



# Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954

*Nick Cullather, Piero Gleijeses (Afterword)*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online ➔](#)

# **Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954**

*Nick Cullather , Piero Gleijeses (Afterword)*

## **Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954** Nick Cullather , Piero Gleijeses (Afterword)

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.

## **Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954 Details**

Date : Published April 1st 1999 by Stanford University Press

ISBN : 9780804733113

Author : Nick Cullather , Piero Gleijeses (Afterword)

Format : Paperback 200 pages

Genre : History, Politics, Political Science, Latin American History, Academic, Grad School, Nonfiction

 [Download Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its O ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954 Nick Cullather , Piero Gleijeses (Afterword)**

---

# From Reader Review Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954 for online ebook

## Marla McMackin says

Secret History is the product of one year Nick Cullather spent as a staff historian at the Central Intelligence Agency. His job was to use still-classified documents to create a training manual, a cautionary tale for new recruits that focused on Operation PBSUCCESS to overthrow Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz. When it was declassified in 1997 and published in 1999, Secret History was the first detailed account of how the CIA carried out the operation.

Cullather's narrative is both secondary and primary source providing valuable insight not only into how the operation played out, but also how the CIA assessed the perceived Guatemalan threat and designed a plan to combat it, as well as what type of government and society it aimed to create in the operation's aftermath. According to Cullather, the goal wasn't simply to remove the popularly elected reformer in order to sever perceived ties to international Communism. "They aimed to produce a radical revolutionary change in Guatemalan politics. They sought the reversal of the Revolution of 1944, the termination of land reform, and the replacement of Arbenz with a liberal, authoritarian leader. Afterwards, they foresaw a prolonged period of dictatorial rule during which the regime would depend on United States aid and arms" (p. 60).

What emerges is a portrait of covert operators who not only misperceived a link between Arbenz and the Soviet Union, but also were too arrogant to allow logistical obstacles or thoughts about the consequences of their actions to interfere with their main objective. Initially considered a triumph that showed what could be accomplished through covert action, no one could deny that Castillo Armas was a bad choice to replace Arbenz. "His repressive and corrupt policies soon polarized Guatemala and provoked renewed civil conflict. Operation PBSUCCESS aroused resentments that continue, almost 40 years after the event, to prevent the Agency from revealing its role" (p. 106).

The CIA declassified the work with some cuts. Cullather restores missing information that has since appeared in the public record, including identifying Albert Haney as the project's director, but the blank spaces marking redacted passages provide a clear example of what is still not known about U.S. actions during the Cold War. Despite the minor sanitizing, the work offers solid evidence of an operation that was plagued by chronic lapses in security, orchestrated by men who failed to plan beyond its final stages and understand not only the intentions of the Guatemalan Army and government, but also the weakness of Castillo Armas and his troops. "All of these were swept away by Arbenz's resignation, and PBSUCCESS went into Agency lore as an unblemished triumph. Eisenhower's policymakers drew confidence from the belief that covert action could be used as a convenient, decisive final resort" (p. 110).

Gregory Granding of Duke University calls Secret History an extremely important scholarly and pedagogical work, adding that it moves discussion from if and how the United States did what it did, to why. Another reviewer was skeptical about Cullather's hope that the disclosure of information about the controversial incident would show that the United States could honestly confront and learn from the painful incidents in its past. This wasn't unwarranted as Secret History is the product of a short-lived openness initiative at the CIA. However, the 2006 edition includes an appendix of 21 additional documents. Some released as part of a truth and reconciliation process stemming from a 1996 peace accord that finally ended the bloody civil conflict that followed PBSUCCESS. Others were relinquished after Freedom of Information Act requests, or published by the State Department. In any case, it isn't unreasonable to believe that one day the veil of mystery "which keeps intelligence and espionage in the shadow of history" (p. xii) will once again be lifted.

---

I will look forward to reading about what is revealed.

---

### **David says**

This book details the events of the CIA's operation to overthrow Guatamalan president Arbenz. This analysis uses declassified government documents collected which provides an interesting perspective of what CIA and the executive branch believed covert operations could produce in the 50's and 60's. It is disappointing that the US promoted an operation that goes against international law, helped provide the inaccurate perceptions of covert action leading to future blunders in Cuba and Vietnam, and the resulting collapse of the Guatamalan government for years to come. In the end, it was all for nothing, a sad conclusion that hopefully our nation has learned from.

---

### **Marko Santos says**

Terrible, simply terrible what the CIA from that time has done to my country, the repercussions of their action left a visible and palpable scar on the current Guatemalan society, now I believe the present is now and is our responsibility what future we construct from it. Still great damage has been made.

I find importance in history as we can identify patterns and work towards avoiding the same mistakes humanity has made for centuries. The book concludes in showing a pattern of actions taken by the CIA during the 60's trying to repeat operations SHERWOOD and PBSUCCESS to depose leaders, using psychological attacks through media until finally using mercenary infiltrations.

Does this ring a bell to you? How about the current media circus talking about weapons of massive destruction, or nuclear weapons programs, now this are just my own speculations and conclusions, but I think is important for citizens to have knowledge of where their parents votes and taxes ended in the past and question where they are ending now.

---

### **James says**

A true story of frightening incompetence that has been repeated again and again in this last half century.

---

### **Ben says**

Well researched look at PBSUCCESS, the CIA's coup in Guatemala. Cullather uses the CIA's own records to craft a powerful narrative that shows an ill conceived and executed operation which had a powerful impact on American Cold War policy.

---

## **Julien Gorbach says**

This book written by Cullather when he was a CIA staff historian goes a long way to explaining the mistakes the United States made during the Cold War, and their wide-ranging, catastrophic consequences.

---

## **Jen says**

It's books like these that sometimes make me embarrassed to be an American. The title is pretty self explanatory. Really the conclusion is that the American supported coup in Guatemala was successful because the CIA got lucky, not because expert planning had gone into the operation. In reality, the CIA had very little understanding of what was happening on the ground in Guatemala.

---

## **Thomas Wolf says**

The main portion of the book, written by Nick Cullather, is a declassified CIA history written in the 1990s in a very straight-forward fashion, and maybe a little too dry to truly enjoy. It was fun trying to figure out what was going on in the still redacted portions.

The facts revealed a fascinating look at the cold-war mindset of the CIA and the US government in the 1950s.

To the opposite effect, the afterward, by historian Piero Gleijeses, was an entertaining opinion piece, which seemed to draw many conclusions not supported by the facts in the main section.

---

## **Ed says**

In 1954 the Central Intelligence Agency planned and executed a seizure of power against the government of Guatemala fearing that it was under the influence of the Soviet Union and could become a beachhead for Soviet influence in Central America. It marked the beginning of routine use of assassination, especially in the form of murder for contrived political gain by the CIA. Nick Cullather was hired, investigated and given a top secret security clearance. He had an office with a safe and access to hundreds of boxes of classified documents relating to the 1954 events.

Cullather's book is the history of the United States deposing of the elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán and installing Carlos Castillo Armas, a compliant thug, in his place. It is based on author's access to classified and only lightly edited files of PBSUCCESS, the CIA code name for operation. The operation was a brilliant success according to CIA lore. Considerations of success or failure are based on whether one thinks that overthrowing a moderate left-wing government that is (or would like to be) friendly to the United States is an appropriate use of national resources. CIA officers and trainees were initial audience for book, which was authorized by the Agency to educate officers engaged in similar operations, using the Guatemala coup as a template since it was an extraordinary melding of timely intelligence and

outstanding operational control.

Cullather found otherwise; those in charge of the mission crushed a the democratically elected government and kept power in the hands of the United Fruit Company and the oligarchs who owned (literally) most of the country. It did so only through a combination of dumb luck, poor choices by Arbenz, dithering of the army leadership and intervention of the Samosa government from Nicaragua. Cullather disputes the CIA version that Arbenz collapsed due to pressure caused by effective psychological, political and military operations. Instead, the author claims that Arbenz was victim of an military coup-- the Guatemalan army, despite tactical successes on the ground against Armas's army because they feared being left out of the disposition of spoils after Arbenz was ousted.

Politically Arbenz was popular among the thousands of peasants who had been granted land under a land reform policy that favored them at the expense of the United Fruit Company and spoke to mass gatherings in Guatemala City of workers supporting him. Militarily the operation was a joke. Armed detachments loyal to (or at least assigned by the CIA to) Castillo Armas got nowhere. One group was detained by police in El Salvador when they tried use it to cross into Guatemala. Another landed at Puerto Barrios, the Atlantic port where the police and hastily armed dock workers arrested the landing party. A third column penetrated three miles into Guatemala and then simply stopped waiting for supplies and orders. The only pitched battle of the campaign was won by the Guatemalan army, an isolated outpost that was outnumbered and outgunned by the invaders but was still able to rout them.

Ultimately the it was an old-fashioned military coup by the army leadership who feared direct military intervention by the United States, a regular occurrence in Central America and the Caribbean. The Arbenz regime's demise left an enduring legacy of anti-Americanism. Castillo Armas assumed dictatorial powers and was the first of five Guatemala political leaders dependent on the United States and answering to the CIA station chief along with a vice-president of United Fruit and the whims of the oligarchy. It led to a thirty year civil war that was brutal even by the ultra-sanguinary terms of Central American guerilla warfare and counter-insurgency.

Castillo Armas used his new power to cancel land reform and outlaw all political parties, labor unions and peasant organizations, abrogate the 1945 somewhat progressive constitution and decreed a "political statute" that gave him complete executive and legislative authority. This didn't bother Allen Dulles, head of the CIA who was the sponsor and overseer of the coup. He didn't like the continued insolvency of the nation and the constant requests, pleas and demands for money. However the only way the Castillo Armas could hang on to power was to deliver the goods from the United States, increasingly difficult as the depth and breadth of corruption in his junta became impossible to hide. Intervention produced "allies" that were stubborn, aid-hungry and corrupt as it did in Vietnam a decade later.

---