

# The CIA's Guatemala coup and all of its implications

## BITTER FRUIT

The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala  
By Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer. Doubleday. 320 pp. \$16.95

By Randolph Ryan  
Globe Staff

The ill-defined borders, unruly politics and seemingly repetitive histories of Central American nations run together to form a hazy common image in the North American eye. Schlesinger and Kinzer have written a first-rate book for that rapidly growing number of readers who seek a clearer understanding of the region, but are not sure where or how to begin.

"Bitter Fruit" focuses on one pivotal event in one country — a coup in Guatemala — 28 years ago, but that story is a prism shedding light on many elements of the ensuing history of Central America. The book is an account of a taut, elaborate, sometimes funny — and ultimately disastrously successful — CIA plot that destroyed a democratic government and launched the most populous and strategically important nation between Panama and Mexico on a slide into deepening political terror.

This point bears repetition. Many Americans look down on Central America as a region of tin-pot tyrannies, far inferior in political development to our democracy. Fair enough. Often it has been that way. But "Bitter Fruit" is the story that does not fit our image of ourselves. Guatemala was at the critical takeoff point of a peaceful, democratic revolution when the

United States stepped in and shot it down. The authors tell how that happened.

Inspired by the ideals of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, especially his Four Freedoms address, broadcast over the shortwave during World War II, the democratic experiment that began in Guatemala in 1944 was by no means anti-American. Its social and economic program, however — particularly agrarian reform — ran counter to the wishes of a great American monopoly, the United Fruit Company. The holdings of *la frutera* in those days constituted a virtual country within a country. Although the land reform policy of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz would have fallen well within the norm of the Alliance for Progress 10 years later, or of the Christian Democrats of El Salvador today, United Fruit prodded the Eisenhower Administration into an undeclared war against Arbenz, the sort euphemistically referred to as "covert action."

Brothers John Foster Dulles, at the State Department, and Allen Dulles, at the CIA, headed the campaign against Arbenz. They said they were promoting the cause of "anticommunism," though it is unclear that the small group of leftists in the Arbenz government presented any threat at all. Meanwhile the damage done by the 1954 coup to the social and political fabric of Guatemala rippled outward through Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. The replacement of a fledgling democracy with a backward-turning military government gave comfort to the reactionary right wing, disillusionment and despair to the democratic center and a well of revolutionary anger to the

left. We are seeing the results today.

"Bitter Fruit" is a compelling read. It begins in midstream, in June 1954, with the elaborate campaign of terror and disinformation through which the CIA intimidated and demoralized Arbenz. The story then drops back a decade to the birth of democracy in Guatemala, and from there sweeps forward through the events of 1954. There is a closing chapter on the aftermath. By 1980 headless corpses left along roadsides by the thousands had become the standard method through which the Guatemalan army and oligarchy suppressed change and dissent.

Some chapters are especially rich. The growth of United Fruit from its origins in Boston is one of the great stories of American capitalism. The authors' account of the brilliant public relations campaign through which the company co-opted the US government, won the backing of both liberals and conservatives and snookered the press is another classic tale. There are some splendid characters, among them Ambassador John Peurifoy whose swaggering, pistol-packing habits made colleagues worry he'd "do something rash and get himself shot."

The book is well sourced, with easy-to-follow footnotes indicating the bibliography behind every substantive paragraph. An observer of the current Central American drama is likely to note numerous elements of the 1954 story that give a vague feeling of *deja vu*, matched against the news of the day. Schlesinger and Kinzer have a light touch, however. They leave it to the reader to draw conclusions.