
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* by Nick Cullather

Review by: Richard H. Immerman

Source: *The American Historical Review*, Apr., 2001, Vol. 106, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), p. 605

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Historical Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2651701>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Oxford University Press and American Historical Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Historical Review*

much that is admirable in Christison's work, and her thesis is at times well thought out and supported, she should try to integrate more of the opposing view into her presentation, rely less on secondary sources, and write in a less strident style.

STEVEN Z. FREIBERGER
College of St. Elizabeth

NICK CULLATHER. *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1999. Pp. xl, 142. Cloth \$39.50, paper \$14.95.

"Operation PBSUCCESS," the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) orchestrated overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán's Guatemalan government in 1954, has been examined with greater depth than any covert project in the history of U.S. foreign relations. Indeed, a boomlet of literature began in 1982 with the publication in rapid succession of Stephen C. Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer's *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* and my *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention*. Based on hundreds of documents released through the Freedom of Information Act, both books presented detailed narratives and critiqued U.S. policy as wrong-headed. But whereas Schlesinger and Kinzer attributed the Eisenhower administration's motives to a commitment to protect U.S. economic interests, especially those of the United Fruit Company, I emphasized strategic concerns and misperceptions rooted in a "Cold War ethos." Then, in *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (1991), Piero Gleijeses, using extensive interviews with Guatemalans, revealed the previously overlooked culpability of Arbenz's military. He also argued that the president's relationship to Guatemala's Communists was much closer than previous students of PBSUCCESS had suggested.

All of these works were handicapped by the continued classification of the archives of the CIA itself. Following the end of the Cold War, however, the agency announced a policy of "openness." It organized a series of conferences with scholars, most accompanied by the release of documents for the first time, and pledged to make public many more in the near future. It also hired skilled historians to write histories of pivotal covert operations.

Nick Cullather was one of those historians. A gifted student of the history of U.S. foreign relations, Cullather was attracted by the chance to gain access to the CIA's files. The opportunity to write about the operation in Guatemala was particularly appealing. Conversant with PBSUCCESS's comparatively rich historiography, he recognized that an agency-sanctioned study, even if intended for internal use as a training manual, would serve as a barometer of the worth of the CIA's archives. He would be able to evaluate the extent to which they addressed unanswered questions and resolved conflicting interpretations.

Cullather wrote *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala, 1952-1954* from 1992-1993. The CIA declassified the manuscript, albeit with numerous redactions, in 1997. Stanford University Press has now made it available, still with the redactions. The general contours of the history of U.S.-Guatemala relations have not been secret because of the prior scholarship (appended at the end are excerpts from Gerald K. Hanes's more sensational study of the CIA's assassination plans). The discussion of the growing alarm with which Washington assessed the Communist threat in Guatemala after the 1944 Revolution; the reform initiatives of Arbenz and his predecessor, Juan José Arévalo; the CIA plan (PBFORTUNE) to oust Arbenz that the Truman administration aborted in 1952; the formulation of PBSUCCESS and identification of Carlos Enrique Castillo Armas to spearhead the counterrevolution; and the unfolding of the operation, the resignation of Arbenz, and the machinations that brought Castillo Armas to the presidency will be familiar to most students of the Cold War.

In many cases, Cullather relies on the extant literature. What is more, he agrees with the consensus that emerged over the past two decades: PBSUCCESS was a blunder that produced tragic consequences for the Guatemalans. His book is, nevertheless, an extremely valuable contribution. It fine-tunes the narrative and provides a more precise chronology. It presents robust evidence that Washington was not the servant of the United Fruit Company, and it demolishes Frederick W. Marks's argument that Castillo Armas's Army of Liberation was a credible force with widespread indigenous support. Most important, Cullather demonstrates all but conclusively that, contrary to legend, PBSUCCESS did not succeed because of committed anticommunists or brilliant CIA planners. It succeeded because the Guatemalan army chose to force Arbenz to resign rather than fight a war it would surely win. "Incredible" was Dwight D. Eisenhower's retrospective reaction (p. 109).

Even with access to CIA archives, Cullather cannot resolve all disputes. Most notably, the issue of Arbenz's ties to the Communists remains to be contested. Still, historians will not be disappointed with the quality of Cullather's scholarship. If anything, the publication of this work should intensify our disappointment with the CIA's behavior. Despite its initial vow, the agency has refused to declassify the documents, even the promised portion, that drove Cullather's study. The few isolated documents that have been released are of limited use for the historian because they cannot be analyzed within the context of their complements. Hence the CIA has placed Cullather in an untenable position for a scholar, and that should offend—and be challenged by—all historians.

RICHARD H. IMMERMAN
Temple University

[All reviewers of books by Indiana University faculty are selected with the advice of the Board of Editors.]

REBECCA E. KLATCH. *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s*. Berkeley and Los