



# Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954

*Nick Cullather*

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In 1992, the Central Intelligence Agency hired the young historian Nick Cullather to write a history (classified “secret” and for internal distribution only) of the Agency’s Operation PBSUCCESS, which overthrew the lawful government of Guatemala in 1954. Given full access to the Agency’s archives, he produced a vivid insider’s account, intended as a training manual for covert operators, detailing how the C.I.A. chose targets, planned strategies, and organized the mechanics of waging a secret war. In 1997, during a brief period of open disclosure, the C.I.A. declassified the history with remarkably few substantive deletions. The *New York Times* called it “an astonishingly frank account . . . which may be a high-water mark in the agency’s openness.” Here is that account, with new notes by the author which clarify points in the history and add newly available information.

In the Cold War atmosphere of 1954, the U.S. State Department (under John Foster Dulles) and the C.I.A. (under his brother Allen Dulles) regarded Guatemala’s democratically elected leftist government as a Soviet beachhead in the Western Hemisphere. At the C.I.A.’s direction, the government was overthrown and replaced by a military dictatorship installed by the Agency. This book tells, for the first time, how a disaster-prone operation—marked by bad planning, poor security, and incompetent execution—was raised to legendary status by its almost accidental triumph.

This early C.I.A. covert operation delighted both President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers, and Allen Dulles concluded that the apparent success in Guatemala, despite a long series of blunders, made the venture a sound model for future operations. This book reveals how the legend of PBSUCCESS grew, and why attempts to imitate it failed so disastrously at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and in the Contra war in the 1980’s. The Afterword traces the effects of the coup of 1954 on the subsequent unstable politics and often violent history of Guatemala.

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