

On 2011-10-21 19:33, Nathan Kling wrote:

Larry, If I remember correctly, you were there for these events.....

<http://www.france24.com/en/20111021-guatemalan-leaders-family-get-apology-1954-coup>

Hello Nate -

Yes, I was indeed present at those events, though only 7 years old. I must say also that the *France24* account is quite one-sided, and I've taken this as a challenge to write an essay on this contentious topic. I hope you find it interesting, in spite of being so long. Feel free to pass it along if you think it worthwhile.



Interestingly, I had a brief acquaintance with Jacobo Árbenz Vilanova, who is about my age. Their family house was across the street from our house in Guatemala City, and a diplomatic “event” was arranged in which I went over to play with Jacobito. It was scary, because after some half-hearted attempts to get to know each other, the President, Jacobito's father, had us come downstairs for Jacobito's “history lesson”, during which he harangued us in a very domineering and unpleasant way about things I didn't understand. In retrospect, I believe he was probably trying to send a message to the US through this 7-year-old boy about the evils of US imperialism. I was totally turned off by this hectoring, bullying man, so the result was quite the opposite. He was peremptory and “Prussian” with his son as well, so I was interested to read in the *France24* article the son's statement supporting his father and his cause.

The coup that removed Árbenz was definitely engineered by the US government, though at the time many in the government (including my father) did not want the fact widely publicized. Many years later, classified documents have been released and published (by the US Government, *not* by Wikileaks!) which tell the whole story in detail. When Árbenz was elected, Ambassador John Purefoy had been sent to Guatemala to deal with a situation that was perceived as a serious threat. Though he did not run as a communist, Árbenz was suspected of secretly being a communist, and evidence was gathered in the form of electronic and human spying. The evidence verified the US's concerns, including a shipload of arms sent from Czechoslovakia to support the Árbenz government. The arms later turned out to be captured World War II German weapons, but that was the last straw for the US. A successful overthrow was organized using Guatemalan opposition leader Castillo Armas and (ironically) second-hand World War II US fighter planes.

In retrospect, I believe it was probably the only thing the US could have done. Consider the situation at the time:

- It was 8 years after the US and allies had barely defeated Hitler and the Japanese Empire in World War II, and there was a strong dislike for dictators

- Joseph Stalin was in charge of Russia, murdering literally millions of citizens.
- Mao Zedung had taken over China in the name of communism five years before, and the US was defending the Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan
- McCarthy was in the Senate conducting “witch-hunts” for communist sympathizers in the US government
- The US was involved in a very hot war on the Korean peninsula to hold back a serious communist take-over; a look at the present state of North vs. South Korea may provide some justification for the idea that preventing the spread of communism was a good idea
- Two years after the Guatemala “regime change”, an openly communist insurgency by the Castro brothers and “Che” Guevara took over Cuba, leading to a mass exodus of Cubans, and that government is in charge to this day
- A decade after the Guatemala coup, Pol Pot massacred millions of Cambodians in the name of communism.

As we sit here in 2011, looking back after the “end of the Cold War”, it's easy to forget that the struggle was very real and had monumental consequences around the world. Both the US and the Soviet Union worked through proxies as well as directly, and the declassified documents now available leave very little doubt that Árbenz was a Soviet proxy. It's equally true that Castillo Armas was a US proxy.

But the world is not, and was not, a simple battle between “good democracy” and “evil communism” (or any other form of human “evil”). In Guatemala, as in much of Latin America, “communism” and “capitalism” were ideologies that overlaid millenia-old, much more basic human struggles. Guatemala was the scene of bloody struggles between the Olmecs and the Mayas, and between rival Mayan city-states that raided each other for slaves and to supply victims for human sacrifices. They in turn were defeated by the Aztecs, and the Aztecs by the Spanish. The Spanish controlled or enslaved the Maya starting in the sixteenth century, becoming the land-owning feudal lords, and there has been a smoldering resentment in the indigenous population ever since. That resentment has flared up from time to time, and its influence can be traced to the mid-twentieth century unrest throughout Latin America, but especially in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. (Mexico went through its major struggles in the 19th century.)

Communist ideology found natural allies in the struggles of indigenous people against their colonial (and post-colonial) rulers in many parts of the world. It was in this context - and the context of McCarthyism - that the US allied itself with the land-owners of Central America. There was a certainty at the time that the Soviet Union was using proxy maneuvers to gain control of Guatemala, but it is also true that the United Fruit Company, one of the largest land-owners in Guatemala, had considerable political influence in the White House after Republican Dwight Eisenhower became President in 1954.

The “apology” of the Guatemalan government to the Árbenz family is interesting in itself. President Álvaro Colom is himself a center-left politician, and so would be expected to be sympathetic to Árbenz and his cause. If a rightist president had apologized, the significance would have been profound, but as it is, the apology seems little more than a political gesture to “Jacobito”, who is a (center-left?) politician himself.

France24 writes, “The coup helped trigger a 36-year civil war that ended in 1996, according to Colom. Indeed, the coup was followed by decades of political violence, military rule and a guerrilla movement formed by disaffected military officers that set off one of Latin America's bloodiest civil wars from 1960 to 1996.” To say that the coup helped trigger the civil war is an exaggeration. The spirit of violence, massacre, and human sacrifice that has dominated Meso-America for millennia was certainly given continued impetus by the coup, which in itself was relatively bloodless (as witness the fact that Árbenz himself was permitted to leave the country unscathed). And though the coup was “successful” in the short term, the age-old conflict between the ruling-class and their subjects, which began when the Olmecs were subjugated by the Mayas, raged for decades and claimed hundreds of thousands of “human sacrifices” before the gods of bloodshed were appeased.

My visit to Guatemala in 2009 left me both glad for the country's present peace, and concerned that it may be very tenuous. On many walls, I saw stenciled the black fist of the right-wing party, known as “Mano Dura”, The Fist. I was curious who the right-wing's popular supporters might be, in a country with such a large proportion of impoverished indigenous people. Traveling with a student from San Marcos University, I expressed my curiosity and was told that the military and their families were the mainstay of Mano Dura. Apparently when the Civil War ended, the Army was downsized to a small fraction of its previous numbers. That left a lot of people out of work, with few non-military skills, and disgruntled that the party for which they had fought was now out of power by democratic election. And Colom's administration is not without its accusations of foul play. It was implicated in a dramatic pre-assassination video by Guatemalan attorney Rodrigo Rosenberg, and other assassinations allegedly attempting to cover up connections with drug traders.

Bottom line: the human race is a mess, and there are certainly no easy choices in trying to navigate the jungles of Central America. One thing I'm afraid we can be sure of: the bloodshed isn't over, and never will be as long as we humans are in charge of our own destiny.

Best regards - Larry 8-)>

PS - I haven't given any references to historical materials, but they can be found easily enough online. - LJK