

CIA Had Hit List of 58 Guatemalans in the 1950s

Agency Reveals Details of Covert Action Against President Arbenz, Overthrown but Not Killed

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer

The CIA considered assassinating Guatemalan leaders more than 40 years ago, reviewing a list of 58 targets and training some gunmen for the job, but the killings were not carried out, the agency said yesterday.

The disclosure came as the CIA announced the release of 1,400 pages of once-classified records describing a covert action that caused the collapse of the government of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in June 1954. Arbenz fled to Cuba and eventually into exile in Mexico.

Although most details of the Guatemalan operation have been well known for years, yesterday's release of documents was the first time that the CIA disclosed that assassinations had been contemplated. Agency officials termed the assassination material "the most sensitive in the collection" that was released to the National Archives for public review.

The Eisenhower administration acted against Arbenz because he was viewed as a leftist. "There was considerable communist influence within his government, giving rise to fears that Guatemala could become a Soviet client state," a CIA official said.

From first planning sessions in 1952 during the final year of the Truman administration, assassina-

tion "as a substitute for, or in combination with" paramilitary operations was considered, the agency said. "Discussions of assassination took place at the working level but also involved senior agency officials and, on several occasions, State Department officials as well," the agency said in a summary paper.

In the end, as previously reported, a paramilitary force of exiled Guatemalans was trained and sent into the country to create pressure on Arbenz and "persuade military leaders inside the government to cooperate in a coup against Arbenz," the agency said. The military action was coordinated with a propaganda campaign against Arbenz; two weeks after the invasion he resigned and left the country.

In the 1960s, the agency undertook other covert actions that included assassination attempts, including against Cuban President Fidel Castro, Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba of the Belgian Congo and the Dominican Republic's dictator, Rafael Trujillo. The Castro efforts failed; and although Lumumba died in a plane crash and Trujillo was shot, a 1975 congressional investigation found that neither death was a result of the CIA's actions.

The Guatemala assassination material was not made available to Capitol Hill investigators during the 1975 House and Senate hearings on

the agency and was only discovered in 1979, the agency said.

However, when the American public learned in 1973 that the CIA had considered assassination as a policy, then-CIA Director William E. Colby prohibited further agency involvement in such action. In 1976, then-President Gerald R. Ford issued an executive order banning any U.S. government employee from involvement in assassination. That prohibition, expanded by President Jimmy Carter, remains in effect today.

Arguments still take place within the agency about the merits of the current policy, primarily because it has kept planners from undertaking covert operations that may as a side effect lead to some killings, according to retired and active agency officials. One official pointed to the Bush administration's military invasion of Panama to capture that country's dictator, Manuel Antonio Noriega, which took place after agency officials said a covert action to seize him might lead to his assassination.

The Associated Press added:
The documents released yesterday indicate that exiled rebel leader Castillo Armas, who took over after the fall of Arbenz, gave the CIA the list of 58 individuals to be assassinated. One CIA official reviewing the proposal suggested "even a smaller number, say 20, would be sufficient."

In March 1954, the CIA drew up criteria for assassination targets: high government and organization leaders "irrevocably implicated in Communist doctrine and policy"; "out and out proven Communist leaders"; or people in key government and military positions of tactical importance "whose removal for psychological, organizational or other reasons is mandatory for the success of military action."

In 1953, the CIA included plans for "K" groups, or assassin teams, to work with sabotage groups, and rebels began training assassins. CIA headquarters in Washington sent 20 silencers for .22-caliber rifles to the rebel killers training in Honduras, said a Jan. 11, 1954, cable.

In the spring of 1954, CIA officers made official requests to the State Department to implement assassinations. No cabled replies were found.

Three weeks before President Arbenz resigned, a CIA field officer met with officials in Washington to submit the political assassination plan in person. It was ruled out "at least for the immediate future," according to a once-classified CIA history of the events that was written in 1995.

Still, upon returning to Guatemala, the official told his CIA staff the consensus in Washington was, "Arbenz must go; how does not matter."