Bitter Fruit

The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala

By Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer

New Essays by John H. Coatsworth, Richard A. Nuccio, and Stephen Kinzer

The David Rockefeller Center Series on Latin American Studies, Harvard University

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AND

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Expanded Edition

Published by
Harvard University
David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies

Distributed by
Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

TO THE PEOPLE OF GUATEMALA

Printed in the United States of America

First David Rockefeller Center for
Latin American Studies Edition 1999
Harvard University

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Schlesinger, Stephen C.
Bitter fruit
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Guatemala—History—Revolution, 1954.
2. Guatemala—Foreign relations—United States
3. United States—Foreign relations—Guatemala
4. United Fruit Company
I. Kinzer, Stephen. II. Title.
F1466.5.S34 972.81'052 80-1728
AACR2
ISBN 0-674-07590-0

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STEPHEN KINZER spent 13 years writing about Latin America, first as a contributor to leading magazines and then as a correspondent for the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times*. From 1983 to 1990, while the Sandinista government was in power in Nicaragua, he was the *Times* bureau chief there. As he was completing that assignment, Columbia University honored him with the Maria Moors Cabot award, a prestigious journalism prize that had also been given to the murdered Nicaraguan newspaper editor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro. In 1991 Mr. Kinzer published *"Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua."* Since then he has been a *New York Times* correspondent in Europe, covering the Yugoslav wars and the emergence of post-Communist states, and in

Istanbul, from which he has covered Turkey as well as the new nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

JOHN H. COATSWORTH is Monroe Gutman Professor of Latin American Affairs at Harvard University, where he also serves as Director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. He taught at the University of Chicago from 1969 until he joined the Harvard faculty in 1992. He was elected President of the American Historical Association for 1995. Professor Coatsworth's research has focused on the comparative economic history of Latin America and the economic and international history of Mexico and Central America. His most recent books include *The United States and Central America: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne, 1994), a history of U.S.-Central American relations, and *Latin America and the World Economy Since 1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), a volume of essays co-edited with Alan M. Taylor.

RICHARD A. NUCCIO received his doctorate in political science, with a special interest in Latin American politics, in 1977 from UMass Amherst. His involvement in Guatemala began in the mid-1980s when as director of Latin America and Caribbean programs at the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies, he helped to secure U.S. funding for efforts to rebuild civilian research institutions that later contributed key personnel to the peace process. From 1991 to 1993 he was a staff consultant to Robert G. Torricelli, Chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, House Foreign Affairs Committee. Between 1993 and 1997 Dr. Nuccio served as senior policy adviser in the Inter-American Affairs Bureau of the State Department, as U.S. coordinator in the Guatemalan peace process, and as special adviser to the President and Secretary of State for Cuba. He is currently a visiting scholar at Harvard University.

INTRODUCTION

Stephen Kinzer and Stephen Schlesinger did not set out to write a classic. They set out to write a fast-paced and highly readable narrative of the overthrow of Guatemala's democratic government by the United States in 1954. They also hoped to convince their readers of the need for what Harrison Salisbury in his 1982 introduction called "a basic reappraisal of American policy in the Western Hemisphere."[1]

When *Bitter Fruit* first appeared in bookstores in 1982, Guatemala was plunging into yet another round of terror and death. On March 9, the Guatemalan president General Romeo Lucas García, perennial star of international reports on human rights abuses throughout the world, declared his own hand-picked candidate the winner of yet another fraudulent election. Rioting erupted in Guatemala City. The government diverted troops from fighting guerrilla insurgents to suppressing the protests. The military high command fretted and worried, and consulted with powerful friends domestic and foreign. On March 23, Lucas García was packed off to exile. The country's military leaders installed a former general turned Christian fundamentalist, Efraín Ríos Montt, as the new president. The army got back to the business of killing insurgents, along with suspected insurgents, suspected supporters of the insurgents, peaceful dissidents of all kinds, and indigenous villagers in zones where subversives were known to be or suspected of operating.[2]

The Ríos Montt era lasted a little over 16 months, until he, too, fell in a military coup on August 8, 1983. Between early 1982 and the end of 1983, the Guatemalan army destroyed some 400 towns and villages, drove 20,000 rural people out of their homes and into camps, killed between 50,000 and 75,000 mostly unarmed indigenous farmers and their families, and violently displaced over a million people from their homes (of whom 150,000 fled into neighboring Mexico). As the atrocities escalated, the U.S. government gave repeated and dramatic evidence of its support of the Ríos Montt regime. Economic aid resumed in October. President Reagan praised Ríos Montt and his government on a state visit in December. In January 1983, the U.S. government lifted its embargo on the sale of arms to Guatemala and sent $6.3 million in spare parts for helicopters, the same helicopters that had already begun to appear in accounts of army massacres of entire villages. Reports based on eye-witness accounts were dismissed by U.S. officials as "unconfirmed."

Unlike the 1950s, Guatemala did not suffer alone in the 1980s. Including the 50,000 or so deaths in the Nicaraguan revolution against the Somoza dictatorship (1977–79), the 80,000 or so killed in the Salvadoran civil war (1981–90), another 50,000 in the contra war waged by the United States against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua (1983–90), and the several thousand victims kidnapped and executed by the security forces in Honduras and Panama, the Central American dead by 1990 equaled the number of U.S. soldiers killed in all of World War Two (about 300,000). By that date, one out of every 150 or so Central Americans had been killed. Refugees (internal as well as external) numbered over two million by 1990 in a region whose total population did not exceed 29 million.

For a generation of U.S. citizens and countless college students, *Bitter Fruit* helped to place the bitter conflicts of the 1980s in historical context. Walter Lafeber's history of the U.S.-Central American relations, aptly titled *Inevitable Revolutions*,[3] provided a much needed critical survey, but *Bitter Fruit* provided the depth that only a case study can offer. Had it not been for the passage of the Freedom of Information Act of 1966, however, this book could never have been produced. Kinzer and Schlesinger used its provisions to secure the declassification of thousands of documents,

including many sensitive CIA reports and memos. They also painstakingly accumulated a wealth of additional detailed information through interviews and additional research.

Since *Bitter Fruit's* publication, important new sources of information have become available to researchers. Piero Gleijeses's masterful 1991 book, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944–1954*,[4] shed new light on many of the crucial events in Guatemalan history in this decade, from the assassination of Francisco Arana in 1949 to the decision by Jacobo Arbenz to give up and flee the country. Gleijeses interviewed many of the key figures of this era, including Arbenz's widow María, his close collaborator Manuel Fortuny, secretary general of the communist *Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo*, and his principal military aides and betrayers. More recently, the C.I.A. finally declassified a large quantity of materials hitherto withheld that add much new detail about the agency's organization and implementation of what it called "Operation PBSuccess."[5] While these and other works have added considerably to knowledge about U.S.-Guatemalan relations during the Arévalo and Arbenz presidencies, this new information tends to confirm rather than alter *Bitter Fruit's* account of events.

Even with the new sources now available, parts of the Guatemalan story still remain obscure because the necessary documentation has either been destroyed or buried. Little is known about the "sizable U.S. military mission in Guatemala City" nor have the official documents released to date revealed much about "in-country CIA connections with Guatemalan individuals and groups."[6]

Bitter Fruit helped to inspire debate among scholars and practitioners about the motivations or causes of the U.S. intervention to overthrow the Arbenz government. An important contribution to this debate was published in the same year as *Bitter Fruit*. In his book entitled *The CIA in Guatemala*,[7] Richard H. Immerman argued that U.S. policymakers were driven by the "cold war ethos" of anti-communism to overreact to evidence of communist "infiltration" in Guatemala. Jorge Domínguez has recently made a similar argument, suggesting that ideological blinders led U.S. policymakers to act "irrationally" toward Guatemala in the 1950s.[8] This view is amply confirmed, in a sense, by every serious work on

Guatemala in the 1950s, all of which conclude that while the Arbenz government was reformist or progressive the probability of a communist regime coming to power was virtually nil.[9]

On the other hand, however, actions that are irrational with respect to their explicit goals may make sense in some other context. For example, reviews of *Bitter Fruit* often mentioned the emphasis that Kinzer and Schlesinger gave to the close ties between the U.S. administration and the United Fruit Company (UFCO), principal victim of the Arbenz government's agrarian reform and other projects.[10] Indeed, as the authors point out, every U.S. policymaking official involved in the decision to overthrow the Guatemalan government, except for President Eisenhower himself, had a family or business connection to UFCO.[11] The access of key UFCO officials to decision makers in the U.S. government, the sympathy of the U.S. administration toward UFCO interests, and the established U.S. view that hostility toward U.S. companies constituted a key symptom of communist penetration all gave UFCO and its anti-Arbenz campaign in the U.S. media considerable influence. If prior U.S. policy is any guide, the United States would probably not have intervened *only* to save UFCO, but that is scarcely the point. The interpretive issue is just how much more reasonable this irrational intervention seemed to key policy makers because of UFCO.

Most accounts of the 1954 Guatemalan intervention, including *Bitter Fruit*, have also emphasized the historic U.S. dominance of the Caribbean basin and the U.S. record of continuous direct or covert intervention in the internal affairs of the small states in this region to maintain that dominance. As the reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* summed it up, "Clandestine operations, by the KGB and MI6 no less than the CIA, suit the post-colonial global system which emerged in 1945, the Cold War being more a pretext than a serious cause."[12] This view is closer to my own (and to Gleijeses) than to others, though it is consistent with the *Bitter Fruit* narrative.

What was at stake in Guatemala in the 1950s was less the imagined Soviet threat to the security of the United States than the historic U.S. threat to the sovereignty of Guatemala. The Guatemalan government could not accomplish its objectives without recovering more freedom of action than the United States saw

as consistent with its customary dominance. It did Arbenz no more good than it did the Sandinistas in Nicaragua a quarter century later to demonstrate his country's independence of the Soviet Union. Whatever U.S. policymakers said to each other and to the public in 1954, this seems never to have been the real issue.

Most historical accounts of the events that brought down the Guatemalan government in 1954 have emphasized the pivotal role of the United States. Like *Bitter Fruit*, they have noted the relative ease with which the United States achieved its objective of overthrowing the Arbenz government and contrasted it to the unsuccessful effort of the United States to achieve the same results in Cuba only seven years later.[13] Since U.S. goals, methods, and capabilities did not change, explanations for the difference in outcomes have tended to point to internal factors. Some early accounts criticized Arbenz for cowardice in failing to put up a fight; Gleijeses rebutted this view by showing that the army's defection left him little to fight with.[14] In the Cuban case, in contrast, the counter-revolutionaries at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 faced an army that had no ties to the old regime, no worries about communism, and no hesitation about defending its leaders to the end. The United States encountered a similar difficulty when it launched its "contras" against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

The differences between the Guatemalan military establishment in 1954 and the armed forces of revolutionary Cuba after 1959 and Sandinista Nicaragua in 1979–90 mirrored differences in two societies. Deborah Yashar's comparative analysis of Guatemala and Costa Rica demonstrates that in Guatemala a powerful class-based opposition arose to challenge the Arbenz government, oppose its reforms and support rebellion.[15] The United States intervention served "as a catalyst" in an already polarized political environment in which the Guatemalan elite fiercely and nearly unanimously opposed the government while urban workers and growing numbers of peasants and rural laborers supported it. In Cuba and Nicaragua by contrast, polarization did not occur until after revolutionary governments supported by broad multi-class coalitions had effectively destroyed the pre-revolutionary state as well as the old regime's armed forces and replaced them with institutions loyal to the new order.

Most accounts of the Guatemalan events, like *Bitter Fruit*, assume that the U.S. role was decisive. The United States organized, financed, trained, and equipped the invasion forces. U.S. personnel flew the rebel aircraft and filled the airways with bogus transmissions suggesting a much larger force had invaded. Unrelenting U.S. diplomatic and political pressure encouraged treason and demoralized supporters. CIA assets in the officer corps and the administration worked actively to undermine President Arbenz's authority and block efforts to move against the rebels. Only the bombing and radio transmissions could have been accomplished without willing and enthusiastic Guatemalan collaborators. Operation PBSuccess would have failed, as Yashar suggests, had it not been for divisions within Guatemalan society and the Guatemalan military.

Though the U.S. intervention would have failed without powerful Guatemalan allies, it is not so clear that Guatemala's powerful conservatives could have brought down the government and the democratic regime created by the 1944 "Revolution" without U.S. intervention. Were Guatemalan conservatives—"a united oligarchy, the Catholic Church, and parts of the middle class," according to Yashar—sufficiently powerful despite majority support for Arbenz to overthrow the government and install an authoritarian regime on their own?[16] Growing tensions within the military preceded the 1954 overthrow, but these tensions were deliberately exacerbated by U.S. pressure and U.S. agents. *Bitter Fruit* had it right, I think, in arguing that Arbenz could have survived had the United States not sought to overthrow him, though historians and political scientists will continue to debate this issue far into the future. What seems unquestionable, from the evidence in *Bitter Fruit* and in all the more recent books, is that divisions within Guatemala made overthrowing its government even easier and cheaper than U.S. policymakers had calculated.

Had Arbenz served out his term, the opposition might well have been strong enough to contest and even win the 1955 elections. Although a distinct minority, the conservative opposition had both money and organized religion on its side. Divisions within the army were strong enough to make it risky for Arbenz to rig the election of his successor. Guatemalan voters, or even Arbenz himself, might have opted for calm and consolidation, as Mexican

President Lázaro Cárdenas did in 1939 when he chose a successor more conservative than himself. In short, the democratic option—however uncertain its results—was still open to Guatemalan conservatives in 1954. The U.S. intervention gave them an opportunity to win by opting instead for the security of authoritarian repression. In taking this path, they condemned their country to four decades of unremitting brutality and violence.

Written in the post-Vietnam war era, *Bitter Fruit* raised questions that were still hotly debated in the early 1980s when it appeared. U.S. policy in Central America in that decade returned to the dogmas of the High Cold War, ignoring the lessons taught by *Bitter Fruit* and a generation of critics of U.S. interventions in the Caribbean. Though the Cold War itself ended nearly a decade ago, the lessons Bitter Fruit sought to convey are just as relevant as they were when Stephen Kinzer and Stephen Schlesinger first set out to write about the tragedy that befell Guatemalan democracy in 1954.

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In his Afterword to this edition of *Bitter Fruit*, Stephen Kinzer, now a foreign bureau chief for the *New York Times*, summarizes the 35-year history of repressive government and endemic civil warfare that followed the 1954 events. He concludes by citing the 3,600-page report of the United Nations Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) presented to Guatemalan president Alvaro Arzú on February 25, 1999. The CEH was created by the peace agreement signed in December 1996 between the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) guerrillas and the Guatemalan government. Headed by German jurist Christian Tomuschat, the CEH was forbidden by the terms of the peace agreement to name the perpetrators of the massacres, extra-judicial executions, tortures, and other abuses it investigated. The U.S. government aided the Commission's work by providing massive documentation from the files of the State Department and other agencies, though the C.I.A., according to press reports, directly provided little of value. U.S. official documents, the CEH report stated, demonstrated conclusively the continuous support provided by the C.I.A. to the Guatemalan Armed Forces, even in periods when U.S. officials were receiving confidential reports of

massacres and other human rights violations on a massive scale.

The U.N. Commission's findings came as no surprise to Richard Nuccio, whose Foreword to this volume provides an insightful summary of the U.S. role in the Guatemalan peace process. Nuccio served as foreign policy adviser to Congressman and later Senator Robert G. Torricelli and in senior policy positions in the State Department and the White House during the Clinton Administration. He was a key player in the events he summarizes. It was Nuccio who exposed the C.I.A.'s misconduct in concealing from congressional oversight committees the fact that one of its Guatemalan "assets" had been involved in the murder of Michael DeVine, an American citizen, and in the extra-judicial execution of a guerrilla leader, Efaín Bámaca, married to U.S. citizen Jennifer Harbury. Nuccio reported the C.I.A. deception to Torricelli, who went public with the information in circumstances Nuccio describes in his account. The C.I.A. demanded that Nuccio's highest-level security clearance (for "sensitive compartmented information" or SCI) be withdrawn as punishment and when the president declined to intervene in the matter, Nuccio resigned from the administration, in February 1997.

As Nuccio's "Foreword" and Kinzer's "Afterword" make clear, the United States has yet to undertake that "basic reappraisal," so much needed and so long overdue that *Bitter Fruit* called for when first published in 1982.

JOHN H. COATSWORTH

Notes

1. Harrison Salisbury was senior military affairs analyst for the *New York Times* when *Bitter Fruit* was first published. His brief "Introduction" was notable for its tone of foreboding and its anticipation of the U.S. interventions of the 1980s. "If the Guatemala model is to be applied today to other countries . . .," he wrote, "we will simply sink ourselves deeper into the mud of militaristic adventurism."
2. For accounts of the Ríos Montt era, see George Black et al., *Garrison Guatemala* (New York: North American Congress on Latin America, 1984); Jennifer Harbury, *Searching for Everardo: A Story of Love, War, and the CIA in Guatemala* (New York: Warner Books, 1997); Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* (Latin American Perspectives Series, No 5,

Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists Against Terror: Guatemala City, 1954–1985* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of the Counterinsurgency in Guatemala* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988); Victor Montejo, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1987); Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). Between 1979 and 1998, Amnesty International published at least 15 reports on human rights abuses in Guatemala; other reports were published by the International Commission of Jurists and a number of U.S., European, and international organizations. The now classic work on the brutal aftermath of the 1954 coup is Richard N. Adams, *Crucifixion by Power; Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944–1966* (with chapters by Brian Murphy and Bryan Roberts, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970). See also Carol Smith, ed., *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540–1988* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) and Kay Warren, *The Symbolism of Subordination: Indian Identity in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

3. The full title is *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).
4. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
5. Nick Cullather, *The C.I.A.'s Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952–1954* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming in 1999). An earlier version was made available by the CIA. The Stanford edition has a new introduction by the author and an "Afterword" by Piero Gleijeses.
6. See John F. McCamant, "Review Essay: Intervention in Guatemala: Implications for the Study of the Third World," *Comparative Political Studies,* 17:3 (October 1984): 373–407; the quotes are from p. 374.
7. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.
8. Jorge I. Domínguez, ""U.S.-Latin American Relations During the Cold War and Its Aftermath" in *The United States and Latin America: The New Agenda* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies and University of London Institute for Latin American Studies, forthcoming, 1999).
9. See all of the works cited in this introduction. In addition, see Cole Blasier's pioneering comparative study of U.S. intervention in Latin

America, *Hovering Giant: U.S. Responses to Revolutionary Change in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976).

10. See the discussions of this issue in the reviews by McCamant cited above ("Review Essay," 379–80) and Whitney T. Perkins in *Journal of American History*, 70:1 (1983): 198–99. For a recent work on UFCO in Guatemala, see Paul J. Dosal, *Doing Business with the Dictators: A Political History of United Fruit in Guatemala, 1899–1944* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1993). For a recent account of the Arbenz agrarian reform and its impact, see Jim Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala, 1944–1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
11. See chapters 5 and 7 below; this issue is also discussed in John H. Coatsworth, *The United States and Central America: The Clients and the Colossus* (New York: Twayne, 1994), chapter 3.
12. Leonard Bushkoff, "Set piece operation," *Times Literary Supplement*, December 17, 1982, p. 1391.
13. For a careful and systematic effort to compare the two cases, see Cole Blasier, *Hovering Giant*, cited above.
14. Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, chapter 14. Note also that it would have been impossible to organize and arm a militia in time to do any good once the army had defected.
15. In *Demanding Democracy: Reform and Reaction in Costa Rica and Guatemala, 1870s–1950s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). In the case of Cuba, virtually the entire business class and most of the leaders (and many followers) of the middle class professional and political organizations opposed to the revolutionary government flew off to Miami after U.S. hostility intensified in mid-1960 to await (or participate in) the U.S. intervention they expected to come; see Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), chapter 5.
16. See *Demanding Democracy*, 200.

FOREWORD TO THE 1999 EDITION

The CIA and the Guatemalan Peace Process

At the dawn of the 1990s the United States Government had an opportunity rarely granted in politics of righting a wrong. Having launched the Cold War in the Western Hemisphere with the Central Intelligence Agency-organized coup against Jacobo Arbenz, the United States might now through its support for a peace process contribute to the ending of four decades of civil conflict unleashed by that intervention.

Some of the signs were auspicious. The global conflict with the Soviet Union was over. Cuba, the remaining reservoir of Communist dogma in the Americas, was viewed as irrelevant to the politics of the region. The Bush Administration had reversed the destructive policies of the Reagan years in El Salvador and Nicaragua and accepted political settlements in both countries. Although Guatemala's civil war was nearly invisible on Washington's radar screen, veteran officials knew that failure to resolve Guatemala's conflict could reverse Central America's emergence from a decade of war and revolution.

Nevertheless, the United States had to overcome its perceived and actual alliance with Central America's right if it was to play a constructive role in Guatemala's peace process. In the Salvadoran negotiations, the United States had not been able to overcome its identification with the Salvadoran government and military.

Parties to the United Nations-brokered Salvadoran peace talks were referred to as the "Four Plus One," signifying that, unlike the Four (Mexico, Spain, Colombia, and Venezuela), the United States had relations only with the Salvadoran government. Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, Bernard Aronson, riding an elevator at UN headquarters in New York during the talks, was confronted with a classic diplomatic dilemma when the doors opened at one floor and Joaquín Villalobos, a senior guerrilla commander, entered. The two senior officials rode to the lobby in silence without acknowledging the existence of the other. They would only shake hands and exchange war stories after the final peace accord was signed. Aronson knew that his inability to deal directly with guerrilla leaders was a liability. But politically it was impossible until the guerrillas had laid down their arms for the United States to build relations with an illegal organization responsible for killing American Marines.

Despite the end of the Cold War, in the early 1990s the United States faced a similar situation in Guatemala. The Reagan Administration had restored military aid to Guatemala, and the guerrilla front known by its Spanish acronyms as the URNG was considered a mortal enemy of the United States. Indeed, one of the senior URNG commanders was alleged to have assassinated a U.S. ambassador in 1968.

However, the 1990 death of an American citizen, Michael DeVine, began a process that would shift Washington away from identification with the government and the military. DeVine's murder—he was taken from his rural lodge by a Guatemalan military patrol for interrogation about a stolen rifle and later found nearly decapitated from a machete blow—shocked Bush's college friend and ambassador to Guatemala, Thomas Stroock. Determined to get to the bottom of the DeVine murder, he confronted his CIA station chief and demanded to know whether any CIA "assets" in the Guatemalan military were involved. Assured that they were not, Stroock was nevertheless convinced that the military had at least tried to cover-up its role. He called his friend the President and recommended the suspension of military aid to Guatemala. George Bush listened.

Guatemala's new civilian president, Jorge Serrano, was dismayed that Bush had severed military aid. An ardent member of one of