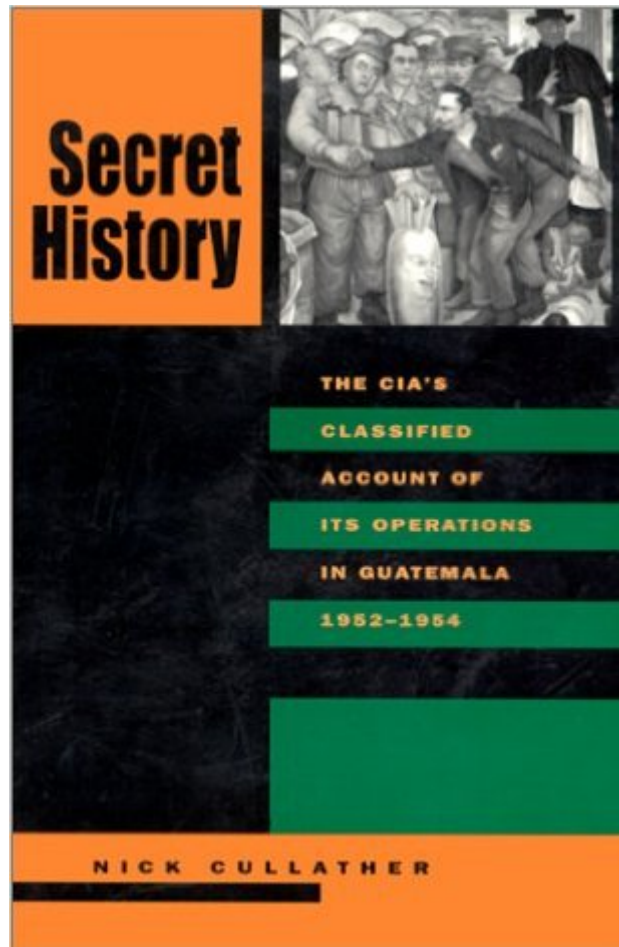


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Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account Of Its Operations In Guatemala, 1952-1954



Synopsis

In 1992, the Central Intelligence Agency hired the young historian Nick Cullather to write a history (classified “secret” and for internal distribution only) of the Agency’s Operation PBSUCCESS, which overthrew the lawful government of Guatemala in 1954. Given full access to the Agency’s archives, he produced a vivid insider’s account, intended as a training manual for covert operators, detailing how the C.I.A. chose targets, planned strategies, and organized the mechanics of waging a secret war. In 1997, during a brief period of open disclosure, the C.I.A. declassified the history with remarkably few substantive deletions. The New York Times called it “an astonishingly frank account . . . which may be a high-water mark in the agency’s openness.” Here is that account, with new notes by the author which clarify points in the history and add newly available information. In the Cold War atmosphere of 1954, the U.S. State Department (under John Foster Dulles) and the C.I.A. (under his brother Allen Dulles) regarded Guatemala’s democratically elected leftist government as a Soviet beachhead in the Western Hemisphere. At the C.I.A.’s direction, the government was overthrown and replaced by a military dictatorship installed by the Agency. This book tells, for the first time, how a disaster-prone operation—marked by bad planning, poor security, and incompetent execution—was raised to legendary status by its almost accidental triumph. This early C.I.A. covert operation delighted both President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers, and Allen Dulles concluded that the apparent success in Guatemala, despite a long series of blunders, made the venture a sound model for future operations. This book reveals how the legend of PBSUCCESS grew, and why attempts to imitate it failed so disastrously at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and in the Contra war in the 1980’s. The Afterword traces the effects of the coup of 1954 on the subsequent unstable politics and often violent history of Guatemala.

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Customer Reviews

This is a great book about one of the great follies of the Cold War: the CIA's overthrow of a leftist government in Guatemala in 1954. The author, Nick Cullather, wrote the book while employed as a CIA historian. He had full access to surviving files on the Guatemala operation, and intended his monograph to serve as a case-study for CIA staff. It was ultimately released as part of a brief "openness" campaign at the CIA. Parts were heavily (and clumsily) redacted by CIA censors before declassification, but the remaining text still fascinates and appalls. Cullather is wise in the ways of government, and understands the role of hubris and error in human affairs. His book is very smart. Today the story is well known. In the early 1950s, the CIA plotted to rub out a reformist Guatemalan government that had redistributed land to peasants and curbed the influence of the United Fruit company. The agency funded anti-regime activists, blocked arms shipments, established a clandestine radio station, and assembled a rag-tag army of rebels based in Nicaragua and Honduras. Notwithstanding the David-and-Goliath nature of the contest, the covert action almost failed. Intelligence was bad, the operation was poorly planned and riddled with security lapses, and most CIA assets within Guatemala were rolled up before the invasion began. Worst of all, the invaders were laughably incompetent and on the verge of collapse after a few days of border fighting. Fortunately for the bunglers at the CIA, the Guatemalan Army became gripped by fear that Eisenhower might send in the Marines: to avoid a showdown with the U.S., the generals removed the reformers from power.

The book, written by Nick Cullather, is a perfect account of the secret operations carried out by the C.I.A. The content is rich with interesting information on how the Guatemalan president, Jacobo Arbenz, was overthrown by rebels and American monopolies who were angered by his policies. The fear of Communist influence within Arbenz regime also alarmed the United States, who then approved immediate action to topple him out of power. The story begins with Jorge Ubico, the president of Guatemala who welcomed U.S. investments and gave the United Fruit Company (UFC) the freedom to do whatever they want in the country. The result led the UFC to control every significant enterprise in the country. Inevitably, this stirred some controversy as peasant strikes

paralyzed the country. Ubico surrendered his power to a military junta led by Jacobo Arbenz, who stepped aside and held elections. Arevalo was elected president. During his presidency, Guatemala took a couple of positive strides with the proliferation of political parties, including a Communist party, and the organization of unions for laborers. But when Arbenz was elected president, he took things further by passing reforms that expropriated land to peasants. For the first time peasants received land instead of being robbed of it or being exploited on it. This threatened United Fruit Company's assets and immediately asked for U.S. intervention which led to the formation of "Operation Success" led by C.I.A. officials and Guatemalan rebel Castillo Armas. The C.I.A.

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