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For a CIA Man, It's 1954 Again

By PHILIP C. ROETTINGER

It is nighttime and we are encamped in a remote area along the Honduran border. A ragtag group of rebels is resting in anticipation of the fighting. They laugh at what they plan to do to the sons-of-bitches after they take over. They are driven by the prospect of power and wealth, not ideology. They are unaware that the President of the United States has described their mission as "preventing the establishment of a communist beachhead in the Western Hemisphere." They intend to overthrow the government, period.

The scene is Honduras all right. But the year is 1954 and the President is Dwight D. Eisenhower. The rebels are Guatemalan, not Nicaraguan. Still, President Reagan, who will address the nation tonight to rally support for his proposal to provide \$100 million in aid to the Nicaraguan *contras*, is repeating Eisenhower's tragic error.

As a CIA case officer, I trained Guatemalan exiles in Honduras to invade their own country and unseat the elected president, Jacobo Arbenz. Our liaison officer with the Honduran military was Nestor Sanchez, now an assistant secretary of defense and a key policy maker in the current war against Nicaragua. We enjoyed great secrecy, but in the final stages of our project, rumors prompted the Organization of American States to dispatch a delegation to Honduras to investigate. Warned by a cable from our Miami headquarters, we quickly dismantled our base and fled to Nicaragua to avoid exposure. It was there, in a Managua hotel, that I received the news: Arbenz was out.

I now consider my involvement in the overthrow of Arbenz a terrible mistake, one that this Administration seems bent on reenacting in Nicaragua.

In March, 1954, three months before we toppled Arbenz and installed our handpicked "liberator," Col. Carlos Castillo Armas, CIA Director Allan Dulles convened his Guatemalan operatives at Opa-Loeka Marine Air Base in Miami for a pep talk. Seated in front of us and puffing on his pipe, Dulles told us exactly the same thing that Reagan tells the American people now: that U.S. support for the rebels will foil the spread of communism.

Later I learned that Dulles had lied to us. Communism was not the threat we were fighting at all; land reform was. Fulfilling his campaign pledge to transform Guatemala into a "modern capitalist state," Arbenz took over some unused land belonging to United Fruit. This angered the Boston-based company, which considered its rights in Guatemala superior to those of Guatemalans. So it asked the CIA to overthrow Arbenz and we complied, trumping up the same charge of "spreading subversion" that the President now levels at Nicaragua.

True, the Sandinista government has played host to some pretty unsavory characters and has received arms from the Eastern Bloc. That must be reckoned with. But in his determination to replace Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega with someone more malleable to U.S. influence, President Reagan has greatly exaggerated Nicaragua's ability to subvert its neighbors. The greatest threat to stability in Central America is this country's unwillingness to heed the call for negotiations made by other Latin American nations through the Contadora group.

When I authorized Castillo Armas, then in a Tegucigalpa safehouse, to return to Guatemala and assume the presidency that we had prepared for him, I had no idea of the consequences of the CIA's meddling. Our "success" led

to 31 years of repressive military rule and the deaths of more than 100,000 Guatemalans. Furthermore, the overthrow of the Arbenz government destroyed vital social and economic reforms, including land distribution, social security and trade-union rights. Thirty years later, Nicaraguans finally have such benefits; Guatemalans and Hondurans are still waiting.

Support for the Nicaraguan *contras* portends the same bloodshed. Even if they are able to unseat the Sandinista government—with or without the help of U.S. troops—can anyone sincerely believe that they will be able to govern? Hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have been beneficiaries of land, health care and education under the current government; they are hardly likely to acquiesce to rule imposed by the United States.

The fruitlessness of our current course struck home for me during a recent trip to northern Nicaragua. Accompanied by only a driver, I toured the countryside, talking with Nicaraguans from all walks of life. *Contra* attacks and

atrocities have only stiffened their resolve to prevail over what they regard as foreign intervention. Surprisingly, Nicaraguans to a person also said they liked Americans but not our government. We shouldn't ignore this residue of good will, which will surely not remain if we continue on our present course.

The coup that I helped engineer in 1954 inaugurated an unprecedented era of intransigent military rule in Central America. Generals and colonels acted with impunity to wipe out dissent and garner wealth for themselves and their cronies. Their days became numbered in 1979 with the overthrow of Nicaraguan dictator and U.S. ally Anastasio Somoza. Today, there are elected civilian governments in every Central American capital.

Congress and the American people must decide whether this country embarks on a new era of conciliation with its southern neighbors or reverts to an earlier era of underhanded coercion. Eisenhower's Arbenz must not become Reagan's Ortega.

I am 70 years old now. I have lived and worked in Latin America for more than 30 years. Done with skulduggery, I devote my time to painting some of the region's beautiful scenery. It's painful to see my government repeat the mistake in which it engaged me 32 years ago. I've grown up. I only wish my government would as well.

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