

INTERVENTION IN THE  
CARIBBEAN BASIN:  
A Search for Stability

*Thomas P. Anderson*  
*Eastern Connecticut State University*

*THE CIA IN GUATEMALA: THE FOREIGN POLICY OF INTERVENTION.* By RICHARD H. IMMERMANN. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1982. Pp. 291. \$24.50.)

*CONSTRAINT OF EMPIRE: THE UNITED STATES AND CARIBBEAN INTERVENTIONS.* By WHITNEY T. PERKINS. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981. Pp. 282. \$35.00.)

*BITTER FRUIT: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE AMERICAN COUP IN GUATEMALA.* By STEPHEN SCHLESINGER and STEPHEN KINZER. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982. Pp. 320. \$16.95.)

U.S. interest in the Caribbean basin area (which includes the islands of the West Indies and the semicircle of the continent from Mexico to Venezuela) is of long standing. It was precisely this region that the U.S. government had in mind when it enunciated the Monroe Doctrine, which first warned European nations to keep their hands off while saying nothing about its own future intentions. Yet, outside of troubles with Mexico, only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did U.S. intervention become pronounced. Then in rapid succession came the war with Spain, which brought with it the problem of Cuba, the U.S.-backed revolt in Panama, and the acquisition of the Canal Zone, as well as military interventions in the bankrupt and turbulent countries of Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti (not to mention the two incursions into Mexico during its revolution). Marines took up garrison duty in Nicaragua in 1912, in Haiti in 1915, and in the Dominican Republic in 1916 (its customs had been in U.S. hands since 1904). With troops in three countries and the United States "authorized" to intervene in Cuban affairs by the Platt amendment, a virtual empire had been established in the Caribbean basin.

It is the obligations that this empire entailed that Whitney Perkins addresses in his book, *Constraints of Empire: The United States and Caribbean Interventions*. He deals with Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti,

and Nicaragua. In the first part of his book, he discusses how the United States came to exercise control. The second part deals with the exercise of that control and discovery by the United States of the limitations of its authority. The third part of this work takes up the painful process of disengagement. The final section of the work explores the consequences of these four interventions and discusses some of the "return engagements" that were necessary, such as the Dominican Republic invasion of 1965 and the efforts to oust Anastasio Somoza Debayle from Nicaragua in the late seventies. The central thesis of the book is that the goal of the United States, however falteringly pursued, was to create stable democracies based upon the model of its own and then to return control to the native people of these countries (p. ix). Or, as Elihu Root put it, "to get the little Central American countries into better shape and to do it in such a way as to win their respect and kindly feeling" (p. 22). Given this premise, the interpretation follows that the United States, after overcoming a certain amount of reluctance, intervened directly only when the governmental and economic processes of these states had almost totally broken down. But as Perkins points out, once enmeshed in the situation, the United States was faced with a paradox: its very presence "perpetuated the political incapacity it was to correct" (p. 2).

Other unforeseen consequences also occurred. Some political out-groups in these dependent states deliberately fostered North American intervention while a weak government, upon seeing itself about to topple, on occasion welcomed intervention as a means of escaping defeat (p. 13). Not only did political groups within the client states use the U.S. presence, but so did nongovernmental actors, including U.S.-based firms and local entrepreneurs. These points are well taken. It was Nicaraguan President Adolfo Díaz who suggested to the U.S. government a treaty that would permit the latter to intervene "to maintain peace and the existence of a lawful government" (his own, of course). He later praised the "happy results" of marine occupation (pp. 30, 149). Similarly, in the initial U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, both the political faction loyal to President Isidro Jiménez and the opposition forces welcomed U.S. intervention and sought U.S. support (p. 41).

Disillusioned by the frustrations of empire, the United States began to withdraw in the 1930s. The marines went home, the Platt amendment was abrogated. Perkins contends that the United States failed "to obtain the unobtainable" (p. 183). The countries the United States vacated were no more democratic than before U.S. intervention. It should be pointed out, however, that they were generally more stable. Rafael Trujillo was enthroned in the Dominican Republic, Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, and Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, while events in Haiti eventually resulted in the establishment of the Duvalier dynasty. Given this pattern, one is tempted to wonder whether that form of stability, rather

than democracy, was not the unstated, but intended, result. The United States certainly looked with considerable favor upon Batista and the Somoza family for many years, and if it did not exactly welcome Trujillo or Duvalier, it accepted them out of fear of having to deal with someone worse. Moreover, the United States intervened to prevent instability, but it never stepped in to squelch a dictatorship, however nasty.

Certainly, if the United States were championing democracy and freedom of choice, Perkin's book itself demonstrates that the United States had a curious way of pursuing these goals. Josephus Daniels admitted in his diaries that "we put" Mario Menocal in power in Cuba "when he had not been elected" (p. 86). In Nicaragua in 1920, according to an American army officer, "the American Government, to all practical purposes, nominated the elected General Emiliano Chamorro as president of Nicaragua" (p. 102). When the legislature in Haiti threatened to pass a constitutional amendment that would have prohibited foreign landownership, Colonel Eli Cole of the U.S. Marines had the assembly dissolved (pp. 126–27). In short, any time democracy did not work out the way the United States intended, it took corrective action—certainly not the best way to instill democratic notions.

The U.S. excuse for this behavior was that if allowed to follow their natural bent, the "locals" (whom it looked down upon in true colonial fashion) might do something to threaten future stability. This word *stability* requires some analysis. It is not synonymous with democracy, to be sure, but paradoxically, it is not even synonymous with relatively secure political continuity. If continuity and popular acceptance were the criteria, the United States ought to be hailing Fidel's Cuba as one of the most stable of our neighbors. Plainly, stability has something to do with a country's receptivity to the concerns of the United States. A country not in tune with U.S. policy is threatening the stability of the region, in the jargon of the State Department. It was this threat to regional stability (that is, to United States hegemony) that prompted the CIA's invasion of Guatemala in 1954 and the Bay of Pigs operation. The invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, which Perkins labels "unnecessary," was to prevent a government from coming to power that might not be friendly to U.S. interests. A stable government, then, is one that is friendly to the United States and not so scandalously tyrannical as to threaten international outcry, although preferably democratic.

Perkins tends to concentrate on the early years of North American involvement in his selected countries. The 1965 Dominican invasion is handled briefly compared to the wealth of detail (albeit few exact dates) given for the events of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. Similarly, the Sandinista ascendancy in Nicaragua is barely sketched, and for obvious reasons, nothing is said about post-Sandinista relations with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

If there is any single instance that best illustrates what the United States was seeking in its various interventions, it is probably the Guatemalan intervention of 1954. Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán was the second constitutionally elected president during the period known as “la Revolución.” His election was reasonably honest, although marred considerably by the fact that the leading opposition figure had been assassinated earlier, possibly with Arbenz’s complicity. The Arbenz government enjoyed broad popular support and was undertaking much-needed reforms, the most important of which was a land reform program that, although ambitious, was modest indeed compared to the one the United States would later back in El Salvador. Although attempts were made to overthrow the government, all had failed miserably, and Arbenz showed every sign of being able to complete his constitutional term and hand power over to an elected successor. Despite all this, the CIA, with the complete knowledge of President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (whose brother Allen was the CIA director), recruited the exiled Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas (a man with little support in Guatemala), hired a mercenary “liberation” army, and brought in planes and pilots to bomb Guatemala. All this was done to a neighbor with whom the United States had diplomatic relations; in fact, the U.S. ambassador, John Peurifoy, was cooperating fully with the plot to overthrow the very government to which he was accredited.

All this history is well documented in *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* by Richard H. Immerman and in *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* by Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer. Both are well-written works that cover the same ground. The Schlesinger and Kinzer work is more journalistic, beginning in the tradition of popular histories, *in medias res*, and then jumping back to the beginning of the story. Immerman plows right through, starting with a discussion of the Cold War in Latin America and then gradually focusing in on his story. Schlesinger and Kinzer will reach a much larger audience because their book is backed by a large commercial firm. Immerman’s volume will probably be eclipsed, which is a pity because although the Schlesinger and Kinzer book is very good, Immerman’s work is clearer on some points and deserves an audience. It should also be noted that Schlesinger and Kinzer benefited from using Immerman’s doctoral research, which formed the basis for this book.

Both works agree that the United States coldbloodedly decided to overthrow Arbenz because of the influence of communists in his government. This influence already had attracted the attention of U.S. diplomats and congressmen, but had they not been aware of it, the United Fruit Company (UFI), which stood to lose a half-million acres to the land reform proposal, hastened to point it out to them. UFI employed “Tommy the Cork” Corcoran as their lobbyist to defame the Arbenz

government (Schlesinger and Kinzer, p. 91; Immerman, p. 116). Because this charge of communism was crucial to the intervention, it is surprising that neither book explores it in any great detail. Only when it is determined how much real influence “communists” had in the Arbenz government can one judge whether national security interests were not compelling, as Schlesinger and Kinzer assert (p. 107). Older studies by Daniel James, John Martz, and Roland Schneider are inadequate<sup>2</sup> because they were written at too close a proximity to the events. Schlesinger and Kinzer claim that the James work was published through a “CIA conduit” (p. 89).

The two recent books devote a chapter to internal conditions in Guatemala. Both conclude that nationalism, not communism, was its overriding theme, but neither have enough details to prove that contention. Another recent study, by José Aybar de Soto,<sup>3</sup> also focuses on the intervention, but gives three chapters to the period of the revolution. A modern, objective evaluation of the revolution is overdue. What the books by Immerman and Schlesinger and Kinzer prove abundantly is that high-handed arrogance and callous disregard for sovereignty characterized the U.S. government at every level from the president down to the ambassador. There is no evidence that anyone worried much about Guatemalan democracy. The main goal was to get Guatemala back on our side in the great international chess game. Yet the legacy of the 1954 coup has been anything but democracy. Guatemala has been condemned to twenty-nine years of violence and repression and the end is not yet in sight.

Although the two works agree on the major outline of the story, they differ on minor points. Immerman claims that Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes was rejected as the savior of Guatemala because he was too reactionary and, in E. Howard Hunt’s view, looked like “a Spanish don” (p. 142); Schlesinger and Kinzer suggest that it was Ydígoras’s “unmanageability” that was the real problem (p. 121). Immerman seems to imply that the Alfhem arms shipment might have bolstered Arbenz’s military position, whereas Schlesinger and Kinzer flatly state that the shipment was worthless (p. 152). Curiously enough, the two works cannot agree on the code name of the CIA operation: was it Project PBSUCCESS, as Immerman has it, or Operation Success, as Schlesinger and Kinzer call it?

Today the United States undoubtedly is reaping the bitter harvest of all these interventions, yet the country seems determined to carry on with the same mixture of bluster and blunder as before. In a recent article in *International Security*, Margaret Daly Hayes rightly calls for “positive policies that emphasize concern for economic and political well-being and security.” But this influential analyst for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee then suggests that this goal can be achieved through military

cooperation, as though the military itself were not one of the principal agents suppressing needed social reforms in many of the countries of the region. Her new book on Latin America elaborates her thoughts on the U.S. role.<sup>4</sup>

Stephen Kinzer, who had been Latin American correspondent for the *Boston Globe* since 1967, made the following comments on U.S. policy in a farewell article: "U.S. policy towards Central America, viewed in retrospect, is a series of "if only" laments. If only we had dumped Somoza years earlier and allowed democracy to grow in Nicaragua, . . . if only we hadn't overthrown the Guatemalan democracy in 1954. . . . Yet, today, we may be making similar errors for future generations to regret. Years from now Americans could be looking back to 1982 and wishing their government had made peace with the Sandinistas and followed a path of conciliation . . . in dealing with the peasant backed rebellions in El Salvador and Guatemala."<sup>5</sup> Anyone reading the three books reviewed here can clearly see the bankruptcy of past policy and the need for a fresh start.

#### NOTES

1. Two essays in a more recent book, *U.S. Influence in Latin America in the 1980s*, shed more light on the current developments in regard to Cuba and Nicaragua. That of Edward González on Cuba explores the reasons for the failure of the seeming detente of the mid-seventies, a failure that he attributes to the continued Cuban involvement in Africa, especially Ethiopia. Charles D. Ameringer, writing on Nicaragua, sees the breakdown in U.S.–Nicaraguan relations as being due to the alleged support of Nicaragua for the rebels in El Salvador. This volume also contains studies of El Salvador and Panama. See *U.S. Influence in Latin America in the 1980s*, edited by Robert Wesson (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982).
2. Daniel James, *Red Design for the Americas* (New York: Day, 1954); John D. Martz, *Communist Infiltration in Guatemala* (New York: Vantage, 1956); Roland Schneider, *Communism in Guatemala, 1944–1954* (New York: Praeger, 1959).
3. José Aybar de Soto, *Dependency and Intervention: The Case of Guatemala in 1954* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1978).
4. Margaret Daly Hayes, "Security to the South: U.S. Interests in Latin America," *International Security* 5, no. 1 (1980): 130–57. Her new book is *Latin America and the U.S. National Interest: A Basis for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983).
5. *Boston Globe*, 12 December 1982.