

Guatemala

Lebanon. They departed in October after U.S. diplomats negotiated an end to the civil war. Although the Eisenhower Doctrine receded from use after Lebanon, the fundamental U.S. posture toward the Middle East changed little. In the end, Eisenhower had "exaggerated the Soviet threat, misunderstood Arab nationalism, and stimulated Arab anti-Americanism."¹⁵¹

Nationalism also tightened its grip on the United States' most immediate sphere of influence, Latin America. Through the Rio Pact (a defensive military alliance formed in 1947), the Organization of American States (launched the following year but formally established in 1951 to help settle inter-American disputes), investments of \$8.2 billion by 1959, economic assistance totaling \$835 million for the period 1952-1961, and support for military dictators like Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, the United States perpetuated its hegemony over neighbors to the south. But many Latin Americans grew restless, and their nationalism became strident. Latin American poverty remained stark; illiteracy rates stood high; health care proved inadequate; a population explosion threatened scarce resources; productivity showed minuscule growth; profits from raw materials such as sugar and oil flowed through American companies to the United States. As the Cold War shifted to the Third World, Washington worried more about Latin American discontents. "To arrest the drift in the area toward radical and nationalistic regimes," Dulles said, the United States would intervene, the Good Neighbor policy notwithstanding.¹⁵²

Guatemala became a test case in which U.S. anticommunism, economic stakes, and hegemonic presumption prompted intervention. Jacobo Arbenz won election as president by a wide margin, and after his inauguration in spring 1951, he set land reform as the central goal of his administration. Only 2 percent of the population owned 70 percent of the land. Under the agrarian reform law of mid-1952, the government eventually expropriated about one-quarter of the nation's arable land and distributed it to some 500,000 peasants. Food production increased. Soon after expropriation, however, Arbenz clashed with the United Fruit Company (UFCO), the U.S.-owned banana exporter and Guatemala's largest landowner. UFCO had to give up more than 400,000 acres of uncultivated land. When Arbenz offered compensation in government bonds, using the value of the land the company itself, for tax purposes, set at \$1.2 million, UFCO claimed the expropriated properties represented \$19 million. The State Department sided strongly with UFCO, which hired lobbyists and propagandists to spread a story in the United States: Communism had secured a beachhead in Central America.

The Soviet Union, prudently honoring the law of "geographical fatalism" in the face of superior U.S. regional power, actually showed little interest in Latin America in the 1950s.¹⁵³ Moscow looked skeptically at Arbenz and other anti-Yankee leftists who seemed more reformist than radical or communist. The Guatemalan Communist party received no money from the Soviets. Still, indigenous communists backed Arbenz. He welcomed their help in the struggle against entrenched interests, and he appointed some of them to administer land reform projects. Arbenz insisted that he would become neither a communist nor an anticommunist, but he defended the communists as servants of Guatemalan nationalism who respected the electoral process. Given their Cold War mentality, however, U.S. diplomats suspected the worst. As Ambassador John Peurifoy remarked,

Arbenz “talked like a Communist, he thought like a Communist, he acted like a Communist, and if he is not one . . . , he will do until one comes along.”¹⁵⁴

The desire to save UFCO properties also motivated U.S. actions, but what worried Washington most was “the strong appeal” among Central American neighbors of Guatemala’s “broad social program of aiding workers and peasants.”¹⁵⁵ Simply put, Arbenz challenged U.S. hegemony in the region. “They would have overthrown us even if we had grown no bananas,” Arbenz’s friend José Manuel Fortuny recalled.¹⁵⁶ Washington opposed radical reform and grew alarmed that it might become contagious in the primary sphere of influence of the United States.

Eisenhower approved a CIA plan to overthrow the Arbenz government. Using a base in Florida and \$5–7 million, the CIA began to hire Guatemalan exiles. Training camps in Nicaragua and Honduras prepared them for an invasion. Colonel

Rioters Stone Nixon in Venezuela. His car surrounded by hostile Venezuelans, Vice President Nixon experienced a grueling outbreak of anti-Americanism in May 1958. He was forced to leave Caracas ahead of schedule, his experience highlighting problems in Latin America for the United States. (United Press International)



Carlos Castillo Armas, a graduate of the army staff school at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, won favor as the president-to-be. In early 1954 the United States prodded the Organization of American States to declare, by a 17 to 1 vote, that the domination of any American state by the international communist movement would constitute a threat to the hemisphere. Washington also cut off technical assistance funds to Guatemala. After learning that the United States plotted his overthrow, Arbenz turned to Czechoslovakia. A Czech arms shipment triggered the last stage of the CIA operation called PBSUCCESS.

On June 18, after the CIA bribed Guatemalans, planted fictitious news stories about Arbenz's submission to the Soviets, and dropped supplies at United Fruit facilities, Castillo Armas's small force attacked from Honduras. U.S.-supplied rebel planes bombed Guatemala City. Abandoned by his military and fearful that Washington would order U.S. marines to Guatemala if Castillo Armas's invasion failed, an anguished Arbenz fled to Mexico, where he died in 1971.

Castillo Armas soon returned UFCO lands, jailed his detractors, and set Guatemala on a course of government-sponsored terror that by 1990 had left 100,000 Guatemalans dead. In 1957 he fell to assassination, but the new regime remained a staunch U.S. ally. Although encouraged by their successful covert operation in Guatemala to stage coups elsewhere, U.S. officials had to endure loud protest from Latin Americans who saw a repeat of past U.S. hubris.

Vice President Richard Nixon felt the protest firsthand in April-May 1958 when he traveled south on a goodwill tour. In Montevideo, Uruguay, anti-Yankee pickets mingled with the cheering crowds when Nixon motored through the city. Determined to counter what he considered communist agitation, Nixon stopped at the University of the Republic and engaged students in an emotional debate on U.S. foreign policy. Nixon claimed a rhetorical "victory" and went on to Peru, where anti-Yankee sentiment welled up at San Marcos University. Nixon went there anyway, vowing to contest a "bunch of Communist thugs."¹⁵⁷ Stoned and spat on, he then headed for Caracas.

In Venezuela all hell broke loose. Earlier in 1958 the ruthless dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez ("P.J.") had been overthrown by a military junta. "P.J." had been a special friend of the United States during his seven-year rule. In 1954 the United States had decorated him with the Legion of Merit. The following year Dulles declared that Venezuela "has adopted the kind of policies which we think that other countries of South America should adopt. Namely, they have adopted policies which provide in Venezuela a climate which is attractive to foreign capital to come in."¹⁵⁸ When Jiménez fled Caracas and the Eisenhower administration gave him asylum, Venezuelan bitterness toward the United States deepened.)

Into this volatile environment stepped Nixon, emboldened by his earlier tangles with protesting students. Crowds blocked Nixon's motorcade en route to a wreath-laying ceremony at the tomb of Simón Bolívar; demonstrators stoned his car, shattering windows. They smashed fenders, rocked the automobile, and threatened the vice president's life. A Secret Service agent drew his pistol: "Let's get some of these sons-of-bitches."¹⁵⁹ Before shooting broke out, however, Nixon's car somehow sped away. In Operation Poor Richard, Eisenhower dispatched two airborne infantry companies to the Caribbean, but Nixon left Venezuela without