

Entanglements in Guatemala and Cuba

NARRATOR:

In the late 1950s, Fidel Castro and his small band of Cuban guerrillas started a revolution that challenged the desire of the United States to control the Western Hemisphere.

FIDEL CASTRO:

[via translator] We couldn't think about the Cold War at that time. And besides, we were naïve. We really believed there was a certain international order. We believed in the existence of certain international principles. We believed that the sovereignty of nations would be respected.

NARRATOR:

To the United States, Castro's nationalism and left-wing policies were a Trojan horse for Soviet Communism.

OLEG DAROUSSENKOV, Communist Party Central Committee:

[via translator] Up until that time, we had viewed Latin America as a distant, exotic continent with which we had virtually no relations. The Cuban revolution changed all this.

[music]

TEXT:

Cold War Backyard
1954–1990

Narrator: Kenneth Branagh

NARRATOR:

From its birth in 1776, the United States had grown and grown. Where its flag did not fly, its troops or agents often intervened. In the 1950s, the Guatemalans dared to challenge an American business that controlled much of its economy.

VIDEO:

Journey to Banana Land
Produced by the William J. Ganz Co.

The Institute of Visual Training
In Cooperation with United Fruit Company

NARRATOR:

The United Fruit Company of Boston owned half a million acres of land, the railroad, the port, and telecommunications. But most Guatemalan peasants found it difficult to survive.

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In 1950, Jacobo Arbenz was voted president. [2:40] He wasn't a Communist, but some of his close allies were. A former military man, Arbenz sought to modernize Guatemala's backward society. Washington was alarmed.

HOWARD HUNT, CIA Chief, Mexico:

What we faced here was the obvious intervention of a foreign power, because these homegrown parties are not really homegrown, they're being funded or advised by a foreign power, i.e., the Soviet Union.

NIKOLAI LEONOV, KGB Officer, Mexico:

[via translator] The Arbenz government, which had been in power from 1950, didn't enjoy any logistical support from the Soviet Union. We didn't even have diplomatic relations. There was no Soviet mission in Guatemala.

NARRATOR:

President Arbenz started a land reform program, buying up fallow land to distribute to peasants. In compensation, he offered the landowners the values they had themselves declared for taxes. United Fruit was offered just over a million dollars for its land. When Arbenz declared nationalization, the company, backed by the United States, claimed 16 million dollars.

JOSE MANUEL FORTUNY, Communist Party, Guatemala:

[via translator] He saw that I didn't look very pleased. He said, aren't you happy about the news? And I replied, now we're going to have to fight on two fronts. We're going to have to fight internally against the landowners, and also against the United States.

HOWARD HUNT:

My counterpart, the Guatemalan City chief of station, was sending in reports too about Communist infiltration in the government, and of course he mentioned Jose Manuel Fortuny and some of the old-time Stalinist Communists who were gaining favorable positions in the Arbenz regime.

NARRATOR:

In this impasse, the US named John Peurifoy as its new ambassador. Peurifoy had had experience of Communist efforts to gain power in Greece.

JOSE MANUEL FORTUNY:

[via translator] Peurifoy said to Arbenz, Mr. President, we can sort out all this business of the United Fruit company so that you can come to a satisfactory agreement with them. The United Fruit company is not the problem. The problem is the Communists that you have in your government.

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ALFONSO BAUER, Agrarian Bank, Guatemala:

[via translator] No less a figure than John Foster Dulles, head of the State Department, was part of the firm of lawyers acting for the United Fruit company. His brother Allen was the head of the CIA. So it didn't take much of an effort on their part to persuade their president, a military man, Mr. Eisenhower, to give them the green light to overthrow Arbenz's government. [6:02]

NEWSREEL:

Dulles asks all Americas to unite against Red peril
Commentary by John Cannon
News of the Day

REPORTER:

US Secretary of State Dulles takes the rostrum to urge united action by the Americas to outlaw international Communist intervention in the Western Hemisphere.

JOHN FOSTER DULLES:

[March 5, 1954] This conference was shocked by the dastardly attack on members of the United States Congress by those who've professed to be patriots. They may not themselves have been Communists, but they had been subjected to the inflammatory influence of Communism, which avowedly uses extreme nationalism as one of its tools.

NARRATOR:

Arbenz once again put on his colonel's uniform as Guatemala prepared for war. In Esquipulas, an important religious shrine in a very Catholic country, the church helped organize the opposition to Arbenz. A CIA operation, code-named PB Success, mobilized disaffected exiles and peasants into action.

HOWARD HUNT:

What we wanted to do was have a terror campaign, to terrify Arbenz particularly, and terrify his troops, much as the German Stuka bombers terrified the population of Holland, Belgium, and Poland at the onset of World War II, and just rendered everybody paralyzed.

NEWSREEL:

War in Guatemala!
UN calls for "cease fire"!

[June 18, 1954]

NARRATOR:

The UN met in emergency session. Guatemala City was strafed from the air. Rebels invaded from Honduras. The CIA spread panic. Washington denied responsibility.

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HENRY CABOT LODGE, US Ambassador to UN:

[at UN] The information available to the United States thus far strongly suggests that the situation does not involve aggression, but is a revolt of Guatemalans against Guatemalans.

NARRATOR:

The Soviets were warned. [8:08]

HENRY CABOT LODGE:

[at UN] Stay out of this hemisphere! And don't try to start your plans and your conspiracies over here.

NARRATOR:

The American PB Success campaign brought the government down and drove Arbenz and his wife into exile. Nine thousand of his supporters were arrested. Many were kept in jail, without trial, for years.

JOSE MANUEL FORTUNY:

[via translator] They even set up anti-Communist committees, where anyone could go and give the names of people who'd been loyal to the revolution. These people were then being mercilessly kidnapped, killed, and so on.

NARRATOR:

Among those who fled was a young Argentine doctor, Ernesto Che Guevara, who went to Mexico and there met Fidel Castro.

FIDEL CASTRO:

[via translator] I remember my talks with him. He was terribly indignant and embittered by these events, which had interrupted an endeavor which wasn't even radical. It was a relatively simple change, land reform, which was very just and necessary.

NARRATOR:

Five years later, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had triumphed. Ninety miles from Florida, in what the United States considered its own backyard, Castro established a regime soon to be allied with the Soviet Union.

JOHN F. KENNEDY:

[January 20, 1961] Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

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NARRATOR:

In 1961 John Fitzgerald Kennedy took over the presidency, and with it, a CIA scheme to send in an army of exiles to overthrow Castro as they had earlier overthrown Arbenz in Guatemala.

HOWARD HUNT:

So I was yanked back from Montevideo, where I would have been content to spend the rest of my life, and told that what we're doing is reassembling the PB Success team, that is the Guatemala operational team, to take care of Castro.

[April 1961]

NARRATOR:

At the Bay of Pigs, Castro's forces routed the CIA-sponsored invasion. [10:55]

HOWARD HUNT:

Castro was secure, and he was beloved by millions in Cuba, and so it was a different situation than Guatemala.

FIDEL CASTRO:

[via translation] The worms, the privileged, the parasites, the sons of parasites want to fly the flag of surrender, ashamed of their crimes against the homeland. Beware you won't confront playboys. You'll be up against men. [applause]

NARRATOR:

Castro, triumphant, was eager to take armed revolution into Latin America. To combat the Cuban challenge, the US established in its Panama Canal Zone a sophisticated school. Here, counterinsurgency forces from all over the subcontinent were trained. [gunfire] By the early 1960s, left-wing revolutionary groups were fighting the authorities in Guatemala, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and the Dominican Republic.

REPORTER:

Marines are ordered into the revolt-torn, small island country by President Johnson. Five hundred leathernecks are put ashore by helicopter.

NARRATOR:

In 1965, US Marines went in to crush the Dominicans, who were trying to restore their elected president.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON:

[May 1, 1965] The American nation cannot, must not, and will not permit the establishment of another Communist government in the Western hemisphere.

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NIKOLAI LEONOV:

[via translator] The Soviet Union, especially after Brezhnev came to power in 1954, adhered to the principle of peaceful coexistence and détente and the relaxation of international tension. But the Cubans had a theory which can be described as, let's have a hundred Vietnams.

NARRATOR:

Che Guevara was behind the call for a hundred Vietnams. In 1965 he went to the Congo, and later to the heart of South America, to spread the cause of violent revolution. By late 1967, US instructors were training Bolivian troops in guerrilla warfare. They set a trap for Che Guevara.

DARIEL ALARCON, Cuban Guerrilla Fighter:

[via translator] On more than one occasion, he said, our last battle is approaching. We have to prepare for it, and we must be very careful not to be taken prisoner, especially the Cubans. [13:53]

NARRATOR:

Che Guevara was captured alive. Hours later, he was shot dead. Five of Guevara's group escaped to the Bolivian capital, La Paz.