 21, 1964. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State. Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2252, National Archives. 2.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Ibid. 2.

leaders.”⁶³⁷ Select youth organizations enjoyed exchange programs and leadership grants. Alliance for Progress dollars, directed through Peralta’s government, continued to create roads, schools, and rural clinics. *Operación Honestidad* gained recognition for creating the first government budgetary surplus since the 1954 coup. Above all, Peralta had made moves toward constitutionality and the return of democracy with the constituent assembly elections, and in the process, forged ties with both the PR and the MLN. The ambassador’s tale, however, contrasted with reports coming from the embassy team investigating Puerto Barrios.

After two days in Guatemala’s primary port, the reporting officer’s alarm over conditions in “the incredibly ugly city of Puerto Barrios” revealed why the region was a hotbed of anti-government sentiment.⁶³⁸ It seemed that Alliance for Progress promises had not affected the “bar and bordello seaport economy,” and a “general atmosphere of decay and dissatisfaction” presented an opportunity for the FAR. Unemployment was the norm and those who could find work saw their earnings decrease as much as sixty percent over the course of the year. Hoping to catch guerrillas, the local garrison regularly performed mass-arrests, which only increased local sympathy toward the insurgency. The report revealed that even the garrison commander feared for his life: “the threat of violence is always present...Col. Manuel Arturo Giron never ventures from his military compound except in an unmarked car, changing his license plates frequently, and with two body guards armed with submachine guns, an armed driver, and with a .45

⁶³⁷ Ibid. 2-3

⁶³⁸ Edward Hef, “Puerto Barrios and Guerrilla Activities in the Izabal Area.” October, 30, 1964. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives Page 1.

caliber pistol tucked in his belt.”⁶³⁹ Writing on behalf of Ambassador Bell, embassy secretary Edward Hef, echoed his boss’ standard line: “there is little question that the military are in control of the guerrilla situation. However, given the elusiveness of the guerrilla groups and the difficult terrain in the area, it is unlikely that the guerrillas can be entirely eliminated.”⁶⁴⁰ Regardless of the single qualifying statement, the dire situation presented in the report appeared at odds with Ambassador Bell’s conclusion that the insurgency was merely a nuisance to an otherwise robust government.

Major figures in the State Department already doubted the ambassador’s rosy outlook on Peralta’s regime. The Panzós raid damaged John Bell’s credibility far more than it harmed the Guatemalan military government. Secretary of State Rusk demanded immediate clarification on the attacks and additional information on the Izabal and Alta Verapaz departments. Furthermore, he ordered Bell to urge Guatemalan authorities “to conduct thorough interrogation of captured guerrillas...with [a] view [of] obtaining intelligence on possible Cuban involvement.”⁶⁴¹ When the confessions of presumably tortured prisoners failed to yield actionable intelligence, Secretary Rusk called for an assessment of the “apparent expansion of [the] area of guerrilla operations.”⁶⁴²

Ambassador Bell, displaying the stubbornness often attributed to Colonel Peralta, gave Secretary Rusk his boilerplate response: the guerrillas were not a threat and the

⁶³⁹ Ibid. 2

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Dean Rusk to US embassy, “Deptel 212.” October 22, 1964. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives

⁶⁴² Dean Rusk to US embassy, “Telegram 246.” November 3, 1964. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL.

Guatemalan government was steadily increasing “pressure against subversive activity...to contain and reduce it.”⁶⁴³ Instead of the guerrillas in the hills, Bell argued that the real emerging threat in Guatemala was the impending breakdown of the odd political coalition Peralta had bolted together for the constituent assembly elections over the issue of selecting a mutually agreeable candidate for the still unscheduled presidential election. Unwilling to recognize the danger posed by the FAR’s growing popularity, Ambassador Bell became an impediment to counterinsurgency doctrine and its many adherents within the Johnson administration.

If State Department chiefs had any remaining faith in Ambassador Bell, his dismissive response to the Panzós raid and the subsequent spate of guerrilla attacks so reduced his standing that the formerly vocal anticommunist crusader became relatively despondent. The Guatemalan Army patrolled the “guerrilla habitat” and reportedly, “kept the subversive groups off balance [by] killing and capturing small numbers of guerrillas in minor clashes.”⁶⁴⁴ The US Army Mission, however, concluded that the Guatemalan counterinsurgency program “began to deteriorate” as early as January 1964 because Peralta had refused to allow proper supervision and inspection by US military advisors.⁶⁴⁵ The Guatemalan Army Chief of Staff had only recently accepted a curriculum suggested by the US Army Mission and it would not be fully integrated until well into 1965. This cast further suspicion on Ambassador Bell’s assurances that the Guatemalan Armed

⁶⁴³ John Bell, “Significance of Panzós Raid,” November 4, 1964. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL.

⁶⁴⁴ John Dreyfuss, “Fifth Monthly Guerrilla Report.” February 6, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives. 1

⁶⁴⁵ Harold Houser, “U.S. Army Mission Program Report, RCS SCARGC-19 (R1)” January 15, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. US Army War College. 4.

Forces had the rebels trapped in their highland hideouts. Increased military presence did temporarily reduce guerrilla actions in rural Izabal and Alta Verapaz, but this was offset by audacious urban attacks that confirmed Ambassador Bell no longer had a firm grasp on the situation in Guatemala.

As fireworks exploded across the sky on New Year's Eve 1964, FAR cells attacked Guatemala City. They torched a USAID hangar, destroying 23 vehicles, and planted a bomb within the US Army Mission headquarters. It failed to detonate, as did a second explosive device found at a gasoline storage depot, but it was clear that the FAR had escalated its operations and could attack major urban targets, including US facilities. Two weeks later, an assassination squad attempted to kill Colonel Hector Medina, one of Peralta's loyal subordinates, in a drive-by shooting.⁶⁴⁶ Then on February 9, two men on a motorcycle sped up to a car containing Colonel Harold Houser, Chief of the US Army Mission in Guatemala, and fired at him point blank—narrowly missing the highest-ranking US military officer in the country.⁶⁴⁷ In the weeks that followed, the FAR continued operations in Guatemala City, hurling bombs into a crowd during a military ceremony and dropping a grenade from a bridge into a truckload of soldiers. Jolted from complacency by repeated attacks in the capital, Peralta declared a state of siege and suspended many of the rights provided by Charter of Government that had temporarily replaced a working constitution.

⁶⁴⁶ Dreyfuss, "Fifth Monthly Guerrilla Report." 2.

⁶⁴⁷ Every secondary source publication that mentions the attack on Col. Houser states that he was killed on February 9, 1965 by this attack. However, the report of the incident, written well over a month later, states that the gunmen narrowly missed Colonel Houser. See: John Dreyfuss, "Sixth Monthly Guerrilla Report." March 20, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives. 1

The crackdown only emboldened the FAR agents, who interpreted the government's state of siege as an indication that their actions were successfully pressuring Peralta and exposing the weakness of his regime. On March 20, insurgents assassinated the notorious secret-police chief Napoleon Arturo Cordova, who was commonly known as "The Torturer."⁶⁴⁸ Killing the infamously cruel officer gave many FAR members a taste of revolutionary justice. When President Johnson ordered US forces to invade the Dominican Republic in an effort to halt the return of overthrown former president, Juan Bosch, many Guatemalan rebels saw their own tragic history repeating in another small, Latin American country. Bosch, elected president after the assassination of the widely hated dictator Rafael Trujillo, was an intellectual and a dedicated reformer. He was overthrown by his own military after serving only seven months in office, but disapproval with the resulting military regime generated a civil war. The Johnson administration's decision to send roughly 42,000 troops to back the unpopular military government incensed many Latin Americans and provided ample propaganda material for guerrilla movements throughout the region. The FAR used their successful assassination of the hated Cordova and the US intervention of the Dominican Republic to amplify their message and attract more adherents to their movement.

By May, despite the ongoing state of siege, the FAR expanded its operations well beyond what the governments of the United States and Guatemala thought was possible. Guerrillas resumed activities in rural areas, this time with a focus along the Honduran

⁶⁴⁸ The secret-police in Guatemala at that time were known as the Judicial Police; John Bell, "[Murder of Judicial Police Agent]." March 22, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253, National Archives.

border.⁶⁴⁹ CIA informants reported that the leadership of the PGT sent out a startling directive to its active cells:

“The group agreed it was urgent to initiate immediate terrorist activities against the United States Embassy and other U.S. government installations in Guatemala, and against personnel of the embassy and of the U.S. government in Guatemala. The terrorist activity will consist of bombing of U.S. installations and private homes of embassy personnel, and of armed action against individuals. The communists will machine gun automobiles and residences of embassy and consular and other United States government personnel... The PGT will urge all other groups to collaborate with it in this terrorist action.”⁶⁵⁰

Attacks on US targets manifested immediately. On May 2, while bombs detonated throughout Guatemalan City, FAR saboteurs peppered the United States’ consulate building with machine gun fire.⁶⁵¹ The CIA noted that the PGT ordered the attacks in response to the invasion of the Dominican Republic. The sound of explosions filled the night air of Guatemala City through the summer of 1965, and American corporations, government buildings, and individual citizens found themselves the primary target of urban FAR attacks.

The Agency was also concerned about the opinion of the American public. On May 4, NBC aired a scathing hour-long program, *The Science of Spying*, which lambasted the CIA and the United States government for its global interventions.⁶⁵²

⁶⁴⁹ John Fisher. “Guerrilla Incident on Guatemalan-Honduran Border.” May 12, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2254 National Archives.

⁶⁵⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, “Plans of Guatemalan Communist Party to Initiate Immediate Terrorist Action against United States Installations and Personnel.” May 17, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL. 2.

⁶⁵¹ Latin American Ad Hoc Interagency Group on Counterinsurgency, “Report on Guatemala.” June 12, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL. Page 5.

⁶⁵² The following information comes from the NBC program ‘The Science of Spying’ which aired on May 4, 1965. The program can be viewed on Youtube or downloaded for free from the National Archives: <https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.614513>

Editorial bias against US policy in Guatemala went undisguised. The program featured interviews with major figures such as Allen Dulles, former CIA chief Richard Bissell, and even exiled former president Miguel Ydigoras. The longest portion of the Guatemalan segment, however, was reserved for an extensive interview with Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, the rebel officer leading the MR-13 guerrilla front. On American national television, Yon Sosa pleaded his case for revolution. He condemned the US-backed military-government and declared that the Alliance for Progress “was inspired by good intentions, but it was too late”. When his interviewer confronted Yon Sosa with accusations of terrorism, the rebel commander responded that such actions were necessary retaliation against soldiers who were committing atrocities in the countryside, including torture, rape, and massacres. Likewise, Yon Sosa claimed that his forces must also attack US officials because they enforced interventionist policy in Guatemala and acted as an occupying force. Moreover, he denied any Cuban involvement with his movement. Clean-shaven and considerate, Yon Sosa’s performance in the interview gave the impression of a reasonable man put in unreasonable circumstances. He was not the bearded, vagabond guerrilla fighter that the Cuban Revolution had impressed upon the American consciousness. Instead, it was the United States and its endorsement of dictatorship that appeared as the real villain of the piece.

The unabated guerrilla attacks and unflattering prime-time television program reflected poorly on Ambassador John Bell’s judgement and ability to perform his duties. Bell’s name appeared on fewer diplomatic cables as other embassy members took on correspondence with Washington that the ambassador formerly monopolized. The First Secretary of the Embassy, John Dreyfuss, began composing the monthly guerrilla reports,

among other important communiques. When Colonel Peralta gave an impromptu press conference on the issue of subversion, First Secretary Dreyfuss reported that the Guatemalan head-of-state dismissed the guerrillas as mere bandits and attempted to blame recent unrest on a plot concocted by the exiled-president Miguel Ydigoras and his nationally despised crony, Roberto Alejos.⁶⁵³ When the State Department responded to Peralta's flippant disregard of the guerrilla threat by demanding the embassy put more pressure on the Guatemalan government to accept US counterinsurgency support and public safety recommendations, Ambassador Bell only managed to muster an unhelpful reply: he would continue put forth these arguments, "but without expectation [of] much success."⁶⁵⁴ It seemed the American ambassador, who had just years before upended Guatemalan democracy in the name of anticommunism, gave up once a genuine communist movement gained a foothold.

A few weeks after Peralta's press event and Bell's unenthusiastic response, the FAR assassinated the Deputy Minister of Defense, Colonel Ernesto Molina Arreaga.⁶⁵⁵ Four days later, on May 29, FAR hitmen nearly succeeded in assassinating Colonel Peralta himself at the inauguration ceremony of the Central American Industrial Fair, but the CIA and G-2 (Guatemala's intelligence service) narrowly managed to uncover the

⁶⁵³ John Dreyfuss. "Peralta Discusses Subversion in Press Conference." May 12, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. Subject-Numeric Files, 1967-69. Box 2253, National Archives. page 2.

⁶⁵⁴ John Bell. "Deptel 658." May 25, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 1, box 54. LBJL. 1-2

⁶⁵⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "Establishment of Guerrilla Headquarters in Guatemala City; Plans for the Assassination of Guatemalan Officials and for Action against U.S. Citizens." June 29, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL. 2.

plot the day before the event took place.⁶⁵⁶ Seven bombs detonated throughout Guatemala City on June 7, with two blasting the residences of the Brazilian and Nicaraguan ambassadors. The FAR targeted these diplomats after their home countries sent troops to support the United States invasion in the Dominican Republic, allowing the intervention to operate within the parameters set by the Organization of American States.⁶⁵⁷ These attacks, and the accompanying social instability, forced the Peralta government to act and on June 9, the Constituent Assembly finally scheduled the Guatemala's return to constitutional rule. The Assembly announced that by September 15, it would enact the new constitution. Moreover, the Peralta regime would finally allow a convocation for congressional and presidential elections on October 1, with elections to follow within six months of ceremony. From these elections, a new Congress would assemble on June 1, followed by the inauguration of a new president and vice president on July 1, 1966. For nearly two years, Washington urged Peralta to set an itinerary for the return to constitutionality, but it was domestic pressure created by relentless FAR attacks within Guatemala City that forced the colonel finally to commit to definitive dates. Democracy, in some form or fashion, would return to Guatemala.

The announcement by the Constituent Assembly pleased the Johnson administration, and US officials believed it would help reduce opposition to the Peralta regime, but Guatemala's problems were far from solved. The sharp escalation of guerrilla activity in Guatemala required the attention of multiple US military, diplomatic, and

⁶⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, "Purported Guerrilla Plot to Assassinate Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia, Chief of Guatemalan Government on 29 May", May 28, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1. Box 54. LBJL.

⁶⁵⁷ Latin American Ad Hoc Interagency Group on Counterinsurgency, "Report on Guatemala." 5.

intelligence organs that coalesced into the Latin American Ad Hoc Interagency Group on Counterinsurgency. This diverse body compiled a report detailing the challenges the Guatemalan government faced along with recommendations on how they might be addressed. The Interagency Group concluded that the “Guatemalan military forces have sufficient training and equipment to counter isolated hit-and-run raids by guerrillas in rural areas” and the ongoing insurgent “activities will not in themselves cause the overthrow of the Peralta government if there is no major deterioration of the political and economic situation.”⁶⁵⁸ Economic and political stability, however, could not be found in Peralta’s Guatemala.

The root of the Guatemalan government’s problems, according to the Interagency Group, was the inability of its leadership to take decisive action. “Indecision in the political field has been matched by indecision in the business of government,” the report concluded.⁶⁵⁹ Peralta’s government had stalled Guatemala’s return to constitutionality until terror gripped the capital. All major USAID loans for developmental projects, excepting Civic Action, went unused as US representatives found themselves “unable to penetrate the suspicion and apathy of Guatemalan officials [to] complete negotiations on these loans.”⁶⁶⁰ Colonel Peralta undoubtedly desired to project the image of a nationalist dedicated to Guatemalan sovereignty and wanted to avoid being viewed as a Yankee puppet, but his government’s resistance to international financial institutions such as the Export-Import Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank caused US policymakers

⁶⁵⁸ Latin American Ad Hoc Interagency Group on Counterinsurgency, “Report on Guatemala.” 5,6.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid. 2

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid. 3.

to conclude that the “lack of action in the economic field fundamentally results from the unwillingness or inability on the part of some members of the government to make effective decisions.”⁶⁶¹

The military regime displayed similar lethargy in its internal defense. The Army had initially proved reluctant to crush an insurgency led by men from their own ranks, and as a result, their former comrades had built a powerful revolutionary movement. Police forces, a crucial component of counterinsurgency strategy, remained underutilized, outdated, and managed by Peralta loyalists instead of professionals with experience and training. Bafflingly unmovable, Peralta’s military government would not even respond to Washington’s offers to increase assistance to Guatemala’s police. That a country helmed by its Minister of Defense and his subordinate ranking-officers failed to deliver political and economic stability is unsurprising, but the military government’s reluctance to accept the United States’ help in combating communist insurgents perplexed policymakers in Washington. The Johnson administration soon determined that US interests would be best served if Kennedy’s colonel-president relinquished his hold over Guatemala.

Following the unflattering report by the Interagency Group, the CIA uncovered that the MR-13 had transferred its headquarters to Guatemala City. Peralta’s government had failed to combat the wave of urban terror, and the insurgent group planned to press the attack with increased assassinations, kidnappings, hit-and-run shootouts, and bombings. The American Embassy reported a series of anonymous threatening phone calls to US personnel, and the CIA revealed, “the guerrillas have a complete list of United States citizens currently residing in Guatemala. The guerrillas will take action

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

against these persons as soon as the 13 November Movement gives the signal for the initiation of hostilities.⁶⁶² By encouraging military rule as a ward against communism in Guatemala, the United States gave life to a leftist insurgency that targeted American citizens.

When Colonel Peralta seized power to prevent Juan Jose Arévalo from campaigning for the Guatemalan presidency, John Bell basked in a mission accomplished. In the wake of the military takeover, his superiors in the State Department charged Ambassador Bell with a new mission: persuading Peralta to avoid personal dictatorship and restore a constitutional, representative government. For nearly two years, he failed to achieve his directive while excusing the authoritarian government he had helped to bring to power. When Peralta relented at last, in the face of domestic unrest and urban terrorism, it was hardly a victory for the American ambassador. No official reprimand of Bell has surfaced in the available archival records, but it seems clear that the ambassador understood he was no longer trusted in the Johnson administration. His dwindling correspondence with Washington officials lacked the strength of conviction that formerly characterized his assessments of the situation in Guatemala. He had played a major role in convincing President Kennedy to allow Peralta to seize power, but his incessant promotion of the regime and his refusal to take the insurgency seriously became a liability for the Johnson administration's approach in Guatemala.

⁶⁶² US Embassy in Guatemala Telegram, June 17, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL ; Central Intelligence Agency, "Establishment of Guerrilla Headquarters in Guatemalan City; Plans for the Assassination of Guatemalan officials and for Action Against U.S. Citizens." June 29, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL. Page 3.

The reasons why John Bell relinquished his ambassadorship are not explicit in official documentation, but several factors likely contributed to his decision to leave what he described in later interviews as “a small, not particularly important country.”⁶⁶³ From his own account, Bell claimed he “could have stayed in Guatemala longer, but I declined” for personal reasons. Chief of these unstated reasons must have been a degree of fear for his personal safety, as the US Embassy seemed like a prime target in the warzone of Guatemala City.⁶⁶⁴ After a lifetime of government service, Bell’s career also must have been an important component of this decision. Clearly, his achievements as ambassador were rapidly being overshadowed by the crises that characterized the majority of his time in office. His greatest accomplishment as ambassador—blocking the return of Arévalo by facilitating the military’s seizure of power—appeared to have backfired, and now Guatemala faced the threat of Red Revolution. As a result, the Kennedy-appointed, self-declared “State Department man” butted heads with his superiors whose influence over foreign policy increased under Johnson. Seeking self-preservation, Bell likely left his ambassadorial post before an injunction, or a bullet, terminated his tenure.

John Bell departed for his new position in Florida as a political advisor to United States Strike Command (STRIKECOM/STRICOM), the integrated command structure of the strategic assets and doctrines of the Army, Navy and Air Force. His replacement at the US embassy, John Gordon Mein, swore his oath of office on September 3, 1965 and came to a country in chaos. A lifelong foreign-service officer whose career mirrored his predecessor in many ways, Mein proved to be as dogmatically anticommunist as Bell, but

⁶⁶³ Lowrie interview with John Bell.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

more shrewd. Moreover, he had no personal attachment to the Peralta regime, making him a much more flexible diplomat. Ambassador Mein oversaw a turning of the tide in Guatemala during his service, but the problems that arose from the United States' devotion to the country's military officer class overrode the appearance of progress. Whereas Bell managed to escape Guatemala with his life intact, John Gordon Mein would not be so fortunate.

* * *

Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia's government demonstrated that the United States could empower strongmen, but not necessarily control them. The small, impoverished country had displayed the United States capacity to wage the Cold War in 1954 by toppling Arbenz, but Guatemala had not transformed into the "showcase for democracy" promised by American coup-plotters. The United States enjoyed a brief window of overwhelming influence over the Guatemalan government for a time, but this eroded quickly as nationalists across the political spectrum resisted Yankee intervention. His seizure of power having received the blessing of the Kennedy administration, Colonel Peralta exposed the limits of US power, even as his intransigence threatened the economic, political, and social stability of the state he commanded. Washington's attempts to influence, persuade, or coerce Peralta usually failed. American officials, especially Ambassador Bell, discovered they had little leverage over the unconstitutional, dictatorial regime because of their complicity in its rise to power. Alliance for Progress programs, to the degree they were permitted, became a tool Peralta wielded to reward loyal subordinates and amplify the control the military had over civil society. Infrastructure, education, public health, and national culture all came into the purview of

the Guatemalan security forces. Expanding its dominance into the political realm, Peralta successfully created the PID, lending legitimacy to the military's role as arbiter in elections. Colonel Peralta eventually agreed to give up his personal powers and permitted elections, but the rule of the Guatemalan Armed Forces remained unassailable. Peralta completed Guatemala's transition from a constitutional, democratic republic to an authoritarian military dictatorship, and the armed forces stood ready to exterminate its enemies with impunity.

CHAPTER V: COUNTERINSURGENCY STATE

The Culmination of the Partnership between the United States and Guatemalan Armed Forces

By 1965, the Guatemalan military and its patron, the United States, faced an armed communist-inspired opposition that challenged the legitimacy of both the government and the Pan-American system. After sending waves of advisors, trainers, and millions of dollars into the country, the United States and Guatemala jointly launched *Operación Limpieza* in 1966, which turned the tide against guerrilla forces and completed Guatemala's transformation into a counterinsurgency state.⁶⁶⁵ The first half of the 1960s had seen little improvement to the Guatemalan economy and although economic production marginally increased as the decade continued, Alliance for Progress programs fell short of improving the lives of most Guatemalans. The Guatemalan economy expanded during the latter years of the Alliance for Progress, but industrial diversification and the influx of private investment benefitted a narrow few. Moreover, enormous sums of foreign aid funneled into Guatemalan military and the pockets of its highest officers.⁶⁶⁶ The uneven economic circumstances, paired with the evaporation of civil liberties, inspired many Guatemalans to sympathize, and even join, the growing insurgent groups.

By the end of 1963, the insurgency began to pose a serious threat to the regime due to Peralta's initial inaction. The revolutionary movement, however, lacked the unity,

⁶⁶⁵ Greg Grandin goes as far as saying "Operation Cleanup marked a decisive shift in the radicalization of the continent." :Greg Grandin. *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 74.

⁶⁶⁶ Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991.) 59.

armaments, and organization to match Central America's most powerful military backed by training, intelligence, and hardware provided by the United States. The unlikely election of Julio César Méndez Montenegro, the progressive leader of the *Partido Revolucionario*, promised to usher in the "Third Government of the Guatemalan Revolution." Instead, it led to the division and conquest of the oppositionist left by the United States, the Guatemalan military, and the right-wing death-squads created through their collaboration. Abiding by their U.S. counterinsurgency training, these death-squads publicly sewed terror by disappearing activists, intellectuals, and political leaders whose names they publicly posted "kill lists". The physical and psychological toll of these terror tactics isolated the various insurgent groups and dried up recruitment. Once fully unleashed, the blood-fueled counterinsurgency forces could not be contained. Even the US State Department grew concerned. In 1967, the US embassy warned Secretary of State Dean Rusk that the Guatemalan counterinsurgency program was "running wild," and that their excessively violent actions were beyond the control of the United States and the civilians nominally in charge of the Guatemalan government.⁶⁶⁷ Although the military still held the reins of the state during Méndez Montenegro's presidency, chaos ruled in Guatemala.

Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, "the Butcher of Zacapa," marshaled the anarchic bloodletting that consumed Guatemala into a coherent counterinsurgency strategy of unprecedented, organized brutality. Colonel Arana received considerable U.S. assistance in his campaign that incorporated death-squads into the formal military apparatus; systematically terrorized civilians through rape, torture, and forced disappearance; and

⁶⁶⁷ Thomas Hughes. "Guatemala: Counter-Insurgency Running Wild?" October 3, 1967. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL. Page 2.

razed entire communities to the ground.⁶⁶⁸ The colonel's savage stewardship over the province of Zacapa, the center of the rebellion, dealt a mortal wound to the insurgency, and fellow commanders emulated his methods across the nation. By 1968, the rebels were no longer a threat to the Guatemalan counterinsurgency state. Two years later, the Butcher became the President.

The first decade of Guatemala's long civil conflict introduced new, frightening elements to waging the Cold War in Latin America. Under the banner of anticommunism, the Guatemalan military used their hold on the power of the state to pursue a relentless witch-hunt for subversive threats. Given a massive technological and financial edge over the insurgents by the United States, the Guatemalan military forwent the responsibilities of governance and pursued an unbridled, nationwide massacre of its own population. To make matters worse, the defeat of the insurgency through mass-murder and state-terror legitimized the tactics in the eyes of the military and the oligarchy. The Guatemalan experience during the Alliance for Progress debuted several nefarious practices that would become common in Cold War Latin America: paramilitary death-squads, reciprocal terror, and forced disappearance originated from the US-Guatemalan counterinsurgency efforts. The Eisenhower administration had promised to transform Guatemala into a "showcase for democracy," but under the Alliance for Progress of Kennedy and Johnson, the country instead became a "laboratory for counterinsurgency."⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁸ Grandin. *The Last Colonial Massacre*. 88

⁶⁶⁹ The phrase "laboratory for counterinsurgency" has been used by several scholars to describe Cold War Guatemala. It most often appeared in the works of Susanne Jonas. Many authors writing on the subject who have used Jonas' extensive research have also adopted the phrase.

This chapter posits that the most significant accomplishment of the Alliance for Progress era in Guatemala was transforming the country into a counterinsurgency state. The evidence presented here reveals that the military high command successfully retained power over the state even after Peralta's regime permitted the left-leaning reformer, Julio César Méndez Montenegro, to take the office of the presidency after his electoral victory. The preservation of the Guatemalan military's authority over matters of state directly resulted from the policies of the Kennedy administration. The new US ambassador, John Gordon Mein, helped the Johnson administration fulfill some of the promises of the Alliance for Progress: the Guatemalan economy expanded, constitutionality and democracy returned, and the threat from the communist-led insurgency disintegrated. The legacy of Kennedy's decision to accept military rule after the 1963 coup, however, overshadowed these nominal accomplishments. Removed from civilian oversight, the leaders of the Guatemalan security forces more readily embraced assistance from the United States in their efforts to destroy the revolutionary movement. The revitalized partnership between the US and the Guatemalan military resulted in a counterinsurgency campaign of unprecedented barbarity, as highly-trained specialist fought alongside partisan death-squads to sow terror and execute anyone who might aid the guerrilla fighters. These methods succeeded in tamping down the revolutionary movement, but at an enormous cost. By the end of the Alliance for Progress era, assassins targeted American officials, commanding officers employed terrorism to control the ballot box, and the military had killed ten-thousand Guatemalans. The exterminationist tactics used in the counterinsurgency campaign in the final years of the Alliance for Progress served as a blueprint for the Guatemalan Armed Forces genocide against the Maya in the 1980s.

Preserving the Military Dictatorship: The US and Guatemalan Military Prepare for Elections

As the guerrilla movements gained more recruits and continued to challenge security forces, Peralta's dictatorship began to appear unsustainable. American officials, including the new ambassador John Gordon Mein, grew tired of Peralta's resistance and strongly advocated for the return of an elected government. Sensing his reign neared its end, Peralta altered election rules and increased collaboration with US security advisers in order to maintain the military's grip on power after he left office. If a candidate not endorsed by the military should take control of the presidency, Peralta's efforts ensured that the Guatemalan Armed Forces would remain the real power in Guatemala.

John Bell's departure from the American embassy offered an opportunity for a change in diplomatic discourse, but the legacy of Kennedy and his ambassador helped ensure that the Guatemalan military retained their control over the state. Though their approaches as ambassador to Guatemala somewhat differed, John Gordon Mein's career shared more similarities with that of his predecessor than differences. Born on September 10, 1913 in Cadiz Kentucky, Mein remained in his home state until he completed his bachelor's degree from Georgetown College.⁶⁷⁰ Mein left Kentucky to attend George Washington University where, like Bell, he earned a law degree. The careers of both men within the State Department began with service during the Second World War. While Bell remained in the United States for the duration of the war and his experience abroad

⁶⁷⁰ Department of State, "John G. Mein Sworn in as United States Ambassador to Guatemala." September 3, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, LBJL

was predominantly in Europe, Mein's assignments were more geographically diverse. After being appointed to the Foreign Service in 1942, Mein served in Rome, Oslo, Jakarta, and Manila. In 1953, Mein attended the National War College—five years after John Bell left the same institution—and gained considerable experience in international crisis management.⁶⁷¹

Mein continued to build on his career in the State Department in Washington D.C. After leaving the National War College, he served as the Director of the Office of Southwest Pacific Affairs from 1957 to 1963 because of his experience in Indonesia and the Philippines. During this period, the State Department awarded Mein the Meritorious Service Award for his diplomatic work in Indonesia.⁶⁷² Seeking greater opportunity and prestige abroad, John Mein returned to the international scene and accepted a position as Deputy Chief of Mission of the US embassy in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Mein's entry position into Latin American foreign policy lasted for five years, and his efforts in Brazil afforded him the opportunity to advance his career to the ambassadorship of Guatemala.

By mid-1965, Ambassador John Bell was ready to leave Guatemala. He had been an integral part of instating an unelected military regime in the hopes that it would quell the potential for communist revolution. Instead, the forfeiture of elections, the exile of both a sitting constitutional president and a former president attempting to return to office, and the military seizure of power transformed an isolated group of fewer than two hundred rebellious officers into a widespread insurgency. The deteriorating situation in Guatemala was proving to be an unmanageable mess, and Bell shared considerable

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

responsibility for partnering US interests with the leaders of the Guatemalan military.

When John Bell became ambassador in 1962, his first evaluation stated that there was no credible threat to the security of the Guatemalan government; when he left his post three years later, a civil war waged through terror tactics embroiled the country.⁶⁷³

Sworn in September 3, 1965, Ambassador Mein inherited an unenviable situation. The Peralta regime was losing its few, key civilian supporters within the Guatemalan business community as the Guatemalan state and military became increasingly indistinguishable. President Peralta original promise to restore constitutionality through free elections by March of 1965 had passed, which cast considerable uncertainty on the true intentions of regime. While the Peralta government proved less prone to corruption than previous administrations, it failed to take advantage of large loans offered by USAID and the Export-Import bank designated for social programs and economic diversification.⁶⁷⁴ The stagnation in government investment exacerbated Guatemala's perpetual poverty problems and the sprawling slums that surrounded Guatemala City and Puerto Barrios became a rich recruiting ground for antigovernment conspirators of all political stripes. Peralta, like his predecessor Ydigoras, had become increasingly isolated from both Guatemalan elites and the common people as his administration became more concerned with preservation than governance.

Ambassador Mein quickly grasped that the worsening conditions in Guatemala required a response that the military alone could not provide. He postulated that the FAR

⁶⁷³ John O. Bell. "[Military Assistance Program Delivery for Guatemala]." February 10, 1962. DNSA: Guatemala and the US, Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives. page 1.

⁶⁷⁴ Latin American Ad Hoc Interagency Group on Counterinsurgency. "Report on Guatemala". June 2, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Vol. 1, Box 54, LBJL. pages 2-3.

used terror tactics to provoke an overreaction on the part of the military government and that state-terrorism, the suspension of constitutional guarantees, and the instatement of a permanent military dictatorship would arouse popular resistance and discredit the democratic process.⁶⁷⁵ Convinced that the Guatemalan government balanced on a razor's edge between military dictatorship and communist revolution, Mein believed that the coming election was not only necessary, but would determine the fate of the Central American republic.

Colonel Peralta's regime also seemed to realize it could no longer remain indolent in combatting the insurgency. In August 1964, Peralta created a special Presidential Intelligence Agency that served as a coordinated communications hub that shared intelligence between the National Police, the military-command, the National Palace staff, and a variety of security forces throughout the country.⁶⁷⁶ He also allowed US advisers to oversee aspects of the new intelligence apparatus and accepted financial support for the project. Formerly unwilling to make use of the police personnel trained under the USAID Public Safety Program, Peralta began to modify and expand domestic security forces. Overhauling the rural military police, the *Policía Militar Ambulante* (PMA) reorganized into a thousand-man regiment tasked with protecting "owners or administrators of estates, haciendas, agricultural lands, forests and all rural properties" by eliminating "all activity that tends to inflame passions among the peasant masses or in the rural communities and, when necessary, repress through legitimate means any disorder

⁶⁷⁵ John G. Mein. "Reactions to Increased Terrorist Activity." (November 19, 1965, DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Records of the Agency for International Development, Record Group 286, Box 66, National Archives. page 3.

⁶⁷⁶ Jennifer Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy*. (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1998) 157.

that should occur.”⁶⁷⁷ Additionally, in June 1965, Peralta formed an elite, urban counterinsurgency unit, *Comando Seis*, to hunt down subversives within the capital. A precursor to the death-squads that would soon appear throughout Guatemala, foreign policy expert Michael McClintock notes that *Comando Seis* employed reprehensible methods such as torture, summary execution, and forced-disappearance in their mission to eliminate subversives.⁶⁷⁸ This black-ops squad received its training, armaments, and funding from USAID’s Public Safety Program. The formation of these units and the increased cooperation with the United States foreshadowed the major counterinsurgency offensive soon to come: *Operación Limpieza* (Operation Cleanup).

The military regime also bolstered its public image by finally issuing the new Constitution on September 15, 1965. Although the document restored many of the basic civil liberties, it had little practical effect during the sixteen-month state of siege that Peralta had decreed in February. Strict provisions outlawing communism effectively nullified the ability of the radical left to participate in national politics, but this was not enough to ensure that the military’s political party, *Partido Institucional Democrático* (PID), could easily usher its chosen candidate into *La Casa Crema*. McClintock’s research reveals that the PID attempted to control the number of participants in future elections through constitutional means. The Constitution of 1965, drafted by the Peralta regime, stipulated that political parties must provide the electoral tribunal with a list of a minimum of fifty-thousand supporters in order to register for elections.⁶⁷⁹ This had the

⁶⁷⁷ James Dunkerly, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America*. (Verso: London, 1988). 446

⁶⁷⁸ Michael McClintock, *The American Connection: Volume Two – State Terror and Popular Resistance in Guatemala*. (Zed Books Ltd.: London, 1985) 76.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

dual-effect of blocking smaller, moderate and left-leaning parties like the Christian Democrats while coercing the remnants of the moribund MDN and *Redencion* parties of the right to consolidate into the PID. Moreover, the membership lists submitted by political parties in order to register provided the military-government with ample information should the need arise to discredit or dismantle any opposition movement.

With these new constitutional stipulations, only the three major parties that had previously participated in the constituent assembly election qualified to run a candidate for the Guatemalan presidency. The PID and MLN remained uneasy allies as factions within the political right vied for the government's endorsement of their candidate. The *Partido Revolucionario* (PR) had detached from its unnatural coupling with the PID, and clearly intended to run its longtime leader, Mario Méndez Montenegro in the presidential race. Méndez Montenegro had been a fixture in Guatemalan politics since the Arévalo administration, and had narrowly survived the counterrevolution because he had resigned from the revolutionary government in 1949 to protest its involvement with the assassination of Defense Minister Francisco Arana. Having secured the legitimacy of the PR by obeying Peralta's directives during the constituent assembly elections, Mario Méndez Montenegro prepared to ride the wave of domestic discontent into the presidential palace.⁶⁸⁰

On October 31, 1965, Mario Méndez Montenegro was found dead in his home with a gunshot wound to the head. The government ruled the death a suicide, but his family refused the official explanation. His brother, Julio César Méndez Montenegro declared the death a "political murder" carried out by a "rightist militarist cabal" seeking

⁶⁸⁰ The constituent assembly election was covered in the previous chapter.

control over the Guatemalan government.⁶⁸¹ Within a few days, Julio replaced his brother as the leader of the *Partido Revolucionario*, and he called for a “united national front of all reformist/leftist groupings under PR leadership.”⁶⁸² If Julio’s claim that his brother’s death resulted from a rightist conspiracy—the now widely accepted explanation—was true, the assassins had made a major miscalculation. The martyrdom of Mario Méndez Montenegro brought together moderate and leftist Guatemalans while the political right divided into warring camps over selecting a presidential candidate.

Two colonels competed for conservative voters and the official endorsement of the military government. Peralta personally favored Colonel Juan de Dios Aguilar, a loyal subordinate who, unfortunately for the PID, was a relative unknown in the country and had few supporters outside of Peralta’s clique within the military.⁶⁸³ The far-right MLN selected Miguel Angel Ponciano, the former Armed Forces Chief of Staff who served under both Colonel Peralta and the party’s progenitor, President Carlos Castillo Armas—the “Liberator” of the 1954 coup. The ambitions and rivalries of MLN and PID leaders made compromise on a single presidential candidate appear impossible. The CIA and State Department believed that Ponciano and his acolytes in the MLN plotted to overthrow Peralta if he could not secure their electoral victory.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸¹ John Mein, “Death of Mario Méndez Montenegro: Consequences.” November 5, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives. Pages 1-2.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.* 2.

⁶⁸³ Sherman Kent, “Guatemala’s Dilemma.” January 18, 1966. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 2. Box 54. LBJL.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The Johnson administration faced a similar problem of indecision when it came to determining which presidential candidate would best serve US interests. Each presidential contender came with their share of potential pitfalls. Due to his lack of popular support, if Colonel Aguilar could secure a PID victory, it would likely be through illegitimate means. Both the MLN and all of the political left would oppose his presidency, creating further instability. If the MLN returned *liberacionistas* to power through Colonel Miguel Ponciano's presidency, political polarization would almost certainly increase under an extreme right-wing government and Alliance for Progress developmental initiatives would likely fall by the wayside. Surprisingly, Washington did not outright oppose Julio César Méndez Montenegro and the *Partido Revolucionario*. Initially, some US officials feared that Méndez Montenegro would take a sharp turn to the left and "in [the] spirit [of] anguish and revenge he may be inclined" to reach out to the FAR and other "leftist extremists."⁶⁸⁵ Subsequent reports, however, described Méndez Montenegro as "brilliant," "popular," and a "safe" candidate for the interests of the United States.⁶⁸⁶ The State Department and its emissaries did not view Méndez Montenegro with the degree of suspicion and hostility that they had displayed toward Arévalo. In order to survive, US officials probably surmised that Méndez Montenegro would have to rely on his relationship with Washington. Desperate for protection against his own army, the civilian president of Guatemala could not rebuff the encroachments of

⁶⁸⁵ John Mein, "Death of Mario Méndez Montenegro: Consequences." Page 1,3.

⁶⁸⁶ John Mein, "Embassy Telegram 258" November 3, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59. Records of the Department of State. Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives. 1-2.; Thomas L. Hughes, "The Situation in Guatemala." November 26, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the United States. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research. 1.

the United States and its emissaries as General Ydigoras and Colonel Peralta had done for years.

Whereas Ambassador Bell's tireless advocacy for the Guatemalan military made him complicit in elimination of elections, the US embassy under the direction of John Gordon Mein defended democracy in Guatemala. The Johnson administration and its new ambassador, however, did not push for presidential elections in Guatemala purely from a position of altruism. This softened approach can be partially explained by the somewhat diminished threat from the Cuban Revolution. The Johnson administration still feared the establishment of another communist beachhead in Latin America and believed that Cuban infiltrators lurked behind every antigovernment action in Guatemala. In 1965, Che Guevara continued to make good on his promise to export revolution with appearances in Africa and Latin America. The call for communist revolution remained pervasive, but the United States feverous obsession with Cuban infiltration had marginally abated. Castro's reputation among some Latin American revolutionaries, including Commander Yon Sosa, had become slightly tarnished because of his relationship with the Soviet Union following the Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, Johnson's invasion of the Dominican Republic reaffirmed that the United States would not hesitate to stage massive military interventions to prevent potentially adverse leftist governments from coming to power. Such actions would not be necessary in Guatemala if the United States could count on a powerful military to crush communists and other opposition movements. With Colonel Peralta's compliance, US officials and Guatemalan officers could jointly build the counterinsurgency apparatus; a pliant civilian president could provide these actions with the cover of democratic legitimacy.

Despite Peralta's sudden, enthusiastic embrace of US security assistance, Guatemalan counterinsurgency forces remained in a nascent state. Military engagements in the eastern countryside had reached a stalemate, but Guatemala City remained under constant threat as the insurgency shifted to urban terrorism. FAR agents kidnapping wealthy Guatemalan citizens for ransom became an endemic problem, and the Peralta regime clamped down on the media to prevent the public from learning of the extent of the guerrillas' urban operations.⁶⁸⁷ Ambassador Mein remarked, "Recently there has been [a] great acceleration [of] dissatisfaction [as a] result of terrorist kidnapping tactics which has sown remarkably deep fear in business and wealthy sectors."⁶⁸⁸ Obeying the maxim of guerrilla warfare of attacking where the enemy is weak, the FAR's targeted assault on Guatemala's economic elites threatened to unravel the military's alliance with its most important civilian supporters.

Describing the symbiotic relationship between the economic and military elites of 1960s Guatemala, political scientist Jerry Weaver argues that, "by associating and dealing with the military government, the [economic] notables brought legitimacy to the de facto regime. At the same time, they provided the government much needed expertise: managerial skills, professional training, technical competence, and perhaps most importantly, experience in dealing with civilians."⁶⁸⁹ When the military-state failed to reciprocate by providing these economic elites with protection, they began to look for

⁶⁸⁷ John G. Mein. "Reaction to Increased Terrorist Activity." November 19, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Box 66. National Archives. 2.

⁶⁸⁸ John G. Mein to Department of State, "Embassy Telegram 317" November 24, 1965. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54. LBJL. Page 1

⁶⁸⁹ Jerry Weaver, "The Military Elite and Political Control in Guatemala, 1963-1966." Social Science Quarterly. Vol. 50, No. 1, June 1969. Page 131.

alternatives. Sensing an opportunity, the MLN provided a solution that would attract more adherents to their far-right party. With the Peralta government appearing incapable of protecting its most valued citizens, the MLN decided to reply to the FAR's political violence in kind. Reports from Ambassador Mein mentioned that the Peralta government might be quietly encouraging the "formation of vigilante-type 'security committees' composed of armed private citizens united for their own protection against terrorist threats" as early as November 1965.⁶⁹⁰ Guided by the practice of "counter-terror," paramilitary death-squads entered into Guatemala's political conflagration.⁶⁹¹

Seeking counterinsurgency expertise, Ambassador Mein requested the assistance of John Longan from USAID's Office of Public Safety. A veteran security adviser, Longan had helped set up the Guatemalan National Police in 1957 during the end of Castillo Armas' presidency. His return eight years later launched an era of atrocity in Guatemala. Focused particularly on Guatemalan police agencies, Longan became the architect of the nerve center of counterinsurgency operations, dubbed "The Box" that coordinated the intelligence agencies of the various security forces and the military high-command. He also orchestrated *Operación Limpieza* (Operation Cleanup), a concerted campaign conducted against the insurgents by special police units and the Army.⁶⁹²

Additionally, Longan hand-picked Colonel Rafael Arriaga Bosque to command

⁶⁹⁰ Mein, "Reactions to Increased Terrorist Activity" page 4.

⁶⁹¹ The term "counter-terror" is used by US and Guatemalan officials during the 1960s to signify the use of reciprocal terrorism and should not be conflated with the contemporary use of the term (although there are several similarities in the two strategies). The death-squads were meant to be a right-wing analogue to the guerrilla *foco* and adopted parallel and countervailing tactics—namely, torture, displaying mutilated corpses of their victims, systemic rape, 'scorched-earth' razing of villages, and forced disappearance.

⁶⁹² The primary police agencies used in Operation Cleanup were the Judicial Police and the National Police which were undergoing extensive counterinsurgency training with US advisers. Found in: Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*. 97

Operación Limpieza. Colonel Arriaga subsequently used his success in *Operación Limpieza* as a springboard into the position of Minister of Defense, where he oversaw the formal implementation of paramilitary death-squads as an integral part of US-Guatemalan counterinsurgency strategy.

In his landmark study of the Guatemalan Civil War, Greg Grandin compared Longan with the notorious Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, because both men refused to acknowledge the horrors wrought by their policies and justified their actions as part of their job as a “technician” within a vast bureaucracy.⁶⁹³ That Longan later concluded that Guatemalans experienced such terrible violence during the 1960s because “it was inbred in them, and they hate pretty deeply,” suggests that Grandin’s comparison was apt. Before Longan and Colonel Arriaga could launch their offensive against the guerrillas, the Peralta regime and the State Department confronted a conspiracy within the MLN to unseat the Guatemalan head-of-state.

The US embassy, gravely concerned that the situation in Guatemala spiraled toward a coup, once again weighed the possibility of another abrogated electoral contest. The Johnson administration, unlike its predecessors, concluded any non-democratic transfer of power would unduly risk a revolutionary takeover by potentially uniting moderate and leftist Guatemalans with the insurgency. Under-Secretary of State George Ball pressed Ambassador Mein to warn the candidates and the military that Guatemala needed an elected government. While the United States still viewed the armed forces as their most valuable ally in Guatemala, it had not proven especially adept at governance, especially in the economic arena. Under the Johnson administration and the Mann

⁶⁹³ Grandin, 190.

Doctrine, the United States welcomed anticommunist military dictatorships in Latin America as useful allies in the Cold War. In Guatemala, however, Peralta's resistance to economic reform and refusal to make use of international loans concerned corporate interests. Furthermore, prolonging direct military rule would likewise prolong the insurgency—and the political and economic instability that came along with it. In order to improve the investment climate of Guatemala, the Johnson administration believed that a degree of civilian rule had to be restored.

The task of convincing these right-wing rivals initially fell to the ambassador's second-in-command, Viron Vaky. Well-versed in the politics and culture of Latin America, Vaky became Deputy Chief of Mission to Guatemala in 1964 after tours as a Foreign Service officer in Ecuador, Argentina, and Colombia. Meeting first with the MLN presidential candidate, Miguel Ponciano, Vaky stressed that the United States would not accept a coup. Ponciano pleaded ignorance of any plots, but complained that the elections would be a sham; Vaky suggested that he make OAS observation of the elections a campaign issue.⁶⁹⁴ After reading Vaky's report of the meeting, Under-Secretary Ball demanded that Ambassador Mein reiterate Vaky's points in his own meetings with Ponciano and Peralta, but above all, the ambassador needed to make it clear that the United States “would not find it easy to cooperate with a Guatemalan government that was the result of the coup.”⁶⁹⁵

When Ambassador Mein met with Peralta to convey Ball's terms and warn him against a potential coup, the colonel dismissed the allegations of electoral fraud and a

⁶⁹⁴ George W. Ball. “[State Department Reaction to Coup Plots; Directed to Ambassador Mein from Jack Hood Vaughn]”. December 15, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, 1.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

military overthrow as fabrications of the Guatemalan press. Mein avoided advocating observed elections, feeling that it would offend the nationalist sensibilities of Colonel Peralta, but Vaky continued to lobby other candidates, especially Ponciano, to demand OAS monitors to ensure a fair election.⁶⁹⁶ The presidential contenders knew that advocating the presence of the Organization of American States would be seized upon by their rivals as subservience to US interests. Instead, Peralta and the MLN came to an understanding and the threat of a coup subsided. The terms of this compact remain unknown, but the subsequent appointment of scores of MLN leaders to key positions is likely a result of the agreement. Many military leaders who belonged to the MLN, such as the aforementioned Colonel Arriaga and the infamous Colonel Arana, received major promotions, while other MLN partisans joined the ranks of the *comisionados militares*. As covered in the previous chapter, Colonel Peralta had reorganized the *comisionados* into a pervasive intelligence network throughout the country. When the MLN came to dominate the *comisionados*, they used the position to organize, and sometimes personally lead, paramilitary campaigns of genocidal violence in the countryside. The overwhelming majority of these efforts, from the ‘counter-terror’ plans of John Longan, to the formation of MLN death-squads, received some support through Alliance for Progress programs of the United States Agency for International Development.⁶⁹⁷

While the embassy officials maneuvered to prevent presidential rivals from forgoing elections, the Guatemalan military clashed with guerrillas along the Honduran border.

⁶⁹⁶ William Bowlder. “Guatemala Situation”. (National Security Archive, Executive Office of the President, December 21, 1965), 6.

⁶⁹⁷ The bulk of these funds would come through the Public Safety Program, but money earmarked for various Civic Action programs also supported these efforts directly and indirectly.

For months, guerrillas had been aggressively prodding the Guatemalan military, picking off soldiers and stealing supplies and armaments. In response, the military deployed more units to the Izabal department, which borders Honduras, and ordered extensive sweeps of the area. In a bold strike on Los Amates, insurgents assaulted an Army headquarters at the center of town in broad daylight. The guerrillas killed six before withdrawing, but US officials were far more concerned about the ability of FAR units to carry out such an audacious attack despite the deployment of a significant contingent of government troops.⁶⁹⁸ The insurgency still lacked the ability to meet the Guatemalan military head on, but no one could deny it was gathering strength at an alarming pace. The security forces could not outright eliminate the guerrillas, but a moderate, left-leaning reformer in the presidential palace presented a democratic political alternative that undermined the revolutionary movement.

As Peralta's prolonged military rule became untenable, the Defense Minister and his subordinates made preparations to preserve the armed forces' power over the Guatemalan state. Although his regime produced a new constitution to replace the one he had dissolved in his takeover and finally agreed to permit elections, Colonel Peralta reoriented Guatemalan politics to give major advantages to the PID-MLN. His regime altered electoral laws to prevent most political parties from running a candidate. Moreover, Peralta began to permit increased security assistance from the United States. Together, the two countries started to build a potent counterinsurgency machine that introduced terror-tactics as a new weapon against the guerrilla fighters. The new

⁶⁹⁸ John Mein, "Embassy Telegram 321." November 26, 1965. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives.

American ambassador, John Gordon Mein, appeared less hawkish than his predecessor, but his desire to return Guatemala to a democratic, constitutional republic resulted more from the Johnson administration's concern about investment opportunities than any moral compunction. Now working closely with US security advisers, Guatemalan officers and police chiefs acquired more resources for their fight against the insurgency, and in turn positioned themselves to remain the de facto rulers of the country regardless of election results.

A Revolution Divided: The Sundering of Guatemalan Revolutionary Movement

The forces that opposed Colonel Peralta's regime gained considerable ground as Guatemala prepared for elections. At this decisive moment when revolutionary victory seemed possible, the conglomerate of guerrillas, politicians, and activists began to fracture along ideological and strategic lines. These divisions allowed counterinsurgency forces, which were steadily building momentum, the chance to deal punishing blows to the armed opposition and sap their growing strength. Just as Julio Cesar Mendez Montenegro and the *Partido Revolucionario* won the presidency, the Guatemalan military stuck out hard against the insurgency and secured their power over the civilian government.

At the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana, the FAR commander Luis Turcios Lima rejected the legitimacy of the impending Guatemalan presidential contest. Speaking to the assembly of leftist fellow-travelers from around the world, the rebel leader proclaimed, "If we revolutionaries were to participate in these elections, or if we

called upon the people to participate in them by voting for the Revolutionary Party or any of the other opposition parties, we would be giving our backing, our principled support, our revolutionary approval and the support of the masses who believed in us, to people who we know have no scruples, who we know are the accomplices of reaction and imperialism.”⁶⁹⁹ The guerrilla fighters challenged security forces in the countryside and even won some conventional battles. Operations in Guatemala City terrified the urban elite, whose loyalty to the military regime waned as kidnappings, explosions, and murder went unchecked. Revolutionary leaders transformed into mythical figures: “They said of Yon Sosa that he slept in the belly of an alligator.”⁷⁰⁰ Targeted by FAR propaganda, morale among the lower ranks of the security forces dropped as guerrillas scored victories and sowed terror. Yet, even as the insurgency appeared ascendant, ideological differences within the revolutionary forces weakened the movement just as the Guatemalan military-state renewed its counterinsurgency efforts.

A composite of various opposition groups, political division existed within the FAR since the coalition’s inception. Yon Sosa’s MR-13 branch embraced Trotskyism, setting it apart from the FAR early on, and his organization formally broke from the rebel alliance with the First Declaration of the Sierra de Las Minas, published in *Revolucion Socialista*, in February 1965. The rupture occurred because Yon Sosa rejected the practices of the PGT leaders who controlled the political direction of the FAR. The MR-13 commander demanded immediate socialist revolution and armed struggle was the only

⁶⁹⁹ Turcios Lima, quoted in César Montes, “Una Ruptura lógica y necesaria”, translated in Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 68

⁷⁰⁰ Louisa Frank, “Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala.” Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, eds. *Guatemala*. (Berkeley, CA:NACLA, 1974). 184

viable path to achieve it. Moreover, the Declaration claimed that, in addition to the struggle against capitalist imperialism, the MR-13 “has had to fight a political battle against conciliatory, vacillating and reformist tendencies which seek to confine the workers and peasants of the country to the false perspective of the so called ‘democratic-national revolution.’ Those tendencies are embodied especially in the leadership of the PGT.”⁷⁰¹

Although the MR-13 remained allied in spirit to the FAR, it no longer took orders from its leadership committee and stopped coordinating its campaigns with the other guerrilla fronts. Freed from the strictures of the PGT’s leadership, the MR-13 rejected the revolutionary potential of the bourgeoisie and began to focus on the peasantry as the base of its organization. Following the Declaration of the Sierra de las Minas, Commander Turcios Lima hoped to repair the relationship between the revolutionary factions and called upon Yon Sosa, his longtime comrade and former classmate, to come to a unity conference for the FAR. Yon Sosa refused to attend, and Turcios Lima resigned from the MR-13, an organization named after the very revolt he had led just four years earlier. With this seismic break, the first incarnation of the FAR technically dissolved.

Nearly a year later, Turcios Lima waged his own battle with the PGT over the prospect of political compromise. He railed against participating in the Guatemalan presidential elections at the Tricontinental Conference, but his views did not align with the PGT leadership. In the year since Yon Sosa’s break with the FAR, the front under Turcios Lima’s command, *Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra* (FGEI) had also developed its own political outlook and began to exert its influence as it became the largest and most

⁷⁰¹ “Declaration of the Sierra de las Minas” translation reprinted in Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 368.

successful of the guerrilla organizations. Like the MR-13, Turcios Lima's band criticized the PGT's categorization of the national bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class and refused to foster alliances with potentially sympathetic segments of the Guatemalan middle-class. The FAR forces under Turcios Lima also began to look to the peasantry as the core of their movement, but unlike the MR-13, the FGEI prepared for prolonged conflict over immediate revolution.⁷⁰² Despite these differences, the FGEI continued to partner with the PGT and served as the primary armed force of the FAR.

While Turcios Lima condemned the Guatemalan presidential elections from Havana, PGT leaders seized the moment and pushed the governing council of the FAR to support the *Partido Revolucionario* and its presidential candidate, Julio César Méndez Montenegro. Even though he had publicly rejected such a compromise, and his FGEI had voted against the resolution, Turcios Lima accepted their decision upon returning to Guatemala. He later explained his reasoning: "voting for Julio César Méndez Montenegro represents a form of struggle against the arbitrary behavior of the government and also a demonstration to public opinion – in this case, particularly international public opinion – of the total repudiation of the dictatorial regime. Therefore the victory of the candidate of the Revolutionary Party signifies a political victory of the FAR, for the Guatemalan people have through voting expressed their irrepressible desire for changing the system." The guerrilla commander also warned, "however, it is necessary to repeat and stress the point that the guerrillas do not have the slightest doubt about what road to take, for there is only one road. This is by no means the road of elections but the road of armed

⁷⁰² Frank, "Resistance and Repression in Guatemala." 182.

struggle.”⁷⁰³ Regardless of his lukewarm endorsement of elections, the FAR remained deeply divided over candidacy of Méndez Montenegro.

The PGT had good reason to hope that electing Méndez Montenegro could bring positive change and reform to Guatemala. Composed primarily of labor leaders, urban intellectuals and professional politicians, many influential members of the PGT balked at the urban terror tactics employed by the guerrillas. During his campaign, Méndez Montenegro promised to bring an end to the conflict by negotiating with the guerrillas and argued that he was the only candidate who could broker a deal. Favoring a policy of total liquidation, the colonel-candidates of the MLN and PID would not convince the guerrillas to lay down their arms. Before the 1966 election, many of the old-guard communists, respected leaders from the Arévalo-Arbenz decade, returned from exile in an effort to curb the growing violence and militancy of the revolutionary movement and encourage participation in the election. It was a fatal mistake that revealed the military-state had no interest in peace and reconciliation.

* * *

The infighting within the revolutionary movement did not go unnoticed by the diplomatic and security organs of the United States. Already preparing for a major offensive against the guerrillas, US officials saw the rifts in the revolution as a significant opportunity for counterinsurgency efforts. Embassy officials honed in on the vulnerability of Yon Sosa and the MR-13, and believed he could be isolated and destroyed more easily than the FAR. Fidel Castro had only extended an invitation to attend the Tricontinental Conference to Turcios Lima. During the event, Castro

⁷⁰³ Turcios Lima interview by Mario Menendez Rodrigues, June 18, 1966, reprinted in *Global Digest* vol. III, No 10, October 1966: translation of text provided by Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 68.

commended Yon Sosa's bravery and patriotism, but lamented that the commander had fallen under Trotskyist influence. "Fortunately," added Castro, "...the revolutionary movement is being saved...by Major Turcios."⁷⁰⁴ Yon Sosa shot back immediately and publicly by issuing a press release that castigated Castro for "betraying the socialist revolution" through his "total subservience to the Soviet Union" and "has forever lost all authority as a revolutionary leader."⁷⁰⁵ Thereafter, Turcios Lima stated that he believed that the reunification of FAR and MR-13 was impossible.

The US embassy was also aware that segments of the PGT debated whether to continue armed struggle or to reorient to political organization before the elections, although they had not yet learned that the leaders of Guatemala's communist party had already decided to support Méndez Montenegro. If properly handled, the combined efforts of the Guatemalan and United States governments could force a wedge into the existing fractures of the revolutionary movement. Most of the US diplomatic team agreed, however, that prolonging military rule "could drive the FAR and MR-13 together again to continue the armed struggle as one, unified guerrilla organization."⁷⁰⁶

Overburdened by its commitments in Vietnam, the Johnson administration could not afford to repeat the military coups of Eisenhower and Kennedy. Guatemala needed an authentic election, or revolution could consume the country.

The State Department predicted that Méndez Montenegro would be the next Guatemalan president if the election proceeded under normal, legitimate conditions. The

⁷⁰⁴ Edward V. Nef, "Monthly Guerrilla Report, January 1-31." February 16, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives. page 3.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid. 5.

only way the two military officer candidates could win the election was through fraud, a political deal, or both. Individually, they lacked a popular backing, and together they divided the political right. Moreover, Secretary of State Dean Rusk doubted that “either has [the] ability to rally [the] country behind effective program of political, economic, and social reform under [the] Alliance for Progress which Guatemala so desperately needs.”⁷⁰⁷ Peralta’s hand-picked successor, Colonel Aguilar dismissed the prospect of Méndez Montenegro’s electoral victory, leading US officials to worry that the military either planned to control the election, or was dangerously out of touch with the electorate and political climate of the country.

Peralta had lost a valuable ally when John Bell left the ambassadorship. With the arrival of Ambassador Mein, the United States embassy seemed more distant and unfamiliar now that the longstanding and relatively close relationship between John Bell and Colonel Peralta’s inner circle had been severed. Peralta and Bell met frequently, but the Guatemalan head-of-state was reluctant to approach the new ambassador. Perhaps Peralta’s nationalist pride prevented him from appearing as a supplicant before the US embassy, and Ambassador Mein certainly did not have as much incentive for cultivating close ties with the outgoing head-of-state. As the March elections neared, Peralta sent emissaries to request a meeting, an occurrence Ambassador Mein found odd considering they could have easily spoken directly in person or over the phone. While the contents of their meeting went unrecorded, Mein came to Peralta with a clear understanding of the situation. Large segments of the population would refuse to accept the election results if the MLN or PID candidates won. These dissatisfied voters would revolt, and likely join

⁷⁰⁷ Dean Rusk to US Embassy in Guatemala, February 14, 1966. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL. Page 1.

with the guerrillas. Although the American ambassador believed that the Guatemalan security forces would unite in support of the government against any such movement, they were not yet prepared for “an all-out offensive by the guerrillas” combined with popular mass resistance.⁷⁰⁸

In order to prevent the further spread of the insurgency and risk revolution, Mein was determined to convince Peralta to allow free and fair elections. The Johnson administration, consumed by the Vietnam War, hoped that a political opening in Guatemala could prevent a conflict that would require a greater US presence in the country. Ambassador Mein decided he needed to have a “frank discussion” with Peralta to enlighten him to the danger of interfering with the election, but he would also extend an offer of increased assistance. “It seems to me,” Mein mused, “that this is the opportunity we have been waiting [for] and that we should be responsive.”⁷⁰⁹ Faced with a likely electoral defeat and an unrelenting insurgency, Peralta was at his most pliable. If the military could be persuaded to accept a civilian president from the moderate left, then the fragmenting revolution might shatter.

Boosting the confidence of security forces was crucial to persuading their leaders that the presidential election, regardless of the outcome, had to go forward. John Longan, the Public Safety program expert summoned by Ambassador Mein, completed his work in training police and coordinating intelligence by January, 1966. Colonel Arriaga assumed command of the newly formed counterinsurgency police units and began to

⁷⁰⁸ John Mein to State Department, February 14, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files: 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives. page 1-2.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid. 3.

implement Longan's teachings immediately, launching *Operación Limpieza*. Grandin's research reveals that over eighty raids—replete with torture, forced-disappearance, and summary execution—took place before the end of February.⁷¹⁰ The specialist units conducted their operations with support from American advisers from the Office of Public Safety, and likely incorporated CIA agents.⁷¹¹ During these raids, security forces captured several opposition leaders, many of whom were never seen again. At the behest of Colonel Arriaga, the embassy requested that US South Command send additional experts who could further train his police forces in counterinsurgency and riot control.⁷¹² While their exact identity remains concealed, many scholars have suggested that these “experts” were US Special Forces operatives.⁷¹³ Upon entering Guatemala, these specialists came under the employ of the Public Safety program and received funding through USAID. Like the Civic Action programs, the rhetoric of the Alliance for Progress concealed repressive militarization under the guise of keeping the public safe.

On March 5, the day before the presidential election, *Operación Limpieza* effectively decapitated the PGT. Many of the leaders had returned from exile to join their

⁷¹⁰ Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*. 97.

⁷¹¹ Although John Longan was no longer present in Guatemala, officials from the Office of Public Safety remained embedded within major Guatemalan counterinsurgency operations as consultants, advisers, and overseers. The US Army and Navy attaché, along with experts assigned by the CIA were also consulted in various counterinsurgency operations, but a defined list of personnel directly involved in specific operations like Operation Cleanup does not exist for public view.

⁷¹² John Mein, “Embassy Telegram 612.” March 1, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Box 66. National Archives. page 1.

⁷¹³ See Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala* and McClintock, *The American Connection*. Jonas outright states that these experts were Green Berets and claims roughly 1000 of them assisted Guatemalan security forces under the Public Safety Program. McClintock also suggests that they were Green Beret, but refers to the various US military advisor groups that were active in Guatemala under the general identification of “Mobile Training Teams (MTT). Their claims come predominately from articles written by Georgie Ann Geyer for the [Chicago Tribune](#) and [The New York Times](#). Geyer conducted several interviews with guerrilla fighters and their leaders during the 1960s.

comrades in organizing support for Méndez Montenegro and bringing the PR to power in Guatemala. Although they had their differences, as many as thirty representatives of the various oppositionist groups gathered together to celebrate the anticipated electoral victory of a candidate who promised to usher in a third incarnation of the Guatemalan Revolution. Crowding into single-story stucco house in Guatemala City, exiled veterans of the Arévalo era conversed with the new generation of hot-blooded guerrilla fighters. Just before noon, one of the occupants of the house noticed a Judicial Police car, but it was too late. The building was surrounded. Some of the scrambling revolutionaries took to the roof and riddled a police car with machine gun fire while the others fled. The elite police units anticipated this, and tracked the escaping rebels to their safehouses. In a single day, the budding Guatemalan counterinsurgency state swallowed up twenty-eight “communists or communist sympathizers.” Among their number were several prominent leaders: Leonardo Castillo Folores, the secretary general of the National Peasants Federation; “Paco” Amando Granados, commander of a MR-13 *foco*; Victor Manuel Gutierrez Garbin, the head of the PGT; and Carlos Barrillas Sosa, the half-brother of Marco Antonio Yon Sosa. The CIA soon learned that, after three days of undoubtedly painful interrogation sessions, all of the captured dissidents were executed. The Guatemalan government planned to deny any involvement. It would be as if they had simply disappeared.⁷¹⁴

The security services struck a decisive blow against the insurgency, but the spirit of the Guatemalan Revolution prevailed in the 1966 presidential election. Julio César

⁷¹⁴ This recreation of the event is a composite drawn from several accounts, but largely comes from CIA documents. Sources referenced include: Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, 69; Central Intelligence Agency, [Abduction of “28” Activists] March 5, 1966; Central Intelligence Agency, [Execution of the “28” Activists]. March 10, 1966. DNSA: Guatemalan and the US.

Méndez Montenegro became the first civilian President of Guatemala since Arévalo. His victory, a plurality of 44.4% of the vote, resulted from the divided political right.⁷¹⁵ Peralta, and most other military leaders, were shocked by the outcome and delayed congressional ratification until they had assurances that they retained their power over the Guatemalan state. By March 12, Peralta's government informed the State Department that an agreement had been reached. Méndez Montenegro would become president, but there would be no real transfer of power.

During his time in office, President Arévalo remarked that Guatemala effectively had two presidents, and that one held a machine gun against the other. Julio César Méndez Montenegro, claimant to the legacy of the 1944 revolution, embodied his forebear's characterization of a Hostage-President. In order to assume the office he had fairly won in the election, Méndez Montenegro handed over most matters of state to the high-command of the Guatemalan military. The military would be autonomous from the civilian government. It would internally select both the Minister of Defense and the Army Chief of Staff. The interlocked intelligence services created with US support would transfer from the Office of the President to the Army Chief of Staff. Military leadership would assume full command of all counterinsurgency efforts and related programs without interference from the civil government. Furthermore, the government would grant amnesty to all security forces for acts committed in the pursuit of the war against the guerrillas. Ambassador Mein observed that "the provisions seemed to be of doubtful constitutionality since they would in effect limit powers of president as commander in chief of armed forces," but concluded "there must have been a meeting of minds" since

⁷¹⁵ The PID secured 31.7% and the MLN gained 23.9% of the vote. Dunkerly, *Power in the Isthmus*, 448.

the agreement was signed by both parties.⁷¹⁶ Whether or not the ambassador realized it, Méndez Montenegro had no choice but to accept. To reject the military's demands would have certainly cost him the presidency, and likely his life. Four months before his official inauguration ceremony, Méndez Montenegro had already ceded the power of his office to the military command.

The Johnson administration accomplished what Kennedy had refused to consider. The United States had encouraged, even facilitated, the election of a moderate-leftist reformer to the presidency of Guatemala. It seemed the Alliance for Progress's promise to foster democracy might be achievable, and the new administration in Guatemala would be more receptive to other social and economic reforms. Ambassador Mein predicted the unconstitutional deal brokered between the military and the PR would assure a peaceful transition period. Despite the appearance of democratic progress, Méndez Montenegro's electoral triumph came too late for Guatemala. The Guatemalan Armed Forces had always enjoyed a position of power and influence, especially after the 1954 coup, but Colonel Peralta had used his time as head-of-state to ensure that supremacy of the military was virtually unassailable.

The headline on the cover of the military's circular, *Ejército*, read "Mission Complete" as Guatemala returned to a democratically elected government. Accompanying the self-congratulations, a loving biographical article hailed Colonel Peralta as a profoundly democratic officer and citizen who led by setting an example for

⁷¹⁶ John Mein, "Embassy Telegram 675." March 12, 1966. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL. Page 1.

honesty, integrity, and austerity.⁷¹⁷ After “political passions are pacified,” future generations would revere Colonel Peralta as a monumental figure of Guatemalan history for his achievements.⁷¹⁸ Moreover, under Peralta’s guidance, the military-government had laid the foundations for a constitutional democracy through the enormous sacrifice of the Guatemalan Armed Forces.⁷¹⁹ Although they had their share of difficulties with Colonel Peralta’s regime, the State Department concluded, “The conservative, lackluster, avowedly caretaker regime of...the stolid colonel, left Guatemalan in better shape—on balance—than when it took over.”⁷²⁰ The Johnson administration hoped that his successor, “the newest Latin American president of the democratic left,” would be “of critical significance to the Alliance for Progress.”⁷²¹

Notwithstanding their general enthusiasm, some US officials observed that Méndez Montenegro was “sure to spend more time walking a tightrope” between his leftist supporters and “the traditional Guatemalan oligarchy...civilian plutocrats and military conservatives.”⁷²² Worse still, “he might turn out to be another President Arévalo, leading Guatemala back along the tragic path of communist infiltration, anti-

⁷¹⁷ “El Coronel de Infantería Enrique Peralta Azurdía,” *Ejercito*. No. 46. June, 1966. Archivo Historical. CIRMA. 1.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.* 2. Original Spanish “Así se reconocera en un futuro proximo, cuando apaciguadas las pasiones politicas se evalúe la obra realizada por el Coronel Enrique Peralta Azurdía como Jefe del Gobierno, agigantando su figura histórica.”

⁷¹⁹ “Misión Cumplida.” *Ejercito*. No. 46. June, 1966. Archivo Historical. CIRMA. 1.

⁷²⁰ “Guatemala—Political Review.” July 5, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, Commission for Historical Clarification. Page 1.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.* 4

⁷²² *Ibid.* 2-3.

communist reaction, coup d'état, and dictatorship.”⁷²³ There were several indications, however, that conservative anticommunists were marshalling their forces to ensure that such an event would never occur. In June, a month before the election, a mysterious group calling itself *Movimiento de Acción Nacionalista Organizada* or MANO BLANCA, (White Hand) littered the streets of Guatemala City with fliers that proclaimed the paramilitary group would be “the hand that will eradicate national renegades and traitors to the fatherland...with the same violence used by the communists.”⁷²⁴ This amounted to an announcement of the creation of Guatemala’s first, and perhaps most notorious, death-squad. The same week that Méndez Montenegro swore his oath of office, *Ejército* warned its readers that the military would not grow complacent in the fight against communists.⁷²⁵ Another ominous sign of impending violence, an aircraft flying over Guatemala City dropped thousands of MANO leaflets demanding that all Guatemalans support the counterinsurgency and praising the military as the most important institution in the country. An early indication of the overlap between the military and death-squads, Michael McClintock reports that the airplane that delivered the MANO propaganda took off, and landed, in the restricted Air Force section of La Aurora airport.⁷²⁶ Promising reform, a surge of popular support had carried Méndez Montenegro into the Presidential Palace, but the real power in Guatemala remained in the hands of the colonels. They would be watching the new president carefully and would not hesitate to remove him for the slightest infraction.

⁷²³ Ibid. 4.

⁷²⁴ McClintock, *The American Connection*. 85

⁷²⁵ “Complacencia del Ejército” *Ejército*. No. 47. July, 1966. Archivo Historical, CIRMA. 1.

⁷²⁶ McClintock, 86.

The guerrillas did not celebrate the electoral victory of the *Partido Revolucionario*. “In the final analysis nothing will change. The army won’t stop its repressions. So we won’t stop either,” Turcios Lima announced in a New York Times interview just after the election.⁷²⁷ Instead, the FAR continued its attacks and mounted a massive propaganda campaign to stoke public outrage over the twenty-eight activists the government had disappeared on the eve of the election. Peralta’s government continued to stonewall public demands for the whereabouts of the missing dissidents. Unable to obtain answers, the FAR decided to take hostages that they could exchange for information. On May 4, a FAR cell in Guatemala City seized the Minister of Information, Baltasar Morales Cruz, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Romeo Augusto de Leon, after a withering firefight in the streets. Peralta deployed an unsurprising response and decreed a state of siege. To assuage fears that the military was attempting to nullify the electoral victory of the PR, Peralta simultaneously issued a statement that he would abide by the will of the Guatemalan people and “install the new constitutional government as scheduled on July 1.”⁷²⁸ The FAR escalated the confrontation and kidnapped the Congressional Vice President, Hector Méndez de la Riva, on May 26. Even in the last weeks of his rule, Peralta remained intractable and refused to acknowledge his government’s role in the disappearance. The truth only came to light after the colonel relinquished his position as head-of-state.

⁷²⁷ Turcios Lima’s NYT interview, March 18, 1966 quoted in Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 71

⁷²⁸ Thomas Huges. “Terrorist Kidnappings Trigger State of Siege in Guatemala.” May 11, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Page 1.

One of the most observable initial differences between the Peralta and Méndez Montenegro government's was how tightly the flow of information was controlled. President Méndez Montenegro lifted the heavy censorship the Peralta regime had placed on the press, and publications immediately produced blistering exposés on the current and previous governments. Members of his own administration were also eager and willing to speak their mind to the public. The source of many of the leaks, according to McClintock's research, was the Vice President, Clemente Marroquin Rojas, the peculiar editor of the newspaper *La Hora*.⁷²⁹ In an attempt to score political points, and sell papers, Rojas published the compact that the military high-command forced upon the Méndez Montenegro. Instead of shaming the officers into submission, public knowledge of the agreement transformed many leftists' reluctant support into suspicious disapproval before Méndez Montenegro could even take office. Three weeks into his presidency, two former police officers involved in the arrest told student activists that the twenty-eight dissidents had been captured, tortured, and shot. The Air Force dumped their bodies into the sea. Each attempting to blame the other, both Peralta's and Méndez Montenegro's Ministers of Government verified the account to the press. The deaths of their comrades confirmed, the FAR released their high profile hostages in exchange for the return of a captured student-guerilla.⁷³⁰ Sensing an opportunity for dialogue, Méndez Montenegro attempted to negotiate with the insurgents.

President Méndez Montenegro had successfully campaigned on the notion that he was in a unique position to broker a peace between the guerrillas and the government. In

⁷²⁹ McClintock, *The American Connection*. 79.

⁷³⁰ Ibid. 71

his inaugural address, he extended the guerrillas “the hand of friendship if they ceased their operations—and the mailed fist if they refused.”⁷³¹ The destruction of much of the PGT leadership in the pre-election raid, the escalating use of reciprocal terror, and the electoral victory of the PR tested the revolutionaries’ commitment to the primacy of armed struggle. Many within the rebel forces, especially among the PGT, desperately hoped to reach a settlement to end the violence. In fact, political scientist Louisa Frank notes that the new Central Committee of the PGT had effectively implemented a ceasefire on July 16, hoping to improve the terms of the peace.⁷³² In its first show of power over the civilian government, the military-command attached onerous addendums to any amnesty agreement. In order to receive a pardon, the rebels would have to surrender and hand over their weapons. Having witnessed the cruelty of the military firsthand, the revolutionary factions rejected the offer. The FAR and PGT issued a joint statement that declared the Méndez Montenegro government was “under the tutelage of North American imperialism.”⁷³³ Yon Sosa, speaking for his MR-13 front, exclaimed, “we have committed no crimes, therefore we do not ask for pardon.”⁷³⁴ He and his men would fight “to the death with capitalism.”⁷³⁵ With the revolutionaries’ rejection of the terms of the peace, the military now had a free hand to make Yon Sosa’s oath a reality.

⁷³¹ William Bowlder, “Guatemala” July 18, 1966. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 2. Box 54, LBJL. 1.

⁷³² Frank, “Resistance and Revolution” *Guatemala*. 185.

⁷³³ Department of State, “Guatemalan Insurgents Reject New President’s Peace Offer” July 26, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, Commission for Historical Clarification. Page 1.

⁷³⁴ Marco Antonio Yon Sosa quoted in *The New York Times*, July 18, 1966, translated in Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 71

⁷³⁵ State, “Guatemalan Insurgents Reject New President’s Peace Offer”

The guerrillas outright dismissal of amnesty reflected the recent successes of the revolutionary movement. The insurgency and its supporters grew precipitously in the last year of Peralta's regime. In May 1966, the FAR's combat potential peaked when Turcios Lima launched a blitz attack against a motorized infantry patrol at the Battle of Zunzapote.⁷³⁶ His FGEI front believed that this marked a new phase in the struggle where conventional battles would be more common. Instead, Guatemalan security forces abandoned their defensive posture and began a countrywide assault on the guerrillas and their supporters. For Comandante Turcios Lima, the victory at Zunzapote would be his final triumph.

On the morning of October 2, Turcios Lima enjoyed a brief respite as he cruised along the Roosevelt Highway just outside of Guatemala City with a girlfriend, Silvia Yvonne Flores Letona, and another unnamed female companion. Suddenly, the car was a flaming wreck and the famed rebel leader was dead. Accounts of the incident vary. The New York Times reported that his car hit an obstruction in the road that caused it to flip over and catch fire. Radio Havana broadcasted that an "explosion of unknown character" had occurred within the car before the wreck. Another version of the story, published nearly a year later, alleged that Turcios Lima had stolen the car to take his girlfriend out, and had crashed into a wall during their joy-ride.⁷³⁷ Whether by design or accident, the revolutionary movement in Guatemala had lost its most effective guerrilla commander. The onslaught unleashed by the Guatemalan Armed Forces shortly after his death only compounded the loss.

⁷³⁶ Frank, "Resistance and Repression." Guatemala. 183.

⁷³⁷ Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. 72-73.

It is a dark irony that the *Partido Revolucionario* and its champion, President Méndez Montenegro presided over the division and destruction of the revolutionary movement. During his hobbled presidency, the United States and the Guatemalan Armed Forces joined together in a manner not seen since the aftermath of the Arbenz coup in 1954 in order to extinguish the revolutionary movement. Right-wing politicians and conservative officers had no love for their president, but the election of Méndez Montenegro hindered the insurgency far more than the direct efforts of Colonel Peralta and his military regime. Although Peralta took the guerrilla threat more seriously toward the end of his rule, his unconstitutional dictatorship drove many Guatemalans to sympathize with, or even support, the oppositional left. Drawing from a diverse pool of recruits—ranging from student activists to former soldiers—the FAR and its constituent organizations incorporated a variety of opinions within its ranks, and thereby lacked ideological cohesion and organizational discipline. As the guerrillas and the military escalated the scope and scale of violence and retribution, many Guatemalans who put their hopes in the revolutionary cause saw a chance for peace in a Méndez Montenegro presidency. Instead, the upper echelons of the Guatemalan Armed Forces used the duly elected civilian administration as a cover for the final stages of Guatemala's transformation into a counterinsurgency state—a government totally consumed by its exterminationist war against guerrillas and anyone who might lend them aid. The Johnson administration, for all its outward support of elections and the moderate-leftist Guatemalan president, could not, and would not, reverse the decisions of Eisenhower and Kennedy that had empowered the military high-command. Julio César Méndez Montenegro, a hollow figurehead whose presidency only served to shield the Guatemalan

military during the wanton slaughter of its counterinsurgency campaign, proved a fitting personification of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala.

The Butcher's Block: The Ascendancy of the Counterinsurgency Forces

Guatemala's gradual transformation into a military-dominated counterinsurgency state completed as the Guatemalan Armed Forces and their death squad auxiliaries launched their campaign against the guerrillas in 1966. Led by two officers who worked closely with US security advisers, Colonels Rafael Arriaga and Carlos Arana, the military utilized strategies designed to completely annihilate the guerrillas and any civilians who might lend them aid. Reeling from this new wave of incredible violence, the few surviving guerrillas scattered and effectively ended their war against the Guatemalan government. The apparent success of these murderous methods enshrined their legitimacy to the officer corps, and directly contributed the military government's genocide against the Maya in the 1980s.

Nearly two-thousand Guatemalans attended the funeral of Luis Augusto Turcios Lima. All of the major guerrilla leaders came together in Guatemala City to bury their comrade.⁷³⁸ To mourn their loss publicly in the capital openly defied the security forces that were determined to destroy the guerrillas. The gesture was a show of strength and resilience—the guerrillas had recently won several battles and were resolved to continue their fallen leader's fight. Even though many insurgents remained hostile toward the new government of Julio Méndez Montenegro, the electoral success of a politician who

⁷³⁸ Frank. "Resistance and Revolution." Guatemala. 185

identified with the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944 clearly emboldened the left. Those that placed a modicum of hope in the president and his *Partido Revolucionario* soon learned their faith had been misplaced.

President Méndez Montenegro understood the precarious nature of his position, yet he still, on occasion, tested the constraints the military placed on his office. At each attempt, his colonels and the death-squads under their command countered any hint of reform with targeted violence. On his first day in office, Méndez Montenegro publicly announced he would reform the various police agencies and that “neither torture nor abuse of authority will take place, these things are finished.”⁷³⁹ The prospect of civilian interference with security forces, along with the relaxation of press censorship and the president’s call for negotiations with the guerrillas, drove MLN partisans into a frenzy. As the FAR halted operations to consider a peace settlement, right-wing paramilitary groups began an urban terror campaign of their own. Bombs detonated almost daily in Guatemala City during the first few months of Méndez Montenegro’s presidency. A faction within the MLN aimed to create an atmosphere of instability that would allow ambitious officers to stage a second “liberation” in the tradition of their founder, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. Conspirators within the MLN even offered generous bounties to any officers willing to support a coup, but only managed to ensnare a few potential usurpers. The government’s response to the plot was swift, but merciful. The three chief Army officers involved, including Vice Minister of Defense Colonel Adolfo Callejas, were quietly exiled to diplomatic posts.⁷⁴⁰ Connecting the coup attempt to the MLN’s

⁷³⁹ *El Imparcial*. July 4, 1966. Archivo Historical. CIRMA

⁷⁴⁰ US State Department, “Guatemala: Army Coup Plotters to be Exiled.” November 16, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Commission for Historical Clarification.

urban rampage, the Méndez Montenegro administration declared a state of siege, amplifying the power of the military and reducing an already fettered presidency to obsolescence. Although many party members were briefly arrested during the state of siege, and a few avaricious officers had been sent abroad, the MLN had successfully infiltrated the real power structure of Guatemala.

The coup attempt failed because of Colonel Rafael Arriaga Bosque. An avowed anticommunist with close ties to the US military, Colonel Arriaga had previously partnered with John Longan in reforming the National Police and intelligence agencies while coordinating their efforts during *Operación Limpieza*. As Peralta left office, he hand-selected Arriaga to be the next Minister of Defense. The decision was likely a political compromise: Arriaga was a long-time friend and supporter of the MLN presidential candidate, Colonel Miguel Ponciano.⁷⁴¹ Arriaga had also assisted in Colonel Peralta rise to power when he joined in the overthrow of President Ydigoras in 1963. Colonel Arriaga also had many admirers from the United States who described him as “intelligent, energetic, ambitious, and professionally well qualified, he is one of the most competent senior Army officers and is a good military administrator.”⁷⁴² Granted total autonomy from the civilian government by the pact the military had forced upon Méndez Montenegro, Colonel Arriaga was the most powerful man in Guatemala.

With an MLN supporter in a position that essentially surpassed the presidency, their plot to destabilize the government appears counterintuitive on the surface. Certainly, many MLN members feared that Méndez Montenegro would attempt reforms and open

⁷⁴¹ US Department of Defense, “Colonel Rafael Arriaga Bosque.” December, 1967. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Commission for Historical Clarification. 1.

⁷⁴² Ibid.

the door to communism. It is also likely that a faction within the party did not value the potential cover the Méndez Montenegro administration could provide for the counterinsurgency state, and hoped to place their own aspirants at the helm of the party. Urban terror and a half-hearted coup plot, however, may have been a trial run for the false-flag operations attempted by the MLN throughout the rest of the decade. Moreover, the discovery of the coup led to the exile of a potential rival to Colonel Arriaga's position, Vice Minister of Defense Callejas. Moreover, the violence perpetuated by the MLN in Guatemala City forced President Méndez Montenegro to declare a state of siege, enhancing Defense Minister Arriaga's already considerable authority while dispensing with constitutional protections. Essentially, MLN actions restored a military dictatorship in Guatemala within months of Méndez Montenegro's inauguration.

Defense Minister Arriaga had consolidated his control over the Guatemalan state by November 1966, but his fierce prosecution of the war against the guerrillas began before he took office. His time working with John Longan and other USAID personnel made Arriaga particularly receptive to Washington, and past visits to various US Army installations allowed him to develop relationships with American military commanders. The Minister of Defense displayed none of the nationalistic reluctance that constrained Colonel Peralta, and he embraced the United States as a welcome collaborator in the counterinsurgency. Relieved to have finally found a willing partner, Washington rewarded Arriaga with a surge of financial assistance and military hardware. In addition to shipments of guns, grenades, and ammunition, US Southern Command sent attack helicopters, napalm-armed jets, and teams of elite specialists who would operate these more complex weapon systems until their Guatemalan counterparts received sufficient

training.⁷⁴³ Additionally, the United States committed an unknown number of Mobile Training Teams (MTT) to assist with the coming counterinsurgency offensive. The MTT occupied a nebulous realm of military assistance—billed as “advisers,” many, if not all MTT units were composed of US Special Forces and CIA agents. An indication of the newfound goodwill between the US and Guatemalan military command, the Military Assistance Program nearly doubled in 1966.⁷⁴⁴ By the time of Turcios Lima’s death in October 1966, Guatemala’s counterinsurgency forces numbered 20,000 men, armed and trained through the United States.⁷⁴⁵ From this position of unprecedented strength, the Guatemalan Armed Forces launched its liquidation campaign against the fragmented revolutionary movement.

The counterinsurgency offensive required a ruthless and inventive commander in the field who could put all of the US training and armaments to proper use. Defense Minister Arriaga needed to look no further than his close friend, Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio. The two colonels belonged to the same military academy cohort, graduating from the *Escuela Politecnica* in 1939.⁷⁴⁶ Colonel Arana’s career advanced rapidly after the fall of Arbenz. He became director of *Escuela Politecnica* in 1954 before serving as the military attaché to the United States from 1958-1959. After developing contacts at his

⁷⁴³ Dean Rusk, “Re: Guatemala Embtel 560.” July 30, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety. Box 72. Page 1-2.

⁷⁴⁴ It is difficult to calculate the exact figure for total US aid to the Guatemalan military. The Military Assistance Program was the largest and most direct program that offered military aid. The program increased its budget from \$994,000 to \$1,745,000. This is only one of the many programs that supplied military aid. USAID programs also contributed to military spending in Guatemala and most, like the Office of Public Safety, experienced similar budget increases. For further information, see McClintock, *The American Connection*, Chapter 4.

⁷⁴⁵ Frank, “Resistance and Revolution.” Guatemala. 185.

⁷⁴⁶ McClintock, *The American Connection*. 79

post in Washington, Arana led the Guatemalan delegation within the Inter-American Defense Board in 1959. He received extensive training at several US military institutions and the Central Intelligence Agency praised him for being “one of the most competent and respected...politically minded officers in the army.”⁷⁴⁷ He returned to Washington to reprise his role as Guatemala’s military attaché from 1965-1966 until Defense Minister Arriaga summoned him back for a special assignment. With unparalleled counterinsurgency expertise and a close connection with US military personnel, Colonel Arana stood out as an obvious choice to command the main thrust of the campaign. In October 1966, the colonel arrived in the province of Zacapa prepared to eradicate the estimated three to five hundred guerrillas in the region. When he concluded his bloody work, Colonel Arana’s forces had killed as many as ten-thousand Guatemalans.

Colonel Arana introduced several practices that would become hallmarks of the Guatemalan counterinsurgency state’s merciless war against guerrillas and their potential support networks. Methodical in his preparations before launching the offensive, Arana deployed spies and made extensive use of the existing *comisionado* network, whose operatives infiltrated local communities to compile lists of potential subversives. The quite literal practice of “scorched-earth” tactics, utilized during the Maya Genocide of the 1980s, originated from Colonel Arana’s strategies. The Guatemalan Air Force had begun to run sorties against guerrilla positions by September 1966, but under Arana’s command, these aircraft began to use napalm to immolate entire villages and the surrounding countryside. Mirroring developments in Vietnam, carpet-bombing in *zonas libres* (free zones) depopulated the countryside with a rain of death. Moreover, an increasing number

⁷⁴⁷ Central Intelligence Agency. “Guatemala—A Current Appraisal.” October 8, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Commission for Historical Clarification. Page 14. (Annex II, page 2).

of airstrikes originated from US Southern Command in Panama without making use of any of Guatemala's own air assets.⁷⁴⁸ Aerial assaults from attack helicopters supported the thousands of ground troops deployed to eradicate the estimated three-hundred guerrillas in Zacapa Province. Already weakened by internal divisions, the guerrilla fronts reeled from the concerted attack, unable to effectively counter this new wave of aggression.

The technological advantage enjoyed by Arana significantly contributed to his ability to decimate Zacapa province, but it was the colonel's use of political violence and social control that allowed him to annihilate the insurgency in the region. A variety of rightist paramilitary organization had already begun to form in the final months of Peralta's rule, but Colonel Arana became the first military leader to intentionally incorporate them into his command structure and strategy. Initially, the MLN affiliated death-squad, *Mano Blanca*, led the extrajudicial bloodletting, but new organizations such as *Consejo Anticomunista de Guatemala* (CADEG) and *Nueva Organizacion Anticomunista* (NOA) formed and joined in the fray. The death-squads acted as a vanguard for the Army, eliminating anyone they pleased, regardless of their potential for subversion. Most of their members also held positions within the security forces.

The death-squads used both targeted and indiscriminate killing in settlements that might offer support to local guerrilla groups. Unless they belonged to the MLN or PID parties, anyone in a position of authority, or even respected within their community, became a possible target for the death-squads. Fear so thoroughly permeated the towns

⁷⁴⁸ Napalm use has not been completely confirmed by the US government. Scholars have cited guerrilla interviews from the 1960s and Vice President Marroquin Rojas' 1967 interview with Eduardo Galeano as proof of the allegation. See McClintock, *The American Connection*. Page 84, 119 footnote 109.

and villages of the Zacapa and Izabal departments that local leaders resigned from their posts and neighbors refused aid to victims of vigilantism. In Rio Hondo, for example, a man was killed in an “anti-guerrilla” operation while he was attempting to repair the roof of his family home. No one dared help the murdered man’s surviving family members, who had to endure Guatemala’s rainy season exposed to the elements.⁷⁴⁹ To do so would invite death-squad retribution.

The most effective contribution made by the death-squads was their ability to eliminate any individual who might pose a threat without directly implicating the military or the government. When confronted with evidence of summary execution or forced disappearance, Guatemalan officials simply asserted they had no control over vigilante citizens. The MLN even ran advertisements announcing that “the government should not be surprised when...citizens organize themselves for self-defense, or take justice into their own hands.”⁷⁵⁰ The US embassy would conclude that many of these organizations were “fictional”: a cover for extrajudicial, clandestine units of the police and military. The Guatemalan government wanted “to appear to be operating within a legal framework as behooves a democracy and to be operating with the support of the people” and blaming assassination, mutilation, and other atrocities on shadowy, anonymous civilians who independently organized in “armed self-defense” provided security forces with plausible deniability.⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁹ Andres Hernandez, “The Creeping Coup.” July 3, 1967. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State. Agency for International Development, Bureau for Latin America, Mission to Guatemala. Page 1.

⁷⁵⁰ El Imparcial. August 27, 1966. Archivo Historico, CIRMA.

⁷⁵¹ John Mein. “Terrorism in Guatemala: New Myths and Hard Realities” February 17, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala. Agency for International Development, Commission for Historical Clarification. Page 5.

As the campaign in Zacapa wore on, death-squads deepened the terror by openly displaying the disfigured corpses of their victims. Additionally, publicly posted “kill list” circulated in urban areas that named individuals, often accompanied with a photograph, who were marked for execution. The psychological impact of these terror tactics played a crucial role in controlling the surviving population after the Army was satisfied the subversive threat had been eliminated in the area. If a name appeared on a kill list, many former friends and neighbors would shun, or even denounce the doomed victim lest they find their own names inscribed on a death warrant.

Reaching a disturbing but unsurprising conclusion, Michael McClintock suggests that the incorporation of paramilitary death-squads within the military structure likely originated from the United States advisory program and was “in every way consistent with the ideal implementation of US counter-insurgency doctrine.”⁷⁵² Reports from the Public Safety Program justified these extreme acts of violence as a part of the American Tradition: “The methods used to discourage guerrillesque activity are patterned after US far west frontier justice.”⁷⁵³ The head of the US military mission in Guatemala, Colonel John Webber, boasted in an interview with Time that he had introduced the use of clandestine paramilitary organizations to the Guatemalan colonels under his tutelage—the most notable of them Colonel Carlos Arana. The reporter interviewing Webber suggested that arming civilians and giving them a license to “kill peasants whom they considered guerrillas or ‘potential’ guerrillas” was dangerous and that “there were those

⁷⁵² McClintock, *The American Connection*. 87.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.* 92.

who doubted the wisdom of encouraging such measures in violence-prone Guatemala.”⁷⁵⁴
The gruff American colonel bluntly retorted, “That’s the way the country is. The Communists are using everything they have, including terror. And it must be met.”⁷⁵⁵
Eventually, some US officials became concerned with rampant vigilantism, and a few expressed their misgivings, but only after the counterinsurgency campaign had effectively destroyed the rural guerrilla fronts and claimed the lives of thousands of innocent civilians.

The collaboration between the United States and Colonel Arana went well beyond the tools and trade of direct violence. During the 1960’s counterinsurgency campaign, USAID allotted five-million dollars for the Guatemalan military’s Civic Action efforts.⁷⁵⁶ Colonel Arana was a prolific proponent of Civic Action and utilized the Alliance for Progress program to a far greater degree than any of his predecessors. After a region had been sufficiently “pacified” the same units that razed villages to the ground rebuilt them and interred civilian survivors within their confines in a manner similar to the strategic hamlets used in Vietnam. The Guatemalan government and military highlighted the presence of medical units, school construction, and civilian cooperation, but the reality was much more sinister. The MLN and associated death-squads maintained a presence in the secured villages and enforced compliance with the military’s demands. For example, MLN partisans forced the captive population of Rio Hondo to perform popular demonstrations in support of the counterinsurgency. Newspapers reported nearly one

⁷⁵⁴Sections of *Time* article, published January 28, 1968 reproduced in Gott, *Guerrilla Movement in Latin America*. Page 88, footnote 2.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁶ Jennifer Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. Page 36.

thousand peasants spontaneously gathered to denounce the FAR and Cuba while holding signs marked with “Viva el Ejército”(Long Live the Army).⁷⁵⁷ US officials were happy to accept the account, which originated from a Guatemalan Army press release, at face value. The best way to preserve one’s life in an occupied region was to be a card-carrying member of the MLN. Unsurprisingly, the party’s numbers grew as survivors of Arana’s campaign joined their ranks: a factor that would contribute to the colonel’s presidential bid in 1970.

Colonel Arana boosted existing Civic Action initiatives that focused on domestic construction and social services, but his most innovative contribution to the program was introducing civil patrols. A mechanism for militarization, civil patrols conscripted survivors into local militias, typically dominated by the MLN, and used them as local defense against guerrillas. Despite the trauma many survivors had suffered at the hands of Arana’s forces, many joined civil patrols to secure access to basic resources provided through concurrent Civic Action programs. Furthermore, refusing to join a civil patrol would arouse suspicion of collaboration with guerrillas—an act that would likely result in appearing on a kill list. Several civil patrols would themselves evolve into full-fledged paramilitary units as the counterinsurgency campaign continued. Embassy officials monitoring the situation welcomed news that the captive population now denied guerrillas access to food, supplies, and information and “in some operations, the *campesinos* have even fought the guerrillas at the Army’s side.”⁷⁵⁸ Although the practice

⁷⁵⁷ El Imparcial. November 25, 1966. Archivo Historical. CIRMA; and McClintock, *The American Connection*. 88.

⁷⁵⁸ Viron Vaky. “Monthly Guerrilla Report—November.” December 17, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253. National Archives. page 2.

would become more widespread and sophisticated during the Guatemalan government's genocidal campaign of the 1980s, Arana's militarization of the surviving population denied the insurgency its vital link with civilian support.

The Zacapa campaign delivered a rapid series of successes for the counterinsurgency state. The gruesome details of the indiscriminate, excessive violence meted out by security forces under Arana abound in scholarly accounts and survivor testimony.⁷⁵⁹ They will not be recounted in this study, but suffice to say Colonel Arana earned his sobriquet: "The Butcher of Zacapa." Before the end of October, less than one month into the campaign, Arana's forces had systematically destroyed the primary guerrilla fronts of the FGEI and MR-13. Many guerrilla leaders died in confrontations with the military or were assassinated by death-squads. Commander Yon Sosa himself narrowly escaped with his life after being wounded in a clash with the Army.⁷⁶⁰ The situation in the countryside became untenable by 1967, and the guerrillas still left alive went into hiding in Guatemala City or outside the country. Those who fled to the capital found little reprieve. While Arana purged the countryside, Defense Minister Arriaga continued to develop Guatemalan police agencies into an urban counterinsurgency force.

⁷⁵⁹ Most coverage of the atrocities committed during the Guatemalan Civil War come from the 1970s and especially the early 1980s when government abuses reached their genocidal apex. For example see: Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*. (New York: Pgrave Macmilan, 2003) ; Rigoberta Menchu Tum, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. (New York: Verso, 1984). Some authors have described or incorporated witness testimony of atrocities committed during the 1960s counterinsurgency push. For examples see: Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America and the Cold War*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1971); Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala*. (London: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷⁶⁰ Vaky. "Monthly Guerrilla Report—November." 2.

Between 1966-1970, USAID, through the Office of Public Safety, provided at least \$2.6 million for bolstering the Guatemalan police. According to the report from political scientist Howard Sharekman, in 1967 alone, the National Police added 1,500 new members to their ranks and an additional 2,000 by 1968.⁷⁶¹ Thousands of officers received specialized training from a variety of US advisers—many came from the CIA, the Green Berets, or fresh from similar assignments in Vietnam. As operations in the countryside wound down, death-squads began to collaborate with police agencies in eliminating urban suspects. The guerrillas had largely been crushed and scattered by Colonel Arana, so the MLN began to direct its paramilitary units against members of its political rival, the *Partido Revolucionario*.

The Secretary General of the MLN, Mario Sandoval Alarcon, did not mince words in declaring his ideological allegiance. “I am a fascist”, the party leader exclaimed, “and I have modeled my party on the Spanish Falange.”⁷⁶² Expressing his deep satisfaction with Colonel Arana’s “plan of complete illegality” against the insurgency in Zacapa, Alarcon decided to improve the MLN’s political standing by killing off PR members. Prominent citizens who registered with the PR found their names on publicly distributed kill lists. Scores of local party leaders were disappeared or executed in areas where the MLN performed poorly in the elections. In the event an explanation was provided, the killers simply proclaimed their victims were agents of the guerrillas, communists, and traitors. President Méndez Montenegro stayed silent as members of his own party were murdered, but by August 1967, the remaining leadership of the PR

⁷⁶¹ Howard Sharekman, “The Vietnamization of Guatemala: U.S. Counterinsurgency Programs” Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, eds. *Guatemala*. Berkley, CA: NACLA, 1974. 199

⁷⁶² Alarcon quoted in: Black, *Garrison Guatemala*. 23.

petitioned the government for protection against “the sowing of terror and death” by the MLN death-squads who falsely operated “under the pretext of fighting the guerrillas.”⁷⁶³ Their request did little to stem death-squad violence that was spiraling out of control.

The MLN and associated paramilitary organizations undeniably aided the counterinsurgency campaign, but their excesses soon threatened to undermine their contribution to the Guatemalan Armed Forces. While many US officials excused or ignored extrajudicial killings at the onset of the offensive against the guerrillas, the daily, public displays of the horrifically mutilated bodies of death-squad victims could not be denied by mid-1967. In May, the State Department concluded “vigilantism...disturbed further the already strained internal security situation in Guatemala. The involvement of the army in this extra-legal activity poses a serious problem affecting the stability of the Méndez government.”⁷⁶⁴ By October, the US embassy speculated that the MLN was attempting to undermine President Méndez Montenegro’s popular support and create the conditions for another military coup. While the embassy report acknowledged the spectacular success of implementing paramilitary forces into the counterinsurgency effort, they believed that President Méndez Montenegro, and perhaps even Defense Minister Arriaga, could no longer control these extralegal elements.⁷⁶⁵ Even Colonel Arana apparently considered disarming some of the death-squad auxiliaries under his command, although he ultimately decided “that the group would not give up its guns willingly because it could not afford to do so. If they gave up their arms, they would be

⁷⁶³ Press statement of *Partido Revolucionario*. August, 1968; Translation found in McClintock, *The American Connection*. 90.

⁷⁶⁴ Thomas Hughes. “Guatemala: Vigilantism Poses Threat to Stability.” May 12, 1967. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. National Security Administration. Page 1.

⁷⁶⁵ Thomas Hughes. “Guatemala: A Counter-Insurgency Running Wild

‘defenseless against reprisals for past deeds.’”⁷⁶⁶ It took two outrageous attacks against public figures before authorities clamped down on MLN terrorism, which proved to be only a minor setback for the fascist political party.

The story of Rogelia Cruz Martinez appears in nearly every account of the Guatemalan Civil War. A renowned beauty, Cruz won Miss Guatemala in 1959 and competed for the Miss Universe title in the United States. Beloved by her nation and hailing from a good family, Cruz’s leftist sensibilities were public knowledge and the beauty queen became romantically involved with a FAR guerrilla. At the close of 1967, Yon Sosa and the remaining FAR leaders attempted to reconcile their differences in an effort to recover from their devastating losses. As a result, the FAR formally broke with the PGT, which had ceased its advocacy of armed struggle, and rejoined with Yon Sosa’s MR-13 remnants. The reformed FAR signed a declaration of war against the government in January, 1968.⁷⁶⁷ The day after the FAR announced their reformation, unknown assailants abducted Cruz. Her half-naked, ravaged body appeared days later under a bridge on the outskirts of Guatemala City. What was left of her remains showed clear signs of torture, mutilation, and rape.⁷⁶⁸ Such occurrences had become common in Guatemala, but her status grabbed the attention of the national and international press.

Retaliation for the vicious murder of Rogelia Cruz came on January 16, 1968. A FAR cell, allegedly led by Cruz’s boyfriend Nayito, attacked a car containing US military advisors. The targets were two of the highest-ranking US military personnel assigned to

⁷⁶⁶ Andres Hernandez. “‘Accion Civica’ del Ejercito” July 3, 1967. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Agency for International Development, Commission for Historical Clarification.

⁷⁶⁷ Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala*. London: Duke University Press, 2002. Page 227.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid. 228.

Guatemala: Colonel John D. Webber, the head of the US military mission in Guatemala, and Commander Ernest A. Munro, the US Navy attaché. Both men were deeply involved in the counterinsurgency campaign. Colonel Arana had trained under Webber and counted him among his most valuable US allies. The FAR squad riddled the car with machine-gun fire, killing both of the American officers almost instantly.⁷⁶⁹ Several guerrillas, including Nayito, died in the ensuing firefight, and the FAR issued a statement claiming the attack was revenge against the United States for creating “genocidal forces” in Guatemala.⁷⁷⁰ The death of high-ranking American officers shocked the US government and public, and the State Department began to make concerted efforts into determining how to “put an end to counter-terror.”⁷⁷¹ Unfortunately, the creature created from US counterinsurgency collaboration had grown far beyond the control of its erstwhile handlers.

Before US officials could grapple with their Guatemalan counterparts over the death of John Webber and Ernest Munro, the MLN lashed out with a public stunt designed to discredit the Méndez Montenegro administration and shift public outrage onto the political left. On March 16, the outspokenly conservative Archbishop of Guatemala, Mario Casariego, vanished. His supposed kidnappers had managed to seize Archbishop Casariego within one-hundred yards of the National Palace despite the abundance of security personnel in the vicinity.⁷⁷² The minds behind the abduction

⁷⁶⁹ Walt Rostow to President Johnson, January 16, 1968. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL.

⁷⁷⁰ Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain*. 228 ; McClintock, *The American Connection*. 95.

⁷⁷¹ Thomas F. Killoran, “Guatemalan Counter-Terror.” February 1, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, Commission for Historical Clarification.

⁷⁷² McClintock, *The American Connection*. 95.

planned to blame the FAR and humiliate Méndez Montenegro in the process, but the implausibility of the battered insurgents carrying out such an operation caused many to believe that the Archbishop was party to his own kidnapping. The US embassy concluded that the “kidnapping of Archbishop seems to have been carried out by members of the armed forces to promote public demonstrations which would give Army motive for taking over government.”⁷⁷³ Drawing a logical conclusion, Ambassador Mein speculated that Colonel Arana and Defense Minister Arriaga “may be party to the plot.”⁷⁷⁴

Within days, the plotters realized their false-flag operation had failed and the Archbishop was released unharmed. The chief culprits within the MLN and military remained concealed, but they supplied two expendable civilians who were involved with the plot as scapegoats. They were subsequently shot after their arrest. Unsatisfied with the obvious attempt to circumvent the consequences of the fake kidnapping, near-universal public condemnation forced President Méndez Montenegro to take action against the colonels who were almost certainly behind the attempt to foment unrest. On March 28, Méndez Montenegro dismissed senior officers involved in counterinsurgency operations, including Colonel Arana and Defense Minister Arriaga.⁷⁷⁵ The move stunned the nation and “Guatemalans of all political shades...interpreted Méndez’ assertion of authority as the end of the armed forces’ constriction on civilian rule.”⁷⁷⁶ Even CIA analysts seemed impressed remarking: “President Méndez relieved three key military

⁷⁷³ John Mein, “Embassy Telegram 3790.” March 20, 1968. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala. Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL. Page 1.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid. 2.

⁷⁷⁵ Central Intelligence Agency. “Guatemala After the Military Shake-Up.” May, 13, 1968. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL. Page 1.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid. 2

men of their posts, and gave Guatemalans a president in fact as well as in name for the first time in five years.”⁷⁷⁷ Counterinsurgency efforts continued under a new Defense Minister, Colonel Rolando Chinchilla Aguilar, and his subordinates, but the six months that followed the botched false-flag kidnapping marked the nadir of death-squad activity.⁷⁷⁸ For that brief moment, it seemed that the forces of revolution and reaction might abate and some semblance of stability might come to Guatemala.

By 1966, the Guatemalan military and its allies from the United States had constructed a deadly counterinsurgency apparatus and launched its campaign to eliminate the guerrilla threat. Implementing a strategy that incorporated death-squads, scorched earth napalm bombings, and public mutilation, Colonel Carlos Arana and other commanders succeeded in bringing the armed opposition to its knees. Although the excesses of the chief architects of the counterinsurgency campaign were briefly and lightly punished, the apparent effectiveness of their murderous tactics were difficult to deny. Massacres and political killings had a long and unfortunate history in Guatemala, but carefully orchestrated, government induced wholesale slaughter deployed in the counterinsurgency campaign of the 1960s was an altogether different phenomenon. The guerrilla movements, which had so recently seemed capable of ushering in a revolution, collapsed in the face of this unprecedented state violence. Guatemala’s transformation into a counterinsurgency state was now complete and its legacy would inspire the country’s future military leaders to build upon the perceived triumph and commit genocide when confronting a resurrected guerrilla movement in the 1980s.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁸ McClintock, *The American Connection*. 95.

Price of Progress: The End of the Alliance for Progress Era

With the apparent success of counterinsurgency operations and the dismissal of its most prominent leaders, it seemed possible that President Mendez Montenegro might return state power into civilian hands. The prospect of civilian rule, however, deteriorated almost immediately as anticommunist elites reaffirmed their dedication to the counterinsurgency state they had built with US assistance. Mendez Montenegro's attempt to pass a tax reform met with impenetrable opposition. Although some US officials began to speak out against the abuses conducted by the Guatemalan military, they soon found themselves silenced by the assassination of Ambassador John Gordon Mein. Barely able to preserve his presidency, Mendez Montenegro retreated in the face of renewed US support for the Guatemalan officer corps. As the 1960s came to a close, the Alliance for Progress faded away, but the counterinsurgency state it had helped to create in Guatemala remained in place for over a decade.

President Méndez Montenegro's newfound political capital encouraged those US officials who had begun to acknowledge the problems of extrajudicial killing units, but the CIA surmised that "Méndez may believe that he can begin to make much-needed socioeconomic reforms, but he will have a difficult time. Much of the military establishment has been alienated, and the wealthy conservative elements will watch his moves carefully."⁷⁷⁹ His most significant attempt at reform met with fierce resistance. Guatemala still possessed the most backward, insufficient taxation systems in Central

⁷⁷⁹ CIA, "Guatemala After the Military Shake-Up." 1.

America. Since his inauguration, Méndez Montenegro's administration had proposed several, moderate tax reforms to help combat the persistent fiscal crisis and contribute to Alliance for Progress developmental programs. Business interests from both Guatemala and the United States routinely blocked these attempts. When Finance Minister Alberto Fuentes Mohr, an internationally renowned economist described as "a perfect Alliance for Progress man," introduced a progressive sales tax on luxury goods, conservatives in the business community labeled him a communist.⁷⁸⁰ In the same month that Méndez Montenegro flexed his presidential power by dismissing his top counterinsurgency colonels, conservative economic elites, who counted an increasing number of military officers among their number, forced the president to remove Fuentes Mohr from his cabinet. The firing of the Finance Minister confirmed that the Méndez Montenegro administration was still very much in the thrall of the military and its wealthy civilian supporters.

The failure of the minor tax reform and subsequent dismissal of Fuentes Mohr provoked a contentious debate between the emerging factions within the field of US policymakers involved in Guatemalan affairs. The excessive human rights abuses induced by US-sponsored counterinsurgency operations repulsed some officials within the State Department by 1967. Several within this "progressive" faction argued that Washington should reduce, or even eliminate, military and economic aid.⁷⁸¹ The "pragmatists," headed by Ambassador Mein, argued that reducing aid would be disastrous for Guatemala and the United States should avoid pressuring the government

⁷⁸⁰ Susanne Jonas, "The New Hard Line: U.S. Strategy for the 1970s." Guatemala. NACLA. 106.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid.

over taxation in order to keep Méndez Montenegro in office. The ambassador likely recalled that the downfall of President Miguel Ydigoras, whose position was arguably more stable than Méndez Montenegro, began in earnest after the conservative general forced his tax bill through the legislature in order to meet Alliance for Progress obligations. The American ambassador's unwillingness to advocate for tax reform, however, signaled that the United States lacked dedication to the principles and programs of the Alliance for Progress. Ambassador Mein and the "pragmatists" prevailed in the debate, but at the cost of alienating many of their "progressive" colleagues. The real winners, however, were Guatemala's oligarchs, military officers, and their MLN-PID coalition. The political scientist Susanne Jonas, an authority on the Guatemalan Civil War, concluded: "For Guatemala, this debate and its resolution marked a turning point: this was the last time the United States flirted with the reformist alternative for Guatemala and with the use of aid as leverage for obtaining reforms."⁷⁸²

All that the defeated progressive policymakers could achieve was the preservation of their dissent for posterity. Viron Vaky, the former Deputy Chief of Mission, had long expressed his concerns regarding the direction of the Guatemalan government and US policy. Shortly after joining the embassy staff in 1966, Vaky warned that US support for counterinsurgency operations had fully transformed Guatemala into a police state.⁷⁸³ After more than a year of regularly reporting on the atrocities committed by death-squads backed by the Guatemalan Armed Forces, and by extension the United States, Vaky

⁷⁸² Ibid. Note that Jonas was writing in 1974, before the Carter administration reduced aid to Guatemala.

⁷⁸³ Viron Vaky. "Guatemalan Police Powers Expanded". December 24, 1966. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966. Box 2253, National Archives. page 2.

could no longer reconcile his career with his moral compass and resigned. He returned to Washington in 1967 to join the State Department's Policy Planning staff, where he continued to keep a close eye on Guatemalan affairs. When he learned that his former supervisor, Ambassador Mein, argued against pushing the Méndez Montenegro administration to act within the window of opportunity created by the dismissal of the counterinsurgency colonels, he decided to speak out against the direction of US policy in Guatemala.

In his scathing report, Vaky unequivocally asserted that the State Department and US embassy that the United States must actively and openly condemn the terror tactics wantonly applied by the Guatemalan military. Vaky outlined, in considerable detail, the ethical and strategic bankruptcy of counterinsurgency efforts in Guatemala. The indiscriminate brutality employed by the Guatemalan security forces stirred up "righteous anger" that contributed to extreme political polarization.⁷⁸⁴ The people of Guatemala saw their government as an adversary, which undermined any effort at institution building and modernization.⁷⁸⁵ Moreover, Guatemalans associated the United States, which had funded and advised the successive military governments, with the use of state-terrorism.

Vaky concluded:

"Most disturbing of all--that we have not been honest with ourselves. We have condoned counter terror; we may even in effect have encouraged or blessed it. We have been so obsessed with the fear of insurgency that we have rationalized away our qualms and uneasiness. This is not only because we have concluded we cannot do anything about it, for we never really tried. Rather we suspected that maybe it is a good tactic, and that as long as communist are being killed it is all right."⁷⁸⁶

⁷⁸⁴ Viron Vaky, "Guatemala and Counter-Terror." March, 29, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, Policy Planning Council, Commission for Historical Clarification. page 2.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid. 5-6.

Vaky believed that the cumulative trajectory of the policy decision made by the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations corroded US credibility and presented an ethical crisis that needed immediate redress. Notably, Vaky believed that state-terror could no longer be stopped by any US actions; the system created in the fourteen years of US-backed military regimes was too deeply entrenched.⁷⁸⁷ The best course of action would be for the United States government to make it unambiguously clear to Guatemalans and the world that it opposed state-terrorism. Otherwise, the United States would “stand before history unable to answer the accusations that we encouraged the Guatemalan army to do such things.”⁷⁸⁸ Vaky, a conscientious and intelligent diplomat, left his post feeling “like [William] Fulbright says he felt about the Tonkin Gulf Resolution--my deepest regret is that I did not fight harder within the Embassy councils.”⁷⁸⁹ Vaky’s proclamation captured the tragedy of US-Guatemalan relations during the Alliance for Progress. In Guatemala, those that sought to fulfill even a hint of President Kennedy’s proclaimed intentions for Latin America could not loosen the grip of the reactionary militarists that his administration had empowered in the name of anticommunism.

On March 31, two days after Viron Vaky lambasted US policy in Guatemala, President Lyndon Johnson announced he would not run for reelection. The Cold War had claimed another aspiring domestic reformer. Granted, President Johnson was culpable for

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.,1.

escalation in Vietnam, the invasion of the Dominican Republic, and Colonel Arana's extermination campaign in Zacapa, among other global and national conflicts, but the beleaguered Texan's real ambition had been his Great Society—a refashioned New Deal designed to aid Americans that the venerable social program had left behind. Instead, the Vietnam War engulfed the Johnson administration and devoured much of the revenue that could have been applied to the Great Society. Unable to end the war or fully deliver domestic reforms, Johnson faced unanticipated opposition from within the Democratic Party. Scholars continue to debate the precise nature of Johnson's rationale for leaving office, but in broad terms, it is clear that he did not believe he could defeat Robert Kennedy in the Democratic primaries. Even after Senator Kennedy's assassination in June, Johnson confirmed he would not run for reelection and helped secure the nomination of Vice President Hubert Humphrey. His health failing fast, the depressed, progressive President of the United States mirrored the decay and disillusionment that plagued what remained of the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala.

Guatemala never occupied much of President Johnson's attention. His sympathizers blamed his administration's foreign policy blunders on his advisers, many of them holdovers from the Kennedy administration. His detractors argued President Johnson's diplomatic failures were of his own making. Regardless of the source of dysfunction, a broad consensus found Johnson inadequate in international relations. His hands-off approach in Guatemala is evident in the records his administration left behind. Unlike Kennedy, whose personal inquiries into the minutiae of Guatemalan affairs abound, President Johnson rarely engaged with matters pertaining to the largest country in Central

America. For his final trip as President of the United States, Johnson traveled to the region for the first time.

On July 6, 1968, Johnson attended the Conference of Presidents of the Central American Republics held in El Salvador. Five years earlier, at the conference's first meeting, the presidents of the United States and Guatemala—Kennedy and Ydigoras—argued over allowing Juan Jose Arévalo participation in the upcoming presidential election. Ydigoras defended Arévalo's right to run for office, albeit for self-interested reasons, and soon found himself ousted from office. The conference in 1968 marked the first time the Guatemalan and American presidents met in person since Kennedy's fateful encounter with Ydigoras and it appeared much had changed in the interim. A left-leaning reformer who campaigned as the inheritor of the 1944 Guatemalan Revolution had come to power through a free and fair election. By 1968, the threat of communist infiltration in Guatemala had subsided and Cuban-inspired guerrilla movements diminished throughout Latin America as anticommunist regimes, in league with the United States, took extreme measures to eradicate the Red Menace. The United States and Guatemala cooperated on a number of projects aimed at economic diversification, social welfare, and infrastructure development. The US-supported a civilian president who had even managed to curb the excesses of his inordinately powerful military. At first glance, the Alliance for Progress had achieved its goals in Guatemala.

Billed as an informal trip, Johnson's stopover in Guatemala was purely ceremonial. Johnson arrived at the airport where he was greeted by dignitaries, observed a few cultural displays, and made a short speech. He affirmed that "The Alliance for Progress,

if we are faithful to its charter, can mean a new dawn of progress for all of us.”⁷⁹⁰

President Johnson praised the ongoing regional economic integration through the Central American Common Market and projected that “Central America can be a workshop for opportunity and a workshop for achievement in this area of the world.”⁷⁹¹ References to communist guerrillas and counterinsurgency terror were notably absent in the president’s brief remarks. Although Johnson admitted there remained much work to be done, the triumphant tone of the exiting American president gave the impression of a victory speech.

Photographs from the event hint at the reality of the relationship between the two countries and their leaders.⁷⁹² Amid the cheerful pageantry on display, Johnson and Méndez Montenegro both appear grim faced. The Guatemalan president obscured his reactions with sunglasses for most of the visit, but a few images revealed that he and Johnson showed the strain of being an enfeebled executive. Dark circles weltered under the eyes of the two progressive presidents who had been overwhelmed, in different ways, by the armed forces nominally under their command. Had they the occasion for a meaningful exchange, Méndez Montenegro and Johnson might have commiserated over the destruction of their domestic agendas. President Johnson, however, remained largely disinterested in the country’s affairs. He departed Guatemala after spending a single hour in the airport.

⁷⁹⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks of the President Upon Arrival at Guatemala City Airport, Guatemala” July 8, 1968. Papers of the President 1963-1969, The President’s Appointment File [Diary Backup], Box 105, LBJL. Page 1.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid. 2.

⁷⁹² Photographs referenced are part of a collection of unnumbered images taken during Johnson’s visit to Guatemala. They are accessed by special request but are part of the Central America trip sub-file in :Papers of the President 1963-1969, The President’s Appointment File [Diary Backup], Box 105. LBJL.

A month after Johnson's fleeting visit, an unprecedented event peeled back the thin veneer of progress: the assassination of Ambassador John Gordon Mein. In early August, the US embassy attributed a significant uptick in violence to the upcoming municipal elections. Most of the 281 offices up for grabs were local and rural, but "of perhaps more importance is the fact that the winners will control the electoral machinery for the 1970 election."⁷⁹³ Paramilitary units of the MLN-PID coalition had established an intimidating presence in areas formerly held by guerrillas and their assassination campaign against PR members and other known leftists resumed. Embassy officials speculated that "some of the violence apparently has been the work of rightist armed vigilantes who are not responding to Government direction. Some of the violence may also be the work of the security forces themselves."⁷⁹⁴ The threat of a grisly death sufficiently motivated many citizens to vote for the conservative coalition, and MLN-PID candidates took twenty-two municipalities, over half of the posts up for election.⁷⁹⁵ Yet resistance remained, both civilian and guerrilla, and faced with the prospect of a renewed cycle of violence and repression, even US officials hoped that Méndez Montenegro would "stiffen his resolve to press on toward the complete elimination of extra-legal operations."⁷⁹⁶ Instead, the military high-command and its partners in the MLN reasserted their domination over the country. The capture of the FAR leader Camilo

⁷⁹³ Thomas Hughes, "Guatemala at the Eve of Municipal Elections." August 7, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala and the United States. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Page 2.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid. 1.

⁷⁹⁵ Carlos Roberto Montenegro Rios, *Historia de los Partidos Politicos en Guatemala*. Author, 2002. Page 122.

⁷⁹⁶ Hughes, "Guatemala at the Eve of Municipal Elections." 3.

Sanchez in late August acted as a catalyst for legitimizing the renewed presence of the counterinsurgency state.

On August 28, Ambassador Mein drove back to the American embassy after lunch with Guatemalan officials. Suddenly, a green Chevelle sped up alongside the ambassador's limousine, pulled ahead, and swerved perpendicular to block traffic. As the ambassador's limo screeched to a halt, a red Toyota appeared from behind, cutting off the exit. A group of men, at least three in number, spilled out of the cars and shouted for the Ambassador and his chauffeur to exit their vehicle. The attackers fired shots into the air, as one of the men grabbed ahold of Ambassador Mein and attempted to drag him into the Toyota. Refusing to be taken as a hostage, Mein broke free from his captors and ran. The apparent leader of the raid shouted from the front car, "Shoot him." A torrent of machine-gun fire flooded the streets. Mein died almost instantly from any one of the six bullets that found their mark. He was the first American ambassador killed while serving in office.⁷⁹⁷

The FAR immediately claimed responsibility for the assassination. They made their rationale abundantly clear in their press release:

"Today...the leading representative in our country of murderous and rapacious imperialism, Ambassador Gordon Mein, was executed. He resisted an attempt to

⁷⁹⁷ This account is derived from a number of primary sources housed in US archives, but the most crucial were: Central Intelligence Agency, "Assassination of US Ambassador to Guatemala." August 29, 1968. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL;

Peter F. Costello, "Killing of U.S. Ambassador, John Gordon Mein." September 27, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety. Box 72. National Archives.;

Walt Rostow, "Assassination of Ambassador Mein." August 29, 1968. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2. Box 54, LBJL.;

Dean Rusk, "Confidential Telegram, State 229659." August 29, 1968. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL.

kidnap him that had been made for political reasons as a response to the capture of Comandante Camilo Sanchez, of the FAR...The capture of comrade Camilo so far has been kept from the public. The FAR demands the appearance of Comandante Camilo Sanchez, at present held...under the command of the sadist, Noeé Villegas Delgado, head of the Fascist groups in the army, Mano, Cadeg, etc., and ex-head of the Fourth Corps of the National Police, the den of reaction where most of the 6,000 victims of reactionary violence in Guatemala have been tortured and murdered. The execution of the Yankee ambassador is only the first in a series of measures that will be taken until Comandante Camilo is produced. By making known the capture and disappearance of the Comandante, the FAR repeats its irrevocable decision to fight until, together with the people, it defeats and drives out the greedy and parasitic bourgeoisie. We will fight on. Victory or Death for Guatemala.”⁷⁹⁸

In response, the Guatemalan government immediately executed Camilo Sanchez. Death-squads that had temporarily deactivated reemerged and returned to their murderous work. Security forces cordoned off the entirety of Guatemala City and began moving house-to-house to root out the suspected assassins. The National Police learned that the cars used in the attack on the ambassador were rented under the name of Michele Firk, a French socialist. Seemingly confirming the FAR’s guilt, she shot herself before police could subject her to what would have undoubtedly been a brutal interrogation. Bounty posters appeared with the faces, names, and aliases of the three chief suspects offering ten-thousand quetzals to “honorable citizens” who could either provide essential information, or neutralize the “leaders of chaos and anarchy” themselves.⁷⁹⁹ It is unclear if Guatemalan security forces actually apprehended the alleged culprits, but the wave of terror and bloodshed that followed the American ambassadors assassination claimed the lives of many leftist dissidents, guerrilla or not. For the scattered guerrillas that remained,

⁷⁹⁸ Translation of the FAR press statement provided in Gott, *Guerrillas Movements in Latin America*. 87.

⁷⁹⁹ A copy of this wanted poster was attached to the following memo: Peter F. Costello, “Killing of U.S. Ambassador, John Gordon Mein.” September 27, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety. Box 72. National Archives. page 5.

the death of Camilo Sanchez and the revivification of right-wing paramilitary activity effectively ended the revolutionary movement of the 1960s. The assassination of Ambassador Mein likewise sounded the death-knell of the Alliance for Progress.

John Gordon Mein did not overtly exhibit the rabid anticommunism of his predecessor, Ambassador Bell, but he cannot not be considered an exemplar for Kennedy's vision of the Alliance for Progress. He supported President Méndez Montenegro and urged for greater civilian control of the military, economic development, and political reform. At the same time, he avidly supported counterinsurgency efforts by calling upon John Longan to recalibrate security forces, and shot down his colleagues support Méndez Montenegro's attempts to push for tax reform. Historian Stephen Rabe points out that Mein had even advised his contacts in the security forces to bury their mutilated murder-victims to prevent bad press.⁸⁰⁰ His assassination provided the perfect opportunity for legitimizing the Guatemalan counterinsurgency state just as it appeared to be at its most vulnerable.

Mein's death cemented the relationship between the United States and Guatemala's military leadership. Shock and anger silenced many of the policymakers who had previously expressed their unease with the excesses of the counterinsurgency operations. The embassy still encouraged Méndez Montenegro's efforts to disarm the estimated three-thousand civilians in clandestine paramilitary organizations, but suggestions for cutting economic or military aid to discourage state-terror evaporated.⁸⁰¹

⁸⁰⁰ Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), page xxxi.

⁸⁰¹ Thomas Hughes, "Guatemala: Disarming the Right-Wing Vigilantes." October 21, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Page 1.

Through the remainder of 1968, the US embassy received numerous reports warning that the FAR had “decided to attack ‘the American presence in Guatemala’ as a matter of policy.”⁸⁰² Specifically, the FAR apparently hoped to repeat their attack on Mein—the embassy learned that “an expert gunman of the FAR already has carried out a surveillance of the Ambassador’s residence in Guatemala City.”⁸⁰³ Crafting a new policy guide, the US embassy now resolved that “we believe it is misleading to hold that socio-economic reforms in the rural areas can provide a direct solution for insurgency.”⁸⁰⁴ In the wake of Mein’s assassination, the United States redoubled its commitment to the Guatemalan security forces while simultaneously abandoning the core values of the Alliance for Progress.

The Guatemalan counterinsurgency state and its constituents were the greatest beneficiaries of the assassination of Ambassador Mein. The overwhelming majority of scholars report that the FAR was behind the plot, citing their press release, but Michael McClintock has suggested that the assassination might have been a false-flag operation carried out by top military officers and the MLN. McClintock cites interviews published by The New York Times and The Washington Post given by two close associates of Colonel Arana, a former bodyguard and the son of one of Arana’s business partners, who implicated several unnamed members of the Guatemalan military to US investigators.⁸⁰⁵

⁸⁰² Thomas Hughes, “Guerrillas Resolve to Attack American Presence.” November 15, 1968. National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 2, Box 54. LBJL. Page 1.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁴ Max Krebs, “Suggested Revisions – IRG/COIN Working Group Action Plan for Guatemala.” December 3, 1968. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, US Embassy: Guatemala, Commission for Historical Clarification. Page 2.

⁸⁰⁵ McClintock, *The American Connection*. 96.

Moreover, McClintock points to a memo written by Mein in June 1966 in which the ambassador reported that he had learned that right-wing extremist plotted to assassinate him and the German ambassador, Count Karl Von Spretti.⁸⁰⁶ In 1970, two years after Mein's death, kidnappers seized Ambassador Von Spretti and killed him when the Guatemalan government refused to negotiate. This was the third major kidnapping blamed on the FAR within a single month, a fact that McClintock finds suspect for the derelict organization. The military high-command used the death of Ambassador Mein to replace the Defense Minister with an MLN hardliner and forced Méndez Montenegro to reinstate the rank of general. For the first time since the 1944 revolution, five colonels were promoted to the military's most preeminent position.⁸⁰⁷ Regardless of whether shadowy right-wing forces or desperate revolutionaries committed the assassination, the death of Ambassador Mein paved the way to victory for the MLN-PID coalition in the upcoming presidential elections.

* * *

If there was any life left in the original vision of the Alliance for Progress, the election of Richard Nixon in 1968 extinguished any hope that the ambitious program could be rejuvenated in Guatemala. As President Nixon entered the White House, Guatemalans began to look toward their own presidential contest that would inaugurate a new administration in July 1970. In preparation for the chaos that accompanied Guatemalan presidential elections, the State Department drafted extensive contingency plans in 1969. The Méndez Montenegro administration had expended what little

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid. 97.

⁸⁰⁷ Handy, *Gift of the Devil*. 163-164.

influence it had marshalled, and threats to the constitutional Guatemalan government came from all sides. Should a right-wing military junta seize control, the State Department again debated on whether or not to withhold economic assistance programs and reduce official personnel if the regime refused to eventually allow elections.⁸⁰⁸ Returning to the perennial fear of Cuban infiltration, US officials also prepared for the resurgence of the battered “Castroist insurgency” and believed that Cuba’s support might resuscitate the guerrillas, who could take advantage of the transition of power. If guerilla and terrorist attacks threatened urban centers, the State Department believed that Méndez Montenegro would have no choice but to grant the military a free hand to establish order to ensure his personal safety.⁸⁰⁹ Additionally, in the unlikely event that the insurgency gained popular support and could not be controlled by Guatemalan security forces, the United States would supply whatever military assistance, short of conventional ground forces, that the Guatemalan military requested.⁸¹⁰

The most worrisome possibility the State Department faced was a nationalist clique of junior officers staging a coup; a recurring path followed by both liberal and conservative military leaders since the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944. The State Department feared that a reformist junta would be intensely nationalistic, potentially anti-American, and would only exacerbate Guatemala’s existing problems. Worst of all, such a regime might follow “the Peruvian example” and inspire other Latin American countries to distance themselves from the Northern Colossus through regional solidarity

⁸⁰⁸ United States Department of State. “Study in Anticipation of a Crisis in Guatemala.” April 21, 1969. DNSA: Guatemala and the US. Department of State, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, Office of Central American Affairs, Commission for Historical Clarification. page 39

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid.

and increased economic self-sufficiency.⁸¹¹ Mired in the Vietnam War abroad and suffering from domestic unrest, the United States found it could do little but watch and wait for the outcome of the Guatemalan elections. By 1970, both Guatemala and the United States elected conservative presidents who had promised law and order, and whose ruthless determination in the pursuit of their goals earned them infamous reputations.

President Julio César Méndez Montenegro survived, but at a terrible cost. Colonel Arana's counterinsurgency campaign had earned him the title, "the Butcher of Zacapa," and for his actions, he became a national hero among the military and landed elite.⁸¹² His popularity only increased during his diplomatic exile as Ambassador to Nicaragua, where he became the protégé of Anastasio Somoza.⁸¹³ Three major contenders vied for the Guatemalan presidency, but Colonel Arana secured the nomination of the coalition of the two major conservative parties, the PID and the MLN. The *Partido Revolucionario* purged its left leaning members and selected Mario Fuentes Pieruccini, a moderate centrist, to inherit the Méndez Montenegro administration.⁸¹⁴ Jorge Lucas Caballeros of

⁸¹¹ Ibid. 18. The Peruvian Example is a reference to the leftist, nationalist military regime that began with General Juan Velasco Alvarado's coup against President Fernando Belaúnde. The political situations in Guatemala and Peru were broadly similar. Belaúnde, like Méndez Montenegro, was a moderate reform who proved largely ineffective in office thanks to domestic and foreign opposition. Both presidents faced rural insurgencies inspired by communism and had to rely increasingly on their militaries to maintain the semblance of order. General Velasco's government, which deposed Belaúnde on October 3, 1968. This military dictatorship was a notable exception in that it was leftist in its political orientation and attempted numerous reform programs, nationalized a number of industries, and invested heavily in import-substitution industrialization. Velasco aligned Peru more closely with Cuba and the Soviet bloc and was regularly at odds with the United States.

⁸¹² Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*. 60

⁸¹³ Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984) 163.

⁸¹⁴ Bureau of Intelligence and Research. "Guatemala: Campaign for National Elections Underway." February 13, 1970. DNSA: Guatemalan and the US. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research. 3.

the *Democracia Cristiana Guatemalteca* (DCG), a moderate leftist, had been an army officer, an economist, and a politician who advocated reform stood little chance against his more conservative opponents according to the State Department analysts⁸¹⁵ The 1970 election was superficially legitimate in that the military did not directly install their candidate in the presidency. They did not need to resort to a coup or widespread violence because they had already captured the mechanisms of state power and controlled enough voters through fear of death-squad reprisals. Norman Gall, an experienced reporter on Latin America, stated that Arana loyalist in the countryside “Threatened to burn down villages that did not vote overwhelmingly for MLN candidates.”⁸¹⁶ A decade of civil war had eliminated an entire generation of moderate leaders and most leftist parties had been outlawed, making freedom of choice in Guatemalan elections merely an illusion. Nearly half of Guatemala’s registered voters abstained from casting their ballots, and Colonel Arana won the presidency with the support of a mere 21% of the electorate.⁸¹⁷ It was the first and only time a right-wing military leader came to power in Guatemala through purely democratic means.

No one within the State Department was surprised by Colonel Arana’s victory in the 1970 presidential election. Arana opened his presidency with a promise; he would eliminate all guerillas even “if it is necessary to turn the country into a cemetery.”⁸¹⁸ The United States would finance his attempt to do so. Immediately, the United States

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁸¹⁶ Norman Gall, “Guatemalan Slaughter.” *New York Review of Books*, Volume XVII, No 9, 20 May 1971; McClintock, *The American Connection*. 99

⁸¹⁷ James Dunkerly, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America*. (London: Verso, 1988) 459.

⁸¹⁸ Colonel Carlos Arana quoted in: LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*. 256.

government began to assist Arana in the creation of an elite police corps designed to help the new president cope with resurgent urban terrorism inspired by his election. Even those State Department officials who advocated the plan admitted that a “close watch” must be kept on Arana and the military because of the “serious risk” entailed in granting more military power to the colonel-president.⁸¹⁹ The fleeting caution of the State Department was well placed; Arana soon declared a state of siege and unleashed death-squads armed with kill lists written by the executive branch. Within the first twelve weeks of Arana’s presidency, the Guatemalan government assassinated scores of political dissidents, arrested 1,600 citizens, and murdered over one-thousand people.⁸²⁰ In the years that followed, Arana achieved a modicum of order through a heavy toll in blood and fear.

As vigilantism and violence once again escalated in Guatemala, the United States found that it could do little to control the counterinsurgency state it had helped create. In fact, the murderous military-machine had managed to become relatively self-sufficient. The aid furnished by the Alliance for Progress had not improved stability, security, or quality of life in Guatemala, but it had built a structure for anticommunist operations. Military and economic assistance from the United States reached its highest levels during the 1960s, and though the Guatemalan military shattered the revolutionary forces before the end of the decade, literacy rates plummeted, malnutrition spiked, and the already wide gap between the wealthy few and the yearning masses expanded. Instead of a more egalitarian and prosperous society, the Alliance for Progress produced *Aranismo*—the

⁸¹⁹ Maurice J. Williams. “[U.S. Assistance to Arana Government].” July 17, 1970. DNSA: Guatemala and the US., Agency for International Development, National Archives, 1.

⁸²⁰ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*. 256.

term used by Susanne Jonas to express the institutionalization of the counterinsurgency state under Colonel Arana.⁸²¹ Throughout the 1960s, US aid aimed at economic development made its way into the hands of military through its unending pursuit of a communist counterinsurgency. After the ascent of Carlos Arana to the presidency, military officers loyal to the president used their unchecked power to carve out massive tracts of land and pillage state coffers to add to their personal assets. Scholars have referred to the 1970s in Guatemala as “the decade of the generals.”⁸²² Combining their unsurpassed military might with the financial assets of the state, the Guatemalan high-command soon exceeded the wealth and power of the country’s traditional civilian oligarchs. Their rule in Guatemala, which continued uninterrupted until 1986, only added more corpses to the mound of dead that the counterinsurgency state had been built upon.

Electing a reform-minded candidate to the presidency did not change the course Guatemalan military officers and US policymakers had already set in motion. This chapter has shown that Julio César Méndez Montenegro was president in name only, and that the leaders of the Guatemalan military retained the power they had seized as a result of the 1963 coup. Kennedy’s decision to accept a military overthrow as a means to prevent a leftist reformer, Juan Jose Arevalo, from becoming the president was meant to prevent an unfriendly and potentially subversive government from coming to power in Guatemala. A reaction to the military’s seizure of power, a full-fledged communist insurrection formed in resistance. Defense Minister Peralta used his time as head-of-state

⁸²¹ Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*. 121.

⁸²² Black, *Garrison Guatemala*. Chapter 2.

to redefine the rules of Guatemalan politics to stymie any opposition to the coalition of far-right military officers and politicians. Faced with a civil war in Guatemala, the Johnson administration thought that the election of Méndez Montenegro would kick-start the Alliance for Progress in Guatemala. Instead, counterinsurgency campaigns consumed Guatemala and projects meant for economic and social development became another set of tools employed by the security forces. Collaboration between the United States and the Guatemalan military reached its peak as Guatemalan colonels, trained by the School of the Americas, orchestrated devastating operations against the revolutionary movement. By the time that some American officials became squeamish over the crimes against humanity perpetrated during the US-sponsored counterinsurgency campaign, the Guatemalan Armed Forces and its political allies had eliminated, controlled, or coopted other contenders for state power. By the end of the 1960s, the Alliance for Progress had failed to bring democracy and prosperity to Guatemala. Their country an inversion of those lofty ideals espoused by Kennedy in 1961, Guatemalans endured decades of harsh military rule, widespread violence, and civil war.

CONCLUSION

In 1975, reflecting on the program he had helped to build, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. despaired at what had become of the Alliance for Progress. The Kennedy administration's idealistic vision of the Western Hemisphere, united by the freedom and opportunity created by the Alliance, had been replaced by a "ghastly illusion"—a myopic focus on counterinsurgency doctrine.⁸²³ The history of US-Guatemalan relations during the Alliance for Progress era offers a cautionary tale of missed opportunity and tragic consequence. Instead of embracing popular leaders who supported the Alliance, the United States colluded with authoritarian commanders within the Guatemalan military and facilitated their ascent to power. At the same time, leading officers of the Guatemalan Armed Forces used the United States' overriding fear of communism gaining additional footholds within its traditional sphere of influence to bring the state under their control, build a fearsome military-machine, and eventually acquire vast personal fortunes. The choices made by Guatemalan military officers and US officials converged to transform Guatemala into a nation where the distinctions between the command structure of the armed forces and the offices of the government were virtually nonexistent. Ultimately, the policy decisions made during the 1960s failed to completely counter communist opposition and enabled the Guatemalan military-government to go on to commit genocide as part of its US-sponsored counterinsurgency program.

⁸²³ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. "The Alliance for Progress: A Retrospective." in *Latin America: The Search for a New International Role*, ed. Ronald G. Hellman and H. Jon Rosenbaum, (New York, Halsted Press, 1975) 83.

This study has reconstructed the course of US-Guatemalan relations during the Alliance for Progress era to show the crucial role the United States played in developing the country into a counterinsurgency state dominated by military officers. Simultaneously, this work has revealed that Guatemalan leaders, particularly those in the armed forces, successfully convinced Washington that they represented the most reliable partner for preventing a communist takeover. The resulting military government maintained its control over the nation through repression and violence. Successive ruling cabals of the high-ranking officers learned lessons during the 1960s that they applied vigorously during the following two decades of military-rule. The scorched-earth, exterminationist tactics employed during the 1960s counterinsurgency campaign laid the groundwork for the genocide the Guatemalan military-state committed during the 1980s. Although the notorious 1954 coup is rightly recognized as a watershed moment for the history of US-Guatemalan relations and the Cold War, the evidence presented here reveals that the military seizure of power in 1963 and its US-sponsored counterinsurgency campaign are critical for understanding how the Guatemalan state became capable of orchestrating the mass-murder of its own citizens.

Guatemala's importance to the United States shifted dramatically at the onset of the Cold War, as the banana republic transformed into one of the Western Hemisphere's most contested battlegrounds. Consecutive presidential administrations, beginning with Truman, were deeply suspicious, and often hostile, toward revolutionary movements and looked upon the reforms implemented by left-leaning Guatemalan nationalists as communist infiltration, or, to paraphrase Ambassador Peurifoy—something near

enough.⁸²⁴ This antipathy toward revolution fostered a close relationship between the anticommunist officers of the Guatemalan military and likeminded American officials before the CIA-backed coup toppled Arbenz in 1954. When the Arbenz government began to encroach on US corporate possession in Guatemala and legalized the communist party, the United States had already hand-picked pliable, conservative military leaders who would do Washington's bidding. Despite their elaborate designs, American planners learned they could not dictate events in Guatemala without the cooperation of key Guatemalan power brokers.

The existing scholarship on US-Guatemalan relations is rooted in the 1954 coup. There can be no doubt that Operation: PBSUCCESS represented a seminal event in US-Latin American relations. Although the United States was deeply involved in Guatemalan affairs since the late nineteenth century, the 1954 coup marked the beginning of a more direct, interventionist approach taken by the United States government. For those who have written about Guatemala's Cold War experience, the overthrow of Arbenz marks the beginning of the country's bloody descent into military rule, civil war, and genocide. In 1954, then vice-president Nixon boasted that the CIA-orchestrated coup against Arbenz represented "the first instance in history where a Communist government has been replaced by a free one."⁸²⁵ Nearly thirty years after President Jacobo Arbenz's forced-resignation, a US official observing what was only beginning of the Guatemalan

⁸²⁴ This is in reference to a previously cited (Chapter 1) remark Ambassador Peurifoy made regarding Arbenz: "I am definitely convinced that if the President is not a Communist, he will certainly do until one comes along."

John Peurifoy, memorandum of conversation, December 17, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954 4: 1091-93. Quoted in Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 181 ; Rabe, *The Killing Zone*. 46

⁸²⁵ Richard Nixon, "What I Learned in Latin America" *This Week*. August 7, 1955 ;quoted in Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, eds. Guatemala. (New York: NACLA, 1974) 74-75

military-governments genocide against the Maya remarked, “What we’d give to have an Arbenz now.”⁸²⁶ While a wealth of scholarship exists on the 1954 coup and the Maya Genocide of the 1980s, English-language accounts that explain the foreign policy developments between the United States and Guatemala during the interim are rare and incomplete. Perhaps the most significant ambition of this study is to suggest that the events that occurred within the twenty-six year gulf between these cornerstones of the scholarship on US-Guatemalan relations of the Cold War are essential for understanding how the two are connected. In the process of reconstructing this overlooked period, the research presented here has provided evidence that what transpired during the Alliance for Progress era had a major impact on the development of the Guatemalan state and its relationship with the United States. Guatemala’s government certainly underwent a counterrevolutionary shift resulting from the 1954 coup, but this research shows that the state did not fully convert into a military regime until 1963. The high command of the Guatemalan Armed forces quickly followed their dissolution of the ostensibly constitutional democratic republic with a vicious counterinsurgency campaign where Alliance for Progress programs reinforced the training and armaments provided by the United States. Simply put, one cannot understand how the Guatemalan military-government committed genocide without realizing the transformative steps taken by Guatemalan military officers and US officials during the Alliance for Progress era.

The United States had opportunities to change course even after the overthrow of Arbenz. The Kennedy administration represented the best chance for real change in US-

⁸²⁶ Alan Riding, “Guatemala: State of Siege,” *The New York Times Magazine*. August 24, 1980 pg 66-67; quoted in: Walter Lafeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983) 9.

Guatemalan relations. Despite promises from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that the Alliance for Progress would herald a new age of opportunity and freedom for Latin Americans, Guatemalans learned that the United States would not accept any challenge to its hemispheric hegemony. Washington's willingness to compromise with reform-oriented nationalists in Guatemala completely disappeared after Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba offered an alternative vision for governance in Latin America. Under the direction of Kennedy's ambassador to Guatemala, John Bell, the United States quietly cultivated its relationships with aspiring military officers who had steadily acquired more power in the crisis-ridden years that followed the 1954 coup. When former president Juan José Arévalo announced that he would return from exile to run for another term, he presented himself as an admirer of Kennedy and a proponent for the Alliance for Progress. Nevertheless, President Kennedy chose to ignore the will of the Guatemalan people and some of his most knowledgeable advisors. Instead of defending the democratic process, Kennedy supported another military coup in Guatemala in order to ensure that the Central American country remained firmly within the United States' sphere of influence.

The United States intervention through the CIA's Operation: PBSUCCESS in 1954 is a monumental event for the histories of the Cold War, US foreign policy, and modern Guatemala. Yet, for all of its importance, it was not an irreversible step in Guatemala's tortured path to military dictatorship, civil war, and genocide. That moment arrived when the Guatemalan Armed Forces, with the approval of the Kennedy administration, took control of the government, canceled elections, and dissolved the constitution in March 1963. Once Defense Minister Enrique Peralta took the helm of

state, the military's hold over the country could not be broken. His regime repressed political opponents, rewrote electoral laws to advantage the conservative-military coalition, and further extended the reach of security forces into Guatemalan society through Alliance for Progress sponsored programs. Under Peralta's rule, the commanding officers of the Guatemalan Armed Forces fully changed from being the praetorian guard of the ruling elite, to the unchallenged masters of the Guatemalan state.

The Kennedy administration's willingness to partner with hardline anticommunist officers was an attempt to prevent the spread of communist-inspired revolution in Guatemala. The strategy almost immediately backfired. Colonel Peralta's seizure of power inspired the disparate opposition groups and rebels to form a united front against the military regime and its US-backers. Faced with a popular revolutionary movement led by communists, the United States priorities in Guatemala shifted overwhelmingly to counterinsurgency efforts. Although their nationalist pride caused some Guatemalan officers, including Defense Minister Peralta, to hesitate in accepting the full measure of US assistance, this reluctance eroded as the guerrilla fronts' attacks became more audacious and threatening. As such, Alliance for Progress programs became dominated by Guatemalan military officers who used the money and material initially intended for developmental projects to bolster their war against the guerrillas. The military's authority over the state became unassailable as Washington poured millions in foreign aid into the coffers of counterinsurgency colonels.

The Guatemalan Civil War provided a perpetual purpose for swollen military budgets and authoritarian rule that the Johnson administration, even if it had desired to do so, could not have reversed. This study has presented the presidency of Julio César

Méndez Montenegro as evidence for this claim. The leader of the *Partido Revolucionario*, who campaigned as the inheritor of Guatemala's aborted 1944 revolution, was president only in name. Peralta and the military high command reluctantly allowed Méndez Montenegro to assume the office that he had fairly won only after he agreed to a secret compact that effectively neutralized presidential power. Furthermore, under the façade of a civilian presidency and a return to constitutionality, the Guatemalan Armed Forces began to take extreme measures in their efforts to wipe out guerrillas and political dissidents. Making use of the armaments and training provided by the United States, the security forces employed clandestine death-squads who tortured, kidnapped, and massacred perceived enemies of the state on a whim. These reprehensible methods produced results. The estimated 500-strong guerrilla movement and its civilian supporters were nearly wiped out by the security forces' coordinated assaults that claimed the lives of as many as ten-thousand Guatemalans. Despite the harsh repression and shocking violence employed by the military, the revolutionary movement was not completely destroyed, although it took nearly a decade to recover. The success of the 1960s counterinsurgency campaign in Guatemala saw the normalization of forced-disappearance, death-squad atrocities, and state-terror throughout Cold War Latin America and foreshadowed the genocide perpetuated by the Guatemalan government against the Maya in the 1980s. For Guatemala, the legacy of the Alliance for Progress era was the institutionalization of brutal military rule.

Several scholars and commentators, especially those writing during the 1970s, regularly compared Guatemala and Vietnam as the United States' laboratories of

counterinsurgency.⁸²⁷ This study too, has infrequently noted some of similarities between the two conflicts. Although if either country could be considered a laboratory, neither contained a controlled experiment. These two major Cold War counterinsurgency efforts, however, have major differences in scale, scope, and outcome. The protracted international quagmire that was the Vietnam War ended with the ignominious withdrawal of US forces and a communist victory. By contrast, Guatemala remained an anticommunist bastion and Cold War ally for Washington through its civil war that dragged on even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In pursuing Cold War victory in Guatemala, the United States encouraged one of the most murderous military regimes of the twentieth century to engage in flagrant crimes against humanity, culminating in genocide, in the name of anticommunism. If we are to make a comparison between these two tragic Cold War policy failures, then perhaps the results of the divergent results of these conflicts takes on greater importance. The Cold War history of Guatemala may offer a glimpse into a version of the Vietnam War that the United States won.

⁸²⁷ For example see: Blase Bonpane, "Our Latin Vietnam" February 4, 1968. The Washington Post; and Howard Sharckman, "The Vietnamization of Guatemala: U.S. Counterinsurgency Programs."; both reprinted in Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, eds. Guatemala. (Berkeley, CA: North American Congress on Latin America, 1974.)

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