

Interventionism or Humanitarianism?
America's Political Interposition in Guatemala

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To the average American *New York Times* reader of the 1950s, it was no secret that the United States had a growing anxiety over the activity ensuing in Latin America, based on the abundance of articles covering the spread of communism made available to their subscribers. The true reasoning, however, for the concern over Latin America, specifically Guatemala, is what was intentionally withheld from the readers. The *New York Times*, along with a variety of other publications, covered Guatemala under the facade of a humanitarian angle, though there was genuinely no apprehension *for* the country, only *of* the country. The concern among the United States government arose as the future of the United Fruit Company, a high profit company where many prominent American politicians and businessmen had stakes, was put at risk by the agrarian reforms implemented by President Jacobo Árbenz of Guatemala. Though the government of the United States strategically misled the American citizens into believing that intervention was necessary for the well-being of Guatemalans through the manipulation of various publications, the true concern was purely and selfishly of monetary policy.

The people of the United States rely on newspapers to inform themselves on the current events ensuing all over the world, and these newspapers, especially those with a certain level of credibility, have the power to shape the opinions of their readers about topics as expansive as an entire country. In 1951, the general population of the United States did not have a profound knowledge about Latin America, making it very easy for the newspapers to form a bases for their readers, whether true or not. This is exactly what the *New York Times* does in a 1951 publication about the alleged spreading ideology of communism in Guatemala, stating that the United States “cannot expect a Maya, living in an ancestral village high in the hills, unable to read, cut off from the main world currents, to recognize communism by instinct as just another system of

slavery”¹. Through this comprehensive description, the *New York Times* is painting a picture of the “average” citizen of Guatemala for their readers. Not only are Guatemalans illiterate, according to the *NYT*, but they are also incapable of recognizing the dangers of communism. This description very well may have sparked a feeling of sympathy for the literate, civilized consumer of the article, and even perhaps a desire to help the underdeveloped and vulnerable country. The *New York Times* begins their concluding paragraph of the article by insisting that the political climate of Guatemala is “important to us” because “its people appeal to our humanity”², appealing to their readers desire to save the people of Guatemala from the imminent communistic take-over.

Interestingly, around this time Edward Bernays, the leader of the propaganda campaign funded by The United Fruit Company, began arranging “fact-finding trips to Central America”³ for a variety of reporters of differing publications. As the expenses of these trips were paid for by the United Fruit Company, “the visiting journalists were happy to interview whomever the company arranged for them to meet”⁴, and on more than one occasion the interviewees were reaping the benefits of the United Fruit Company’s extensive power. Once returning from these all-inclusive expeditions, the journalists were ready to report about the Anti-American behavior developing in Guatemala. In this manner, the United Fruit Company had considerable control over the American press, in which the U.S. government was able to discretely gain the acceptance of the American public to intervene in Guatemala and overthrow the progressive President Jacobo Árbenz, under the premise of ending the spread of communism being reported

¹ “Communists in Guatemala,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1951. <https://nyti.ms/3T9QGZz> (accessed October 7, 2022).

² *New York Times*, “Communists in Guatemala.”

³ Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 2005), 87.

⁴ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 87.

by the American newspapers. Once Árbenz was out of office, the United Fruit Company could return to their majorly unsupervised operations of exploiting Guatemala and its citizens, and the politicians and businessmen entangled with the company would have more money in their pockets again.

Around the time that the *New York Times* article was written in 1951, the CIA had developed a plan called “Operation Fortune” to smuggle weapons to Árbenz’s opponents in Central America via boats belonging to the United Fruit Company, forming an alliance with Nicaragua and Honduras to aid the overthrowing of Árbenz. This established relationship between the CIA and two Central American countries quite differs from the alleged concerns of communism spreading mentioned in the *New York Times* article, stating that the political climate of Guatemala is a problem for the United States because it “influences other Latin-American countries”⁵. Seeing as the CIA was ready to implement a plan where both Nicaragua and Honduras were “prepared to act against Árbenz”⁶, it would seem as though the United States government would be fully aware of the amount of influence that Guatemala’s alleged communist agenda truly had over its neighboring countries, who were ready to turn on Guatemala at the snap of the United States’ fingers. Also, seeing that the United Fruit Company had extensive connections and influence in the U.S. government, as the CIA planned to use their boat to conduct Operation Fortune, as well as the American press, they clearly understood that the “threat” of communism spreading through Central America was nonexistent, though they perpetuated this misconception through their connections and power.

The *New York Times* concludes their article by stating although they (the government) cannot “suppress communism” in Guatemala, they can “increase [their] efforts to convince the

⁵ *New York Times*, “Communists in Guatemala.”

⁶ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 93.

Guatemalans that [they] are their friends”⁷, taking on the “big brother” role to the reportedly incapable Central American country. Despite this allegedly friendly helping-hand being offered to Guatemala, the United States proceeded to maintain the ban of sales of military supplies to Guatemala and influenced many other countries to do the same, strategically leaving Guatemala with virtually no way to obtain the proper weaponry to defend themselves during an uprising. Furthermore, the CIA was successful in involving the Catholic church in the matter, resulting in churches throughout Guatemala requesting that the Guatemalans “rise as a single man against this enemy of God and country”⁸. With the U.S. government, the American press, and the church against him, Árbenz realized that his options and resources were limited, and his downfall was approaching. He made the decision to attempt to negotiate with the U.S. government, but to no avail, as “Operation PBSuccess” (which succeeded “Operation Fortune” after it was blocked by the CIA) was already underway. During his last attempt to negotiate with the United States, he went as far as promising to “negotiate with United Fruit over the issue of compensation for its expropriated land”⁹, but the U.S. evidently did not care to act as Guatemala’s friend, as was once claimed in the press.

The intentions of the United States were clarified to Jacobo Árbenz through the involvement of the United Fruit Company throughout the entire endeavor of overthrowing the Árbenz regimen. This was not an issue of political ideology, but an issue of capitalism and control. The government succeeded in manipulating the American public into believing that, in this instance, intervention was an act of humanitarianism, though the actual goal of the intervention was to eliminate any obstacle that could deter the United Fruit Company from

⁷ *New York Times*, “Communists in Guatemala.”

⁸ Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*, 155.

⁹ *Ibid*, 164.

making as much money as possible, as President Árbenz knew from the beginning. The American coup was not to benefit the people of Guatemala, it was to maintain the power of the politicians, businessmen, and corrupt corporations that absolutely controlled the opinions of the American public, as well as their southern neighboring countries.

Bibliography

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