

Bitter fruit by stephen
schlesinger and
stephen kinzer essay
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The year is 1954. Government agencies resurrect secret plans previously discarded until a more forceful administration comes to power. Behind the scenes, the CIA and State Department are fervently working in over time trying to engineer a government overthrow against a populist nationalist in their own backyard who has the dare audacity to threaten both US economic and geopolitical interest. Accusations of communism and Soviet penetration permeate the discourse and heat up the rhetoric; swift action must be taken to stabilize the hemisphere.

Intervention by any means necessary. Exiled opposition leaders are paid off, trained, equipped, and installed. Propaganda transmits through jammed radio towers and warns the peasant population of invasion and liberation. Psychological warfare in conjunction with paramilitary covert operation is launched. The target—Guatemala, a third world poverty stricken country in which the fruits of revolution and conflict are as ripe as the bananas that dot the landscape.

Such a riveting story could easily fill the pages of Tom Clancy's next best-selling and fictional political thriller but instead, it is the true story unearthed through extensive investigation by Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, who with *Bitter Fruit*, meticulously detail a thought provoking and well-documented historical account of the Guatemalan coup d'état. The sowing of the seeds, subsequent cultivation, and ultimately the dangerous harvest of these bitter fruits is the basis for this compelling chronicle of one of the most controversial and darkest chapters in American history.

Through impeccably examining the historical events that transpired throughout the period of post-war global transformation amidst the backdrop of a looming Cold War that spanned the four corners and thus became localized in Guatemala with the culmination of the 1954 overthrow, the book raises fundamental questions regarding US foreign policy and its ambivalent and contradicting response to rising national movements all across the third world.

The authors essentially contend that the US consistently failed to appropriately distinguish nationalism from communism and thus delegitimized movements and aspirations of foreign nations by crying the Soviet wolf. The disparities that arise between democracy, dictatorship, and stability are also addressed through the scope of US economic and political interest. Furthermore, these interests provide the contextual framework for exposing both the corruption and exploitation of an inconsistent foreign policy whose objectives were achieved through controversial tactics employed by the emerging CIA.

Though it is difficult to succinctly consolidate the authors arguments, as the aforementioned themes and issues often interact and interconnect, the centrality also lies upon challenging the very foundations of American exceptionalism through dichotomizing our ideals with our actions and raising imperative questions regarding to what extent American foreign policy is dictated by economic and neoliberal influence.

And with this influence, to what extent is a policy of intervention justified, especially when it undermines another nations sovereignty, negates the

rights of self-determination, and transforms a stable democracy into a ruthless military dictatorship. Such transformations would have been almost impossible if it weren't for the extraordinary capacity of the media, through governmental manipulation in addition to blind complicity and complete dereliction of duty by neglecting to investigate the truth, helped further accelerate the fate of Jacobo Arbenz and ultimately, the fate of Guatemala.

Thus the role of the media is a continuous theme in the book as imperative questions of objectivity and journalistic integrity inevitably follow.

Furthermore, the authors attempt to connect the historical dots linking events with the past with the then-present through a cause and effect paradigm that further expands the periphery to a global Cold War context that spanned prior to the events of 1954 while emphasizing the immediate and long-term consequences.

The authors do an excellent job providing extensive detailed accounts of the events and are so meticulous in this endeavor, that at times it can become excessive to the point of irrelevancy if the reader's desire is to acquire a basic synopsis of the story. If the reader is seeking a dry and monotonous academic account, they will certainly not find it here as the history is brilliantly retold in a page-turning and dramatic fashion. Complete with an exhausted list of characters, who at many times, can be difficult to keep up with but are nonetheless instrumental to understanding the intricacy and complexity of the story.

Filled with anecdotes and side notes enriched by just about every relevant character and figure of the story whose roles and significance can often be

confusing if not followed carefully, the story plays out as a dramatic and theatrical performance that jumps between geography and time. The authors do a remarkable job in providing character profiles, though at times, may teeter tediously as they dive into personal histories and anecdotes that have the potential for both swaying the reader's attention and content's intention.

However, one must undoubtedly appreciate the journalistic style employed by the authors to weave a story of deep convolution, one that thoroughly investigates every aspect and dynamic with rather fine-toothed precision and accuracy, albeit its length. This is one of the authors' most effective approaches and styles, and although some may cynically portray or doubt their findings because the suspense reads more like a Tom Clancy novel than an academic historical analysis, it is suffice to say you simply can't make this stuff up; the story was written by those architects in power, and not by imaginative minds in Hollywood.

The book is masterfully structured in a format that often transcends time and space beginning with the end of the story, that initially thrusts the reader by overwhelmingly diving into unfamiliar territory but then effectively works its way backwards through historical sequence to provide the reader with a remarkable framework of comprehension and contextual understanding. The pieces of the puzzle beautifully and tragically come together in melodramatic fashion; a style captured by the foreshadowing that concludes every chapter and immerses the reader into multidimensional complexity.

The book traces Guatemala's history academically and journalistically (a style utilized through much of the book) and depicts the overthrow of

General Jorge Ubico's, whose harsh repressive dictatorship and aristocratic structure marginalized the vast majority of the nation, which includes a sizeable indigenous population and even greater impoverished peasantry. The climactic revolution swept the nation and ushered in a new era of reform of social, political, and economic reform predicated on the beliefs and virtues of US inspired idealism and democracy, nationalism, and social liberalism; ultimately improving the lives of Guatemalans through social justice and equitable change.

Spearheaded by Juan Arvelo and later his predecessor Jacobo Arbenz, the "October Revolution" actively sought the pursuit of social justice, but as the authors contend, such a policy of drastic reform is a direct threat to the delicate balance of power wielded in the hands of the very few but who nonetheless ominously lurked in the background pulling the strings.

Such power imbalance existed not only politically but also economically. This disparity is embodied no more by any other group of influence than by the colonial entity known as The United Fruit Company who exercised unrestrained monopolization and exploitation of the nation's chief agricultural output—bananas.

As a result of the disproportionately privatized ownership of the lands enjoyed by both UFC and the established aristocracy, Arbenz pursued and instituted an ambitious policy of agrarian, labor, and land reform including redistribution and rationalization (much of the land remained uncultivated and fallow including 85% of UFC's ownership that was later compensated according to dishonest and disproportionate tax undervaluation).

The pursuit of economic nationalism through breaking colonial dependency and modernizing into a capitalistic state, as the authors contend, was the foundation of the movement. Rather than nationalize the oxymoronic industry of agriculture where output was greater, the programs instituted were more capitalistic than communistic, as the ensuing rhetoric and accusations would suggest.

The strategy was “ to limit the power of foreign companies through direct competition rather nationalization” and expropriate land by encouraging newfound privatization, albeit by the landless, (through rental programs similar to the Homestead Act and ideals of Manifest Destiny) thus spreading economic opportunity to counter the monopolies of the foreign companies and their subsidiaries; specifically UFC and the IRCA railroad. Though the reforms were ambitious in principle, they were relatively modest in practice and implementation but constituted a dire threat to the establishment regardless.

Thus when Decree 900 in all of its populist glory passed, it sealed the fate of Arbenz himself rather than its intended but target—UFC which represented the ire of Guatemalan resentment and the scorn towards their economic captivity. The authors go into great lengths describing the reform, its goals, and responses, using such opportunity to effectively introduce a foundational pillar of their argument that the US inherently failed to make the crucial distinction between nationalism and communism and at times, populism and socialism.

Thus by painting Arbenz and his policies with broad brush strokes of communism, the national security state led by Cold War warriors such as the Dulles brothers, and others within the State Department, CIA, and other governmental agencies quickly went into action. Suffice to say this action was greatly influenced at the behest of the UFC and reinforced by the dominance of influential corporate lobbying as well as outright corruption, which took form in numerous conflicts of interests breached by those in Washington who had direct personal economic interests in the matter.

Kinzer and Schlesinger scrutinize these questionable and shady interests and devote their investigative talent to exposing the intricacies and powerful relationship that exists between economic interests and intervention thus further arguing that political and ideological objectives are mere facades masquerading and justifying imperial objective, in this case, securing UFC monopoly and lining the personal pockets of those in Washington, Boston, and Guatemala City.

This is an effective argument as significant documentation exposes the links of corruption and the motivation to go to great lengths to preserve the status quo. The rest of the book explores those great lengths taken by the CIA, and provides the reader with exclusive perspective behind the scenes from characters involved to operational details. Through a masterminded plan of coordinated deception, manipulation, ruse, sabotage, coercion, and paramilitary activity, the CIA unequivocally flexed its newfound muscle with the confidence and arrogance it had inherited from their successful Iranian experience the year before.

Recycling some tactics from Kermit Roosevelt's playbook but employing a more militaristic strategy by staging an invasion, the CIA and thus the Eisenhower administration took a huge gamble with the Guatemalan experiment. Kinzer and Schlesinger argue that without extensively employing an ambitious but brilliant campaign of ruthless psychological warfare, including the hijacking of radio stations to transmit lies and deception while fueling fabricated rumors, the exaggerated invasion would have been quickly realized by both the people and government as a propagated sham rather than an imminent reality, contrary to what the littered leaflets said.

Ironically, such invasion as the authors argue, would not have succeeded considering the ineptitude of the "liberation force" which was made up by a paid ragtag assembly of mercenaries, rebels, and vindictive exiled figures thirsty for power including most notably, Castillo Armas, who "dapper into his command car, a battered station wagon, led a string of trucks across the frontier and into Guatemala.

The authors do make a strong argument that without aerial support (nicknamed laxatives) that essentially bombed Arbenz into submission, and coupled with the continuously pounded perception of inevitable defeat and further destruction, the invasion surely would have failed. Because of this, the immensely exaggerated but brilliantly orchestrated coup flirts with the borderline of absurdity and serendipity and transcends the contradiction between hubris and impossibility; it is almost as comical as it is tragic.

Never failing to make important historical connection, the authors contend that the overconfidence of the CIA directly led to the abject failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion while also recognizing the pivotal links between Guatemala, Che Guevara, and Cuba and foreshadowing further Latin American armed struggle against US imperialism. As the dust settles, the authors continue with one of their strongest and most powerful chapters, both contextually and argumentatively.

The Aftermath” chronicles not only the subsequent ironic and extraordinary demises of many of the characters involved in the coup as well as the targets, but also describes the downfall of United Fruit (one of the biggest ironies of the whole story considering it was US antitrust laws that disintegrated United Fruit). The poignant story of Bitter Fruit concludes here but the uncompromising and journalistic integrity of Kinzer and Schlesinger take one last further dive into exploring the devastating ramifications that erupted immediately. If the United Fruit Company had not existed, there would have been no problems.

The overthrow of Arbenz had an incalculable effect on other Central American nations, for whom Guatemala had always been and remains something of a regional leader. If Arbenz had survived his term in office, it would have influenced and strengthened democrats in Honduras and El Salvador and isolated Somoza in Nicaragua. His downfall, on the other hand, fortified reactionary forces in the area and guaranteed that future movements for social change would be more extreme and more anti-American than Arbenz had been. ”

The powerful political pendulum effectively swung Guatemala back a decade rolling back all the progress of the October Revolution and re-subjecting the nation to oppressive subjugation. Reactionary forces inevitably emerged and a devastating conflict characterized by brutal violence quickly became the norm. The instability marked decades of militarized dictatorship, failed political transition, and a bloody civil war waged by various US-installed and heavily assisted dictatorial puppetries who engaged in violent campaigns against an intense and determined guerilla insurgency who sought nothing more than a better life usurped by imperialism.

Kinzer and Schlesinger bring everything full circle by emphasizing the consequences to prove the point that sadly the demands of the past have only worsened over time and until they become addressed and resolved, no military defeat, despite the disproportionate use of terror to fight terror, can ever truly reconcile the wrongs perpetrated by those who clench power with impervious grip. The hostilities will continue to be engendered and Guatemalans will never forget the extent of US involvement in destroying their nation and way of life.

The authors solidify much of their overarching themes and arguments of US intervention and its deleterious consequence within these pages. By further exposing the sequence of events in which turmoil and instability engulfed the nation, they suggest that America's hands were equally drenched in blood as their complicity exacerbated the conflict for years to come while power and politics compromised staggering innocent human life.

The documentation provided including testimonies, transcripts, and declassified information, consistently proves to be a solidifying and convincing approach to underscore their fundamental argument that US foreign policy and its ambivalent pursuit of intervention is directly responsible for sowing seeds of instability, undermining democracy, disregarding human rights, and supporting tyranny for political expediency and economic interest.

Such sentiment is eloquently expressed before a US congress committee—
With its policy of supporting dictatorships, the United States has collaborated in the strengthening of these regimes and burdened our people with debts, often for the most superfluous programs. With its policy of military and police assistance, the United States has collaborated in the acts of repression, and consequently in the violation of human rights. These types of assistance weigh heavily on a developing people, whose efforts should all be concentrated on promoting production and achieving greater social justice”

Ultimately it is the people who must not be forgotten amidst the destruction. The authors convey this sentiment by giving voice to the silenced and including testimonies of Guatemalans themselves who illustrate the suffering with poignant clarity. The personalization of the story is a tool used with great effect through out the book as the reader develops unequivocal emotional responses that connect the reader with the story in a very powerful and melodramatic fashion. The experience of mixed feelings continues to be one of the most remarkable attributes of the book.

The humanization the authors craft further instills a sense of shame and dismay as even the most insensitive readers can develop the slightest sense of empathy and sympathy upon discovering an inconvenient truth that inevitably swallows the obstructive pride of even the most ardent. Despite this reconciliation of truth, some would interpret the harsh criticism that manifested through out the book in various forms as blatant bias on the authors' part and may mudsling accusations of anti-Americanism to masquerade and refute the findings.

Such criticism is rejected by those who adhere to objectivity that is largely encompassed in the text and supported by an extensive multitude of documented facts uncovered through deep searches into countless historical archives from all aspects, diplomatic cables, secret files, dialogues, academic analyses, and a wide spectrum of historian accounts and international press findings.

Most importantly, the authors' unwavering commitment to declassification made possible through the Freedom of Information Act provides powerful redibility as information is revealed and undusted from the shelves lining the corridors of power and secrecy. Though history is subjective to the extent of the dominating narrative expressing its side of the story, (and in this case, US revisionism actively downplays much of the story) the authors achieve in an underlying objective of disputing the mythology of American exceptionalism by casting an illuminating light on an otherwise forgotten dark shadow and illustrating that ideas of benevolence are overshadowed by actions of malevolence.

Furthermore, the investigative integrity combined with a passionate desire to inform audiences of the truth, albeit how ugly, sensitive, and challenging the truth may be, speaks volumes to the cruelty of the reality of the world we live in and to the history that continues to shape and define our past, present, and future. Irrespective of perspective, the ugly truth must be brought to surface and can no longer be subject to censure for the sake of political expediency and convenience.

For this, Kinzer and Schlesinger must be respectfully commended for their courage and determination to retell an untold story, that if not explored in depth, surely would have been discarded to the dustbins of history.

Ultimately the reader will bear witness to the crux of hypocrisy and imperialism that continues to dictate US foreign policy. The stories of the past reverberate with great effect all through out our modern post-War history and leading up to the present.

It is almost impossible to read the book without drawing important parallels to the turbulent events that are happening to this day—the characters, nations, and even the terminology change but the story is consistent. The ghosts of history constantly remind us, as JFK once exclaimed, “ those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable. ” After reading this book, it is safe to assume that no one can ever sink their teeth into a cheaply purchased banana again and not realize they have bitten into a ripened piece of bitter fruit, no matter how jubilant the lady on the logo appears.