NO SECOND CHANCES: US-GUATEMALAN RELATIONS IN THE 1960s

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of History
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

September 2013

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: No Second Chances: US-Guatemalan Relations in the 1960s

This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of History by:

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Degree awarded September 2013

THESIS ABSTRACT

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September 2013

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This thesis examines US-Guatemalan relations during the first half of the 1960s. At a critical juncture in Guatemalan history, a relatively inexperienced US ambassador, John Bell, subverted democratic systems in Guatemala and helped install a military dictatorship that ruled the country for more than three decades. Ambassador Bell's policies undermined the Kennedy administration's idealistic modernization drive for the region, the Alliance for Progress, and contributed to one of the longest civil wars in the Western Hemisphere.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the University of Oregon's Department of History for providing me with guidance, support, and assistance in preparing this manuscript. Special thanks are due to Professor Glenn May, my thesis advisor, for providing invaluable insight and reading countless drafts of this work. Also, Professor Carlos Aguirre, Professor Marsha Weisiger, and Professor Reuben Zahler have my deepest gratitude for working with me in producing this thesis. I also thank Kate Doyle, Director of the National Security Archive Guatemala Project, whose digitalized records made this research possible.

For Amber

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the Cold War, Guatemala endured the misfortune of setting precedents for the United States' foreign policy in Latin America. In 1954, the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated a coup that overthrew the democratically elected President of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz, in what would be the first of many anti-communist interventions over the next four decades. The United States hailed the 1954 coup as an important Cold War victory in a time of communist expansion. The need to maintain Guatemala as an ally and symbol of US victory only increased with the onset of the Cuban Revolution. In order to combat the perceived threats from Cuba and the Soviet Union, President Kennedy launched the Alliance for Progress, an ambitious economic aid program designed to compete with communism for the hearts and minds of Latin America's underprivileged. In Guatemala, however, Alliance for Progress initiatives were undermined by Cold War fears of reform leading to revolution.

This study examines the failure of US foreign policy in Guatemala during the Kennedy administration by focusing on the actions of the United States' Ambassador to Guatemala, John Bell, who held that office from December 1961 to September 1965. President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, branded as "enlightened anti-communism" was meant to be a departure from his predecessors' reliance on dictators to maintain US dominance in Latin America.[1] Instead, the United States found itself unable to meet the dual demands of security and development in Guatemala because anti-communism superseded economic and social reform in the struggle to win the Cold War. Ambassador

[1] Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 196.

Bell arrived in Guatemala armed with an impressive résumé, but a shallow understanding of the region and his mission. As a result, the limits of US power and influence became glaringly apparent as Bell juggled Guatemalan politics, combatted perceived communist threats, and tried to implement contradicting demands from Washington.

Guatemala had been experiencing a perpetual state of crisis since the October Revolution of 1944, and the overthrow of the government ten years later made a difficult situation worse. The Central American republic held relatively little economic value, but its geographical proximity and the success of the 1954 coup required the United States to maintain Guatemala as a staunch ally. Taken together, the state of perpetual turmoil and the necessity of maintaining a strong relationship between the United States and Guatemala demanded adroit diplomacy and leadership from US emissaries. John O. Bell, appointed Ambassador to Guatemala in 1961, proved a competent and diligent diplomat in previous assignments, but lacked the flexibility and foresightedness that Guatemala needed at a critical historical juncture.

Convinced that Guatemala faced a nascent threat akin to Fidel Castro, Bell and his superiors in Washington required expedient, stabilizing solutions that they believed only the Guatemalan military could provide. Following the logic dictated by the Kennedy administration, Ambassador Bell paved the way for military dictatorship in Guatemala by amending US policy to reflect the primacy of anti-communism. As a result, the political, economic, and social reforms promised by the Alliance for Progress, so desperately needed in war-torn Guatemala, fell by the wayside in favor of establishing a counterinsurgency state. In choosing the Guatemalan military as primary ally of the

United States in the country instead of developing stronger civil institutions, Ambassador Bell unwittingly contributed to Guatemala's descent into a 36 year Civil War.

It should also be noted that historical analysis on Guatemala during the 1960s is nearly non-existent in English-language sources. Most scholarship on US-Guatemalan relations revolves around two watershed events: the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup of Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz and the genocide of Guatemalan Maya perpetuated by the Guatemalan government during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some secondary literature addresses this period as part of a larger study on Latin America during the Cold War. Stephen Rabe has produced two of the most focused works on US-Latin American relations during the Cold Wars, and in his studies, Rabe has dedicated several sections to the United States and Guatemala during the Kennedy administration and beyond. In *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, Rabe contends that the Alliance for Progress failed because Kennedy's administration placed too much faith in developmental theories and the belief that the United States could dictate political outcomes in Latin America.[2] Moreover, when US interest faced and immediate threat, especially one that challenged the United States tradition of dominance in the Western Hemisphere, Kennedy relied on military options to maintain the sphere of influence. Others, such as Suzanne Jonas, have mentioned the period in polemical works on US-Guatemalan relations and condemned the United States as a knowing architect of a murderous terror-state.

One of the most prolific scholars on US-Latin American relations, Walter LaFeber, contended that the United States had willingly set up a system of dominance over Latin America following the Spanish-American War, and that the Cold War was and ideologically tinged continuance of this hegemonic relationship. Guatemala features in

[2] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 197.

LaFeber's writing as the testing ground for the United States for economic imperialism and later as a laboratory of counterinsurgency. Most historians, however, who address this period use it as background to more detailed studies of Guatemalan political, social, and economic life. Although thousands of documents from the State Department, CIA, Department of Defense, and the Executive Office of the President have been declassified and made widely available through online resources, a detailed study of this period is still desperately needed by scholars of the Cold War, US foreign policy, and Latin America.

CHAPTER II

ORIGINS

After World War II, international competition with the Soviet Union caused anti-communism to feature prominently in both the domestic and foreign policy of the United States. The chief component of the foreign policy was containment, an approach formulated by respected statesman George F. Kennan during the Truman administration. Taking the Soviet Union as his subject, Kennan argued that peaceful coexistence between capitalist and communist countries was impossible because of the expansionist ideology of communism.[1] In Kennan's view, preventing the spread of communism might cause it to collapse under its inherent economic dysfunction, or cause it to soften from exposure to capitalist markets. By 1949, the detonation of the first Soviet atomic weapon and Mao Zedong's victory in China seemed to prove that international communism was indeed an existential threat and Kennan's call to confront the global menace dominated the actions of the United States and its allies for the next four decades.

After formulating a cornerstone of US-Cold War policy, Truman's first Secretary of State, George Marshall, appointed Kennan to head the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. In 1950, he travelled throughout Latin American to meet with ambassadors and assess the United States' southern neighbors.[2] Kennan felt that the geographical, cultural, and racial qualities of Latin America made the region and its people inherently backwards. Citing Catholicism, tropical climate, and racial mixing as

[1] X (George F. Kennan). "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs* (July, 1947). http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/23331/x/the-sources-of-soviet-conduct

[2] Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22.

the root of Latin America's troubles, Kennan observed, "it seems to me unlikely that there could be any region on the earth in which nature and human behavior could have combined to produce a more unhappy and hopeless background for the conduct of human life than in Latin America."[3] Even so, in the larger geopolitical struggle of the Cold War, Kennan maintained that Latin America must remain the United States' uncontested sphere of influence. The Truman administration, molded by Kennan's ethnocentric approach, pushed anti-communism as the preeminent feature of US policy in Latin America through military aid, support of dictatorial regimes, political repression, and, if the need arose, direct intervention. The Kennan Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, a term coined by historian Gaddis Smith, called for the United States to intervene in Latin American countries in order to save them from the communist threat that their leaders where incapable of handling.[4] Echoing Theodore Roosevelt's view of Latin America, the United States would rely on local dictators to maintain order and use its military might if its patrons failed to secure its political and economic interests.

Guatemala presented the first challenge to maintaining the United States' dominance within its declared sphere of influence. In 1944, Juan Jose Arevalo became Guatemala's first popularly elected president after a group of young, military officers overthrew General Juan Federico Ponce, the most recent successor to a long line of military dictatorships. A philosophy professor of considerable charisma and charm, President Arevalo ushered in an era of reform known as the "Ten Years of Spring." During his term in office, Arevalo established a social security system, legalized unions,

[3] Rabe, *The Killing Zone*, 23.

[4] Gaddis Smith, *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine, 1945-1993* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1994), 68.

set a minimum wage, rebuilt the education system, and reached out to indigenous communities by encouraging increased civil participation. His administration also crafted a new constitution that divided the power of the state into executive, legislative and judicial branches, and guaranteed basic human rights. The traditional Guatemalan oligarchy of landed elites and military brass chafed at Arevalo's reforms, but lacked the popular base to challenge a president who had won eighty-five percent of the vote.[5] United Fruit Company, which owned a large percent of the arable land in Guatemala, also expressed concern about the motives of the reformer president. Arevalo's enemies pointed to his vaguely defined personal doctrine of "spiritual socialism," which they claimed was a thinly disguised communism. Arevalo himself stated that spiritual socialism would transcend communism and fascism, liberalism and conservatism, "to liberate men psychologically" with a balance of personal freedom and community cooperation.[6] As Arevalo's term continued, conservative opposition, especially from the upper brass of the military, stymied his reforms and threatened his presidency with more than twenty failed coup attempts.[7] His successor, Jacobo Arbenz, would face even greater threats.

Arbenz was one of the military leaders of the 1944 revolution that ended Guatemala's military dictatorship. Under Arevalo, he became Minster of Defense and the president's chosen successor. After winning the 1950 election, Arbenz decided he would

[5] Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1991), 36.

[6] Juan Jose Arevalo, "A New Guatemala," in *The Guatemala Reader* ,eds. Greg Grandin and Deborah Levenson (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 208.

[7] Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 47.

push for more radical change. One of his first actions as president was the legalization of the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT)—the Guatemalan communist party. This action generated considerable concern in Washington, which had tolerated Arevalo's liberalism with decreasing patience.

Arbenz was not a communist, but Marxist thought certainly influenced his political beliefs. He saw the feudalistic finca system, a plantation economy that shackled the Guatemalan economy to a few export crops and effectively enslaved much of the country's indigenous population, as the primary cause of economic and political underdevelopment. In order to foster greater economic participation in the free market, Arbenz believed that peasants needed a substantial increase in both communal and private property. The Guatemalan legislature fulfilled Arbenz's campaign promise of land reform when it passed the Agrarian Reform Law in May, 1952. The new law called for the immediate expropriation large tracts of uncultivated land for redistribution to small Guatemalan farmers and peasants.[8] Five weeks later, on June 17, 1952, the president issued Decree 900, which established the hierarchical system that would implement the new law. Unlike the radical land reforms under Stalin and Mao, Arbenz's system was gradual and bureaucratic, with local agrarian committees having to push petition through several layers of administrators before their claim to land could be considered.[9] Nevertheless, when Arbenz realized his dream, he also sealed his fate.

United Fruit Company stood to lose considerable assets as a result of these land reforms. The company had greatly undervalued its holdings over the previous decades to

[8] Gleijeses. *Shattered Hope*. 146.

[9] Ibid., 151.

avoid taxation, and when Arbenz offered compensation at the declared value, UFCo executives responded by claiming that Arbenz was a communist. The Eisenhower administration supported United Fruit. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles, were major shareholders in United Fruit, and both had acted as legal consultants for the company when the brothers worked at the prestigious law firm, Sullivan & Cromwell. Under their direction, the State Department and the CIA mounted a campaign against Arbenz that isolated the country from regional and international allies, blockaded Guatemalan ports, and spread falsehoods to the effect that the president was a communist subversive.

The CIA also covertly trained a band of mercenaries and exiles in Honduras under the command of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a conservative militarist who had been exiled after attempting to overthrow Arevalo in 1949, to act as a 'liberation force' that would remove Arbenz. In May 1954, the CIA commenced Operation PBSUCCESS, combining an invasion by Castillo Armas's armed group with an extensive disinformation campaign that included invented radio battle reports, air-dropping of anti-Arbenz leaflets, sabotage, and claims that a full-scale US invasion was forthcoming. Fearing that US Marines would soon arrive if they resisted, the upper echelons of the Guatemalan military refused to act, commanding their forces to remain in the barracks. When Arbenz attempted to arm a civilian militia of loyalists as a defense against Castillo Armas and the potential US invasion force, the military turned against their president and forced him to resign. Colonel Castillo Armas assumed the position of president and immediately overturned ten years of reforms. The United States now had an ally in control of Guatemala.

After the 1954 coup, US policymakers focused on state-building and economic recovery, though preventing communist influence was always an important part of the agenda. When Guatemalans called for Castillo Armas to drop his emergency dictatorial powers and restore some semblance of democracy to the country, the US embassy concurred.[10] Its preferred approach was to support Castillo Armas financially as he formed a loyal political party, while also cultivating potential opponents of the president: opponents who the US mission considered politically reliable.[11] The State Department saw that there was a potential danger in adopting this approach, as an unfriendly, left-leaning government could come to power as a result of increased democratization, but that possibility did not stop the US from advocating development and elections.[12] After an assassin ended Castillo Armas's presidency in 1957, the United States sponsored a presidential election, marred by claims of fraud and voter intimidation, that brought a conservative general, Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes, to the presidency.

The threat of a pro-communist seizure of power in Guatemala seemed more concrete after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and, few, if any, events had greater impact on US Cold War policies in Latin America. Fidel Castro, doctor-turned-revolutionary, after suffering military defeat, imprisonment, and exile, toppled the corrupt dictator and US ally, Fulgencio Batista. Castro led his July 26 movement, named after his failed assault on the Moncada barracks in 1953, into Havana after six years of building the

[10] John Calvin Hill Jr. "The New Phase in Guatemalan Political Life and Its Relation to U.S. Policy," June 24, 1955, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives, 1.

[11] Ibid., 9.

[12] Ibid., 11.

small group of political dissidents into a guerilla army. The Eisenhower administration was suspicious of the popular revolutionary leader despite Castro's emphatic assurances that he and his government were not communists.[13] Ironically, Moscow also had difficulty discerning the aims of Cuba's new leader and worked closely with his brother Raul Castro to gain influence within the new regime. After Castro's agrarian reform law of 1959 expropriated over one thousand acres of farmland for redistribution, the already troubled relations between the United States and Cuba rapidly deteriorated.[14] The Eisenhower administration made little effort to win over the Cuban government. Likewise, Castro and his followers often denounced the United States for its neocolonial rule of Cuba. By 1961, the Cuban revolutionary government nationalized US property, and Fidel Castro announced: "I am a Marxist-Leninist, and I will continue to be a Marxist-Leninist until the last days of my life."[15] Communism had claimed its first country within the Western Hemisphere.

In Guatemala, a third of the army revolted against the oppressive and corrupt Ydigoras government in 1960. Although these officers were nationalists who demanded a just government established through fair elections, the uprising fed US fears about communist infiltration in the region. The objectives of the US mission in Guatemala shifted: uncovering "the international Soviet Communist conspiracy" became the order of the day, but policymakers wanted to counter communist influence with developmental

[13] Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 10.

[14] Rabe, *The Killing Zone,* 63.

[15] Ibid.

projects and media manipulation, not the suspension of elections.[16] Once the relatively inexperienced Kennedy administration confronted problems that required immediate responses, the long-term goals of development and democratization were undermined by defaulting to military solutions.

Two years after Castro greeted cheering crowds as he rolled into Havana atop a tank, John F. Kennedy became the thirty-fifth president of the United States. Ambitious, dynamic, and the youngest president to date, Kennedy embodied the potential and energy of the 1960s. In his presidential campaign, Kennedy lambasted the Eisenhower administration for not waging the Cold War effectively. Although the most well-known accusation Kennedy made was the baseless claim of a growing "missile-gap" created by the rapid increase in the Soviet nuclear arsenal, Kennedy also blamed the Eisenhower administration for mishandling Cuba.[17] Kennedy had his own bold, new plan for winning the Cold War in Latin America: the Alliance for Progress.

On March 13, 1961, Kennedy gathered two-hundred fifty guests, selected from the diplomatic corps and Congress, in the White House for a lavish ceremony. Broadcast by the Voice of America in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, President Kennedy announced a renewed partnership between the United States and Latin America that would "complete the revolution of the Americas, to build a hemisphere where all men

[16] Frederick J. Barcroft, "Country Assessment Report – Guatemala," February 3, 1961, Digital National Security Archives. United States Information Service, Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1, 5, 16.

[17] John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, "Debating Cuba and Castro" October 21, 1960 in *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*, eds. Robert Holden and Eric Zolov, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). 221.

can hope for a suitable standard of living, and all can live out their lives in dignity and in freedom."[18] The Alliance for Progress, in spirit, was a quasi-Marshall Plan for Latin America that promised to help fund economic and social development in the region. Kennedy championed education, public health, and most significantly, tax and land reform. After the passage of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, a new organization, the Agency for International Development (USAID/AID) emerged to administer assistance programs.[19] Although, in his speech, Kennedy invoked the American and Bolivian revolutions that liberated much of the Western Hemisphere from colonial rule, the President and his advisors feared that the region was vulnerable to radical social revolution.[20] A product of the modernization theory postulate that material improvement would induce social and political progress, the Alliance for Progress offered an alternative to the Cuban model. Some scholars, such as Lars Schoultz, have asserted that the Alliance for Progress was little more than Dollar Diplomacy with "social science window dressing."[21] At the time, however, many Latin American governments embraced the Alliance because it seemed to mark a significant shift in US policy toward the region.

For all the idealism and potential of the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy administration faced significant hurdles of implementation. No member of Kennedy's cabinet or White House staff had extensive experience or expertise in Latin American

[18] John F. Kennedy. "The Alliance for Progress" March 13, 1961, in *Latin America and the United States,* 227.

[19] Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 357.

[20] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 10.

[21] Schoultz, *Beneath the United States,* 357.

affairs. Although some influential aides, such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., provided advice on the region and supported the Alliance, most major policy decisions fell to the president alone.[22] And he got little help—Secretary of State Dean Rusk had little interest in the region and viewed it as peripheral to concerns in Europe and Asia. One of Rusk's staffers complained that Rusk gave as much attention to Western New Guinea as he did Latin America.[23] Most officials, including Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Edwin Martin, lacked fluency in Spanish. Ambassador to Guatemala, John Bell, was no exception to the rule and came to his office with little experience in Latin America beyond infrequent travel and minimal "classroom" Spanish.[24] Without knowledgeable, skilled officials, Kennedy's ambitious project lacked a crucial component necessary for a major policy shift.

The United States' legacy of militarism in both its historic relationship with Latin America and the prosecution of the Cold War proved an even greater challenge to overcome. Kennedy wanted to avoid the mistakes of the recent past by cutting ties with dictators who curried the United States' favor by professing their anti-communist credentials.[25] At the same time, Kennedy recognized that military aid was necessary for maintaining influence over Latin American armed forces. As a result, USAID did not restrict its funding to developmental projects and often contributed to police and military

[22] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 16.

[23] Ibid., 15.

[24] John Bell, interview by Arthur L. Lowrie, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. June 17, 1988. http://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mssmisc/mfdip/2005%20txt%20files/2004bel02.txt

[25] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 24.

forces. In Guatemala, as we shall see, security forces not only received the bulk of US foreign aid, but also became responsible for implementing Alliance for Progress initiatives ranging from building schools to reforestation projects. The Guatemalan Army, which shouldered most of these new responsibilities, used the funds to indoctrinate youths, control vital resources like clean water and medicine, and to gain greater control over civil society. Kennedy's high-minded rhetoric failed to match his actions, and anti-communist strongmen continued to enjoy the patronage of the United States.

The failed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 compounded the weaknesses and contradictions within the Kennedy administration's plans for US-Latin American relations and critically undermined the goals of the Alliance for Progress. Kennedy had inherited the plan to invade Cuba from the Eisenhower administration. In fact, Eisenhower cautioned Kennedy that the Soviets and their allies were on the offensive and that hemispheric security rested on removing Castro from power.[26] Hoping to win a clear victory and establish his credentials as a Cold Warrior, Kennedy moved ahead with Eisenhower's operation. The invasion, modeled to a large extent on the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala, did not enjoy the success of its predecessor. Castro had anticipated an invasion, and built a two-hundred thousand man militia to support the regular army, and had arrested one-hundred thousand Cubans with questionable loyalty to prevent a potential uprising.[27] On April 17, the fifteen-hundred strong force of CIA-trained exiles landed at the isolated bay and met heavy resistance. Faced with an unfolding disaster, Kennedy withheld vital air support to avoid the direct

[26] Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 77-78.

[27] Thomas C. Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 32.

involvement of the United States. The invasion force became stranded along the beach as Cuba's Soviet-made tanks and aircraft routed the would-be attackers and cut off their supply lines. Kennedy took personal responsibility for the failed mission and the humiliation significantly shaped his administration's work in Latin America.[28]

[28] Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 97

CHAPTER III

CAREER COLD WARRIOR

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion dealt a serious blow to the United States. Fidel Castro now had a unifying symbol to rally the Cuban people to his socialist revolution and his partnership with the Soviet Union became much stronger. Kennedy felt personally disgraced by the failed invasion, and the president waged a clandestine war against Cuba, utilizing sabotage, terrorism, and assassination, in an attempt to bring down Castro's regime. The Kennedy administration became fixated on the need to prevent another Cuba. Now more than ever, reformist leaders in Latin American countries seemed to be a potential threat. Juan Jose Arevalo, along with his Argentinian and Brazilian contemporaries, Arturo Frondizi and Joao Goulart, respected constitutional processes and supported the Alliance for Progress.[1] Nonetheless, the Bay of Pigs fiasco solidified the United States' hostility toward leftist reform and recast potential allies of the Alliance for Progress as subversive agents of the Soviet Union.

During Kennedy's administration, Guatemala again became a harbinger of US-policy in Latin America. Ambassador John Bell decided Arevalo represented a threat that United States could not tolerate even though a majority of Guatemalans apparently wanted him to return to the presidency.[2] Ignoring the former president's repeated avowals of anti-communism, Bell preferred a military seizure of power over the risk of letting the popular reformist return to power. Though Bell conceded that civilian leaders were preferable to a military regime, he doubted whether it would be possible to find a

[1] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 197.

[2] John O. Bell. "[Guidelines for Policy and Operations: Guatemala]," September 11, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives, 7

competent Guatemalan politician who could also defeat Arevalo. As a result, Ambassador Bell began to amend US policy in Guatemala to make dealing with the military leadership more palatable. His most significant contribution to US policy was to establish that the "primary and overriding objective of US policy in Guatemala should be to prevent it from becoming a Communist State."[3] While this goal was not unusual for Cold War policy in Latin America, Bell specifically pushed for the primacy of anti-communism over genuine political or economic development. The result was antithetical to what Kennedy had promised with the Alliance for Progress: a repressive military regime that rejected democracy, social justice, and the rule of law.

John O. Bell drove down the Inter-American highway to assume his position as Ambassador to Guatemala in December of 1961. Becoming ambassador was his most prominent achievement in a rapid climb through the State Department bureaucracy. The problems that plagued Guatemala would prove far different from those he faced in Copenhagen, but the ambassador embraced a broad, if not fully developed, Cold War policy that could be applied in Latin America as well as Western Europe: preventing communism at all costs. In Guatemala, Bell established the primacy of this overriding goal in his earliest reports, and though he felt that the Red Menace had to be defeated in the political, social, and economic arenas, he relied on fostering a close relationship between the United States and the Guatemalan military in building strong US-Guatemalan relations.

John Bell began a lifelong career in government service in 1928 at the age of sixteen. Initially s messenger boy for the Agriculture Department, Bell became a clerk

[3] John O. Bell, "[Guidelines for Policy and Operations: Guatemala]," 3.

after two years, while attending night classes at George Washington University. Bell then learned that the State Department was offering an entry position that paid twenty dollars more a month than he was making.[4] He took the job as a clerk, but quickly advanced to the Passport Office, where he continued to work through the decade as he finished his bachelor's and law degrees. The young Bell displayed a strong work ethic and a drive for professional advancement that characterized his life in government service.

At the outset of the Second World War in Europe, Bell spent most of his time preventing German and Spanish communists from entering the United States.[5] Bell worked on a new initiative to "replace all passports in existence" with redesigned documents that were difficult to forge because of a growing fear that foreign agents could easily produce counterfeits.[6] When the United States entered the war, Bell shifted to the Aviation Division where he continued to build his career.

After the war, Bell, now a self-declared "State Department man," took advantage of the National War College's invitation to Foreign Service personnel to attend classes at Fort McNair in Washington D.C.[7] From 1946 to 1948, Bell acquired international management skills while attending lectures from General Leslie Groves, Robert Oppenheimer, and Dwight Eisenhower.[8] His time at the National War College was a period of immense personal growth, and he acquired a lasting respect for the intellectual

[4] John Bell, interview by Arthur L. Lowrie, June 17, 1988. http://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mssmisc/mfdip/2005%20txt%20files/2004bel02.txt

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

prowess of the top brass of the military. Bell returned to the State Department in late 1948, receiving his first foreign posting with the European Division.

Stationed in Copenhagen, Bell began to climb the ladder of the State Department's bureaucracy with almost annual promotions between 1948 and 1954. An emerging Cold Warrior, Bell believed that the United States had irresponsibly demobilized in Europe at the end of World War Two because "the concept of the Russians as enemies hadn't really percolated thoroughly."[9] Though Bell had concerns about European security, he was not initially hawkish. He disapproved of missile deployments in Greece and Turkey in 1953 because he believed they would be an unnecessary provocation of the Soviets that would not reap long-term strategic dividends.[10] He convinced Dean Acheson to oppose military support for Dutch efforts at reestablishing colonial rule in Indonesia.[11] Reflecting later on the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the rapid expansion of America's global power, Bell felt that his years in Europe were "the golden age of American foreign policy."[12] In European matters, Bell was comfortable with the Kennan approach favoring patient containment over aggressive confrontation with the Soviets.

After a brief assignment in Washington D.C., Bell became Deputy Chief of Mission to Pakistan in 1955. Although he had no experience in Middle Eastern affairs, his growing reputation within the State Department made him a key figure in John Foster

[9] Ibid.

[10] John O. Bell. "IRBMs," January 26, 1953, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives, 2.

[11] John Bell, interview by Arthur Lowrie.

[12] Ibid.

Dulles's plan to "build a wall against Sino-Soviet Imperialism."[13] Bell claimed that the greatest difficulty he had in Pakistan was cultural adjustment: he compared the "sophistication" of the Dutch with the "primitiveness" of the Pakistanis. In a country of "80-some million," he stated, "there were perhaps 2,500 who were politically articulate."[14] These observations smacked of ethnocentrism, or at least, extreme cultural insensitivity. It is clear, in any event, that the assignment was not to Bell's liking.

During the two years he served in Pakistan, Bell was rarely content with the situation. He believed that Dulles was attempting to transplant the Marshall Plan in the third world, but that fostering economic recovery in Europe was not the same thing as developing a modern economy in the Third World.[15] Bell did not, however, offer a viable alternative. Bell's discontent in Pakistan shaped his world view as much as his time in Europe. He learned that developing nations required something more than piles of money to protect themselves from communism, and he linked this observation with a demeaning attitude toward the inhabitants of the Third World.

In 1957, Bell took the first opportunity to leave Pakistan and returned to Washington D.C. He became the International Regional Director for Near East and South Asia.[16] Bell also cultivated political connections with an eye on the 1960 election. At this point, most of Bell's work for the State Department consisted of facilitating international aid, and he quickly gained the confidence of Kennedy's man in charge of consolidating

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

America's foreign-aid agencies into the Agency for International Development (USAID/AID), George Ball. After Kennedy's election, he was asked if he was interested in becoming Under Secretary of Administration. Bell rejected the offer because, as he later put it, the Kennedy team wanted him to help "clean out the State Department and get rid of all the dumb jerks."[17] Against the advice of Ball and Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, Bell told Kennedy that the AID program did not need reorganization. Bell suggested that all that was needed was "two good men for each country in Washington and two good men for each country abroad" for a total of four hundred able and honest Foreign Service personnel.[18] Kennedy retorted, "Hell, that's more good men than I'll get in the whole administration."[19] Despite his occasional sparring sessions with the president's advisers, Bell collaborated with the Kennedy team in writing up a legislative proposal for the reorganization of USAID, which passed as the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

The passage of the Foreign Assistance Act earned Bell some powerful new allies in Washington. Bell caught the attention of his former law professor, Senator J. William Fulbright, who was impressed by Bell's work on foreign aid and spoke highly of him, boosting his status in the State Department. A few months after the Foreign Assistance Act passed, Bell received several promising offers. John Galbraith, Ambassador to India, wanted Bell as Deputy Chief of Mission. Bowles made a pitch for Bell in Iran.[20]

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

Ultimately, Bell turned both offers down citing financial reasons and a desire to remain relatively close to his family. Instead, he chose a posting as ambassador to Guatemala.

In thirty-three years of government service, Bell proved to be a capable, dedicated diplomat with respectable anti-communist credentials. Although Bell voiced his disagreements with various policies of three presidential administrations, he preferred to follow prevailing trends in Cold War thought. Like many US officials, he believed that winning the Cold War necessitated a brand of anti-communism where economic and political strategies played a supporting role to a show a military strength. Despite his commitment to the State Department's goals, Bell lacked a clear, distinctive vision of anti-communism beyond defeating what he had been told was a rival, and destructive, ideology. Bell was a State Department man, but within that context, a career man. His previous assignments did not require a well-developed approach to communism, but Guatemala presented an unfamiliar situation that demanded immediate, effective response. It was Bell's job to prevent communists from gaining influence in Guatemala, and so he committed to that goal with little strategic thinking beyond the conviction that his course was correct.

When John Bell chose Guatemala, he was given the ambassadorship on the condition that he drive to his new office to emphasize the importance of completing the missing link of the Inter-American highway in Guatemala.[21] After driving through forty miles of dusty country without air conditioning, the new ambassador was surprised when the mayor of Huehuetenango greeted him at the border with a party of local dignitaries.

[21] Ibid.

Wearing old clothes that were stained by sweat and "oozing dust", Bell attended a reception where he gave his first speech in broken Spanish. He joked that he was probably "the dirtiest ambassador they had ever seen."[22]

Bell arrived at the US embassy in Guatemala City at the end of December, 1961. Guatemalan politics were experiencing a period of heightened tension and turbulence at the time. After the assassination of President Castillo Armas in 1957, a retired general and long-time presidential contender Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes had won Guatemala's highest office in the 1958 election. Ydigoras initially proved to be an effective ally for the United States in Guatemala due to his pragmatism, lack of ideological convictions, and singular devotion to his own survival.[23] Reminiscent of the dictators that ruled Guatemala before the Ten Years of Spring, Ydigoras and his sycophants plundered public coffers and blamed ever elusive communists for the countries problems. The United States found Ydigoras's claims of a communist threat credible, particularly after the Cuban Revolution, and supported the president despite Kennedy's anti-dictatorial aspirations. As his tenure in office continued, however, the corruption and cronyism within his regime spawned a coup attempt. Led by nationalist junior officers, one third of the Guatemalan military openly rebelled against the government in 1960.[24] The attempt to unseat Ydigoras failed, but many of the conspiring officers fled and began a civil war.[25] By the

[22] Ibid.

[23] John O.Bell. "Guidelines for Policy and Operations: Guatemala," 11

[24] Suzanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and US Power,* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1991), 67.

[25] Suzanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala,* 59.

time Ambassador Bell assumed control of his post, the Ydigoras administration was becoming more of a liability than an asset to the United States.

At a highpoint in a career marked by regular promotion, Bell came to Guatemala determined to succeed. Bell believed that Guatemalan institutions were weak, corrupt, and lacked popular support. Governmental agencies, including the presidency, were more practiced in graft and repression than public administration. President Ydigoras exemplified the dysfunctional state, and Bell predicted that the president would not finish his term in office.[26] The unpopularity of the Ydigoras administration resulted in political divisiveness that led Bell to assert "a developmental program is probably impossible."[27] Bell saw communist agitators behind every public protest and student demonstration, and stated that they had enjoyed a "splendid year" as anti-communists divided and formed opposition groups against Ydigoras.[28] Dismissing the genuine social and political concerns the anti-communist opposition may have had, Bell claimed that these groups believed Ydigoras had "exceeded the bounds of permissible graft" and was not sharing the spoils beyond his "sycophants and fellow grafters."[29] Even if Alliance for Progress initiatives were attempted, Bell feared that the funding would not leave the hands of Guatemalan administrators. Above all, Guatemala needed stability in order to overcome the challenge of communism.

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[26] John O. Bell, "U.S Interests and the Guatemalan Political Scene," March 30, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives, 5.

[27] Ibid., 6.

[28] Ibid., 3.

[29] Ibid., 4.

Bell exempted the military from his criticism of the country's leadership. The ambassador complained that the mission he inherited lacked information on the aspirations and attitudes of military officers and that the embassy needed to foster a closer relationship with its natural allies. The Guatemalan military was vehemently anti-communist, and Bell speculated, "in all likelihood there are less crass motivation also present among the military, such as devotion to constitutional government, [and] intellectual conviction as to the merits of democracy."[30] Unwilling to rely on the civilian government, doubtful of the prospects for development, and threatened by domestic and international subversion, only the Guatemalan military could establish the order and stability necessary for Bell's anti-communism vision.

In his earliest cables to Washington, Bell favored the Guatemalan Armed Forces as the most effective partner for advancing US interests in the region. He petitioned Washington relentlessly to support the Guatemalan military. On February 9, 1962, he urged the State Department to expedite shipments of F-51 Mustang fighter planes to reinforce the Guatemalan Air Force.[31] On the following day, while asserting that there was no evidence that Guatemala was in immediate danger of being overthrown by force, he emphasized that the army had an immediate need for communications equipment and T-33 jet fighters.[32] Though he viewed the rebels as little more than a nuisance, Bell believed there was a high probability that they would follow the Cuban example and

[30] Ibid., 2.

[31] John O. Bell, "[Guatemala Seeks Replacements for Planes Lost in Clash with Guerillas]," February 9, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

[32] John O. Bell "[Military Assistance Program Delivery for Guatemala]," February 10, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives..

begin protracted guerilla warfare in the countryside. Aiding the Guatemalan military in its efforts to eliminate the potential guerilla threat was an absolute necessity because "the US has nothing to gain and much to lose by [the] success [of] rebel elements."[33] For Bell, military aid served a dual purpose of building a relationship with the armed forces while safeguarding the country against the fledgling insurgency.

Along with his advocacy of a military buildup, Bell devoted his efforts to preventing, at any cost, a communist seizure of power. The Cuban Revolution, and the subsequent failure of the US invasion at the Bay of Pigs, gave a new urgency to maintaining US hegemony in Latin America, and Bell was not unusual in his enthusiastic red-hunting. He scoured intelligence briefs and after-action reports on guerilla operations seeking a clear Cuban connection. Both the Guatemalan Army's intelligence units and the American ambassador sought to link Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, a prominent member of the 1960 military uprising and guerilla leader of growing acclaim, to Castro. In Zacapa province, raiders, allegedly commanded by Yon Sosa, stole a paltry sum of 18,000 quetzals (roughly $2,100) from a United Fruit office on the same day that Guatemalan Army units were ambushed by insurgents fifty miles from Guatemala City. Bell reported that G-2, Guatemala's military intelligence unit, believed that Castro had coordinated these attacks with Yon Sosa. G-2 informed its US contacts to expect a massive strike from Cuban MIG jets.[34] Unsurprisingly, this aerial assault never materialized. The warning from G-2 seems far-fetched today, but Bell found the threat credible enough to

[33] Ibid.

[34] John O. Bell "[Cuban Connection to Guerilla Raid in Bananera Feared]," February 7, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State. Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives, 1.

report to the Secretary of State. The Kennedy administration could not tolerate another Cuba, and every US official understood that presiding over such a setback would mark the end of a career. To both fulfill his duties and preserve his profession, Bell's pursued any potential communist threat without hesitation.

Despite their considerable efforts, neither the US embassy nor G-2 could find solid evidence of a communist conspiracy in Guatemala. This hardly hampered Bell, whose militant solutions to Guatemala's communist problem found a new avenue. Rumors that Juan Jose Arevalo, the former president and popular reformer, was planning to return to Guatemala and run a presidential campaign for the 1964 election presented Ambassador Bell with a mission of significance. Conflating Arevalo's reformism with Castro's radicalism, Bell dedicated the next two years to doing everything within his power to ensure that Arevalo would not become the president of Guatemala.

In late April 1962, three months after becoming ambassador, Bell's predictions of a growing communist insurgency seemingly gained more credibility. The list of President Ydigoras's allies grew shorter by the day, as the "Old Man" alienated elites with his perceived softness on domestic communism and enraged the urban classes with violent repression of student demonstrators and labor organizers.[35] Amid the unrest, Ydigoras refused to bar Arevalo from running for office, which deeply troubled the State Department and the Guatemalan military. Guatemalan military leaders vowed that they would never allow Arevalo to enter the country. Ambassador Bell mirrored the military's position, viewing Arevalo as another potential Castro. Fearing that the conditions for a

[35] John O. Bell, "[Military and Political Opposition in Guatemala]," April 30, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives, 4

communist uprising now existed, Bell alerted Washington that Guatemala stood at the precipice of disaster. [36]

The State Department prepared for the worst: Secretary of State Dean Rusk prepared a resolution to justify U.S. military intervention in Guatemala to be presented to the Organization of American States should Ydigoras request assistance.[37] George Ball, now Kennedy's Under Secretary of State, informed Ambassador Bell that a battle group of 1,400 US troops was on alert and could hit Guatemalan soil within twelve hours of an attempted communist takeover.[38] The ambassador again looked to Cuba to justify a direct intervention. Bell launched an investigation hoping to uncover that Cubans had air-dropped propaganda to insurgent groups, who disseminated the material among dissidents in Guatemalan City. Unable to find a shred of evidence of such a plot, Bell blamed the inefficiency of Guatemalan surveillance and maintained that it was likely that Cuban airplanes were involved in the demonstrations.[39] Despite his suspicions, Bell admitted that the existing evidence was insufficient for justifying intervention, but might still prove useful if the operation could be justified on other grounds. The Ydigoras regime teetered on the brink of collapse and the United States prepared for invasion.

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[36] Ibid., 3.

[37] Dean Rusk, "[Justifying Military Intervention in Guatemala before the Organization of American States]," March 26, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

[38] George Ball, "[Mobilization of U.S. Forces for Intervention in Case of Imminent Communist Takeover in Guatemala]," March 15, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

[39] John O. Bell, "[No Evidence of Air drops to Dissident Groups]," April 2, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

Ydigoras managed to survive the wave of spring protests by suppressing the demonstrations with the combined strength of the Guatemalan army and police forces. More than five-hundred Guatemalan civilians were killed to end the protests.[40] Indicative of the precariousness of Ydigoras' rule, military leaders, tired of the president's schemes, demanded power in exchange for loyalty. The Guatemalan Armed Forces continued to support Ydigoras on the condition that he share power with a military cabinet.[41] The State Department, particularly Rusk, welcomed the idea of joint rule, believing the generals could bring stability and credibility to the dissolving Ydigoras regime.[42] Bell predicted that the military would try to oust Ydigoras before his presidential term expired and began to prepare the way for accepting military rule in Guatemala.

It was an absolute necessity for Guatemala to remain a staunch US ally. The United States celebrated the 1954 coup as an early Cold War victory. Moreover, the possibility of losing Guatemala was widely seen to be a major blow to US prestige. For US policy makers, the threat of another Cuba far outweighed the potential political cost of installing a military state in Guatemala. The mobilization of a considerable US invasion force to counter unarmed protestors, a massive overreaction considering the lack of evidence of any communist plot, revealed the lengths the Kennedy administration was willing to go to ensure communists did not gain a foothold in Guatemala. Ambassador Bell was aware of this situation and also knew that his steady climb through the State

[40] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 72.

[41]Central Intelligence Agency, "Effort of Nonpolitical Leaders to Reach an Agreement with President Ydigoras through Which They Can Cooperate with Him," May 4, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

[42] Dean Rusk, "[New Military Cabinet and U.S. Interests after Fall of President Ydigoras]," April 28, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 3.

Department hierarchy would end abruptly if Guatemala went the way of Cuba. The ambassador had little faith in Guatemala's political leaders, especially Ydigoras, leaving him few viable alternative avenues. Development through the Alliance for Progress programs was too slow and uncertain in Guatemala corrupt political environment to manage the perpetual crises that plagued the country, so Bell cast his lot with the most reliable, anti-communist institution: the Guatemalan military.

As time passed, Bell became increasingly sympathetic to the Guatemalan military. In August 1962, he wrote of the virtues of military rule in Guatemala and Latin America in general. Bell saw the Guatemalan military as the bedrock of the state and believed the cooperation between the US military and the Guatemalan Army would develop "respect for democratic and progressive policies," whereas individuals within the private and political sectors would plunder US developmental aid to add to their personal wealth.[43] The Kennedy administration allocated twenty-seven million dollars in Alliance funds for Guatemala from 1961 to 1963, despite knowing that Ydigoras's only concern was maintaining his personal power by bribing the oligarchy.[44] Bell steered funding from the Alliance for Progress and USAID into programs administered by the military. Early initiatives sponsored riot control courses for police and literacy programs for soldiers, but gradually, the military used funds to indoctrinate and militarize Guatemalan youths through the euphemistically labeled Civic Action Program. Bell regularly praised the military's efforts as a means to foster development through cooperation between the

[43] John O. Bell, "[Comments on U.S. Military Assistance Plan]," August 13, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Department of State, Decimal Files 1960-1963, National Archives.

[44] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 72

armed forces and the civilian population.[45] In reality, the military used these programs to conscript peasants and extend its presence into village life. Bell continued to channel aid money into the military as it expanded its grasp through so-called developmental projects.

The ambassador was not the only State Department official who viewed the Guatemalan military as the United States' most important ally in the country. Secretary of State Dean Rusk approved Bell's close collaboration with the Guatemalan military solutions as an effective means to preventing another Cuba. In fact, during Bell's time as ambassador to Guatemala, he seemed to have no greater supporter than Rusk.[46] In the spring of 1962, as popular protest called for Ydigoras's resignation, Rusk drafted a resolution for committing US ground forces to Guatemala to present to the Organization of American States. If the beleaguered president presented evidence of "international communist involvement" and requested assistance, the United States would urge member states to join it in taking action against communist aggression and subversion.[47]

After the military forced Ydigoras to rule jointly with a cabinet staffed by ranking officers, Rusk wrote Bell that the cabinet would serve as "one of first tests whether energetic military action can be effective" and that the military ministers might generate

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[45] John O. Bell, "[Policy and Operational Guidance for US Activities in Guatemala]," October 16, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, Massachusetts, 7

[46] In his 1988 interview with Arthur Lowrie, Bell claimed that he was often at odds with Secretary Rusk. The documentary record reveals quite the opposite and suggest that Bell may have been trying to distance himself with the failed policies of Johnson and Rusk in Vietnam.

[47] Dean Rusk, "[Justifying Military Intervention in Guatemala before the Organization of American States]," March 26, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives.

more popular appeal by cleaning up the Ydigoras administration.[48] Moreover, Rusk suggested his openness to removing Ydigoras and advised the embassy that things might be better without him.[49] Secretary Rusk acknowledged it was unlikely that President Ydigoras would remain in office until his term expired in 1964. He provided Bell with a list of potential parties, both allies and adversaries of US interests, that could unseat Ydigoras. Bell's list noted the strengths and weaknesses of these groups and hypothesized what actions the United States might have to take should one of those groups overthrow the government. Unsurprisingly, conservative army officers were branded the most stable, US-friendly group, and Rusk requested the ambassador's input in drawing up contingency plans for a military coup.[50] In short, Rusk told Bell that the United States would recognize any usurper, civilian or military, who was committed to preventing communism in Guatemala.

The Secretary was equally concerned about the prospect of Arevalo returning for the election. In an attempt to persuade Ydigoras to bar Arevalo's return, Rusk arranged for President Kennedy to meet with the Guatemalan president to discuss the issue while Kennedy was touring Latin America.[51] Ydigoras assured Kennedy that Arevalo would not become the president, even if he was allowed to participate in the elections. Neither Rusk nor Bell had any faith in President Ydigoras's plans and feared that Arevalo's

[48] Dean Rusk, "[New Military Cabinet and U.S. Interests after Fall of Ydigoras]," April 28, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives, 1.

[49] Ibid., 2.

[50] Ibid., 3.

[51] John O. Bell, "[Excerpt from Memorandum of Conversation between Presidents Kennedy and Ydigoras on Juan Jose Arevalo]," March 26, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Department of State, National Archives, 1.

return would establish another communist beachhead in Latin America. Without a pliable civilian competitor who could defeat the popular former president, only the Guatemalan armed forces could bring stability, and maintain US hegemony, in the country.

CHAPTER IV

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

On a balmy afternoon in October 1962, Ambassador Bell sat down to compose a draft of US policy and operational guidelines in Guatemala. The document doled out responsibilities to US agencies, but its primary focus was to reaffirm the ambassador's anti-communist approach. The document focused on political, economic, and military goals, but its most impressive feature was the many different ways the ambassador repeated and rephrased his call to eliminate the communist threat to Guatemala. USAID needed to provide financial support to the government to prevent instability; USIS would intensify anti-communist propaganda and destroy communist influence in schools; and the US military group was to continue training its Guatemalan counterparts in counterinsurgency warfare and riot control.[1] All three agencies would collaborate in order to encourage the Guatemalan military to engage in more civic action programs. Bell assigned himself, the embassy staff, and "all elements as directed" the task of assuring the installation of an anti-communist government that would support both Alliance for Progress initiatives and US foreign policy abroad.[2] By two in the afternoon, Bell finished the task, but his superiors were far too busy to read it. That very morning in Washington, Kennedy had looked at black-and-white aerial photographs of indistinguishable clumps of trees and tiny rectangular buildings—nuclear missiles in Cuba.

[1] John O. Bell, "[Policy and Operational Guidance for U.S. Activities in Guatemala]," October 23, 1962, Digital National Security Archives, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library, 4,8.

[2] Ibid., 2.

Soviet warheads in Cuba indicated that a new threat had emerged in the region. The Cuban Missile Crisis had legitimized Ambassador Bell's brand of militant anti-communism. His previous efforts to find Cuban connections with Guatemalan dissidence now seemed rational, even prescient. The collaboration between Soviets and the Cubans appeared to prove that communist expansion in Latin America posed an immediate, existential threat. Although the US-Soviet confrontation in the Caribbean ended without a nuclear exchange, Cold War fears ran high. A new period of US intervention in the Latin America had begun.

President Ydigoras was quick to pledge his full support while heaping encomiums on President Kennedy. Referring to Kennedy as "Your Excellency," Ydigoras thanked the president for addressing the "danger [to the] American continent of [the] Communist, de facto government of Fidel Castro."[3] Ydigoras had viewed Castro as a threat since the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, and the president touted the fact that his demands for intervention in Cuba no longer seemed overzealous. While Ydigoras' anti-Castro credentials cannot be doubted, the timing of the Cuban Missile Crisis likely preserved the unpopular president against an emerging threat from within the military.

By the end of November 1962,Ydigoras's indifference toward Arevalo's pending arrival provoked an open revolt from restless officers who had grown tired of the president's schemes. For the second time, Ydigoras faced a rebellion from his own military, though this uprising had fewer participants and a fundamentally conservative agenda. The CIA reported the day before the attempted coup that a small faction of air

[3] John O. Bell, "[Translation of Letter from President Ydigoras to President Kennedy]," October 23, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files : Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1,2.

force officers planned an imminent assault on the loyalist command center at the Ciprisales military base in Guatemala City and would proceed to assume control of the government.[4] To aid in their takeover of the capital, the rebelling officers secured an alliance with an army brigade stationed at a military base, Mariscal Zavala, on the outskirts of Guatemala City and twenty-two members of the Guardia de Honor, the elite praetorian force that guarded the President and his ministers. Fully aware of the situation, the United States government watched and waited.

Central Intelligence Agency memos described the rebel officers as non-leftist, anti-Arevalo, and friendly to the United States.[5] While the coup attempt received no endorsement by the United States, the CIA did not assist Ydigoras. Nonetheless, most of the military remained loyal to the "Old Man" of Guatemala and thwarted the attack on Ciprisales.[6] President Ydigoras likened the event to a boil bursting to relieve a festering sore.[7] He took advantage of the situation and purged the armed forces, particularly the air force, of disloyal elements, arresting hundreds of military personnel. Not one to miss an opportunity for political gain, Ydigoras also ordered the arrest of numerous political

[4] Central Intelligence Agency, "Possible Attempt to Overthrow the Guatemalan Government," (November 24, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Box 101, Country Files: Guatemala, John F. Kennedy Library,1.

[5] Central Intelligence Agency, " Possible Attempt to Overthrow the Guatemalan Government," November 25, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

[6] Robert F. Corrigan, "[President Ydigoras Cracks Down on Air Force following Unsuccessful Coup]," November 28, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives, 1.

[7] Ibid., 3.

opponents.[8] However, to the dismay of his loyal commanders and Ambassador Bell, Ydigoras still refused to bar Arevalo from the country.

Having spent considerable time and energy over the past year procuring military hardware, especially aircraft, Bell was concerned about Ydigoras's crackdown on the air force. A few days after the revolt, the ambassador and President Ydigoras met, and Bell expressed his worries. At the air force's request, Bell had secured another shipment of T-33 fighter jets for Guatemala, which were slated for imminent arrival. Ydigoras promised Bell that the air force would experience some reorganization, but it would remain intact and that the jets were still a modernizing necessity.[9] Despite the president's assurances, Bell believed that the arrests and expulsions were too harsh and that Ydigoras needed to maintain a close alliance with the military in order to manage the impending election crisis. In an attempt to bandage the fissures appearing between the armed forces and the government, Bell approved the delivery of jet fighters, claiming they were a symbol of the United States' commitment to the Guatemalan military.[10] For Bell, the most significant threat to US interests, and his own career, was the return of Arevalo. The United States could not afford to lose ground within its sphere of influence because of the squabbling within the Guatemalan elite. Ydigoras had weathered waves of civilian protests and military uprisings. Ambassador Bell could not risk the possibility that the unpopular president would become another Fulgencio Batista.

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[8] Ibid., 1.

[9] Ibid., 2.

[10] John O. Bell, "[Delivery of T-33 Aircraft for Guatemalan Air Force]," December 17, 1962, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, National Archives, 5.

While Bell strategized how to save Guatemala from communism, his superiors seemed content to let the ambassador control the situation as he saw fit. The upper echelons of the State Department had several priorities outside of Guatemala in the early 1960s. The standoff in Europe had cooled after the Berlin Crisis in 1961, but the Old World still loomed large in Cold War geopolitics. In Vietnam, escalation continued unchecked and the recalcitrant Ngo Dinh Diem frustrated the Kennedy administration. In Latin America, the State Department focused on the issue of Cuba. Still, Guatemala clearly mattered, and Bell, as ambassador, appeared to have considerable influence over US policy in Guatemala. There is no indication that Rusk or other State Department officials questioned Bell's initiatives or approach. The only member of JFK's administration who did was Arthur Schlesinger Jr, Camelot's court historian

Schlesinger occupied a unique position as Special Assistant to the President. While not a major maker of policy, Schlesinger did have influence within Kennedy's inner circle. Unlike Bell, Schlesinger did not see Arevalo as a nascent communist threat, and in January 1963, Schlesinger circulated a telegram through the State Department that challenged the accepted thinking on the popular Guatemalan reformer. Schlesinger conceded that open association with Arevalo should be avoided, but he postulated that the United States might be "missing a bet if we do not assign some non-official people to cultivate Arevalo quietly, explore his views, and see whether he can be steered in sensible directions."[11] Furthermore, he felt that Arevalo's professions of anti-communism and his expressed desire to work with the United States should be taken more seriously; he found

[11] Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, "State Department Circular Telegram on Arevalo," January 8, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 394, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

no reason for the former president to have any ties to Castro or the communist world. Schlesinger concluded with a warning: "The present line is one of those self-fulfilling prophesies: if we persist in acting as if Arevalo were beyond all hope of salvation, he will certainly end up that way."[12]

Schlesinger's appraisal of Arevalo developed from his optimistic view of how the United States could bring positive change to Latin America through democracy and building up the middle class. An avid proponent of Alliance for Progress reforms, Schlesinger's opinion was rooted in modernization theory. Prominent academics in the social sciences held that education, social welfare, and competitive political parties could uplift traditional societies out of the hierarchical, economically stagnant systems, undermining radical political movements in the process.[13] The military and socioeconomic elite often rejected forms of modernization as a challenge to their privileged position, which encouraged radicalization among marginalized groups. This approach toward Third World countries led Schlesinger to favor economic development and democracy as cornerstones of successful anti-communism. To Schlesinger, Arevalo's current and historical political initiatives aligned more closely with the ideals of the Alliance for Progress than those of the reactionaries, militarists, and radicals that competed for power in Guatemala.

Unlike every other member of the Kennedy administration, Schlesinger seemed receptive to Arevalo's public praise for the Alliance for Progress and his denunciations of Castro. A fellow academic with democratic credentials and a history of moderate reform,

[12] Ibid.

[13] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Place in the World*, 26.

Arevalo fit Schlesinger's ideal for a Latin American leader. Considering the alternatives, a pseudo-civilian kleptocracy or a military dictatorship, Arevalo had more potential. The Guatemalan political and military elite would likely use Alliance funding to preserve their own narrow interests under the guise of modernization. If properly cultivated and controlled, an Arevalo presidency could advance Alliance for Progress programs while sapping the momentum of oppositionists and radicals. Schlesinger's telegram received no formal response. Most likely, the officials who received the telegram, including President Kennedy, had decided that Arevalo was, at best, a "menace" and that his links to Arbenz were evidence enough that he would encourage communism in Guatemala.[14] The fear that an avowed reformist could quickly transition to a radical revolutionary remained too great a risk for Kennedy and Bell to even consider the possibility of Arevalo's return to presidency.

In January 1963, with the Air Force coup attempt behind him, Bell could once again focus on Arevalo and the upcoming elections. Though he admitted that Ydigoras had considerable political skill, evidenced by his survival, Bell reported, "there is widespread feeling in Guatemala favoring a military coup to oust Ydigoras and [to] arrange for elections which would exclude the participation of Arevalo."[15] Despite this supposed opposition to Arevalo, Bell claimed that political moderates lacked the unity necessary to produce a significant challenger. Contradicting his earlier characterizations of Arevalo, Bell admitted that the former president was not a communist, but that "his

[14] Dean Rusk, "[Excerpt from Memorandum of Conversation between Presidents Kennedy and Ydigoras on Juan Jose Arevalo]," March 26, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

[15] John O. Bell, "Guatemala," January 21, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Presidential Office Files, Box 118, John F. Kennedy Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

confused, ill-balanced, political philosophy of 'spiritual socialism,' fed by deep prejudice against the United States, served the Communist purpose well during his administration" and was a precursor to the "Communist dominated Arbenz administration."[16] Bell also suggested that Ydigoras might be conspiring with Arevalo. He noted that Ydigoras continued to withhold his endorsement of any presidential candidate and speculated that the president was in contact with Arevalo in order to secure a life of comfort in Guatemala after the election.[17]

Bell maintained his belief that forging strong ties with the military remained the best way to create a stable, anti-communist Guatemala. Ranking officers had already declared that they would not allow Arevalo into the country, and the November coup attempt proved that the armed forces planned on keeping their word. Although Bell deemed it unlikely, he maintained that finding an acceptable candidate who could beat Arevalo remained his priority.[18] Failing that, he urged a concerted effort to assess Arevalo's popularity outside of the capital, covertly reduce the former president's prestige, and dissuade him from running in the election. That option, however, seemed unlikely to succeed. In that case, should Ydigoras be displaced before the election, Bell suggested grooming military men suitable for governance.[19] Bell promised another interagency appraisal of Guatemala in March, but given the ambassador's preference for the military, the likelihood of a change in approach seemed minimal.

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 2.

[19] Ibid., 2.

Although it appeared that Bell had cast his lot with the Guatemalan armed forces, the ambassador scheduled a final meeting with the intractable Guatemalan president. The discussion focused almost entirely on Arevalo's return. Ydigoras waited patiently as Bell expressed his concern that Arevalo would win the election if he were allowed to run for president. When the ambassador finished, Ydigoras presented a convincing defense of his actions. He explained that Guatemala's borders made it practically impossible to prevent a determined individual from entering the country. If Arevalo were arrested after entry, Guatemalans would view him as a hero, or martyr, in the mold of Castro.[20] An arrest would lead to court appeals, public disorder, and a spectacle that would only increase his stature and renown. Furthermore, there was no legal basis for keeping Arevalo out of the country and Ydigoras, "like his friends in the United States," respected the rule of law.[21] The wisest course of action, the president explained, would be to allow Arevalo to run for office, which Ydigoras believed would divide and weaken all of the leftist candidates.

The meeting between Ydigoras and Bell presented new possibilities and challenged the accepted logic of the Kennedy administration. Not only did Ydigoras inform Bell that Arevalo's popularity was overrated, he also revealed that his own relationship with the former president was misunderstood. Ydigoras admitted that among the "rich people" of Guatemala, rumors had circulated that he had "sold out" to

[20] John O. Bell. "[Conversation with President Ydigoras]" (February 11, 1963, GU00111, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, National Security Files, Digital National Security Archive, John F. Kennedy Library. Massachusetts.) 3

[21] Ibid.

Arevalo.[22] In fact, Ydigoras opposed Arevalo. He simply believed that the defeat of the former president required "cold and clear planning and not letting hate drive one into ill-considered and hasty actions."[23] The president's argument apparently impressed Bell. In a report to the State Department summarizing the meeting, he stated that he was "inclined to agree with Ydigoras" that it would be a mistake for the Guatemalan government to keep Arevalo out of the country.[24] Bell's suddenly more favorable assessment of Ydigoras suggested that the ambassador might be open to safeguarding Guatemala against communist threats through non-military means. Arevalo's impending arrival, the unrest within the armed forces, and the ambassador's two years of cultivating a close relationship between the embassy and Guatemalan officers, however, all prevented Bell from changing course at so late an hour.

As the ambassador's options narrowed, the likelihood of a coup increased. The Guatemalan military remained unconvinced by Ydigoras's political schemes. After meeting with Bell, Ydigoras continued to maneuver, and finally endorsed a candidate, his longtime crony Roberto Alejos. That decision pushed Defense Minister Enrique Peralta, who formerly avoided plots to overthrow the president, to reconsider his position. Bell's Deputy Chief of Mission, Robert Corrigan, met secretly with Licenciado Arturo Peralta, the brother and confidant of the Minister of Defense. As the brother told Corrigan, Ydigoras's selection of Alejos, whose venality earned him enemies in all sectors of

[22] Ibid. 4

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 6.

Guatemalan society, guaranteed that Arevalo would win the election.[25] Furthermore, Peralta's brother repeated the claim that Ydigoras was working with Arevalo and could not be trusted. The only remaining option appeared to be a coup.

According to Corrigan, Licenciado Peralta also explained the benefits of a military government headed by his brother. The new military regime would immediately enact economic reforms, place capable men in the ministries, and bring much needed integrity and efficiency to the Guatemalan government.[26] Peralta had considerable support within the armed forces, however the army would not act until it was certain that the coup would succeed and their rule would be legitimized by the United States. Corrigan gathered that the Defense Minister's brother sought some indication of how the United States would respond to Ydigoras's expulsion. The silence in Corrigan's report was telling. The United States would give no open assent, but neither would it prevent Peralta from seizing control.

President Ydigoras was not a fool. He calculated that the military would move against him with the quiet consent of the United States. Seeking self-preservation above all, Ydigoras finally acceded to the army's demands and claimed that Arevalo was ineligible for office because he was a communist. He also forbade the commercial airlines on the Mexico-Guatemala route from flying him to Guatemala.[27] Ydigoras now claimed that if Arevalo participated in the election, he would win by a substantial

[25] Robert F. Corrigan, "[Conversation with Defense Minister's Brother on Plan to Overthrow President Ydigoras]," March 12, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, John F. Kennedy Library, 1-2.

[26] Ibid., 2.

[27] John O. Bell, "Internal Defense Plan for Guatemala: Progress Report," March 19, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Box 73, Record Group 286, National Archives, 2.

majority.[28] Ydigoras also expressed his frustrations with the United States. He complained that President Kennedy and the US government had failed to deal with him responsibly when his vigilance alone had warded off communism in Guatemala.[29] President Ydigoras's sudden reversals and denunciations read like the last acts of a desperate man. The Guatemalan military was skeptical of Ydigoras' about-face and continued to believe that the steps he had taken were simply political maneuvers.

Violence erupted as speculation increased that Arevalo was about to return. In late March, bombs exploded throughout Guatemala City. In his report, DCM Corrigan wrote that the army staged these bombings to justify the imposition of a state of siege. Five days later, Corrigan's suspicions of an army plot were confirmed, and the government declared a state of siege because of a "vast plan [of] agitation and violence" by armed communist groups.[30] Bell noted that the government suspended Article 46, among other constitutional guarantees, which guaranteed Guatemalans the right to enter or leave the country.[31] The military had fulfilled its promise to block Juan Jose Arevalo from exercising his legal right to run for president.

When he had been president of Guatemala, Arevalo had refused to be intimidated by threats from the military, and he had not changed in the thirteen years since he had left office. Bell received word from "high Arevalist sources" that Arevalo would return on

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[28] Central Intelligence Agency, "Views of President Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes on the Upcoming Meeting of Presidents," March 16, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

[29] Ibid., 1.

[30] John O. Bell, "[State of Siege Decreed in Guatemala]," March 25, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, Massachusetts

[31] Ibid.

March 31 at eleven in the morning.[32] According to the source, Mexican president Adolfo Lopez Mateos had provided Arevalo with a private plane, and several important Mexican officials agreed to accompany him, as did twenty four foreign journalists from the US, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.[33] Meanwhile, Defense Minister Peralta assured the embassy that he remained determined to prevent Arevalo's return.[34] The moment that Ambassador Bell had prepared for was seemingly at hand.

In fact, Arevalo had already arrived in Guatemala alone on March 27 at a secluded farm airstrip. He drove to Guatemala City where he stayed with friends, changing his location at night.[35] On March 29, Arevalo met with his principal followers to determine a course of action. The CIA speculated that Arevalo and his followers might soon organize an uprising, but the former president managed to hold only a few quiet, clandestine meetings with peasants and supporters.[36]

On March 30, 1963, the Guatemalan Army, acting under orders from Defense Minister Enrique Peralta, forced President Ydigoras out of office. While the CIA knew of the plot before it was initiated, the embassy did not confirm the coup until the following day, after receiving word from Peralta's brother that the defense minister had become the head of state and that all commanding officers of the Guatemalan Armed Forces

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[32] John O. Bell, "[Presidential Candidate Arevalo's Plans to Return to Guatemala]," March 28, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, Massachusetts, 1.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 2.

[35] Central Intelligence Agency, "Arevalo's Return to Guatemala," March 29, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

[36] Ibid., 2.

supported the Colonel-President.[37] There was no sense of shock or disapproval at the US embassy. In the year since Arevalo had announced his candidacy, Ambassador Bell and his staff had accepted the idea that the rule of a military government was a positive good in Guatemala. As the Peralta's regime attempted to consolidate its position, the situation in Guatemala rapidly deteriorated as popular discontent transformed into civil war.

A series of crises legitimized a hardline approach to anti-communism in Guatemala that resulted in the second overthrow of a democratically elected government in less than a decade. The idealism and promise of the Alliance for Progress's renewed relationship with Latin America crumbled as the Kennedy administration confronted Castro's Cuba. Under these circumstances, Bell's fixation on blocking Arevalo from running for president seemed rational and necessary for stymieing communist influence in Guatemala. The Alliance for Progress was placed on the backburner because Bell believed that only the military could produce both stability and anti-communism. The ambassador held that development programs and modernizing initiatives were too slow and uncertain for the immediate problems he faced in Guatemala. Although alternative solutions arose, Bell and his superiors never considered anything but Arevalo's exclusion from Guatemalan politics as an option. Bell briefly reconsidered his positions, but his plans were too far along to radically change course. Instead, Bell continued to advocate for the Guatemalan military's positions. The elaborate fantasy of Arevalo's communist subversion guaranteed that the only plausible partner for the United States in Guatemala was its armed forces.

[37] United States Embassy, "[Conversation with Defense Minister's Brother]," March 31, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, Massachusetts, 2.

CHAPTER V

THE COUNTERINSURGENCY STATE

Arevalo acted bravely when he entered Guatemala, but after Peralta seized power, he had no choice but to flee the country. The day after the coup, Arevalo left for Tapachula, Mexico, as Guatemalan security forces arrested scores of Arevalista leaders.[38] Ambassador Bell reported, undoubtedly with some satisfaction, that the army would make use of the disorganization and lack of resources of Arevalo supporters to "make effective counteraction most unlikely."[39] Whether the result of genuine optimism or self-interest, within the month Bell's glowing appraisal of the situation in Guatemala proved as rooted in reality as his association of Arevalo with communism.

The ambassador wasted no time in praising Peralta. Two days after the coup, Bell defended the Peralta regime as having, through "honest convictions," saved the country from communist control.[40] Moreover, the new government pledged to restore honor and efficiency in governance. Should "leftist opponents of the new regime" threaten the military-government, it would be able to organize an effective response without requesting US assistance.[41] Elections and the constitution would be suspended while the Peralta regime solidified its control over Guatemala. Once the State Department produced its "minimal requirements" for what it would consider a constitutional regime, Bell

[38] John O. Bell, "[Presidential Aspirant Arevalo Flees to Mexico]," April 1, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

[39] Ibid.

[40] John O. Bell, "[Recognition of Guatemalan Military Government]," April 1, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

[41] Ibid., 1-2.

promised he would ask Peralta to commit to a timetable for elections.[42] The ambassador suggested that the United States recognize the Peralta government within the week to maintain a friendly relationship with the new regime.

The following day, in an interview with the Miami Herald, President Peralta announced that elections could probably be held "in more or less than two years."[43] Immediately afterward, Ambassador Bell defended the long delay. Peralta needed time to build up the private sector and develop a reputation for decency and honesty. Sensing that Peralta's indeterminate plans for elections might trouble both Guatemalan's and US officials, Bell suggested that perhaps the comments were simply "off the cuff."[44]

Despite Peralta's anti-democratic leanings, Bell maintained that the coup and the military government furthered the interests of freedom in Guatemala, the United States, and the hemisphere. Had the elections gone forward, the ambassador argued, Arevalo would have taken advantage of the "naiveté and innocence of the Guatemalan people" and opened Guatemala to "communist infiltration and control."[45] Furthermore, Bell contended that "responsible elements" of Guatemalan society showed courage and foresight that had prevented civil war by overthrowing the government.[46] Suspending the constitution and the democratic process were the only viable courses of actions, and the ambassador believed it would be a mistake for Guatemalans to hold elections in the near

[42] Ibid., 1.

[43] John O. Bell, "[U.S. Posture toward Colonel Peralta's Government]," April 3, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

[44] Ibid., 1,2.

[45] Ibid., 2.

[46] Ibid., 1.

future. Bell declared that "right thinking Latin Americans" would agree with his assessment.[47] If the United States fully supported the Peralta regime, it would bring order and progress to the perpetually backward nation. Bell's patronizing rhetoric rarely, if ever, surpassed this early defense of the Peralta regime. His analysis would prove to be fatally wrong.

Not all members of the State Department shared Ambassador Bell's favorable assessment of Guatemala's military government. On April 4, George Ball composed a partial response to the ambassador's vigorous defense of Peralta. Ball directed Ambassador Bell to approach Peralta with a proposal of forming a Council of State, and led by Peralta comprised of distinguished citizens, who would hold executive and legislative powers until the promised election. He further proposed that the council include mostly civilians who represented the leading political sectors of the country.[48] With a broader political base provided by the Council, the new government could fix a time for elections, carry out essential programs, encourage cooperation within the region, and obtain more widespread acceptance. Ball stressed the importance of holding elections within a year and allowing all democratic parties to participate, especially considering that current acceptable presidential contenders were more likely to continue to work with the Peralta regime if it looked less like a dictatorship.

Ball went on to lecture the ambassador on the inherent problems of military regimes. Ball's foremost concern was the vague, two-year projection of military rule. In his view, the Peralta regime would be able to deal with opposition, now sure to have

[47] Ibid., 2.

[48] George Ball, "[Provisional Rule of Military Government in Guatemala]," April 4, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library.

communist support, only by infringing on civil liberties, which would foster resistance. Ball observed that military regimes were not sensitive to popular reactions to authoritarianism and feared that opposition elements might be strengthened, "in will if not number," should Peralta prolong his rule. [49] Often inflexible and deeply conservative, military governments were likely to find persuasive reasons to maintain their position of power and forgo needed reforms at the expense of the electorate. Military regimes, Ball added, had a "greater ability to remove a bad government than create a good one."[50] He concluded by stating that an early return to democratic practices and the restoration of constitutionality would better protect Guatemala from Arevalo returning to power by reducing the development of dangerous political intrigue common in closed political systems.[51] This mild chastisement by his superior had little apparent effect on the ambassador as he continued to support Peralta's personal rule. Peralta retained total executive and legislative control in Guatemala for over three years.

The Under Secretary of State's criticism of Bell's approach in Guatemala reflected his own concerns about a concurrent foreign policy quagmire: Vietnam. Ball had long advocated the adage of avoiding a land war in Asia and felt that the Kennedy team's uncompromising commitment to "win" in Vietnam had obstructed alternative, more politically oriented, strategies in Southeast Asia.[52] Nevertheless, in the final months of the Kennedy administration, Ball found himself ensnared by troubling developments

[49] Ibid., 2.

[50] Ibid., 3.

[51] Ibid.

[52] George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 361, 368.

within the South Vietnamese leadership. Although the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem was not the military dictatorship Ball described to Ambassador Bell, Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu personally controlled South Vietnam's security forces and used them to brutalize opponents and rivals.[53] Ball lamented that the callousness of Diem's leadership required the United States to distance itself from "Nhu's noxious activities" even though the US "had in effect created him in the first place."[54] In Peralta's Guatemala, Ball saw a close enough parallel to caution the ambassador against following a similar path. Ironically, four months after challenging Bell's work in Guatemala, Ball became one of the chief architects in the conspiracy that toppled the Diem government, installed a military regime, and resulted in the assassination of both Diem and Nhu. In both Vietnam and Guatemala, the United States' interference in the name of anti-communism intensified ongoing conflicts and brought disaster to the respective regions.

As April 1963 came to a close, the Central Intelligence Agency reported that several guerilla groups had jointly declared war against the Peralta government. The Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT)—the Communist Party of Guatemala—claimed to speak for the various opposition groups now under its political guidance.[55] The expulsion of Arevalo and subsequent seizure of power by the military provided the disparate oppositionist groups of student activists, political dissidents, and guerilla fighters with a common cause. Clashes between insurgents and army units became

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[53] James A. Bill, *George Ball: Behind the Scenes in U.S. Foreign Policy,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 154.

[54] Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, 371.

[55] Central Intelligence Agency, "Planned Declaration of War by Guerilla Units against the Government," April 24, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1-2.

increasingly frequent in the following months, and it soon became undeniable that Guatemala was in the midst of a civil war.

With Arevalo out of Guatemala and Ydigoras replaced by a military regime under Colonel Enrique Peralta, Bell believed that that the most significant communist threat to the Guatemalan government had ended. The Peralta regime laid out its agenda, pronouncing the eradication of extremist threats to the existing government as its main objective.[56] Promising a restoration of governmental honesty, the Peralta government vowed that it would implement Alliance for Progress initiatives, honor international commitments, and promote a democratic climate. The military would turn over power to an elected government after it had fulfilled these goals. Excepting George Ball's warning to the ambassador, the harshest criticism US officials mustered against Peralta was that he might have been too "honest and upright" for Guatemalan politics.[57] His reputation, however, did not prevent the new Guatemalan president from appointing three family members to key ministries in the government. Peralta rejected the internal political machinations that Ydigoras relied upon to remain in power, and relied on family and trusted allies to maintain his rule. This new administration would be disciplined, loyal, and ruthlessly efficient in the pursuit of its mission.

Ambassador Bell remained optimistic about the prospects of the Peralta regime. The government he had helped install, in his view, was proud, dedicated, and willing to use force to eliminate potential threats. In his messages to his superiors, Bell suggested

[56] Thomas L. Hughes, "The New Guatemalan Regime and Implications of the Coup for U.S. Policy," April 25, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, National Archives, 5.

[57] Ibid., 6.

that a vast majority of Guatemalans supported the unconstitutional regime because it promised a modicum of social and economic progress, and if the regime made improvements, the population would tolerate an autocratic political system.[58] Bell downplayed the ongoing guerilla activities and declared that the Peralta regime faced no serious threat to its stability. The ambassador had seemingly achieved his objective—or so he thought.

The Central Intelligence Agency was less sanguine about the Peralta government. Its analysts believed that, in their current disorganized state, oppositionist forces did not yet have the ability to overthrow Peralta, but worried that the insurgent groups could develop into a serious problem in time. The three leading opposition groups—Arevalistas, the PGT, and Yon Sosa's guerilla fighters— had apparently held meetings with representatives from leftist student groups to discuss the overthrow of President Peralta. The groups remained divided on strategy. Arevalistas favored the suspension of subversive activity so that the state of siege would be lifted; the PGT and the guerillas favored robberies, bombings, and the assassination of key government leaders.[59] The CIA concluded that although these groups did not yet challenge the government, a unified insurgent movement could unleash another Cuban-style revolution in Guatemala.

The Cuban Revolution had demonstrated the potential of a dedicated, rural insurgent group under the command of a charismatic leader. And indeed the Movimiento Revolucionario 13 Noviembre (MR-13) hoped to replicate Castro's success by mirroring

[58] John O. Bell, "[Prospects for Peralta Regime]," May 23, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

[59] Central Intelligence Agency, "Arevalist-Extremist Planning to Overthrow the Government," May 23, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Presidential Office Files, Box 118, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

his 26th of July Movement. The leadership of MR-13 boasted two figures of growing renown: Marco Antonio Yon Sosa and Luis Augusto Turcios Lima. Both men were former Guatemalan Army officers, veterans of the 1960 rebellion against Ydigoras, who had received training at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia.[60] In the aftermath of the failed 1960 uprising, they found refuge among indigenous peasants and came to believe that change would come to Guatemala only through popular armed struggle. The two guerilla leaders subsequently travelled to Cuba where they received further training and funding, and attracted the full attention of the CIA. The agency noted that Yon Sosa, in particular, was highly regarded by the Castro regime, which had provided him with fifty-thousand dollars to continue his guerilla campaign against the Guatemalan government.[61]

After returning from Cuba in November 1962, Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima began to work closely with other oppositionist groups, namely Guatemala's communist party, the PGT. The PGT had formed its own armed wing, which merged with MR-13 in December 1962 to form a nominally united armed opposition front, the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR).[62] Groups within FAR retained considerable autonomy, and members remained loyal primarily to their commanders rather than to the organization. Still, increased collaboration between these groups marked a significant period of rejuvenation

[60] Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 66.

[61] Central Intelligence Agency, "Make-up and Plans of the 13 November Guerilla Movement; Money Received from Cuba," August 23, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 3.

[62] Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 67.

of oppositionist momentum. Under Peralta's rule, a communist insurgency, funded by Cuba, actually emerged as a significant threat.

With the regime change in Guatemala, US officials began to reassess priorities and goals. The AID program remained unchanged as American officials hoped that Peralta would be able to utilize the existing thirty million dollars in unexpended funds that the Ydigoras government had failed to utilize.[63] Both the State Department and the Department of Defense agreed that the interests of the United States would be served best by maintaining a close relationship with the Guatemalan armed forces and increasing military aid to Peralta's government. In its Military Assistance Program, the Department of Defense focused on the objective of establishing the Guatemalan military as the institution that would not only safeguard the government from communist penetration, but also act as the chief contributor to social and economic development through civic action programs. The Military Assistance Program allotted one million dollars to the Guatemalan Army for the construction of roads, bridges, public buildings and schools and created public water utilities and initiating reforestation projects.[64] This figure was dwarfed by the estimated twelve million dollars to fulfill standing Defense Department obligations to the Guatemalan military.[65] Military Assistance Program personnel projected that, by the end of the decade, Guatemalan security forces would have adequate

[63] Ralph A. Dungan, "[Report on Peralta Administration; Includes Memorandum Entitled "The New Guatemalan Regime: Its First Three Weeks"]," April 27, 1963,Digital National Security Archive, Presidential Office Files, Countries, Box 118, John F. Kennedy Library, 4.

[64] Robert J. Wood, "Military Assistance Plan, Guatemala," July 15, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Department of Defense, U.S. Army War College,18.

[65] Ibid., 37.

hardware and funding to meet US goals, but that a potential shortfall existed in the number of adequately trained personnel.

The State Department's Internal Defense Plan echoed the position and goals of the Department of Defense. Referring to the prevention of Arevalo's candidacy, the report boasted that "immediate primary objective of our IDP was effectively implemented." [66] The plan reiterated Bell's assertion that the Peralta regime faced no serious threat and that Guatemalans had apparently accepted military rule as a welcome change from Ydigoras. Nonetheless, the Guatemalan government needed to confront serious issues.

The most significant concern was the lack of proper training in security personnel, which was compounded by the fact that appointments to high-ranking positions in the police and military were based on patronage instead of merit. When selecting new heads of Guatemala's police forces, Peralta chose loyal army officers instead of police officers who had received extensive US training through the AID sponsored Public Safety Program. This marked a growing divide between the actions of the Peralta regime and the demands of the United States. Even Ambassador Bell, who had facilitated Peralta's seizure of power and acted as the regime's most vocal advocate within the State Department, began to have his doubts about the new Guatemalan government.

On September 7, 1963, Bell compiled his progress report for the Internal Defense Plan. In the five months since the establishment of Peralta's military government, Bell's enthusiasm about the regime had shifted to disappointment. The ambassador found that

[66] Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, "Internal Defense Plan—Guatemala: Progress Report," May 28, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Record Group 286, Box 73, National Archives, 1.

the Peralta government had become difficult to work with because of "its sensitivity and over developed sense of dignity with respect to 'sovereignty'"[67] While Peralta's regime dealt with subversives efficiently, it was slow, even unwilling, to implement measures and programs that addressed social and economic problems. When Peralta and his representatives were questioned about setting a timetable for elections, they became irritated and claimed that the country's "social problems" required a solution before a presidential election was feasible.[68] Despite the Peralta government's resistance to US advice, Bell maintained that replacing Ydigoras with a military regime had achieved the United States' immediate goals by blocking Arevalo's return. Unwilling to accept that the military regime might prove as problematic as George Ball had cautioned, Ambassador Bell concluded that the United States should stay its course in Guatemala and continue to keep on good terms with influential figures in Peralta's administration.

Other US officials were not as kind as Ambassador Bell towards the increasingly dictatorial Peralta. Officials with the Agency for International Development met to determine whether a reduction in Public Safety Program funding might effectively chastise Peralta for ignoring needed reforms and appointing his own men to head Guatemalan police agencies over US recommendations for the posts.[69] Writing directly to Ambassador Bell, George Ball stressed that his "central purpose" as the ambassador should be to cultivate greater influence over Peralta and to steer him away from personal

[67] John O. Bell, "Internal Defense Plan for Guatemala: Progress Report," September 7, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Record Group 286, Box 73, National Archives, 2.

[68] Ibid., 3.

[69] Herbert O. Hardin, "Proposed Meeting on Program—Guatemala," September 18, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Record Group 286, Box 65, National Archives, 1.

dictatorship.[70] Ball cautioned that there was a growing concern in Washington regarding Peralta's refusal to address political and economic problems while refusing help and advice from emissaries of the United States. In South Vietnam, the relationship with the US-installed Diem regime was deteriorating rapidly, and Ball hoped to avoid a similar situation in the Western Hemisphere. Advocating the "slow and careful" courting of Peralta and his advisors, Ball stressed that the ambassador deliver the message that continued political repression would drive the opposition underground and invited insurrection.[71] Bell had helped install the Peralta regime, but the new president had secured his position and would prove difficult to dislodge. For all of its supposed military and economic might, the United States found itself relatively powerless to control an allied government within its sphere of influence because it had committed itself to the regime by endorsing its subversion of democracy.

In Washington, Ball was not alone in his unease with Peralta's uncooperative streak. Dean Rusk, after reviewing the AID proposal to reduce funding from the Public Safety Program, instructed the ambassador to present Peralta with an ultimatum. Peralta had already appointed loyal army officers to lead Guatemalan police forces against the advice of the United States, but now the regime was refusing to meet the minimum financial and staffing requirements set by the bilateral Public Safety Program.[72] If the Guatemalan government failed to honor its commitments, Rusk warned, then AID would

[70] George Ball, "[Dissatisfaction with Peralta Regime]," September 19, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

[71] Ibid., 2.

[72] Dean Rusk, "Public Safety Program," October 16, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Record Group 286, Box 65, National Archives, 1.

reduce its contributions, including military equipment.[73] Rusk believed that Peralta needed to be reminded that maintaining law and order through well-trained security forces was in the interest of both the United States and Guatemala. A spike in guerilla attacks in the following months would test Guatemalan security forces, the military government, and the US ambassador who had helped bring it to power.

Both the US embassy and the CIA devoted considerable attention to uncovering a Cuban connection to insurgent activities in Guatemala. When a bomb prematurely exploded, killing alleged PGT member Jose Ibarra Escobar, the embassy accepted the rumor that the deceased had been a "Cuban-trained technical expert in explosives" as fact.[74] Similarly, the embassy suggested Cuban involvement when an unnamed fifteen-year-old student was killed in an attack on a police station because he was a member of a leftist youth organization.[75] The CIA began to take a more direct role in assisting the Guatemalan government with interrogation of captured guerillas and proudly announced the effectiveness of its techniques after its agents recruited a former member of Yon Sosa's MR-13 group.[76] Though the relationship between Castro's Cuba and leftist opposition to the Peralta regime was often minimal at best, US officials exaggerated collaboration between these groups to fulfill the Cold War canon of international

[73] Ibid., 2.

[74] Robert F. Corrigan, "[Speculation on Cuban and Communist Involvement in Political Unrest]," October 31, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Box 101, John F. Kennedy Library, 1.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Interdepartmental Coordinating Committee on Cuban Affairs, "Report on the Sub-committee on Cuban Suversion: Action Taken during September 1963 in Curbing Cuban Subversion in Latin America," November 13, 1963, Digital National Security Archive, Guatemalan and the US, Department of State, John F. Kennedy Library, 2.

communist conspiracy. Paradoxically, Ambassador Bell, while hunting for Cuban influence in Guatemalan dissidence, denied that the insurgency was a genuine threat.

For John Bell, 1964 was a difficult year. Bell owed his ambassadorial appointment to his close connections with the Kennedy team, and the assassination of the president in November 1963 dealt him a heavy blow. The new year with a new president began with problems that continued for the rest of the ambassador's term. Guerilla forces went on the offensive throughout Guatemala and established themselves as a serious threat to the military regime. Bell was no longer the active Cold Warrior who averted potential communist threats. The ambassador went on the defensive and showed signs of being overwhelmed by the communist insurgency.

The recent union of guerilla groups into the FAR revealed its potential through a series of coordinated attacks in January, 1964. In the countryside, guerillas regularly clashed with the army units in the Izabal Department. The influence of the small band in the predominantly rural region was growing and threatened to hamper access to Guatemala's most important port, Puerto Barrios.[77] More troubling to the ambassador, insurgents assaulted urban targets. Mortar rounds shelled a Guatemala City airport on three occasions and then targeted an Honor Guard compound. Bell noted that FAR pamphlets signed by Commandant Yon Sosa had been distributed in nearby neighborhoods warning people to stay away from the airport to avoid future attacks made

[77] John O. Bell, "[Guerilla Clash in Izabal]," January 9, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2253, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives, 1.

"in retaliation for [the] military dictatorship's action against guerillas" in Izabal.[78] At the end of the month, the FAR assassinated Colonel Jose Oliva Valdez, an intelligence officer of the Puerto Barrios garrison, in a drive-by machine gun attack in Guatemala City.[79] In his monthly assessment, Bell admitted that the insurgency had escalated its attacks, but that the military, as a result of US training, was becoming a more efficient counterinsurgency force.[80] Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, Bell continued to claim that the guerilla forces did not pose a major threat to the Peralta government.

Responding to the demands of his superiors in Washington and the increasing problems on the ground, Bell suggested a reorientation of US domestic policy in Guatemala. The new policy objective emphasized greater cooperation with the Peralta regime to advance the economic and social goals of the Alliance for Progress and the reinstatement of a democratic, constitutional government.[81] Following the advice of Ball and Rusk, the ambassador suggested that making overt demands on the Peralta government would not work. Instead, the careful cultivation of influential members of the regime had proven most effective. By building his relationship with Peralta's brother and other influential members in the regime, Bell encouraged elections for a Constituent

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[78] John O. Bell, "[Guerillas Attack Honor Guard Brigade]," January 22, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

[79] John O. Bell, "[Intelligence Officer Shot]," January 24, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2253, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives, 1

[80] John O. Bell, "[Guerilla Threat]," January 15, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 1.

[81] John O. Bell, "Internal Defense Plan for Guatemala: Progress Report and Prospects," March 6, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 1.

Assembly that would be held May or June.[82] The ambassador stated that long-term social and economic programs would undermine the insurgency over time, but that increased support for the Guatemalan military and police was necessary to maintain the momentum of the current counterinsurgency efforts. The organization of these security forces, however, remained a contentious issue between US officials and Peralta's government.

State Department officials, CIA analysts, and US military advisors all agreed that the National Police and Guatemalan intelligence agencies needed to be professionalized and restructured in order to meet the growing insurgent threat effectively. Rusk's plan of threatening to pull the funding of the Public Safety Program in order to to push Peralta into reforming the police and appointing US-trained officers to leadership positions continued to be ignored by the regime. With guerillas targeting urban areas with more frequency, Bell reported that the need for an effective police force was now Guatemala's most significant national security problem.[83] A collaborative effort between AID and Guatemalan police officers produced a plan for reorganization that would be presented to the Minister of Government, but Bell feared that the Peralta regime would continue to dismiss these suggestions. DCM Corrigan presented the police reorganization plan to the Minister of Government, who agreed that the reforms were badly needed, but the Peralta government continued to ignore the suggestions.[84]

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[82] Ibid., 3.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Robert F. Corrigan, "Police Reorganization: Visit to Minister of Government," March 10, 1964, Record Group 286, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Record Group 286, Box 65, National Archives, 2.

Despite Peralta's unwillingness to listen to its US allies on internal security matters, his regime finally set a date, May 24, for elections to the Constituent Assembly. The elections, however, came with a caveat. No opposition parties would be allowed to participate. In fact, all the parties that ultimately participated presented nearly identical, government-selected, platforms.[85] The brief prospect of political stability and progress rapidly dissolved.

A proliferation of coup plots against the Peralta administration marked the immediate popular response to the announcement of the election. Military leaders, political oppositionists, journalists, and students of all political identities conspired to overthrow the government, but these self-interested groups lacked the resources and political unity to overthrow the regime. Ideological fissures within the FAR's tenuous alliance began to appear between the PGT, which favored political participation, and the MR-13, which rejected the elections and demanded a continuation of armed struggle.[86] Although participation in the elections was low, May 24 came and went without a serious disruption, and a toothless, conservative Constituent Assembly granted the pretense of democratic progress to the Peralta regime.

Through the summer of 1964, the US embassy continued to lament the inaction of the Peralta regime, yet still discounted the danger posed by opposition forces. Bell recommended that the Public Safety Program officials delay their assessment of Guatemalan police forces because the government continued to rely on the army as both

[85] George C. Denney Jr, "Guatemalan Elections Will Be in Effect a Plebiscite," May 7, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

[86] Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 67.

an urban and rural counterinsurgency force.[87] Major guerilla engagements had largely subsided; they averaged, Bell reported, "one murder a month for the past five months," targeting plantation owners and a few army officers.[88] Peralta's neglect of public security seemed justified by the diminishing momentum of the insurgency. The optimistic assessments of the embassy, and the arrogance of Peralta's government quickly dissipated in the face of a sustained assault that began in the provincial village of Panzos.

On October 16, 1964, a guerilla attack on a Panzos military detachment initiated a wave of constant violence that lasted into the 1970s. An estimated twenty guerilla fighters killed three soldiers and seized all of the weapons and ammunition in the barracks after the army detachment retreated.[89] The Guatemalan Armed Forces launched a combined sweep of the area and successfully captured six guerillas. Ambassador Bell's repeated statements that the insurgency was merely a nuisance garnered much less credence from a surprised Johnson administration.

Dean Rusk cabled the embassy demanding explanations. He ordered Bell to urge Guatemalan authorities to conduct a "thorough interrogation" of the guerillas with the express purpose of obtaining intelligence that proved Cuban involvement in the attack.[90] Rusk's call for thorough interrogation no doubt alludes to the military intelligence's

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[87] John O. Bell, "The Threat of Violence in Guatemala," May 22, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Record Group 286, Box 66, National Archives, 3.

[88] Ibid., 1.

[89] United States Army Attaché, "[Guerilla Attack at Panzos]" October 19, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, National Security Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2.

[90] Dean Rusk, "[Interrogation of Captured Guerillas]," October 22, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2253, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives.

penchant for torture. Bell relayed Rusk's demand immediately. No record of the information gathered from the detained insurgents has been made publicly available.

Meanwhile, Secretary Rusk received reports of increased guerilla activity around Puerto Barrios in the Izabal department. While the resident military commander promised US embassy officials that the guerilla threat was "more or less" under control, high unemployment in the port town provided recruiting opportunities for the insurgency.[91] Additionally, MR-13 units were engaging in small skirmishes and detonating bombs within the city with increasing regularity. Rusk demanded more information from the embassy, specifically whether the attack in Panzos and the activity in Puerto Barrios were related. [92] Bell, despite evidence to the contrary, continued to claim that the guerillas were not a threat.

Bell's final denial of the capabilities of opposition forces revealed the extent of the ambassador's intransigence. In his report to Rusk, Bell stated that although the Panzos attack represented "the boldest and most publicized guerilla action in some time," it did not represent an expansion of the insurgency because Panzos was a mere eleven kilometers from the border of the Izabal department.[93] Bell postulated that the small, highly mobile bands falsely presented a larger range and greater collaboration than they actually enjoyed. The ambassador confirmed that the guerillas in Panzos and Puerto

[91] Edward V. Nef, "Puerto Barrios and Guerilla Activities in the Izabal Area," October 30, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2253, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives, 4.

[92] Dean Rusk, "[Clarification of Guerilla Attacks]," November 3, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2253, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives.

[93] John O. Bell, "[Significance of Panzos Raid]," November 4, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 1.

Barrios were probably members of the FAR, but that their loyalties and strategies were determined by individual unit commanders.[94] Seeking to reassure the Secretary of State, Bell praised the Guatemalan military's swift, overwhelming response. He declared that the Peralta government showed its "capability [to] control [the] situation without too much difficulty" and demonstrated an increased will and determination to crush the insurgent forces.[95] During the last months of Bell's term in office, a steady stream of raids, ambushes, and bombings exposed the flaws in the ambassador's thinking.

Assisting Peralta's coup to prevent the potential election of the pseudo-communist Arevalo had seemed like a major accomplishment in John Bell's steady advancement through the State Department. By 1964, however, Bell's achievement revealed how unprepared the ambassador was for his post. Although he had helped Peralta come to power and had significant contacts within the regime, Bell found that his influence within the Guatemalan government was almost negligible. Although the Peralta regime allowed highly restricted elections for a powerless representative body, Bell failed to implement any significant policy initiatives. Even when faced with urban guerilla attacks, the Peralta government refused to address what US officials deemed Guatemala's most pressing national security issue, the creation of an efficient police force. Contradicting his attempts to convince Peralta to improve the police, Bell repeatedly downplayed the significance of the insurgency, even as its attacks grew bolder and spread throughout the country. In his final year as ambassador, Bell's delusions finally gave way as he retreated from the violence and terror that gripped Guatemala.

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[94] Ibid., 2.

[95] Ibid., 2.

Pressure from guerillas remained constant into 1965. On New Year's Eve, urban insurgents burned down the USAID transport garage, planted defective bombs at the US Army Mission headquarters, and attempted to assassinate a Guatemalan colonel, Hector Medina, in a drive-by-shooting.[96] Although most of these attacks were failures, they represented a shift in focus from rural areas to urban centers. Bell's repeated assurances that the situation was in hand no longer seemed credible in Washington. Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Mann, a respected authority on Latin America, reported to the National Security Council that guerilla activity in Izabal was a chronic problem and that urban terrorism was polarizing the electorate in anticipation of the promised presidential contest.[97] Despite Mann's appraisal, he suggested that military and police aid should not be increased. Mann believed that Guatemalan security forces had more than adequate resources and that further funding would stymie the potential for elections.

Mann reiterated his point in a letter to Bell. The letter signified an attempt to reorient US-policy in Guatemala away from its nearly exclusive partnership with the military. Mann stated that, while the military could be a useful force against communism, they should not interfere in "normal political processes."[98] Furthermore, Mann informed Bell that it was the ambassador's duty to persuade Peralta's government to promote

[96] John T. Dreyfuss, "Fifth Monthly Guerilla Report," February 6, 1965, Digital National Security Archive, Record Group 59, Records of the Department of State, Box 2252, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964-1966, National Archives, 1.

[97] Thomas Mann, "Progress Report on Guatemalan Internal Defense Plan," December 2, 1964, Digital National Security Archive, Records of the Agency for International Development, Records of the Office of Public Safety, Record Group 286, Box 70, National Archives, 5.

[98] Thomas Mann, "[Security Assistance to Latin America]," January 21, 1965, Digital National Security Archive, Commission for Historical Clarification, Department of State, 2.

democracy in Guatemala.[99] Effectively reprimanded for his policies, Bell retreated from his formerly active role until he left office in September.

While Ambassador Bell had transitioned from vigorous interventionist to a passive observer, the insurgency escalated throughout Guatemala. Guatemala City and other urban areas were particularly hard hit, and the Guatemalan government declared a state of siege in February 1965. Bombings, kidnappings, and political assassinations plagued Guatemalan cities while guerillas maintained pressure from their stronghold in Izabal. In June, Bell reported that the U.S. military group chief and the Air Force attaché had received death threats from the FAR.[100] In the following years, increasingly desperate insurgents fulfilled their promises, killing and kidnapping several US officials.

When asked about his transition from the ambassadorship of Guatemala to an advisory position at STRIKECOM in Miami, Bell was evasive and vague, claiming that he "turned down the position" because of "personal reasons."[101] Regardless of Bell's real motivations for vacating his post, when he left Guatemala in September 1965, the country was in far worse shape than when he arrived in 1961. A military regime had replaced a democratic government. Quiescent, disorganized opposition groups had developed into a unified, communist-inspired insurgency. Civil war sewed indiscriminate violence in both the cities and countryside. Only four years had passed, but the idealism of the Alliance for Progress seemed like a distant dream when confronting the harsh realities in Guatemala.

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[99] Ibid., 3.

[100] John O. Bell, [Threats against American Personnel]," June 17, 1965, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Volume 1, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

[101] John Bell, interview by Arthur Lowrie.

Although Bell's successor, John Gordon Mein, successfully facilitated the transition from Peralta's military government to the freely-elected presidency of Mario Mendez Montenegro, the Guatemalan Armed Forces had already firmly established their control over the government and forced the Mendez administration to cede its power to the generals. Mendez would be the last civilian president of Guatemala for over twenty years.

As the insurgent forces continued their campaign, the United States increased military aid and sent military personnel to act as advisors. Several sources, including a high ranking Guatemalan police official, have claimed that as many as one thousand Army Green Beret's played an active-combat role in the counterinsurgency effort, although US officials have categorically denied the allegation.[102] Under advice from US Navy and Special Forces officers, Guatemalan commanders began to incorporate the use of paramilitary death-squads alongside normal operations as part of an emerging counterterror doctrine.

After a right-wing death squad associated with the military raped, murdered, and mutilated a former Guatemalan beauty queen for decrying human rights abuses, the FAR retaliated by assassinating two US military advisors and kidnapping Ambassador Mein.[103]The FAR kidnapped the ambassador with the intent of exchanging him for a captured rebel leader, but when Mein attempted to escape, the rebels "cut him down."[104]

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[102] Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 70.

[103] Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain*, (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 226.

[104] Walt W. Rostow, "Assassination of Ambassador Mein," August 29, 1968, Digital National Security Archive, National Security Files, Country Files: Guatemala, Vol. 2, Box 54, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2.

John Gordon Mein, the inheritor of Bell's legacy, became the first United States ambassador killed in the line of duty.

By the end of the decade, the brutal tactics of Colonel Carlos Arana that combined the counterterror of death-squads with a scorched-earth policy in the countryside, quelled the insurgency for most of the 1970s. Arana's massacres earned him the title of "the Butcher of Zacapa." In 1970, the Butcher became the President of Guatemala and maintained order through disappearance, torture, and assassination.[105] The Counterinsurgency State, in many respects, was set in motion with the derailment of democracy and legitimization of military rule that occurred under Ambassador John Bell.

[105] Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 63.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The beginning of the 1960s represents a tragedy of missed opportunity between the United States and Guatemala. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress promised a new era of economic and social progress that would overhaul the battered relationship between the United States and its southern neighbors. In Guatemala, the potential reelection of Juan Jose Arevalo, a proven reformer and proponent of the Alliance for Progress, seemed like the fulfillment of the promise of change. Pervading Cold War mentalities, however, ensured there would be no second chances for either Arevalo or the United States. Fears of communist infiltration, exacerbated by the partnership between Cuba and the Soviet Union, reduced Kennedy's idealistic initiatives to empty rhetoric as his administration pursued the interventionist mentality that had long characterized US-Latin American relations.

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations attempted to combat communism in Latin America with political and economic incentives through the Alliance for Progress. By the end of Johnson's administration, however, the program was an admitted failure. The Alliance for Progress was meant to counter the example set by Cuba, but the potential spread of Castro's revolution, the prevailing policy of containment, and the overriding need to maintain the United States' sphere of influence led the administration and its officials to rely on military expedients when crises erupted. The United States reduced its commitment to the Alliance for Progress with the goal of addressing more immediate problems, but the situation in Guatemala only grew worse. By cancelling elections and facilitating regime change in the name of stability and anti-communism, the

United States and its Guatemalan allies produced widespread civil strife and inspired a unified communist opposition. Although the United States had the capacity to force change in Guatemala, it could not determine the outcome it desired. The thirty-three years of civil war in Guatemala that followed the 1963 coup revealed major limitations of US power and the deleterious effects of its interventionist policies.

Ambassador Bell fostered a close relationship with the military because of pervading Cold War trends and his own personal biases. As a result, Bell facilitated a military seizure of power at a critical moment in Guatemalan history. This decision solidified the military's rule over Guatemala for the next twenty-three years and condemned the country to more than three decades of civil war. The ambassador's power, like his vision, proved limited. As George Ball had warned the ambassador after the 1963 coup, once Peralta's military regime took power, it refused to implement reforms and ignored both the demands of the Guatemalan people and the advice of US officials. Insensitive to local concerns and lacking in foresight, Bell's unsophisticated brand of anti-communism brought disaster to Guatemala.

Bell's tenure in office represented a failure in policy made all the more tragic because of the potential of the road not taken. Just as the 1954 coup portended future interventions by the United States throughout Latin America, instead of becoming a "showcase of democracy" Guatemala became the first of many US-sponsored counterinsurgency states that used torture, forced disappearance, and death squads to eliminate the perceived communist threat.[1] By the 1980s, state-terror evolved into

[1] Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 57.

genocide and the United States found itself unable to distance itself from the murderous military regime that it had helped to build.

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