

# *Operational Discrepancy: An Analysis of the CIA's Success in Iran and Guatemala and Subsequent Failure in Cuba*

by Cindy Lewis

The end of the Second World War signaled the emergence of a new global conflict. The United States and Soviet Union emerged from the war as superpowers and each aimed to spread their influence across the globe. As communism began to spread, the United States adopted the policy of containment, which involved preventing the further expansion of communism by any means necessary. Containment comprised a myriad of tactics which included providing economic and military aid to ailing nations in an effort to revive economies and reduce the appeal of Soviet communism; direct military conflict as in Korea and Vietnam; and covert operations carried out by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 was a covert operation which aimed at deposing the communist dictator Fidel Castro. It was not the first or the last time that the United States government attempted to overthrow the leader of a sovereign nation. In 1953 and again in 1954, the CIA successfully deposed of the democratically elected leaders of Iran and Guatemala. The success of these operations led the CIA and other government officials to believe that similar results could be achieved in Cuba. The operation in Cuba, however, would not share the successful outcome of its predecessors. The Bay of Pigs invasion ultimately ended in failure because the CIA neglected to employ the same tactics that worked in Iran and Guatemala. The CIA implemented inadequate and inefficient propaganda and psychological campaigns and were therefore unable to influence public opinion in their favor. In addition, they proved unable to form cooperative relations with prominent members of the Cuban population that might have helped to solidify their goals. Finally, the CIA failed to properly evaluate the necessary strength of operation forces. These discrepancies can be clearly seen through a comparative analysis of the operations in Iran, Guatemala, and Cuba.

In April 1951, Mohammed Mossadegh was appointed Prime Minister of Iran. Mossadegh, an ardent nationalist, took steps to nationalize Iran's oil industry. The British, who had a great deal invested in Iranian oil, felt threatened by Mossadegh's reforms and immediately began planning to remove him from power. Britain's MI6 requested help from the CIA, who had their own qualms with Mossadegh's political goals. Due to the heightened activity of the communist Tudeh party since Mossadegh's election, the CIA felt confident that Mossadegh would allow Iran to become a

communist nation.<sup>1</sup> The CIA eventually took the lead in the coup, known as Operation TPAJAX, and provided a total of \$147,500 for the operation, which involved CIA agents working directly with the Shah and pro-Shah military personnel.<sup>2</sup> The strategy decided upon by the CIA aimed at convincing the Shah to issue a series of decrees that would effectively remove Mossadegh from power. To replace Mossadegh, the CIA chose Fazlollah Zahedi, an Iranian general who, it was assumed, would be much more responsive to US and British interests.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing the significance of public opinion in accomplishing their goal, the CIA used an array of strategies, including mass propaganda and psychological tactics, to stir up unrest and encourage the people of Iran to side with the Shah. The propaganda campaign began in May with the aim of discrediting the Mossadegh government. Included in this campaign was the mass distribution of anti-Mossadegh cartoons and mock news articles.<sup>4</sup> The agency even went so far as to give a leading Iranian newspaper owner \$45,000 "in the belief that this would make his organ amenable" to their purposes.<sup>5</sup>

The CIA and their allies threatened pro-Mossadegh individuals and directed a series of bombings that were designed to appear as though they had been perpetrated by communists.<sup>6</sup> Although the bombings were mostly psychological in nature, the house of at least one prominent Iranian citizen was damaged by explosives.<sup>7</sup> By manufacturing chaos and violence, the CIA and their Iranian cohorts created an environment in which the people of Iran had to choose between "stability and instability."<sup>8</sup> They sought to convince Iranians that Mossadegh's administration lay at the root of Iran's volatile state of affairs.

Mossadegh eventually became aware of the plot to remove him and immediately attempted to consolidate his power by abolishing parliament. This act only raised suspicion among the Iranian people. The Shah was hesitant to act but, under constant immense pressure from the CIA, finally signed the decrees on August 13.<sup>9</sup> However, due to a delay in publicizing the decrees, the people of Iran, including Mossadegh and his followers, were not immediately made aware of the change in leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Secret CIA History of the Iran Coup, 1953," The National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 28 (Washington D.C.: George Washington University, November 29, 2000), <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB28>.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Rahnem, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 61.

<sup>3</sup> "The Secret CIA History of the Iran Coup, 1953"

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

On August 19, a pro-Shah mob joined by military and police forces, all with ties to the CIA, began raiding homes and offices of Mossadegh and his allies throughout the city of Tehran.<sup>10</sup> Soon after, pro-Mossadegh and pro-Shah forces, led by Zahedi, clashed in a battle that claimed the lives of hundreds of Iranians. Although the Shah's forces outnumbered those of Mossadegh, the operation's chances of success initially looked bleak.<sup>11</sup> Mossadegh, thinking that he had thwarted the hostile takeover, sent his men home.

Later that day, Zahedi arrived at a radio station in Tehran and announced over the airways that the Shah, by constitutional authority, had appointed him as Prime Minister.<sup>12</sup> Zahedi's forces finally managed to take control of the city and Mossadegh and many of his supporters were subsequently arrested, tried, and imprisoned.<sup>13</sup> Zahedi remained in power for the next several years and proved to be a strong ally of the west.

The following year, the CIA used the lessons from the Iran coup d'état to successfully overthrow Jacobo Arbenz, the democratically-elected leader of Guatemala who had become president in 1950. Much like Mossadegh, Arbenz wished to secure political and financial sovereignty for his nation. He initiated a series of economic and social reforms in an effort to alleviate the nation's troubles and create a strong middle class.

While beneficial to the people of Guatemala, many of these reforms threatened United States economic interests within the country. Arbenz initiated a radical redistribution of land which included 160,000 acres of uncultivated land that belonged to the United Fruit Company (UFCO).<sup>14</sup> The Guatemalan government compensated the UFCO but company executives were nevertheless angered by Arbenz's actions. UFCO leaders and their Washington allies began lobbying the United States government to remove Arbenz from power. The US government did not require much convincing as numerous government and agency personnel had been eyeing Arbenz's policies with suspicion since his election. Many believed Arbenz to be a communist who was simply employing Mao pragmatism by briefly embracing liberal ideas in order to gain power.<sup>15</sup>

United States government officials decided on a CIA-directed covert operation to stage a coup d'état to depose of Arbenz. The plan involved training a paramilitary force

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<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Byrne, "CIA Admits It Was Behind Iran's Coup: The agency finally owns up to its role in the 1953 operation." Unredacted: The National Security Archive Unedited and Uncensored. The National Security Archive. August 26, 2013. <https://nsarchive.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/cia-admits-it-was-behind-irans-coup-the-agency-finally-owns-up-to-its-role-in-the-1953-operation/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "The Secret CIA History of the Iran Coup, 1953."

<sup>14</sup> "Guatemala, 1954," The Cold War Museum, <http://www.coldwar.org/articles/50s/guatemala.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

of anti-Arbenz rebels and utilizing propaganda and psychological campaigns to shape public opinion. In September 1952 the CIA initiated Operation PBFORTUNE through which the CIA funded, supplied, and trained a counter-revolutionary army of anti-Arbenz rebels. Training camps were established in Nicaragua and Honduras and Armas' troops spent the following year training for the operation. The CIA chose Col. Carlos Castillo Armas to lead the rebel army.

To achieve their goal of gaining public support and discrediting Arbenz's administration, the CIA utilized a variety of covert strategies including fabricating Guatemalan aggression against Honduras, simulating kidnappings of prominent Guatemalan citizens, threatening Guatemalan police and government officials, and defiling churches with pro-communist expressions.<sup>16</sup> To give the impression of a large, powerful anti-Arbenz movement, the CIA forged news articles, painted anti-Arbenz graffiti throughout Guatemala, and enlisted the cooperation of a large network of anti-communist student activists.<sup>17</sup>

In April the CIA established a radio broadcast called La Voz de Liberacion (The Voice of Liberation) and employed a small group of Guatemalans for on-air broadcasting. Programming laced with anti-Arbenz, anti-communist rhetoric emphasized "patriotism and base values of society" and included topics aimed at appealing to all sectors of Guatemalan society, especially the elite and military personnel.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, La Voz proved so successful that it served as inspiration for Che Guevara's pro-Castro Radio Rebelde established during the Cuban revolution.<sup>19</sup>

On June 18, 1954, the paramilitary invasion, known as Operation PBSUCCESS, began with Armas' forces, consisting of 480 mercenary soldiers, entering Guatemala via five key points along the Honduras-Guatemala and El Salvador-Guatemala borders. A clash of opposing ground forces commenced following the invasion. Arbenz's army, which far outnumbered Armas' troops, was successful at repelling the invading forces. Arbenz, however, had gotten word of CIA-planted rumors that the US planned a full invasion in the event of Armas' defeat. Wanting to avoid direct conflict with the United States, who had a heavy presence in surrounding areas, Arbenz gave orders to allow invading troops to push deep into Guatemala. Many of Arbenz's troops refused to continue fighting for fear of provoking the United States.

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<sup>16</sup> Kate Doyle, "Guatemala -- 1954: Behind the CIA's Coup," The Consortium. 1997, <https://consortiumnews.com/archive/story38.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Moore, "The Clandestine Granddaddy of Central America," <http://www.pateplumaradio.com/central/guatemala/vozlib.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Moore, "Revolution! Clandestine Radio and the Rise of Fidel Castro," <http://www.pateplumaradio.com/central/cuba/rebel1.html>.

Meanwhile, the Liberation Air Force, stationed in Panama and consisting of US military and Guatemalan mercenaries, initiated air raids against Guatemalan cities and military targets. Although mostly done for psychological effect, the air strikes managed to do considerable damage to ships docked in Puerto San José. On the morning of June 27, Arbenz, shocked by the tactics of the invading forces and distressed by large numbers of deserters from his army, resigned the presidency and fled to Mexico. He was immediately replaced by Armas who assumed the role of military dictator.

Less than a decade later, the CIA once again attempted to remove a leader they viewed as a threat to US economic interests and national security. This time they targeted Cuban revolutionary and Soviet ally Fidel Castro. In February 1959, after a bloody revolution, Castro came to power in Cuba. He quickly aligned himself with the Soviet Union and began nationalizing Cuban industries. President Eisenhower believed that Castro needed to be removed from power as soon as possible. He allotted \$13 million for the CIA to plan and execute a coup.<sup>20</sup> In January, the CIA developed a plan, known as Operation Trinidad, which involved “small teams of agency trained specialists in communication, sabotage, and paramilitary operations to provide training and guidance to anti-Castro dissidents.”<sup>21</sup> Kennedy was briefed on the plan to overthrow Castro before being elected President. Following his election, Kennedy urged the CIA to make changes to the original plan in order to keep knowledge of US involvement to a minimum.

The final plan, codenamed Operation Zapata, involved an “amphibious landing with armor and combat air support to establish lodgment in Cuba from which a provisional government could operate.”<sup>22</sup> The CIA would train a group of Cuban exiles living in Miami to invade Cuba and spur an anti-Castro uprising among the Cuban people. These 1,400 exiles, officially known as Brigade 2506, were trained in Guatemala.

On April 15, Cuban exiles flying American B-26s disguised as Cuban aircraft began bombing air fields near the Bay of Pigs and the Zapata swamp. The bombers hit only a few of Castro’s air craft but the damage was not sufficient to debilitate Castro’s air force. Shortly after midnight on April 17, six ships carrying the CIA trained exiles arrived in the Bay of Pigs. The invasion started off poorly as several ships became stranded off the coast due to coral reef that had been misidentified by U-2 reconnaissance as seaweed. Brigade 2506 initially had success in fighting local militias but Castro quickly sent reinforcements that crushed the invasion within a matter of days. On August 19, after being denied reinforcements from the United States, Brigade

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<sup>20</sup> “Bay of Pigs: 40 Years After,” The National Security Archives, George Washington University, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/bayofpigs/index.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Jack B. Pfeiffer, “The Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation,” *Evolution of CIA’s Anti-Castro Policies*, Vol. 3. 1951-January 1961, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB355/bop-vol3.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

2506 surrendered to Castro's forces. More than 100 Cuban exiles had been killed in the battle and 1,209 were arrested and jailed. The failure of the invasion served as an embarrassment to the Kennedy administration and increased tensions between Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

One of the primary reasons for the botched Bay of Pigs invasion was the CIA's failure to effectively manipulate public opinion and garner much needed support from the people of Cuba. At the very foundation of Operation Zapata was the hope that the invasion would spur an anti-Castro uprising that would ultimately remove Castro from power. This, of course, did not happen because the CIA's propaganda efforts were inefficient and poorly executed.

The CIA took over broadcasting at Radio Swan on the Swan Islands and put Cuban exiles in charge of programming. The broadcast, however, lost credibility and effectiveness as programmers began to focus more on the plight of Cubans in America than encouraging the uprising against Castro.<sup>23</sup> Nearly every attempt at using Cuban newspapers to publish anti-Castro rhetoric was thwarted by the fact that Castro had wasted no time in taking over news outlets within Cuba.<sup>24</sup> The CIA also dropped anti-Castro leaflets but these were largely ineffective due to Castro's ability to counteract negative messages and because most Cubans were living comfortably under the Castro regime and had little interest in starting another conflict.<sup>25</sup>

Another factor which contributed to the operation's failure was the CIA's inability to form cooperative relationships with prominent members of the Cuban population. In Iran, the CIA worked with the Shah and his many followers and handpicked Mossadegh's replacement among Iran's military personnel. In Guatemala, the CIA chose Arbenz's successor and was able to connect and cooperate with anti-Arbenz groups. No such thing happened in Cuba. It is possible that this tactic was not used in Cuba because there were no prominent Cubans who were willing to go against Castro. It is also possible that the CIA simply did not make the effort to find them.

Finally, the inability of the CIA to accurately appropriate an invading force with the size and strength necessary to accomplish the task at hand played a major role in the operation's failure. In Iran, the CIA did not need to supply or train anyone. The Shah already had plenty of people on his side. The CIA only needed to provide guidance. In Guatemala, there existed a large number of people who opposed the Arbenz administration. Although the invading force was relatively small, their task was made easier by the CIA's highly effective propaganda campaign.

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Bissell Jr. with Jonathan E. Lewis and Frances T. Pudlo, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 156.

<sup>24</sup> Jack B Pfeiffer, *The Taylor Committee Investigation of the Bay of Pigs*, December 6, 1984, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB355/bop-vol4.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

In Cuba, the shortcomings of the CIA-sponsored invasion force are obvious. The agency sent a small, ill-equipped, poorly trained group of exiles into battle against Castro's forces which numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Invasion forces were ill-prepared, in part, because training facilities in Guatemala were highly inadequate.<sup>26</sup> The exiles could not be moved to training facilities within the US because of Kennedy's policy of "plausible deniability."<sup>27</sup> The agency also had great difficulty building a "unified, cooperative coalition" among the exiles due to inter-group rivalries and conflicting motives.<sup>28</sup> Finally, despite expert opinions, the CIA failed to mobilize a stronger force to be used in the event that the initial invasion failed.<sup>29</sup>

Through analyzing the CIA covert operations in Iran, Guatemala, and Cuba, the flaws of the Bay of Pigs operation can be clearly seen. Unlike the CIA operations in Iran and Guatemala, the Bay of Pigs operation did not involve the necessary aspects for a successful coup d'état. The agency failed to garner much needed public support, failed to work directly with prominent members of Cuban society, and failed to build an efficient invading force. President Kennedy has, in the minds of the American people, long been blamed for the botched Bay of Pigs invasion and his legacy has had to bare the enormous weight of failure and national embarrassment. The CIA has only recently begun to share some of that burden. As Kennedy himself explained, "There's an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Bissell Jr., *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs*, 158

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 162, 165.