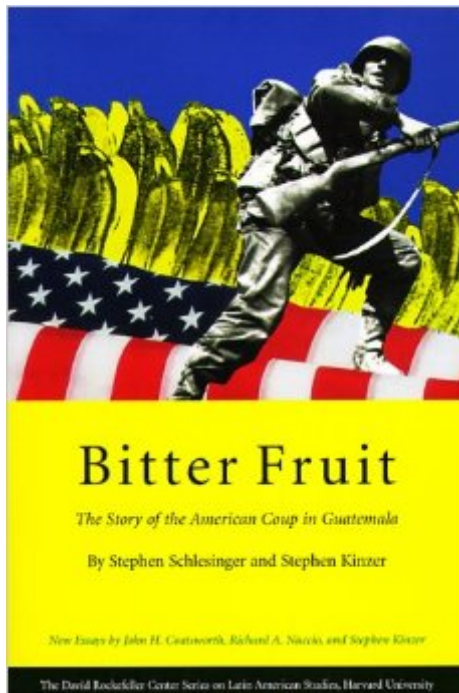


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Bitter Fruit: The Story Of The American Coup In Guatemala



Synopsis

There is a newer edition of this book. Bitter Fruit recounts in telling detail the CIA operation to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1954. The 1982 book has become a classic, a textbook case study of Cold War meddling that succeeded only to condemn Guatemala to decades of military dictatorship. The authors make extensive use of U.S. government publications and documents, as well as interviews with former CIA and other officials. The Harvard edition includes a powerful new introduction by historian John Coatsworth, Director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies; an insightful prologue by Richard Nuccio, former State Department official who revealed recent evidence of CIA misconduct in Guatemala to Congress; and a compelling afterword by coauthor Stephen Kinzer, now Istanbul bureau chief for the New York Times, summarizing developments that led from the 1954 coup to the peace accords that ended Guatemala's civil strife forty years later.

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Customer Reviews

Schlesinger's and Kinzer's classic study examines one of the more disgraceful chapters in the history of American foreign policy: the CIA-sponsored overthrow in 1954 of the democratically elected government of Guatemala. The long-term repercussions of this unprovoked excursion are still felt today; many Latin American countries still do not trust United States intentions because of

our actions in both Guatemala and, two decades later, Chile. "Bitter Fruit" explodes some cherished myths that apologists for the coup have proffered over the years. First, it's clear that Roosevelt rather than Stalin provided the inspiration to the presidencies of Juan Jose Arevalo (1945-1951) and Jacobo Arbenz Guzman (1951-1954). Both Arevalo and Arbenz were motivated by the policies and practices of the New Deal; their support for labor and their actions towards American businesses must be viewed in this light and were never any worse than the laws passed during the Depression in the United States. Regardless of whatever tolerance Guatemalan Communists may have enjoyed, or influence they may have had--and it's clear that they didn't have much--the Eisenhower administration was motivated as much by scorn of the Roosevelt and Truman years as by anti-Communism. (Tellingly, those who cite Che Guevera's presence in Guatemala often fail to note that his arrival, at the age of 25 in early 1954, postdated the planning of American intervention and predated by many years Guevera's notoriety.) Second, the succession of American puppets who succeeded Arbenz were certainly not supported by the people of Guatemala: the ragtag opposition "army" never exceeded 400 troops in number, and none of the dictators during the next four decades could have survived a freely held election. Between 1954 and the early 1990s, tens of thousands of civilians were imprisoned, executed, or "disappeared" at the fleeting whims of a series of brutal tyrants--and this, to most Central Americans, is the "bottom line" legacy of American interference. Third, some defend American intervention because the Guatemalan land reforms in the early 1950s "stole" property from the United Fruit Company. What the supporters of the company's property rights rarely acknowledge is that one of the company's early founders, Samuel Zemurray, acquired its land, as well as a railroad monopoly, by organizing from New Orleans a coup in 1905 that overthrew the existing government and installing UFC's own puppet--all in violation of American law. In addition, when the Arbenz government attempted to compensate UFC for the land (all of it fallow), the company admitted that it had fraudulently undervalued their holdings for tax purposes at \$627,000; the land was worth closer to \$16 million. And, finally, what is clear from Schlesinger's and Kinzer's account is that the Americans behind the 1954 coup, from Ambassador John Peurifoy to the Dulles brothers to Eisenhower himself, knew that what they were doing was indefensible. In order to "sell" the coup at all they had to invent a propagandistic war against a democratically elected government to a gullible American media. Not surprisingly, they covered up and denied American involvement not only at the time but during the ensuing years. Furthermore, many of the participants who survived into the late 1970s either confessed their regret to the authors of this book or admitted that the horrific long-term consequences of the coup in no way justified its short-term "success." The American adventure in Guatemala was fostered by bad intelligence,

furthered by greedy intentions, and executed with no coherent strategy, and it dealt a serious blow both to democracy and to the immediate and long-term interests of the United States government. Meticulously documented, this blood-boiling yet even-handed study should be read by all who are concerned by the consequences of ill-conceived, unilaterally executed, and short-sighted foreign policy planning.

Well, OK, Watergate actually triggered the erosion of my faith in the US government. But I was barely a teenager as that story broke. I was in my early 20's when I read *Bitter Fruit*, prior to meeting Stephen Schlesinger at a university function. This is the story of how the United States Government plotted against and overthrew the first democratically elected government in Guatemala. It clearly demonstrates how our government became an instrument, not of Democracy, but of oppression for the benefit of the wealthy. The right-wing coup, planned and supported by the CIA, led to other covert operations, many of which succeeded in enriching American corporations at the expense of Democracy. Jacobo Arbenz, elected to the presidency of Guatemala was faced with a crisis of poverty. Most of the nation's land belonged to a very few rich, and to United Fruit Company. Much of that land lay fallow. Arbenz instituted a land reform package which called for turning over fallow land to the country's impoverished campesinos. Land would be purchased by the government from the owners at the value THE OWNERS had declared for property tax purposes. Sounds fair enough, right? Honest landowners would receive fair recompense for unused land. Dishonest landowners would get their just desserts. Nevertheless, United Fruit Company, using its pull with John Foster & Allen Dulles, Secretary of State & CIA Director, respectively, managed to have their own revolution created and funded by the US Government, wrapped in a shroud of anti-communism. The dictator they instated continued the tradition of repression that Guatemala had known for decades before. The only real winners of in this story were the stockholders of United Fruit. Today, in the "New World Order," we're more subtle, using international development loans and free trade agreements to undermine Democracy in third world nations. The tools may have changed, but the goal remains the same: Corporate wealth continues to supersede and destroy Democracy worldwide.

Whether you're a connoisseur with a PhD in international relations, a high-school dropout looking to enhance their missing education, or someone who just wants to read an engrossing book with a little intellectual flare to it, one can be both entertained and appalled by the story contained in "*Bitter Fruit*". Kinzer and Schlesinger's writing is impeccable, and somehow manages to stay apolitical. The

authors do an excellent job of not flaunting the miscues of the American overthrow of Guatemala's democratically elected government, but merely let the facts from all angles tell their own story. In addition, the writing is quite fast-paced in style but pays attentive detail to fact and exhaustively denotes the sources behind the writing. I purchased this for reading as part of a class assignment - and then cited it in two places in my senior essay! So instead of buying a FICTIONAL thriller or adventure or spy novel for your downtime reading, why not pick up a book where the plot . . . actually happened?! In addition, despite being originally published a quarter century ago, the book is amazingly relevant to issues in today's foreign policy (*cough* Iraq *cough*). Also, I HIGHLY recommend for history buffs like myself - but this book can be enjoyed by anyone. Well, "enjoyed" isn't really the word - after reading this book, I felt a sense of anger towards our government for their selfish actions 50 years ago, and a sense of pity toward the people of Guatemala, who had no idea what hit them. But the feelings weren't on the level as to wish that I had never read the book - on the contrary, it made me feel more enlightened both about the Cold War era as well as today's international climate.

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