

CREATING THE POLITICAL SPECTACLE DURING THE COLD WAR:
GUATEMALA AND THE UNITED STATES

A Senior Honors Thesis

By

MICHAEL CASSIDY BURTON

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
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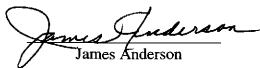
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ABSTRACT

Creating the Political Spectacle During the Cold War:

Guatemala and the United States. (April 2000)

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The political spectacle is a show and a way of seeing things. In effect, the media reduces politics to theatre, simplifying complex issues into a world of black and white, where leaders compete with an enemy for influence over a social problem. On another level, the spectacle is a looking glass, used by politicians to distort the public's view of the world in order to maintain their own power.

The political spectacle is more than an individual's interpretation of events, however. It is a social construction that has developed over a long period of time in which "the observer and what they observe construct one another" in an attempt to bring order to and make sense of reality. The political spectacle is created by the way leaders, enemies, and social issues interact with one another and reconstruct one another over time.

Furthermore, some social constructions of reality are better than others. Good policymakers and citizens have a responsibility to step back and critically evaluate the political spectacle and determine if it created based on reliable evidence or assumptions. When the observer attempt to deconstruct the political spectacle and look at it from multiple perspectives they can reach a more complete understanding of the event.

The objective of this research is to show how the interaction between the United States and Guatemala during President Arbenz's tenure in power is a good example of Edleman's political spectacle. Depending on how US policymakers interpreted Arbenz's policy decisions and actions determined if he was perceived as an enemy of the United States or a reformist leader. The accepted interpretation had important ramifications on government policy, the future of Guatemala, and ultimately human life.

Regardless of whether an individual believes the Eisenhower Administration made the right or wrong decision about Arbenz, policymakers and concerned citizens need to be aware of the political spectacle and its mystifying properties, and attempt to evaluate their own positions and their political leaders in terms of it. Hopefully, this analysis of events will provide an example for how this can be done.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II HISTORICAL OVERVIEW.....	5
III THE GUATEMALAN CONSTRUCTION.....	7
IV THE AMERICAN CONSTRUCTION.....	13
V DEFINING THE SOCIAL ISSUE: AGRARIAN REFORM OR RED PLANNING.....	18
IV DEFINING THE POLITICAL LEADER: THE WAR HERO AND THE CONCERNED NEIGHBOR.....	22
V DEFINING THE POLITICAL ENEMY: ARBENZ THE RED OR AMERICA THE IMPERIALIST.....	26
VI SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	28
REFERENCES.....	34
VITA.....	36

INTRODUCTION¹

The political spectacle is both a show and a way of seeing things. In effect, the media reduces politics to theatre, crafting complex issues into a simplified realm of black and white, where leaders compete with an enemy for influence over a social problem. On another level, the spectacle is a looking glass, used by politicians to distort the public's view of the world in order to maintain their own "status, wealth, or ideological beliefs".²

The political spectacle is more than an individual's interpretation of events, however. It is more complex than a point of view. It is a social construction that has developed over a long period of time in which "the observer and what they observe construct one another" in an attempt to bring order to and make sense of reality.³ The political spectacle is created by the way leaders, enemies, and social issues interact with and reconstruct one another all combining to "reinforce one another, imply one another, and transform into one another".⁴

Not all social constructions are created equally. Some interpretations of reality are better than others. Good policymakers and citizens have a responsibility to step back and critically evaluate the political spectacle and determine if it is based on reliable evidence or assumptions of fact. When observers attempt to deconstruct the

¹ The format for this document follows the standards set by the Editorial Board of the American Political Science Review.

² All theory related to the construction of the political spectacle is from Dr. Murray Edleman's text, Constructing the Political Spectacle, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) The question is at p. 69.

³ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 3.

⁴ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 80.

political spectacle and look at it from multiple perspectives, studying how it developed over time, they can reach a more complete understanding of the event. That is why Dr. Murray Edleman's theory and this research are important.

When one recognizes that multiple constructions of reality exist, it becomes clear why debate about political issues and historical events persists. "If political developments depended on factual observations, false meanings would be discredited over time and a consensus upon valid ones would emerge, at least among informed and educated observers", but it doesn't because what makes these issues political is what keeps their meaning from being resolved.⁵ After all, there is nothing political about issues that everyone agrees on. It is the conflicting interpretations of facts and events, what they mean, and what should be done about them that makes them so.

The objective of this research is to show how Operation PBSUCCESS, a CIA plan to overthrow the democratically elected President of Guatemala Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, and other events that were related to this topic are a good example of Edleman's political spectacle.⁶ "In every era and every national culture, political controversy and maneuver have hinged upon conflicting interpretations of current actions and developments." This example is no different. How US policymakers interpreted President Arbenz's policy decisions and actions determined if he was perceived as an enemy to the United States as opposed to a reformist leader. The

⁵ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 3.

⁶ Most CIA operations have a country code before their names, in this case PB means Guatemala. Christopher Andrew, For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), p. 207.

accepted interpretation had important ramifications on government policy, the future of Guatemala, and ultimately human life.

What I will argue, regardless of whether an individual believes the Eisenhower administration made the right or wrong decision about President Arbenz, is that policymakers and concerned citizens need to be aware of the political spectacle and its mystifying properties, and attempt to evaluate a country and its own leader's decisions and actions in terms of it. Hopefully, this analysis of Guatemala will provide an example of how this can be done. In order to complete this task, a broad range of literature presenting different social constructions was reviewed including recently declassified CIA reports, international and US newspaper clippings, academic articles from both liberal and conservative sources, and some recent historical analyses of Operation PBSUCCESS. These sources were used to discover how the political spectacle is created and reconstructed over time.

This paper presents some historical perspective to establish the narrative's setting and then offers competing constructions of how a supporter of President Arbenz might have interpreted the events that transpired in Guatemala in the early 1950's followed by a chapter proposing how an American supporter of US policy might describe history. While scholars defend some of the ideas presented in both constructions, these diametrically opposed points of view are meant to expose the two dominant social constructions in a creative but meaningful way so that they can be analyzed and compared.

After the presentation of the American and Guatemalan Constructions, three chapters are devoted to analyzing them with attention to the creation of the social issue, the leader, and the enemy, respectively. Additional information will be introduced that was not mentioned in the competing constructions in an effort to show how different individuals assembled them. The constructions at the beginning of this paper are only meant to introduce the political spectacle as a whole and highlight some of the ideas, while the each individual chapter on the creation of social issues, the leader, and the enemy are meant to look more closely at the two different narratives and show how each part of the political spectacle is created. The concluding chapter discusses my own reactions and interpretations of the research and offers a brief account of how I think the political spectacle is affected in a Modern Democracy and the Information Age.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

To better understand the debate that surrounds Operation PBSUCCESS, it is helpful to put the events and people in historical perspective.⁷ Essentially, the ancient Mayan Empire was crushed by the Spanish who set up a system of large estates to enslave the indigenous people of Guatemala, who were used as a cheap source of labor in the profitable coffee trade. The coffee market was not as profitable in the 1930's, and because the poor working class was forced to absorb the financial loss by the rich *landinos* or plantation owners, the wealthy needed an effective leader to keep the masses from revolting. Jorge Ubico ruthlessly achieved what his supporters wanted of him, but he disliked the *landinos*. Instead, he encouraged American businessmen to invest in his country, and none did so as aggressively as United Fruit. At one point, United Fruit employed 40,000 Guatemalans on its banana plantations, owned and operated the only major port on the Atlantic, and dominated the nation's utilities and railroad industry, earning the title *El Pulpo* or the Octopus.

Eventually, Ubico's methods of managing the populace led to more social unrest than his Army could manage and the people revolted in the Revolution of 1944. Two heroes of the revolution, Capt. Jacobo Arbenz and Maj. Francisco Arana, sponsored popular democratic elections in which Juan Jose Arévalo, a "professor from the University of Tucuman", was elected to the presidency.⁸ Arévalo's regime

⁷ This brief summary of Guatemala's history leading up to the conflict in the early in 1950's is based on a section of Nicolas Cullather's report in "Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala," Center for the Study of Intelligence, Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1994, pp. 1-14.

⁸ Piero Gleijeses's book *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and The United States, 1944-1954*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) clarifies Arévalo's former position as a professor on p. 34.

allowed for some pluralism, and as a result labor unions formed and smaller political parties came into being. Arana was presumed to be the next president elect and in a prideful move demanded Arévalo relinquish power before his term was up. Arévalo requested some time to consider Arana's proposal, and while he waited Arévalo and Arbenz planned a way to arrest Arana. When the soldiers tried to apprehend Arana he was killed in the resulting gunfire.

The public perceived it as an assassination rather than an accident, and Arana's death sent shockwaves through the country. Loyalists rebelled in the July Uprising, yet the Aranistas were quickly defeated. Arbenz purged the government of them, and those who did not flee into exile were incarcerated. One Aranista in particular, Col. Castillo Armas, who led a failed attack on Guatemala City, would eventually command the paramilitary invasion of Guatemala for the United States in Operation PBSUCCESS.

This short retelling of history establishes some background for the present state of the narrative. It is the late 1940's. Arbenz is now in power. Armas is in exile in Honduras. The United States is at war with the Soviet Union, albeit a Cold War – not a shot fired overtly. The tension between the two superpowers is acute, and an ideological battle between democracy and communism is being waged worldwide. A nation has not fallen to communist influence in the Western Hemisphere; however, American policymakers are becoming more concerned with the possibility that Guatemala might be the first when Arbenz passes a very popular law among his people called Decree 900.

THE GUATEMALAN CONSTRUCTION⁹

President Arbenz was a democratically elected hero of the Guatemalan people. His agrarian reform program, Decree 900, liberated the poor and took back the country from greedy business interests and oppressive landowners. President Arbenz justifiably removed those in the Guatemalan Supreme Court who unfairly declared the policy unconstitutional in order to serve the best interests of his people.

United Fruit, the tyrannical banana monopoly, was furious over the matter. The company that claimed it had helped develop the economy in Guatemala only made the people and government dependent on United Fruit for employment and capital investment.¹⁰ Ironically, it got what it deserved when 250,000 acres of United Fruit's property were taken back and redistributed to the people it had exploited for so long. President Arbenz offered them financial compensation for the land, but they stubbornly refused it.¹¹ Making no progress in Guatemala, United Fruit decided to dispatch lobbyists to Washington to make its case and using its powerful connections within the United States government and playing to communist paranoia, the company cajoled American policymakers into protecting their economic interests.

⁹ For both the Guatemalan and American Constructions, a good deal of newspaper articles covering related events from 20 June to 3 July 1954 in the New York Times contributed to their formation. I have made an effort to include the most important references throughout the paper, but I want recognize the overall role all of these articles played in helping me to get a grasp of the political spectacle. Also, Nicolas Cullather's report "Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala," (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1994) was an important part of shaping my approach to these constructions and the topic

¹⁰ Flora Lewis, "The Peril is Not Red In Central America," The Nation, 13 February 1954, p. 128.

¹¹ Some sources show that he offered "book value" for the land. Marlise Simons, "Guatemala: The Coming Danger," Foreign Policy, 43 (Summer 1981), p. 94.

Among its allies in Washington, United Fruit could count on John Foster Dulles who helped establish the deal that put the company in charge of the banana business in Guatemala in 1936 when he was employed by Sullivan and Cromwell or powerful stockholders like US Ambassador to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge.¹² In charge of planning in the early stages of Operation PBSUCCESS, Walther Bedell Smith “was [also] actively seeking an executive position with United Fruit.”¹³ These connections to the US government are even more proof that CIA plans for Operation PBSUCCESS were influenced by big business.

Although Eisenhower Administration also expressed concern about communism in Latin America, these worries were unfounded. President Arbenz was no communist.¹⁴ Guillermo Toriello, his foreign minister, accurately stated that the US categorizes “as communism every manifestation of nationalism or economic independence, any desire for social progress, any international curiosity, and any interest in progressive liberal reforms.”¹⁵ While Arbenz appointed communists to lower level Cabinet positions within his government, he did not put them in positions of any real power. Communists only held four of the sixty-one seats in Congress, and even though Guatemala’s Communist Party leader Manuel Fortuny did have close ties

¹² Evan Thomas, The Very Best Men: Four Who Dared the Early Years of the CIA, (New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 111.

¹³ William Blum, Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since WWII, (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1995), p. 75.

¹⁴ This statement is given some credit in the World Marxist Review that says the people’s revolution in Guatemala might have been more successful if the country had a leader with firmer ideological convictions. Pedro Martinez and Bauer Piaz, “Lessons of the Guatemalan Tragedy,” World Marxist Review: Problems of Peace and Socialism, 27 (1984), p. 102.

¹⁵ William Blum, Killing Hope, p. 73.

with Arbenz their relationship did not warrant characterizing the president as a communist.

The suspicion of Soviet influence was also unfounded. They provided no direct support to the Arbenz regime nor did they indirectly provide arms.¹⁶ The eventual shipment of Czech arms was an unfair reason for American policymakers to use as a reason for authorizing the covert paramilitary invasion led by Castillo Armas.¹⁷ They saw ties to the Soviet Union because they wanted to see ties to the Soviet Union. It was the arms embargo placed on Guatemala by the United States that forced President Arbenz to buy weapons from wherever he could get them.

Even with the arms embargo in effect, in order to maintain US dominance in the region and justify their position, the CIA used radio propaganda, rumor-mongering, subversive pamphlets, and even Catholic priests to warn their congregations of the godlessness of Communist regimes and what was to come if Arbenz stayed in power.¹⁸ The United States government was even prepared to resort to cold-blooded assassination attempts if the regime could not be toppled with diplomatic and economic pressure.¹⁹

The pervasive fear in Guatemala, both among government officials, military officers, and the people led a Guatemalan hero to act in ways characteristic of a leader

¹⁶ William Blum claims the Russians had no interest in Guatemala, not even so much as an Soviet embassy there. *Killing Hope*, p. 73.

¹⁷ See "Again the Big Stick," *The Nation*, 29 May 1954.

¹⁸ William Blum suggests that Francis Cardinal Spellman, a prelate in New York, arranged for the anti-communist propaganda to be distributed by the Catholic Church through Archbishop Mariano Rossell Arellano in Guatemala. *Killing Hope*, p. 77.

¹⁹ Gerald K. Haines details these plans in "CIA and Guatemala Assassination Proposals 1952-1954," CIA Historical Staff Analysis, (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1995).

devoted to protecting his country. Arbenz tried to appeal to the United Nations for a cease-fire. He requested that a fact-finding group be sent to Guatemala, but the United States was able to use its diplomatic strength to prevent the UN Security Council from intervening in Guatemala's case. Instead, Arbenz's pleas were delegated to a forum in which the United States had even more power over, the Organization of American States.

After the peaceful attempt to manage the conflict failed, Arbenz was justified in buying arms to protect his country and his people during the coming invasion. Guatemala's neighbors had no right to fear invasion. Arbenz was trying to defend Guatemala from outside aggressors, not attack them. Some of these aggressors were even being supported by Latin American countries, most notably Honduras and Nicaragua, who the Guatemalan Foreign Minister openly accused of being in cahoots with the United States.²⁰

Prior to the invasion, leaflets were dropped on the capital. People believed them to be practice bombing raids and panic spread quickly. In order to manage conflict during the invasion Arbenz arrested 480 people believed to be supporters of the insurgents. Castillo Armas, a traitor to his homeland and puppet to the United States government, led the initial attack on Guatemala the next day, June 19, 1954 at 7 o'clock in the morning. The illusion of a massive invasion, broadcast over radio channels and printed in international newspapers, all funded by US tax dollars, was

²⁰ Guatemalan Foreign Minister Guillermo Toriello's appeal to the UN Security Council was published in the New York Times "Guatemalan, Honduran Text," 22 June 1954, p.2.

what succeeded in removing Arbenz from power.²¹ The pathetic “rag tag” forces of Castillo Armas on their own would have been defeated swiftly by the Army if reality had not been distorted by American propaganda makers.

Arbenz stepped down after some negotiating with military elites and Armas assumed control of the ruling junta. The United States succeeded in removing a man from power who was democratically elected by his people and put a tyrannical puppet in control of the government in order to prevent the perceived spread of communism in the Western Hemisphere. The United States ruined the chance of a liberal banana republic evolving into a respectable democracy and broke many laws to achieve this.

The covert action it supported is in violation of international law. The State Department and CIA’s plans violated a number of treaties and policies, most notably the Rio Pact and the Good Neighbor Policy, and while the United States wanted to protect itself from the Soviet Union, its perception of reform in Guatemala was misinformed and misguided.²² The United States had no right to involve itself in the affairs of a sovereign country, and ironically practiced the type of imperialism that it argued against so passionately on the world stage.

Arbenz was no communist. He acted independently of the people who advised him. He was created as an enemy for the convenience of American plans in the region. Decree 900 was a progressive policy that liberated a long-suffering people. It is

²¹ As many historians on the subject note, if Arbenz had held out “one week more” he would have been able to stop Armas’s forces. J. Alvarez del Vayo, “Guatemala’s *Strong Man*,” The Nation, 14 August 1954, p.124.

²² Bernard Rosen argues that the United States prevented Guatemala from developing into an industrialized country, and that agrarian reform was not communist planning but “the Latin American

unfortunate that the US was spurred to action primarily by the economic interests of United Fruit and the mere perception of Soviet influence. The imperialists to the North would be wise to evaluate their own policies and way of seeing things before jumping to conclusions about another country's leader.

version of Keynesian economics" in his article "Counter Revolution: Guatemala's Tragedy," The Nation, 31 July 1954, pp. 88-89.

THE AMERICAN CONSTRUCTION

President Arbenz rose to power by eliminating his only political competition and ensuring his victory by stuffing ballot boxes with forced votes. The revolutionaries who attempted to avenge the likely president elect Arana, were arrested and imprisoned, or like Col. Castillo Armas, forced into exile in Honduras. Arbenz's agrarian reform policy, Decree 900, which authorized the government's plan to seize private property across Guatemala's countryside and redistribute it to the people was the first major sign of his communist leanings.²³

In an attempt to curb the illegitimate policy, the Guatemalan Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional. Arbenz immediately showed his selective regard for democracy by promptly firing each of the justices. United Fruit, an American company in Guatemala, was understandably furious over about the new government program. Around 250,000 acres of its property were seized, and although the Arbenz regime offered to pay part of the land's value to the company, his offer was far from generous. United Fruit tried to resolve things in Guatemala, but because the Arbenz regime was uncompromising it decided to dispatch lobbyists to Washington to make its case.

Even with the pressure on the administration to act for economic reasons, the State Department was growing more and more concerned about Guatemala's policies and the increasing influence of José Manuel Fortuny, leader of the Guatemalan

²³ Evan Thomas says Arbenz "considered himself a communist, and among his close confidantes, spoke like one." The Very Best Men, p. 112.

Communist Party, otherwise known as the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT). Decree 900 combined with Arbenz's close relationship to Fortuny was what led to US plans for Operation PBSUCCESS. American interests in Guatemala were motivated more by legitimate national security concerns than anything else. The possibility of a communist country in "America's backyard" and a potential Soviet satellite state was unacceptable to US policymakers during the Cold War.²⁴

While Arbenz did not appoint Communists to any Cabinet positions within his government, he tried to hide them from concerned eyes in important sub-Cabinet leadership roles like the state-run newspaper and radio, the Department of Agriculture, and Guatemala's Social Security program. In order to bolster their image in the media and build new power bases, each of these positions was filled by communists. With only a few Communists elected to Congress, Arbenz and the PGT were slowly building a foundation for communist influence in Guatemala. Fortuny carefully used his close relationship to the president to advance these goals, giving the PGT more influence than a small party of four thousand in a country of three million should have had.

Although Arbenz's relationship with Fortuny and Decree 900 were the two major reasons for US planning of Operation PBSUCCESS, suspicion of Soviet influence and the eventual shipment of Czech arms led to the paramilitary invasion.²⁵

²⁴ David Atlee Phillips, the CIA officer in charge of radio propaganda in Operation PBSUCCESS, notes that intelligence showed Soviets intended to give Arbenz backing. David Atlee Phillips, The Night Watch, (New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. 35.

²⁵ Howard Hunt claims in his book that Arbenz's wife was an "indoctrinated communist", his sources in Mexico knew of anti-Communist student leaders in Guatemala that were being tortured, and that the Guatemalan ambassador had a Soviet contact; insinuating that their was a connection between the country and Moscow's plan for Latin America. Undercover: Memoirs of an American Secret Agent, (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1974), p. 83-96.

Other forms of covert action used on a smaller scale included recruiting of foreign nationals and sabotage. Assassination was considered as an option, but no plans for these extreme measures were ever taken to completion. All of these methods were intended to contribute to the Eisenhower Administration's goal – to remove Arbenz from power in and put an anti-communist leader in his place. Covert action was considered the most cost efficient method, both financially and with regard to human life, while it also offered a preventive means of dealing with the problem rather than waiting until tension escalated to a point where more drastic measures would have to be taken.

Fear was pervasive in Guatemala, among government officials, military officers, and the people. Arbenz tried to appeal to the UN for support, but his plans looked more like a plea for Communist sympathy in the Western Hemisphere than an honest attempt at peaceful reconciliation. US Ambassador to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge in a UN Security Council meeting told the Soviet Union: "Stay out of the Western Hemisphere. Stay out of this hemisphere. Don't try to start your plans and conspiracies here."²⁶ Instead of making Guatemala's case in the Organization for American States, Arbenz tried to use the Soviet's influence in the Security Council and bought arms to protect his country from the impending invasion from communist Czechoslovakia. Guatemala's neighbors feared invasion, and the arms shipment provided more evidence for potential connections to the Soviet Union.

²⁶ A.M. Rosenthal, "Debate is Bitter," New York Times, 20 June 1954, pp. 1,3.

Prior to the invasion, leaflets were dropped on the capital. People believed them to be practice bombing raids, and in a fit of anger Arbenz arrested 480 people in two weeks and tortured and killed 75 of them, burying the victims in a mass grave. In the meantime, Castillo Armas and his troops, who were receiving training in Honduras and planning for the invasion, prepared for the initial stage of the attack which followed the next day, on June 19, 1954 at 7 o'clock in the morning.²⁷ After less than a month of small battles the Guatemalan people liberated themselves, and became the first country to "throw off the yoke of communism" as Arbenz stepped down and Armas assumed control of the presidency.²⁸

Covert action was a necessary and effective means of fighting Communism and preventing a larger loss of life during the Cold War. The State Department and CIA's plans may have violated some treaties and policies, but both the Truman and Monroe Doctrines can be used to defend US involvement in Operation PBSUCCESS. While the United States had obligations to its southern neighbors, preventing the spread of Communism in the 1950's was a much higher national priority.

Many critics say that Arbenz was not a communist, yet they neglect to mention his close ties to José Manuel Fortuny and dismiss his leftist land reform policies as progressive, when Decree 900 was actually a policy used to establish a power base for

²⁷ One particular academic article gives Col. Castillo Armas all of the credit for removing Arbenz from power, but Frederick W. Marks "The CIA and Castillo Armas in Guatemala, 1954: New Clues to an Old Puzzle" grossly overestimates Armas's ability as a commander and his actual number of forces. The Journal of Diplomatic History, Vol. 14, No.1 (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., Winter 1990), pp. 67-86.

²⁸ Armas was actually characterized as the first person to lead a country to "throw of the yokes of communism" when he testified at a House Committee hearing on Communist Aggression. Questions were posed by Congressman Patrick Hillings of California and the transcript was reproduced in American Mercury, 80 (January 1955), p. 137.

the communists in Latin America. While Fortuny exhibited powerful influence over Arbenz's land reform ideas, the President also appointed Communists to important sub-Cabinet positions. Those critics who concede that Arbenz had communist leaning say the United States still had no right to overthrow a democratically elected leader; however, Arbenz took his office in a process that was anything but democratic. His major opponent was assassinated, ballot boxes were stuffed, and illiterate indigenous Indians were led to the polls and instructed to vote for Arbenz.²⁹

The US was spurred to action not by the economic interests of United Fruit, but rather by a justifiable concern for national security. US policymakers were influenced by the Soviet Union's designs for world domination and had witnessed how the USSR had exploited the opportunity already by taking advantage of political turmoil in other nations. Looking at Operation PBSUCCESS in the historical setting of the Cold War and the American point of view in the 1950's makes sense of the United States intentions.

²⁹ American Mercury, 80 (January 1955), p. 140.

DEFINING THE SOCIAL ISSUE: AGRARIAN REFORM OR RED PLANNING

Social issues and their proposed solutions serve as “reinforcements [for] ideologies”.³⁰ The issue of agrarian reform, debated in the American and Guatemalan constructions, is used to define and unite supporters. The proposed way of dealing with the issue ultimately benefits the people who are in power, and in order to gain the mass’s support, leaders put these solutions into terms that are rationally acceptable.

For example, supporters of Decree 900, the Arbenz’s policy that redistributed private property to the poor people of Guatemala, claim it was intended to improve the quality of life and liberate the impoverished from oppressive and powerful landowners. That was the goal of the policy, but at the same time the people who benefited from Decree 900 became more loyal to President Arbenz and his party, increasing his regime’s power while simultaneously reducing the strength of his major political enemies, the landinos and United Fruit, by taking away the source of their financial might – their land. This is not to say Arbenz or other political leaders for that matter define solutions to issues in order to consciously gain power. They often believe in the rational behind their policy and contribute to the political spectacle without even realizing it.³¹

By defining how the social issue should be approached, Arbenz is assigning its value, claiming ownership for the solution, and gaining influence accordingly. It makes sense that Decree 900 was the issue that he used to define himself as the leader

³⁰ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 12.

³¹ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 12.

of Guatemala, for it was the agrarian reform that thrust him into a position of political influence during the Revolution of 1944 when he sided with the people to remove Ubico and the landowners from power. While removing all of the Supreme Court justices from office was an extreme measure and would be used against him in the American Construction, it was a necessary choice for him to implement the policy that was the cornerstone of both his legitimacy as a revolutionary leader and political power as the new president elect.

Unfortunately, the solution for one group of people's ills is a problem for another.³² The conflict over different interpretations of the value of a solution to a social problem grows, in this case quickly, and depending on which construction the observer identifies with it classifies both the leader and the enemy for that participant in the political spectacle.³³ The Guatemalan Construction uses Decree 900 to define President Arbenz as the people's hero, whereas the United States becomes the meddling imperialist. United Fruit is characterized as the heavy-handed monopoly and members of the former power structure become traitorous rebels.

The converse is true for the American Construction. Here, the United States is defending itself and the Western Hemisphere from the spread of communism, United Fruit is a company who has wrongfully had its lands seized, and Col. Castillo Armas is the real hero of the people, only he has been run into exile by the enemy, Arbenz and his red henchmen.

³² Murray Edleman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p. 14.

³³ Murray Edleman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p. 14.

As a policy, Decree 900, went about making change quickly and dramatically. Had change been more incremental, perhaps things might have turned out differently. Instead, the multiple interests organized themselves and acted rapidly according to what they perceived they had to gain or lose both politically and economically. These groups rationalized their positions in terms of the dominant social constructions of a particular political spectacle. Liberals and communists viewed Decree 900 as agrarian reform designed to help the people, while conservatives and most American policymakers interpreted Arbenz's policy as an unlawful seizure of private property and a potential inroad for Soviet influence in the Western hemisphere.

What the poor of Guatemala saw as a policy intended to liberate them, and what Arbenz recognized either consciously or not as a defining issue that would solidify his power; the United States saw Decree 900 as evidence for a communist sympathizer not far to the south of its borders and a potential Soviet ally. Arbenz's policy ultimately became the basis for the United States intervention in Guatemala and the removal of its president.³⁴

It also sets the stage for the political spectacle. In the American Construction, the United States assumes the role of world leader and protagonist. It is the concerned neighbor, worried about communist schemes in Latin America and Arbenz the Red. One journalist notes that Assistant Secretary of State John Moors Cabot used as a "test for determining United States policy toward Latin American countries was whether

³⁴ Jim Handy, "The Most Precious Fruit of the Revolution: Guatemala Agrarian Reform, 1952-1954," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 68 (1988), p. 675.

they where with us or against us.”³⁵ In this case, Guatemala was obviously interpreted as being against the United States. In the Guatemalan Construction however, the roles reverse, and Arbenz is the revolutionary war hero and leader of his people challenging his enemy to the North, the American Imperialists.

³⁵ Freda Kirchwey, “Guatemala Guinea Pig,” The Nation, 10 July 1954, p. 21.

DEFINING THE LEADER: THE WAR HERO AND THE CONCERNED
NEIGHBOR

A political leader can be viewed as a symbol, assigned meaning by both the issues he defends and those who follow him. The political leader is easy for the public to identify with because he simplifies and “introduce[s] meaning to a confusing political world”.³⁶ In the context of the political spectacle, the leader is the protagonist in a great drama doing battle with a feared enemy.³⁷ By ‘entertaining’ those who he leads, the leader earns their admiration and reconstructs the spectacle to serve his interests and maintain his power. Arbenz does this effectively with Decree 900, which was discussed in the previous chapter.

On another level, while the political leader is expected to show the way, they are at the same time beholden to the ideology that helped them gain political power in the first place.³⁸ To deviate from that ideology in order to make a decision that might be unpopular risks losing the coalition that helped put them in power. Often times, leaders will either try to reconstruct an issue in terms that are more acceptable to the public or construct new problems and threats based on the current and dominant political themes to feed the public’s backing. A mixture of fear and awe drives this support.³⁹

This was especially apparent in Congress during the 1950’s with respect to the issue of communism in Latin America. Even Democrats in the Senate blasted Arbenz

³⁶ Murray Edleman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p. 37.

³⁷ Murray Edleman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p. 40.

and his ideas, regardless of whether they thought his policies were good for the people of Guatemala, because the issue resonated with American voters, maintained the politicians hold on power, and defended the American social construction of reality. An example is Senate Democratic Leader Lyndon B. Johnson's speech to Congress on June 22, 1954. In his comments he stated that the "communists were seeking to establish a beachhead in the Americas now" and that "they have passed the stage of infiltration and of building small groups for espionage, sabotage, and subversion" in order to start "a semi-military phase of operations" and begin to take over the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁰ This understandably would scare the American public and lead them to support a leader who was going to take a strong stand against the spread of communism.

While leaders create enemies to gain the public's support, leaders are also created to serve the psychological needs of the masses. Rather than bear the responsibilities for difficult decision making by themselves; the public would rather give authority to a leadership figure who can be responsible for social problems, cheering him on when he succeeds and assuming that insurmountable obstacles prevent him from victory when he fails.⁴¹

In the American Construction the leadership figure takes on multiple forms. In a broad sense, it is the country itself, the United States of America, resisting the evil forces of communist Russia. More specifically, it is politicians and policymakers like

³⁸ Murray Edleman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p. 37.

³⁹ Murray Edleman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ William S. White, "Warning to Soviet on America Asked: Johnson, Democratic Leader, Tells Congress Reds Seek Hemisphere Beachhead," *NYT*, 23 June 1954, p. 1.

President Dwight Eisenhower, United Nations Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles. Posed on Guatemala's border, it is their ally, Col. Castillo Armas who is leading the cause for the rebels. These different leaders are defined in the American construction by the stand they take against President Arbenz and the spread of communism. For example, John Foster Dulles said the United States was committed "not merely to political opposition to communism, but to help alleviate conditions in Guatemala" where there was clear evidence for Soviet influence over the country's leaders, most notably President Arbenz and the Foreign Minister Guillermo Toriello.⁴²

In the Guatemalan Construction, President Arbenz is characterized quite differently, and is the primary leader in this construction. He is characterized by his supporters as a liberator and a talented statesman. He is the agrarian reformer, the protector of labor, the emancipator of the indigenous Guatemalan Indians, and the man who created a centralized bank and took back the natural resources only his countrymen had a right to own.⁴³ He carried on the reforms of his predecessor, President Arevalo, who allowed a multi-party system to develop and encouraged the formation of trade unions and the freedom of speech.⁴⁴ He is the leader who stood up

⁴¹ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 60.

⁴² For a full copy of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's Speech see "The Text of Dulles' Speech on Guatemalan Upset," NYT, 1 July 1954, p. 2. This quote is taken from Walter Waggoner, "Dulles Acclaims Guatemala Gains: At Least One Grave Danger to Hemisphere Removed, Secretary Asserts," NYT, 1 July 1954, p. 2.

⁴³ Pedro Martínez and Bauer Piaz, "Lessons of the Guatemalan Tragedy," World Marxist Review, pp. 101-102.

⁴⁴ "The Death of Francisco Arana: A Turning Point in the Guatemala Revolution," Journal of Latin American Studies, 22 (1990), p. 534.

for Guatemala against United Fruit and the imperious United States.⁴⁵ He is a symbol of the sovereign ruler, rallied around by the parliaments of Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile who all passed pro-Arbenz resolutions and who is praised in student demonstrations in Cuba and Mexico.⁴⁶

Leaders from the United States will carefully skirt some of the positive characterizations of President Arbenz expressed by his supporters in the previous paragraph, and instead use his agrarian reform program against him. Instead of using Decree 900 to identify him as a liberator, like his supporters in Guatemala would, American leaders will say it is evidence of his communist leanings. This process of changing the meaning of a word or phrase is called signification and is a powerful tool in reconstructing the political spectacle. Guatemalan leaders and the Soviet Union will do the same thing when creating the image of the United States as the enemy. Instead of the defender of freedom and human rights, the United States is characterized as a greedy colonial power concerned about its own economic interests and political dominance of the Western Hemisphere.

⁴⁵ J. Alvarez del Vayo, "Aggression is the Word: The Guatemala Crisis," The Nation, 26 June 1954, p. 538.

⁴⁶ J. Alvarez del Vayo, "War Against the UN: The Guatemala Chapter," The Nation, 3 July 1954, p. 4.

DEFINING THE ENEMY: ARBENZ THE RED OR AMERICA THE IMPERIALIST

The creation of the political enemy is an essential part of establishing a leader's authority. In defining who is "evil", the party who threatens the leader's social construction, the public's fear can be focused on the external or even sometimes internal threat. In exchange for the leaders protection from the enemy the public is willing to relinquish authority. The enemy then will be considered evil regardless of what set of actions they take.⁴⁷ If they do something seemingly redeeming in the public's eyes the leader will quickly discredit the enemy by reconstructing their actions in such a way to show that the enemy is trying to misguide and undermine the populace. For example, when Arbenz tried to peacefully end the invasion of Col. Armas's forces by appealing to the United Nations Security Council for a cease-fire, US Ambassador to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge characterizes his request as a plea for communist sympathy in the Western Hemisphere and an attempt to undermine the authority of the Organization of American States.⁴⁸

The enemy can never do right in the leader's mind because the enemy is an essential part of reinforcing the leader's position, whether it be his 'wealth, status or ideological [beliefs]'.⁴⁹ Besides serving this function, leaders define the enemy in such a way that psychologically justifies the way the enemy will be dealt with. By focusing on an enemy and relying on that characterization as a foundation for a leader's political

⁴⁷ Murray Edleman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ "Text of Lodge's Statement Before the United Nations Security Council," *NYT*, 26 June 1954, p. 2. Besides Lodge's direct contribution to the political spectacle, A.M. Rosenthal offers her own interpretation of this topic with her article "UN Bans Debate Over Guatemala Pending Inquiry," *NYT*, 26 June 1954, p. 1.

career and the justification for a political system's philosophy, the leader who creates and invests so much in the social construction often loses perspective.⁵⁰ What he creates, the absolutes he uses to characterize the enemy, becomes an interpretation that both mystifies and dominates its creator.

It begins when a political leader can only see the enemy in his terms and rejects any proof that the opponent may not be what he is constructed to be.⁵¹ As the leader becomes more committed to his social construction he becomes more adept at identifying the enemy's weaknesses. Every action and decision can be interpreted in such a way that supports the leaders' construction. This has the effect of decreasing the leaders "sensitivity" to the uniqueness of each individual in an opposing group and causes all members of an enemy party to be lumped into one category.⁵² In the case of Guatemala, Arbenz and all of his supporters are Communists, not individual human beings. This makes it easier to justify more extreme measures of dealing with the enemy, because it masks their humanity.⁵³ This, however, is a fundamental way the enemy is dealt with and helps a country or group rationalize decisions that are sometimes violent means to achieve an end. The process continues endlessly, for if the current enemy is defeated or expires, another one will be created to take its place so that the group identity can continue to be molded and held together.

⁴⁹ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 69.

⁵⁰ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 75.

⁵¹ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 79.

⁵² Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 77.

⁵³ Murray Edleman, Constructing the Political Spectacle, p. 76.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To a degree, I can't help but be trapped in my own country's political spectacle. I can challenge it. I can say, this part doesn't make much sense or the reasoning is not based on any reliable evidence, but I still can't reject the idea of protecting the United States from the possibility of outside aggression, even if it means taking preventive measures to ensure America's national security. I can't say just because Arbenz liberated the poor or ushered in some new freedoms in Guatemala that he was wrongly deposed. He was a complex individual, with both strengths and weaknesses, but his plans for agrarian reform that were dramatically changing the face of his country for the betterment of his people threatened the stability of the region and the safety of the United States.

His agrarian reform policies and willingness to openly include communists in his regime provided the ideal climate for the PGT to grow and organize into an influential group.⁵⁴ Other communist parties in Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica that had gained considerable influence were banned by 1948, yet only in Guatemala did communist power continue to grow until Arbenz was finally removed from office in 1954.⁵⁵ Land reform is a popular idea in Latin America, and had Decree 900 been successfully implemented in Guatemala, both Arbenz's policy and the Communist party officials that helped to create and administer it would have gained a great deal of legitimacy, spreading the call for agrarian reform and communism to other parts of

⁵⁴ Flora Lewis interestingly notes that "Communism in Central America is obliged to use the mechanics of other causes to lift itself to power." The Nation, 13 February 1954, p. 129.

Latin America.⁵⁶ Strategically, the spread of communism in “America’s backyard” would have been a glorious victory for an enemy that was well worth stopping – the Soviet Union.

Even though my position on communism was largely glossed over earlier, I believe that it is a powerful political spectacle based on appealing social constructions of reality manipulated to deceive the impoverished, oppressed, and intellectuals with the false promise that the working class can “seize the means of production and use its profits to create a just society” where everyone is equal.⁵⁷ In communism’s actual form, this utopian ideal was never realized. It was only used by communist leaders to establish their authority. Before the masses had the opportunity to unravel the political spectacle, the state was already in the process of systematically robbing people of their individuality and personal security. As one scholar of political culture writes:

“[I]n a Marxist-Leninist system ... a comprehensive ideology and elaborate state policies [are] aimed at atomizing citizens, destroying communities, and controlling the resources necessary for independent action. Punishment for taking part in independent activities – outside the direct sponsorship of the state and therefore “contrary” to its interests – include expulsion from the country, internal exile, [or] exorbitant fines aimed at ruining a person’s life financially. The state exercises complete control over all forms of activity in society: political, economic, and social.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Piero Gleijeses, Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and The United States, 1944-1954, p. 362.

⁵⁷ It certainly offered an example for other political leaders in Latin America, who took more from Arbenz’s experience than his ideas about agrarian reform. In the World Marxist Review it notes that Cuban revolutionaries and the Sandinistas learned from Arbenz’s mistakes and would make sure the oligarchs had no power to challenge the new regime and that the public would be armed in case the military did not side with the leadership. Pedro Martinez and Bauer Piaz, World Marxist Review, pp. 101-102.

⁵⁸ Monte Palmer, Comparative Politics: Political Economy, Political Culture, and Political Interdependence, (Itasca: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc, 1997), p. 50.

⁵⁸ Christine Sadowski, “Autonomous Groups as Agents of Democratic Change in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe,” Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries, ed. Larry Diamond, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), p. 163.

This was how communism was practiced. Diverse ideas and intellectual freedom were extinguished in favor of the state's position. Fear and suspicion began to dominate people's lives. "Informers were everywhere, and children were even encouraged to spy on their parents and relatives ... [some] individuals were arrested simply for fitting the wrong profile".⁵⁹ It is estimated that "8,000,000 citizens were incarcerated at any given time" in Russia and "1,000,000 were assumed to be shot" during the Stalinist era.⁶⁰ In the name of the proletariat, Stalin killed his own people, but in fact it was only to maintain his power and a political system that was doomed to failure.

The Soviet Union created "a culture of dependence by encouraging people to rely on the state rather than on themselves" and it is this "persistence of a socialist work ethic that saps the productivity of Russian workers".⁶¹ Communism, as a political spectacle, is supposed to be a dazzling show that promises amazing levels of productivity and equality for all of its citizens, but in practice it fails miserably. The promises used to lure the educated and the economically disadvantaged into supporting the communist state have to be reinforced by intimidation to make the system work and maintain the Communist Party's dominance. The communist political spectacle's legitimacy during the Cold War was based on the illusion that the people in communist

⁵⁹ Monte Palmer, Comparative Politics: Political Economy, Political Culture, and Political Interdependence, p. 314.

⁶⁰ Monte Palmer, Comparative Politics: Political Economy, Political Culture, and Political Interdependence, p. 315

⁶¹ Monte Palmer, Comparative Politics: Political Economy, Political Culture, and Political Interdependence, p. 352

countries supported it, but “compliance was only instrumental, stemming from widespread repression and fear.”⁶²

Conversely, the genius of democracy is its openness and tolerance for conflicting ideas. The validity of one political party or group’s social construction of reality can be challenged by another without resulting in violence. Conflict is managed in open forums of debate where two different views can be expressed without fear. This discourse usually dismantles poorly supported social constructions and prevents *irresponsible leaders from rising to power* or in the case of two extreme positions, reasonable politicians can find a middle ground and a more moderate course of political action is usually followed.

This is not to say that democracies are impervious to the mystifying affects of the political spectacle or that America is the ideal form. There have been times in the United State’s history when the public was dominated by a political spectacle that was based more on assumptions or misguided thinking: like slavery, the murder of American Indians in the name of Manifest Destiny, or the pervasive suspicion of citizens with Asian heritage during World War II that led to Japanese internment camps. Fortunately, the United States does not ignore its history and has tried to learn from its past mistakes.

The United States fought a justifiable battle for democracy against communism during the Cold War. While some of the rhetoric during the Red Scare was unfounded, driven by paranoia, and used to advance certain irresponsible people’s political careers,

⁶² Larry Diamond, Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries, pp. 18-19.

like Senator Joseph McCarthy's who claimed that numerous people working at the State Department and other government agencies were communists; other speeches like President Harry Truman's address to the joint session of Congress on 12 May 1947 are shining examples of what the United States was committed to protecting by stopping the spread of communism.⁶³ While some policy mistakes were also made and cannot be defended, like Operation Chaos started by Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms during the Johnson Administration to determine "the extent of foreign influences on domestic dissent" in the United States during the student protests against the Vietnam War, these kinds of mishaps are far outnumbered by rational decisions and good judgment on the part of American policymakers and the CIA.⁶⁴ I believe Operation PBSUCCESS for the most part was one of them.

Another promising tool for those who would challenge the political spectacle is the arrival of the Internet. While the media still interprets complex events in terms of good and bad or black and white, the Internet provides the public with access to a variety of different sources. Had citizens in the 1950's had the access to the Internet a student does today, perhaps they could examine the developments in Guatemala online from the point of view of American policymakers in Washington, advocacy groups in Latin America, or even European and Russian news sources. Technology promises to

⁶³ The speech became the foundation for the Truman Doctrine. Martin Walker, The Cold War: A History. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), p. 49, 70.

⁶⁴ The CIA has no authority to operate within the United States. For legal reasons, that is the domain of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Furthermore, despite the evidence that no international communist conspiracy designed to orchestrate the protest movement existed, Operation Chaos which continued into the Nixon Administration continued to be used by the President to collect information on American students. Christopher Andrew, For the President's Eyes Only. pp. 336, 354-355.

be a powerful tool for those who wish to deconstruct the political spectacle and try to evaluate it on multiple levels.

As long as leaders try to examine their decisions in terms of the political spectacle and learn from mistakes in the past, the United States will go in the right direction. Responsible citizens also have a duty to make sure America's leaders don't reconstruct social issues or enemies with information that ignores reliable evidence or fundamental human rights. It is both the political leader and the public that is responsible for seeking the ideal, and in a Modern Democracy there is the most opportunity to do that.

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