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# Considering Democracy "An 'Unrealistic' Alternative": The Results of the 1954 American Intervention in Guatemala

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## **CONSIDERING DEMOCRACY “AN „UNREALISTIC“ ALTERNATIVE”: THE RESULTS OF THE 1954 AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN GUATEMALA**

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Guatemalan political elites have traditionally resorted to violence and repression in order to suppress social reform movements. In 1944, a group of middle-class reformers, including army captain Jacobo Arbenz, spearheaded a revolution that replaced dictator Jorge Ubico and began instituting genuine democratic reforms. The new civilian president, Juan Arevalo, sponsored new economic and political reforms intended to benefit the rural poor that constituted two-thirds of the Guatemalan population. Six years later, the revolution continued with the election of Arbenz, who promised to continue the efforts of his predecessor. However, U.S. officials, viewing developments in Guatemala through a Cold War prism, came to see Arbenz as a communist subjugating Guatemala and turning it into a Soviet proxy state. In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his advisors responded by approving and implementing a Central Intelligence Agency plan to overthrow Arbenz and replace him with a counter-revolutionary leader, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. This paper examines the results of the 1954 American intervention, why it ultimately failed and why historians have come to view it as a mistake. It is based on relevant secondary literature and original U.S. government sources, including Department of State and Central Intelligence Agency telegrams, correspondence and National Intelligence Estimates.

## Considering Democracy “An „Unrealistic“ Alternative”: The Results of the 1954 American Intervention in Guatemala

A Study by Mark Viskocil Submitted for Review to the Department of History  
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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## **Considering Democracy “An „Unrealistic“ Alternative”: The Results of the 1954 American Intervention in Guatemala**

Driving a dilapidated station wagon and wearing a leather jacket over his checkered shirt, Lieutenant Carlos Enrique Castillo Armas led his rebel troops across the Honduran border into Guatemala on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1954, to overthrow the popularly elected, progressive government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. Accompanied by only 450 soldiers, Armas nevertheless succeeded, thanks to the assistance of the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States government. Unfortunately, the long-term consequences of the decision to overthrow Arbenz were disastrous, as Armas and his successors inflicted 35 years of severe political repression that left hundreds of thousands of Guatemalan citizens dead. During the civil war, American officials felt that authoritarian, non-democratic governments were appropriate for Guatemalan citizens and continued to support violent military dictatorships. Through original government and relevant secondary sources, this belief is discarded. The American intervention in Guatemala ultimately failed and historians have come to view it as a mistake.

The Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department, by 1954, believed they achieved a great victory against communism by ousting Arbenz from power. The covert operation to do this, PBSUCCESS, had two main goals: “1. To remove covertly, and without bloodshed if possible, the menace of the present Communist-controlled government of Guatemala and 2. To install and sustain, covertly, a pro-US government in Guatemala.”<sup>1</sup> PBSUCCESS attained both goals-Arbenz capitulated on June 27<sup>th</sup>.

In an attempt to salvage ten years of economic, political and social progress initiated by the 1944 revolution (in which Arbenz spearheaded the overthrow of the

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Cullather, Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954 (California: Stanford University Press, 2006), 152.

highly repressive dictator Jorge Ubico Castaneda), Arbenz handed the presidency to Colonel Carlos Enrique Diaz, but former bureau chief Enno Hobbing of *Time* Paris remarked “Colonel, you’re just not convenient for the requirements of American foreign policy.”<sup>2</sup> Pressured by Hobbing, John Doherty (CIA station chief) and John E. Peurifoy (American Ambassador to Guatemala) to step aside, Colonel Diaz complied and on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1954, Castillo Armas became president.<sup>3</sup>

Although U.S. officials hoped that Castillo Armas would govern as a centrist, the new Guatemalan leader immediately began securing power for himself. His security forces-led by the highly unpopular Jose Bernabe Linares-banned all literature deemed inappropriate, while Armas “disfranchised illiterates (two-thirds of the electorate), cancelled land reforms, outlawed all political parties, labor confederations and peasant organizations...finally, he decreed a „political statute“ that voided the 1945 constitution, giving him complete executive and legislative authority.”<sup>4</sup>

Playing off President Dwight David Eisenhower’s anti-communism, Castillo Armas requested significant amounts of monetary and financial aid from the United States, but his inability to be fiscally responsible quickly became apparent, as his government was almost broke a year later. This was partially due to government corruption, such as handing out corn importing licenses for a \$25,000 kickback during the corn famine of 1955.<sup>5</sup> When critics raised their voices, Armas sent his police force to silence them.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 206.

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 177.

<sup>4</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

That same year, Castillo Armas displayed his financial dependence on the United States by requesting \$260 million in aid—an amount so high it even surprised Thomas Mann of the State Department, who quickly denied the request.<sup>6</sup> Armas stated that \$60 million of the aid would go towards a national road project, but the State Department felt that acquiescing to his expensive appeals would encourage other financially dependent countries in Latin America to follow suit with their own high dollar requests and as historian Nick Cullather concludes, “by the end of the year, it was apparent that each country had entirely unrealistic expectations of the other.”<sup>7</sup>

United States officials were dismayed by Castillo Armas’ lack of financial accountability, but the National Security Council nevertheless decided to grant a loan for \$53 million on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1955, because the collapse of the Guatemalan government would have been an enormous embarrassment for the American one.<sup>8</sup> Vice President Richard Milhous Nixon stated that abandoning “the first government in history resulting from an overthrow of a Communist regime...will discourage oppressed peoples everywhere in the world and would reflect unpardonable inaction on the part of the US Government.”<sup>9</sup> CIA Chief of Special Research Staff, Dana B. Durand, agreed and wrote CIA director Allen Welsh Dulles, asserting that “the downfall of the Castillo Armas

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<sup>6</sup> Department of State Memorandum, Norman Armour to Henry Holland, January 25, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 21, 59, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0093.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 1, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Department of State Memorandum, Henry Holland to Herbert Hoover, Jr., May 20, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 30, 80, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0114.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 1, 2008. See also Cullather, page 115.

<sup>9</sup> Department of State Telegram, Richard Nixon to John Dulles, February 15, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South American, Volume VII,” Document 24, 66-67, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0100.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 1, 2008.

regime would be a major blow to US prestige and a powerful propaganda theme for International Communism.”<sup>10</sup>

To prevent the downfall of the Castillo Armas regime, historians Max Gordon and Robert J. Alexander stated that the United States government drastically increased its aid to Guatemala: “American assistance, which had totaled only \$600,000 during the entire revolutionary era of 1944-1954, soon reached a level of \$45 million annually.”<sup>11</sup> In the first three years of the Armas presidency, the American government gave his administration \$80 million, almost all in the form of grants that did not have to be paid back. In fiscal year 1956-57 alone, the United States gave Armas \$36 million. In comparison, the amount equaled a fourth of the aid sent to the entire nation of India.<sup>12</sup>

A July, 1955 National Intelligence Estimate (high level, interdepartmental and authoritative reports from the intelligence divisions of the Department of State, CIA, Army, Navy, Air Force, Joint Staff and others who appraise vital foreign policy problems and present them to the president, his appropriate cabinet level officers and the National Security Council for evaluation) explained another key reason for the substantial spending increase: “Most politically conscious Guatemalans believe that the US planned and underwrote the 1954 revolution, and therefore has a continuing responsibility for the success or failure of the present government.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> CIA Memorandum, Dana Durand to Allen Dulles, June 19, 1956, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 43, 121, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0155.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 2, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 233.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-233.

<sup>13</sup> IAC National Intelligence Estimate 82-55, Office of National Estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency, “Probable Developments in Guatemala,” July 26, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 35, 94, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0128.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 1, 2008.



No amount of money could have brought stability to Guatemala, because the CIA had replaced a progressive and reformist Arbenz government with an incompetent military dictatorship. During a February 1955 conversation with Henry F. Holland (Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs), Castillo Armas elaborated on his administration's inability to successfully lead Guatemala without American direction. Armas voiced his concerns about his inexperienced and incapable government and he even admitted to Holland that "he himself was poorly prepared to cope with many of his problems and that he desperately needed advice and guidance" from the United States.<sup>14</sup> The Office of National Estimates (the directors of interdepartmental National Intelligence Estimates working groups) in the Central Intelligence Agency concurred with Holland, expressing fears that "Castillo may have damaged his potential capacity for leadership by excessive reliance on US advice and aid."<sup>15</sup>

By January, 1955, Castillo Armas was frustrated by his inability to implement public works projects and effectively deal with agrarian reform, labor issues and many other pressing matters. The American Ambassador to Guatemala, Norman Armour, informed Washington that Armas blamed the U.S. Embassy for the delays in starting financial and technical aid programs and had actually accused the Embassy of "ulterior

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<sup>14</sup> Department of State Memorandum, Conversation between Henry Holland and Castillo Armas, February 14, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII," Document 23, 63, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0097.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 1, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> IAC National Intelligence Estimate 82-55, Office of National Estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency, "Probable Developments in Guatemala," July 26, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII," Document 35, 104, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0138.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 2, 2008.

motives and conspiracies with real and fancied opposition elements.”<sup>16</sup> Armour depicted Armas as completely incompetent, noting that “There are moments when he seems almost pathetic. He must literally be led by the hand step by step.”<sup>17</sup>

Castillo Armas’ shortcomings frustrated not only U.S. officials, but also his Liberation army—who had previously fought by his side during the overthrow of President Arbenz, but were now growing impatient. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1954, a cable from the CIA station in Guatemala reported that the members of Armas’ army had been living on \$18 for two months and were being “fed through charity.” CIA officials added that although “Calligeris (Armas) had collected more than \$200,000 for aid to army of liberation...these funds have been spent on other „confidential“ matters. Funds embarked by Arbenz govt for Congressional expenditure have also been spent for intelligence activities by Calligeris!”<sup>18</sup>

The telegram proceeds to state that thirteen government officials were attempting to resign from office in mass protest against Armas’ overall conduct in handling political affairs, but were retained by an individual whose name remains classified. The cable continues by saying “[name not declassified] has consistently prevented these resignations but bluntly stated today that continuance of irresponsible activities by Calligeris will force him to permit the resignations of these individuals and the opening of a strong political campaign against Calligeris.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Department of State Telegram, Norman Armour to (name omitted), January 25, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 22, 62, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0096.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 1, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> CIA Telegram, (name omitted) to (name omitted), August 29, 1954, “Foreign Relations of the United States, Guatemala 1952-1954,” Document 285, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/ike/guat/20181.htm>; internet; accessed December 22, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The irresponsible activities of the Castillo Armas regime included reversing the social reforms of the Arbenz presidency, including a major agrarian reform bill that Arbenz had submitted to the congress on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1952, in hopes of lifting the poor from their poverty-stricken existence. The poor consisted mainly of descendants from the ancient Mayan civilization-the Mayan Indians-who composed two-thirds of Guatemala's population.<sup>20</sup> In 1952, the Mayan Indians had a 90-99 percent illiteracy rate, a 60 percent infant mortality rate and malnutrition in which measles, parasites and the whooping cough thrived; moreover, the Mayan population subsisted on a per-capita purchasing power that "amounted to about \$1 per year."<sup>21</sup>

The provisions of this bill, Decree 900, declared that the state would expropriate all uncultivated land in private estates of more than 672 acres, as well as idle land in estates between 224 and 672 acres if less than two thirds of the acreage was under cultivation. Decree 900 added that the government owned Fincas Nacionales (state-owned landed estates) would be entirely parceled out.<sup>22</sup> All other estates were to be left alone. The idle, uncultivated land would be redistributed to the poor peasants who had been economically and often legally enslaved to work it.

Decree 900 was a modest reform program that expropriated land from those who could easily afford to go without it...and were not using it. As historian Richard Immerman noted, "the thirty-two largest fincas totaled 1,719,740 acres, of which 1,575,181 acres were not under cultivation...Consequently, the land which was expropriated came primarily from the 1,059 properties whose average size was 4,300

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<sup>20</sup> Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Piero Gleijeses, Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 150.

acres.”<sup>23</sup> All of the estates were compensated at a rate of 3-5 percent in agrarian bonds that matured in twenty-five years and the value of the expropriated land was determined by the amount the owners declared on their tax returns prior to May 10, 1952.<sup>24</sup>

Choosing to present an unbiased model of equality, Arbenz’s reform was far less confiscatory than previous ones in Europe and far more restrained than either the Mexican reform before it or the Cuban one after it.<sup>25</sup> As further legitimacy to its modesty, the United States had already implemented similar agrarian programs in Formosa (Taiwan) and Japan, which led U.S. aid officials and the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organizations’ senior members to consider Decree 900 “constructive and democratic in its aims.”<sup>26</sup>

Ratified on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1952, Decree 900 became law and Arbenz immediately sought to implement it. He employed reforms to provide Guatemala’s citizens with literacy, credit and agricultural tech programs that would presumably help Guatemala’s peasants utilize the newly learned methods of farming so they could benefit from their labors. Technical assistance began when Arbenz created the Oficina de Programas de Produccion Agricola, which used proletarian terms to explain how to increase productivity and decrease chances of economic ruin.<sup>27</sup> The literacy campaign was put in motion through the two largest labor and peasant unions, the Confederacion Nacional Campesina de Guatemala (CNCG) and the Confederacion General de Trabajadores de Guatemala (CGTG), while the line of credit was offered after Arbenz established the National Agricultural Bank in 1953-in the following month alone it approved over \$2.5

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<sup>23</sup> Immerman, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 151.

<sup>25</sup> Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Gleijeses, 160.

million in loans, giving on average \$188 to each individual.<sup>28</sup> This gave the standard Mayan much more purchasing power than the dollar per year they were used to.

By the end of Arbenz's presidency, Decree 900 expropriated roughly 1,657,659 acres of land, which averaged out to 10.5 acres per individual-giving approximately 100,000 Indian families, or about 500,000 individuals, cultivatable land that was primarily being unused.<sup>29</sup> Almost overnight, Jacobo Arbenz had brought some relief to one-sixth of the Guatemalan population and "for the first time since the Spanish conquest, the government returned land to the Indians."<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, the Indians subsistence was irrelevant to Castillo Armas. His close aide, Captain Antonio Montenegro, stated that Armas accomplished a "Herculean feat" during his rule after the coup: "all but two hundred of the „squatters“-the beneficiaries of Decree 900-had been chased off the land they had received under Arbenz."<sup>31</sup> In the first year and a half after taking office, Armas had driven over ninety-nine percent of the Indians off the land they received under Arbenz.<sup>32</sup>

Immediately after seizing power and ordering the agrarian statute that legalized the removal of the "squatters," Castillo Armas demanded the abolition of all political parties.<sup>33</sup> National Intelligence Estimate 82-55 states that he also strengthened his

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<sup>28</sup> Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala, 66.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Gleijeses, Shattered Hope, 160.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>32</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, Bitter Fruit, 233.

<sup>33</sup> IAC National Intelligence Estimate 82-55, Office of National Estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency, "Probable Developments in Guatemala," July 26, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII," Document 35, 92, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0126.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 2, 2008.

authority by allowing the government's assembly to hold "virtually no legislative powers," ensuring that its sole function was to draft a new constitution.<sup>34</sup>

However, by July of 1955, Castillo Armas had created the official National Democratic Movement (MDN) to serve as the government's legitimate political faction. The party's proclaimed middle of the road mission statement quickly attracted 144 people "representing all shades of non-Communist political beliefs" and the members of the Committee of Anti-Communist University Students (CEUA).<sup>35</sup> The party appeared doomed from the start to the United States Intelligence community, who argued that "it is improbable that such diverse elements can be held together," seeing as how the "hybrid character of the MDN is already the target of considerable criticism."<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Armas' anti-communist congressional party was the only party allowed to provide nominees for seats to the assembly.<sup>37</sup>

Following the advice of the CIA and the State Department, Castillo Armas moved against Guatemalan leftists, creating the National Committee of Defense Against Communism and the Preventive Penal Law Against Communism, which "established the death penalty for a series of „crimes“ that could be construed as „sabotage,“ including many labor union activities."<sup>38</sup> In addition, Armas gave the National Committee the ability to meet in secret and brand anyone a communist, the authority to randomly arrest and hold suspected communists for six months without legal defense or appeal, and the authorization to prevent them from occupying public office-the committee's ambition

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, Bitter Fruit, 233.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 221.

allowed for it to have, by November 21, 1954, “some 72,000 persons on file and was aiming to list 200,000 in all.”<sup>39</sup>

From the start, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and American Ambassador Peurifoy began cracking down on Guatemalan communism by providing their own list and demanding that those contained within it be instantly assassinated.<sup>40</sup> Immediately after the fall of Arbenz, Peurifoy visited interim president Colonel Enrique Diaz.

According to Arbenz’s Foreign Minister, Guillermo Toriello, Peurifoy brandished a long list containing leaders’ names and required Diaz to shoot them within twenty-four hours.

“That’s all, but why?” Diaz asked. „Because they’re communists,” replied Peurifoy.”

When Diaz refused to participate, Peurifoy explained to him that it would be better, then, to have the American flag flying over Guatemala’s Presidential Palace.<sup>41</sup>

Castillo Armas shared the virulent anti-communism of his patrons and upon taking office, immediately began subjugating unions and effectively silencing labor opposition so harshly that “the labor movement was virtually destroyed.” The July, 1955 National Intelligence Estimate states that while Arbenz had championed the cause of labor, Armas viewed them as “objects of official suspicion” and the “efforts by employers to negate the benefits granted to labor by the previous (Arbenz) regime had increased unemployment and intensified labor’s feeling of insecurity and resentment.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 221.

<sup>40</sup> Department of State Telegram, John Peurifoy to John Dulles, June 28, 1954, “Foreign Relations of the United States, Guatemala 1952-1954,” Document 82, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/ike/iv/20212.htm>; Internet; accessed December 20, 2007. See also Schlesinger and Kinzer, 208.

<sup>41</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, 207-208.

<sup>42</sup> IAC National Intelligence Estimate 82-55, Office of National Estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency, “Probable Developments in Guatemala,” July 26, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 35, 97, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0131.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 3, 2008.

Guatemalan employees vented their frustration with Castillo Armas during the 1956 May Day rally when workers disgusted with the anti-union laws taunted government speakers off stage. Alarmed by the protests, Armas declared a state of siege and ordered his forces to “impede, suppress or suspend strikes of any nature,” because the communists were plotting conspiracies and it “has become indispensable to adopt severe and drastic means of repressing it.”<sup>43</sup> In response, university students organized mass demonstrations against his government. The protests disrupted a number of cities and Armas angrily answered back by having thirty student leaders expelled from the country.<sup>44</sup> By June, 1956, Armas had finally began to decrease his grip over the labor unions, but they continued to be allowed only on farms employing more than 250 people-leaving most employees with little or no representation.<sup>45</sup>

The thirty university students were fortunate that they were only expelled, as Castillo Armas was content with and often used extreme violence as an indiscriminate political tool. In September 1952, Jacob R. Seekford, the pseudonym for a U.S. official whose name remains classified and identity continues to be undisclosed, informed the CIA’s Chief of Western Hemisphere, Joseph Caldwell King, that Armas and Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo had come to an agreement. Trujillo would support the overthrow of President Arbenz if Armas would execute four Santo Dominican men living in Guatemala. Armas responded by saying he “would be glad to carry out the executive action,” but informed Trujillo that it had to wait due to security reasons-Armas pointed

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<sup>43</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 235.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> CIA Memorandum, Dana Durand to Allen Dulles, June 19, 1956, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 43, 121, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0155.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 2, 2008.



out “that his own plans included similar action and that special squads were being designated.”<sup>46</sup> He then ensured Trujillo that the four men would soon be executed.

A year before the May Day rally, in January 1955, Castillo Armas’s administration proclaimed that it had unearthed a “pseudo-Communist plot” being planned by regular army officers. Taking exceptionally drastic measures at repressing the dissidents, the government executed six of the men and banished several leading officers, in which Armas rewarded his Liberation Army officers by conveniently placing them in the newly vacant positions.<sup>47</sup>

On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1956, Castillo Armas employed a *Law of Public Order* State of Alarm, after growing rumors circulated that “communists and leftists” were plotting against the government and planning “disturbances” for the 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup>. As a result, constitutional guarantees were temporarily suspended and all demonstrations were prohibited. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, the students and their associates held the protests in Guatemala City anyways, and of the 300 attending, 50 were taken to jail by the police.<sup>48</sup>

The following day, several hundred students attended a demonstration led by anti-government speakers infuriated with the previous days’ arrests. Persuaded by the orators, the students began a march for the Presidential Palace to protest the detentions, but were confronted by three cars-each carrying six men-before they arrived. The government

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<sup>46</sup> CIA Telegram, Jacob Seekford to Joseph King, September 18, 1952, “Foreign Relations of the United States, Guatemala 1952-1954,” Document 18, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/ike/guat/20195.htm>; Internet; accessed January 31, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> IAC National Intelligence Estimate 82-55, Office of National Estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency, “Probable Developments in Guatemala,” July 26, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 35, 93, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0127.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 2, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Department of State Memorandum, Henry Holland to John Dulles, June 26, 1956, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 45, 123, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0157.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 3, 2008.

agents initially fired their machine guns into the air, but then turned them onto the crowd of student protesters which killed six and wounded many more. Armas responded by declaring another state of siege and subsequently suspending all civil liberties.<sup>49</sup>

U.S. Ambassador Edward Sparks attempted to impress upon Castillo Armas “the importance of publicizing, with supporting evidence, the events as part of a communist plot.”<sup>50</sup> The United States Information Agency (USIA) concurred and immediately sent instructions to their agents on how to handle the situation, while Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Henry F. Holland, urged Armas to make a public address on or near the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the liberation that would make a permanent impact upon the population by arguing that “those who died did so not because of government tyranny, but because of cynical communist political maneuverings.” Holland also counseled the president on the need for restraint in responding to demonstrators, pointing out that “tear gas was effective and infinitely preferable to bullets.”<sup>51</sup>

The USIA found scapegoating communism so effective that the agency used it again after Castillo Armas was assassinated by a member of the presidential guard on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1957.<sup>52</sup> When Secretary of State Dulles learned the USIA was unable to definitely tie the assassination to communists, he “took strong exception” to the uncertainty and began educating them by stating “the fact that the assassin was himself a

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<sup>49</sup> Department of State Memorandum, Henry Holland to John Dulles, June 26, 1956, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 45, 123, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0157.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 3, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 115.

<sup>51</sup> Department of State Memorandum, Conversation between Jose Luis Cruz Salazar, Henry Holland and Bayard King, June 29, 1956, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 47, 126, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0160.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 3, 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Cullather, 116.

Communist should permit an emphasis on the Communist connection, especially because Communists have a fundamental motivation which leads them to violent revolution.”<sup>53</sup> Secretary Dulles felt that absolute proof was unnecessary when laying blame on communists and taking the hint, the Secretary’s staff contacted the Bureau of Inter American Affairs (ARA) and asked them to “continue to exploit as fully as possible in our publicity the Communist implication in the assassination of the President of Guatemala.”<sup>54</sup>

Allen Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence, was more skeptical than his brother in accepting the communist affiliation in the Castillo Armas assassination. During the National Security Council discussion on August 1<sup>st</sup>, Dulles suggested that other rightist parties may have been involved and proceeded to note his reasons for doubting a communist connection. Dulles stated that immediately after the assassination, the Guatemalan news had been shut down for twelve hours to keep the murder secret and all witnesses had become inaccessible-showing signs of advance planning. He continued by saying the communists in Guatemala seemed to be content, but taken aback by Armas’ death and he attested that an assassin would not have held incriminating documents on his person. Dulles questioned the “extraordinary readiness of the Guatemalan Government to handle the situation” and then bluntly stated that “a genuine Communist coup would not have been handled in this way.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Department of State Note, Secretary of State (John Dulles) Staff meeting, August 7, 1957, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Document 60, 146, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0180.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 3, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Intelligence Advisory Committee Note, Staff meeting headed by Allen Dulles and supplemented by Hugh Cumming, July 30, 1957, from John Glennon, ed., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII,” Documents 58-59, pps143-145,

Hugh Smith Cumming, Jr., a Foreign Service Officer and later the Director of Intelligence and Research for the State Department, backed Allen Dulles at the discussion by informing the council that other Department of State members held reservations about believing the Guatemalan Government's story of blaming the communists. He noted that it was unusual for "organized Communists to go in for assassination unless the specific gain will counter the adverse reaction" and that "Communists usually do not leave such a recognizable record as in this case."<sup>56</sup> Differences aside, the American heads of state had a common concern in wondering what would happen to Guatemala without Castillo Armas at the helm.

The Office of National Estimates could not have predicted or underestimated Guatemala's future any more precisely than it did in July, 1955: "If the Castillo government should be overthrown, Guatemala would probably experience a protracted period of political instability."<sup>57</sup> Following the death of Castillo Armas, Ortiz Passarelli (the centrist candidate) defeated the reactionary Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes, resulting in Ydigoras' followers rioting. The army subsequently seized power and held another election in 1958, voting Ydigoras in. He immediately declared another state of siege and assumed full power, but his "increasingly autocratic rule" led to a revolt by junior

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*United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0177.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 4, 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Intelligence Advisory Committee Note, Staff meeting headed by Allen Dulles and supplemented by Hugh Cumming, July 30, 1957, from John Glennon, ed., "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII," Document 58, 144, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0178.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 4, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> IAC National Intelligence Estimate 82-55, Office of National Estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency, "Probable Developments in Guatemala," July 26, 1955, from John Glennon, ed., "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957. American republics: Central and South America, Volume VII," Document 35, 90, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://images.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/EFacs2/1955-57v07/M/0124.jpg>; Internet; accessed March 2, 2008.

military officers in 1960.<sup>58</sup> After the revolt failed, the four leftist groups went underground and befriended Castro's Cuba; they became four guerrilla groups-including the Guerrilla Army of the Poor-and led armed insurrections against the government of Guatemala for the next thirty-five years.

Ydigoras was consequently removed in a March 1963 coup by the Minister of National Defense, Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia. Peralta's justification for the removal was Ydigoras' mishandling of former president Juan Jose Arevalo Bermej's candidacy in the 1963 elections. Peralta made clear that the military's intention was to retain "direct control of the caretaker government by decreeing that the Minister of National Defense would also serve as Chief of Government."<sup>59</sup> The coup conveniently placed Peralta in both positions.

Although the Guatemalan political atmosphere was unstable, the repression was not. As the guerrilla groups emerged in eastern Guatemala in the 1960's, the United States sent military advisors and weapons to aid the government. In 1966-1967, President Julio Cesar Mendez Montenegro gave his security forces free reign in return for their military support. The result was mass kidnappings, torture and summary executions that left 10,000 peasants dead.<sup>60</sup> State Department Intelligence noted in 1967 that a large number of the deaths resulted from "over-zealous clandestine counter-insurgent activities by the security forces and their associates." The Guatemalan government, State Department officials reported, had formed a special commando unit which carried out torture, executions, abductions, bombings and assassinations of both "real and alleged

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<sup>58</sup> Department of State Background Note, August, 2007, from Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Guatemala: Profile," History 1944-1986, *United States Department of State*, available from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2045.htm>; Internet; accessed December 19, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 169.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

communists.” The security forces had autonomy to suppress dissent because the enemies of the state were defined so vaguely.<sup>61</sup>

In the 1970’s, the repressive state of siege continued indefinitely as President Carlos Arana Osorio’s forces rounded up and killed *suspected* communists-In January 1971, two-hundred oppositionists were killed in the San Marcos Department alone.<sup>62</sup> In the first three years of Arana’s presidency, government-sponsored death squads, military personnel and police forces became so indiscriminate in their extermination efforts against leftist guerillas that investigative reporter Jack Anderson of the Washington Post printed “the estimates of victims, many of whose mutilated corpses made identification impossible, range from 3,500 to 15,000.”<sup>63</sup>

In the 1980’s, the civil war proceeded to intensify and President Romeo Lucas Garcia made it clear to U.S. Army General Vernon Walters that “his government will continue as before-the repression will continue.”<sup>64</sup> President Lucas was not about to discuss the United State’s newfound Human Rights concerns. Lucas wanted the communist, left-wing guerillas and everyone associated with them exterminated. In February 1982, his army went into the El Quiche Department and burned entire towns that supposedly supported the guerrilla army of the poor. Lucas’s army had orders to burn all abandoned towns and destroy any others assumed to be those of guerrilla conspirators.

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<sup>61</sup> Department of State Intelligence Note, Thomas Hughes to Dean Rusk, October 23, 1967, from George Washington University, “Guatemala: A Counter-Insurgency Running Wild?” Document 4, 1-2, *National Security Archives*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/04-01.gif>; Internet; accessed December 22, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> DIA Intelligence Bulletin, (name omitted) to (name omitted), January 12, 1971, from George Washington University, “Guatemalan Antiterrorist Campaign,” Document 6, *National Security Archive*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/06-01.gif>; Internet; accessed December 22, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, page 249.

<sup>64</sup> Department of State Memorandum, Robert Jacobs to Luigi Einaudi, October 5, 1981, from George Washington University, “Guatemala: What Next?” Document 13, *National Security Archives*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/13-01.gif>; Internet; accessed December 22, 2007.

Most of the towns belonged to Indian peasants who fearfully fled to the hills-leaving thousands with no home to come back to. Its success appeared to be limited to the destruction of several towns and “the killing of Indian collaborators and sympathizers.”<sup>65</sup> The hunt for guerrilla conspirators by the Guatemalan army in the later 70’s and early 80’s left more than 100,000 citizens dead.<sup>66</sup>

The military assumed that anyone who wanted social change were communists who must be silenced. The Guatemalan Death Squad Dossier-an internal military log smuggled from Guatemala’s army intelligence files and given to human rights advocates in February, 1999-provides a glimpse into the thirty-five year civil war that occurred after the fall of the Arbenz government. The dossier (with pictures and descriptions of the victims) documents the abduction, torture and assassination of 183 citizens who “disappeared” between August 1983 and March 1985.<sup>67</sup>

When the killings became too pronounced in the 1980’s and human rights activists began to have their voices heard, the American government “tried to shift the blame from the army to the guerrillas or to fictive civilian death squads.”<sup>68</sup> Rosario Godoy, along with her brother and two-year old son, disappeared on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1985. When the three were found dead at the bottom of a ravine outside Guatemala City, the

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<sup>65</sup> CIA Secret Cable, (name deleted) to (name deleted), February, 1982, “Counterinsurgency Operations in El Quiche,” from George Washington University, Document 14, 1-3, *National Security Archive*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/14-01.gif>; Internet; accessed December 22, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, xxviii.

<sup>67</sup> National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 15, Press Release, May 20, 1999, from George Washington University, “Guatemalan Death Squad Dossier,” *National Security Archives*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB15/press.html>; Internet; accessed February 25, 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Cullather, xxxiii.

country had lost its only human rights leader. Suspicion of foul play began to grow after it was noted that the fingernails of Rosario's two-year old son had been pulled out.<sup>69</sup>

President Ronald Reagan's Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Elliott Abrams, attempted to downplay the incident by stating "So far there is no evidence indicating other than the deaths were due to an accident"- the army stated that it was a car accident as well, while the Archbishop called it "triple murder."<sup>70</sup>

By the end of the thirty-five year civil war, the Guatemalan security forces had killed 160,000 people and "40,000 disappeared-93 percent at the hands of the Guatemalan security forces."<sup>71</sup> The U.S. allowed these events to take place and even encouraged them at times: the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research Thomas L. Hughes stated that "the counter-insurgency operations...have been so successful," after security forces kidnapped, tortured and executed hundreds in 1967.<sup>72</sup> As the killings swelled to unparalleled heights in the early 1980's under General Efraim Rios Montt, President Ronald Reagan declared to the world that the general had gotten a "bum rap on human rights."<sup>73</sup>

The reformist leader, Jacobo Arbenz, had witnessed the suffering and repression of Guatemala's citizens his entire life and as president, tried to foster a more humane Guatemalan society by implementing social and political legislation in an attempt to

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<sup>69</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, xxxiv.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 15, Press Release, May 20, 1999, from George Washington University, "Guatemalan Death Squad Dossier," *National Security Archives*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB15/press.html>; Internet; accessed February 25, 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Department of State Intelligence Note, Thomas Hughes to Dean Rusk, October 23, 1967, from George Washington University, "Guatemala: A Counter-Insurgency Running Wild?" Document 4, 1-2, *National Security Archives*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB11/docs/04-01.gif>; Internet; accessed December 22, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Cullather, xxviii.



quickly alleviate the destitution of the country's majority population. Because Arbenz befriended and did not persecute Guatemalan communists and leftist labor leaders, U.S. officials concluded that communism in Guatemala was a rampant extension of Russia.

The U.S. government felt that pondering over whether or not Arbenz was truly a communist was unnecessary—at the very least, his administration and closest advisors posed a threat to U.S. National security. After all, they had former Ambassador to Guatemala Richard Patterson Jr.'s Duck test: “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...he goes to the pond...and swims like a duck...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.”<sup>74</sup>

Ambassador Patterson and the United States government were right. President Arbenz was a communist and officially joined the PGT in 1957, three years after his capitulation from the Guatemalan presidency. Arbenz's wife, Maria, stated that “Jacobo was convinced that the triumph of communism in the world was inevitable and desirable. The march of history was toward communism. Capitalism was doomed.”<sup>75</sup> But Jacobo Arbenz's reasons for embracing communism were altruistic, extremely compassionate and due to conditions within Guatemala, not because of any Moscow intervention.

The rigid policies of the United States government and Guatemala's upper elite provided Arbenz with few alternatives to communism, as their history of economic and political repression fostered the suffering of the majority of Guatemala's population. In communism, Arbenz found a way to diminish the hopelessness that pervaded the country.

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<sup>74</sup> Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala, 102.

<sup>75</sup> Gleijeses, Shattered Hope, 147.

Guatemalan Interior Minister, Augusto Charnaud MacDonald, said that Arbenz found the answers to his countries problems in the Soviet Union, which symbolized “something new in the world...it was governed by a class which had been ruthlessly exploited; it had defeated illiteracy and raised the standard of living in a very short time; it had never harmed Guatemala.”<sup>76</sup>

Nick Cullather asserts that American officials successfully deposed a government, but failed to install a stable, democratic one.<sup>77</sup> Piero Gleijeses, the Professor of American Foreign Policy in the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, states that the Guatemala of today continues to be a “sick society-the tortures, the disappearances, and the killings fester.”<sup>78</sup> The State Department’s secret report, *Guatemala’s Disappeared: 1977-1986*, confirms both Cullather and Gleijeses’ view on the conditions that have saturated Guatemala since the ousting of President Arbenz. It blatantly states that “Guatemala is a violent society” and “Statistics on homicides reveal that Guatemala has a murder rate almost equivalent to that of the rest of Latin America combined.”<sup>79</sup>

The secret report continues by discussing how violence is used as a political tool and is consciously accepted, how security forces and paramilitary groups are responsible for most kidnappings of rural social workers, medical personnel and campesinos (the Indian peasants) and how personal enemies, business competitors and military

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<sup>76</sup> Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 141.

<sup>77</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 113.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

<sup>79</sup> Department of State Secret Report. (name omitted) to (name omitted), March 28, 1986, from George Washington University, “Guatemala’s Disappeared: 1977-1986,” Document 8, 1-2, *National Security Archive*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB15/08-01.gif>; Internet; accessed December 21, 2001.

commissioners accuse the innocent of being insurgents and get them disappeared for financial gain or to “eliminate personal and ideological opponents.”<sup>80</sup>

The State Department official who authored the report-and whose name is not declassified-accepts department blame by stating “we have failed in the past to adequately grasp the magnitude of the problem.”<sup>81</sup> Dated March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1986, the internal report provides primary documentation that explores the extensive history of Guatemalan violence against the innocent. On a brighter note, it offers optimism by stating “Economic development and judicial reform, hopefully, will eventually lead to a reduction in the rate of disappearances.”<sup>82</sup>

The irony of the statement lies in the fact that U.S. officials helped create the violent repression they later tried to avoid. Deposing President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman was a mistake that fostered unnecessary bloodshed and by removing him, the United States government removed innovative economic, judicial, social and political progressions-progressions that cultivated an atmosphere of aspirations. Instead of continued Guatemalan advancement, the long-term consequences of the American Intervention are death and destruction and the current despair was summed up over two decades ago, when a regretful U.S. State Department official said “What we’d give to have an Arbenz now, we are going to have to invent one, but all the candidates are dead.”<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Department of State Secret Report. (name omitted) to (name omitted), March 28, 1986, from George Washington University, Document 8, 1-2, “Guatemala’s Disappeared: 1977-1986,” *National Security Archive*, available from <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB15/08-02.gif>; Internet; accessed December 21, 2007.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Cullather, *Secret History*, 105.

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### **Authors Biography:**

While earning his Associate of Arts degree, Mark Viskocil took an opportunity to travel the world by participating in the Fall 1997 Semester at Sea Program through the University of Pittsburgh. In 1998, he received his degree and moved to northern California, where he became an inspector for fire suppression systems inside critical environment data centers in the San Francisco Bay area (“Silicon Valley”). Upon returning in 2006 to his native town of Waseca, Minnesota, he enrolled as a Psychology major with a History minor at Minnesota State University, Mankato. After attending Dr. Matthew Loayza’s Foreign Policy class in Spring 2007, he contemplated switching his major to History; due to the extended period of instruction, he decided against it. He graduated December 2007 and hopes to enroll in Minnesota State University’s Master of Business Administration program.

**Faculty Mentor’s Biography:** Matthew Loayza is an Associate Professor of History at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He received his Ph.D. in U.S. History at Purdue University in 1999 under the direction of Dr. Patrick J. Hearden. Dr. Loayza spent four years in the history department at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse before joining the faculty at Minnesota State, where he teaches survey level courses in U.S. History and a variety of upper level courses related to the History of U.S. Foreign Relations.

Dr. Loayza’s research focuses on U.S. relations with Latin America during the 1950s. He published an article in *Diplomacy and Statecraft* on this topic in 2003, and he is currently working on an article on cultural exchanges during the Eisenhower presidency. He has also published essays on pedagogy in *Passport: the Newsletter of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations*.