

RS#10: Source 7 - Philip C. Roettinger "The Company, Then and Now," 1986

Philip C. Roettinger was a former member of the CIA and an active participant in the Guatemalan coup in 1954. Roettinger helped trained Guatemalan rebels in Honduras to overthrow the Arbenz government. In the following passage, Roettinger discusses his overall feelings about the operation.

Recalling the Overthrow:

It is night and we are encamped in a remote area. A ragtag group rests around a fire. They are rebels, trading war stories and laughingly planning what they will do when they take over the capital [of Guatemala]. Uninterested in social reforms and untouched by ideological conviction, they haven't heard the President of the United States describe their mission as preventing the establishment of a communist beachhead in the Western hemisphere. They just want to overthrow the government....

As a CIA case officer, I trained Guatemalan exiles in Honduras to invade their country and oust their democratically elected President, Jacob Arbenz. I now think my involvement in the overthrow of Arbenz was a terrible mistake. The reasons the Eisenhower administration gave were false; the consequences were disastrous.

In March 1954, three months before we toppled Arbenz and installed Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, our handpicked "Liberator," CIA director Allen Dulles convened his Guatemalan operatives at Opa Locka Marine Base in Miami for a pep talk. Seated in front of us, resplendent [shining] in a tweed sport coat and puffing a pipe, Dulles exhorted [advised] us to do our jobs well and told us the same lie Ronald Reagan is telling the people today: The purpose of the U.S. support for the rebels is to stop the spread of communism.

But communism was not a threat we were fighting. The threat was land reform. Fulfilling a pledge to transform Guatemala into a "modern capitalist state," Arbenz had taken over some unused land belonging to the United Fruit Company. The Boston-based company, which considered its rights superior to those of Guatemalans, retaliated with a publicity campaign to paint Guatemala red [Communist]....

"Operation PBSuccess" was a failure. The new regime [Castillo Armas] burned books. It disfranchised [deprived of the right to vote] three-fourths of Guatemala's people. It dismantled [took apart] social and economic reforms such as land redistribution, social security, and trade-union rights. Our overthrow began thirty-one years of repressive military rule and the deaths of more than 100,000 Guatemalans...

The coup I helped engineer in 1954 inaugurated an unprecedented era of intransigent [uncompromising] military rule in Central America. Generals and colonels acted with impunity [knew their actions would go unpunished] to wipe out dissent and amass wealth for themselves and their cronies [friends]....

I am 70 years old now. I have lived and worked in Latin America for more than thirty years. Done with skullduggery, I devote my time to painting the region's beautiful scenery. It's painful to look as my government repeats the mistake in which it engaged me thirty-two years ago. I have grown up. I only wish my government would do the same.

Source: Philip C. Roettinger, "The Company Then and Now," *The Progressive*, July 1986, 50.