

Introduction

A Culture of Destruction

This study is a product of the Central Intelligence Agency's "openness" initiative, which for a short while promised to reveal the agency's history to the public. Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates apologized to the Oklahoma Press Association in February 1992 for the agency's reflexive secrecy and announced that all documents over thirty years old would be reviewed for declassification. Senator David Boren, a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, applauded, noting that a new understanding of history would "create a climate in which the wisdom of current operations will be carefully weighed."

It seemed a natural, almost predictable announcement, given the history-making events of the early 1990s. Two months earlier, the Soviet Union dissolved, and the new Russian government threw open the archives of the Communist Party in Moscow. The KGB escorted network television crews on tours of its inner sanctum while former spymasters signed book deals in New York. Almost every week newspapers carried revelations from the Soviet files on the Alger Hiss case, the fate of POWs in Vietnam, and other mysteries of the Cold War. If the Communist enemy was going public, how could the United States refuse?

Americans expected not only a "peace dividend" after the Iron

Curtain fell, but a truth dividend as well. Governmental secrecy, at least on the scale that it had been practiced during the Cold War, seemed a relic of the past. Responding to the public mood, Congress passed legislation requiring the release of materials on the assassination of John F. Kennedy and accelerating the declassification and publication of diplomatic records. Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* turned support for declassification into a fashion statement. Shortly before Christmas 1991, I noticed a sales clerk at Marshall Fields in Chicago sporting a stylish pin that read "Free the Files."

Having spent the previous three years requesting, and for the most part being denied, information on U.S. government activities in the Philippines, I cheered the prospect of a more open CIA. The agency destabilizes history, particularly in poorer nations where rumors of dark plots often blend into a kind of surrogate history in which the CIA is the only real actor. When I arrived in Manila just after a military coup attempt had nearly toppled the Aquino government in 1990, I found many people who believed the CIA had both initiated the coup and then engineered its failure. Secrecy prevents such stories from being challenged, and they gradually harden into fact. Picking up the pieces years later, historians can never be entirely sure of themselves as they try to sort reality from illusion. Openness might remove the veil of mystery which keeps intelligence and espionage in the shadows of history.

Shortly after Gates announced the openness program, the CIA began advertising for historians in the newsletters of scholarly associations. In my last year of graduate school and intrigued by this unusual opening, and I telephoned J. Kenneth McDonald, the CIA's chief historian, to ask about the position. He explained that the History Staff would be at the center of the openness effort. Its eight historians would have complete access to the agency's files. They would locate documents, rank the papers in order of importance, and then pass them to the review group that did the declassifying. Major covert actions had first priority, and agency historians would research and write secret, internal histories of operations in Iran, Guatemala, and Indonesia as part of a process that would end with a public conference at which the history and documents would be released. The job was a career posi-

tion; I could stay with the History Staff or, if I wanted, move off into Intelligence, Operations, or one of the other directorates.

I asked if anyone was working on Guatemala. Operation PBSUCCESS, which overthrew the Guatemalan government in 1954, was one of the best known and most analyzed covert operations. Richard Immerman wrote in the 1980s that it set a pattern for later agency activities, from the Bay of Pigs to support for the Nicaraguan Contras. Piero Gleijeses had recently attacked the story from the Guatemalan side, revealing the secret of Jacobo Arbenz's ties to the Communists and the military's complicity in the coup that overthrew him. There were still plenty of contested issues—What was the CIA's connection to United Fruit? Was the CIA-sponsored invasion a real threat?—but since this was the most studied covert operation, it could show, better than any other, what CIA documents had to offer. I could see what the agency's files had that was completely new and unavailable in outside sources. McDonald said that the project was mine if I wanted it.

After a security check, polygraph test, and an interview by a psychiatrist, I arrived on July 26, 1992, at the PlayDoh-shaped Old Headquarters Building in Langley, passing under a concrete entrance canopy that ramped skyward in a gesture of early space-age optimism. For three days, I trained with other agency recruits who would be secretaries, scientists, and spies. The program consisted of several hours on personal financial management, instructions on whom to consult about psychological or substance abuse problems, a short course in agency lingo, a rundown on the various departments and subunits that made up the intelligence community, and procedures for classifying documents and disposing of them in special "burn bags."

The following week I began working through boxes of classified material. With Top Secret and compartmentalized clearances, I had access to all of the records I needed. Internal restraints on the flow of documents and ideas seemed to be loosening up. The information control officers who guarded the compartmental boundaries—the firewalls that keep secret information from moving from one part of the agency to another—were renamed "access management officers." The one I dealt with seemed eager to help me find documents

on PBSUCCESS. Over 260 boxes of material related to the Guatemala operation had already been found in Job 79-01025A.

The only constraints on my work were time, space, and sloppy record-keeping. There was almost too much material. Allowing a year to complete the project, I would have to read over 500 pages a day just to get through the records already discovered. Security procedures made it difficult to skim the files in a hurry. Archive boxes had to be ordered from a distant location, usually arriving the next day at the vaulted office where between eight and eleven historians worked in cramped cubicles. Only a few boxes at a time could fit into a cubicle or the office safe, and the remainder had to be sent back at the end of the day. Other document collections (called "jobs" in agency parlance) contained some useful information, but finding anything in the trackless storehouse of agency records was uphill work. Indexes listed materials by office of origin, not by topic, and offices frequently took vague titles (like the "Office of Survey Information") to deflect inquiries. Indexes had been destroyed in routine purges, and there was often no way to tell which files had been burned and which preserved. Occasionally a hunch paid off or a cache of valuable files turned up in an unexpected place, but such discoveries depended on having plenty of time and luck.

Ken McDonald, Mary McAuliffe, Gerald Haines, and other historians on the staff were happy to offer suggestions, but decisions about how to shape the project and the final manuscript were left entirely up to me. I first had to decide how to limit the project to a manageable scope. Job 79-01025A contained over 180,000 pages, and to write a concise story in a reasonable amount of time I had to choose what to keep and what to leave out. Early on, I elected not to deal with the question of how much the operation cost. The small price tag was one of the features that drew the Eisenhower administration to covert operations in the first place, but the Kirkpatrick Report on the Bay of Pigs revealed that while operational budgets started small they quickly mushroomed out of control.¹ I suspected

¹Office of the Inspector General, *Survey of the Cuban Operation and Associated Documents* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, February 16, 1962).

that the same was true of PBSUCCESS, and that the total cost may have been larger than the estimates given to the administration. It was only a guess, but I doubted that Oliver North was the first person to think of diverting money from one operation to another. The cost figures could also be checked: Agency accountants demanded exacting records; every pencil eraser, hotel bill, and bribe was vouchered. There were entire boxes filled with receipts, and expense reports and ledgers interlarded nearly every file. Partly because these sources were so plentiful, I decided to lay them aside. The side tracks and spur lines on the money trail would take months, perhaps years, to chart, and I was not sure I had the expertise to do the job.

Despite a trove of intriguing materials, I also chose not to analyze the content of the radio propaganda effort known as SHERWOOD. Believing the new techniques of advertising and psychology could create a revolution by themselves, agency officers invested SHERWOOD with more effort and creativity than any other aspect of the Guatemala operation, and dozens of boxes of well-preserved materials, including recordings of the actual broadcasts, and scripts in Spanish and English, offered a look at how the agency tried to manipulate culture and opinion. But David Atlee Phillips had described this operation at some length in his book *The Night Watch*, and shortly after beginning my research I came across cables from the Guatemala City station complaining that SHERWOOD's signal was too weak to be heard in the capital. In this, and in many other instances, the elaborateness of the scheme seemed inversely related to its effectiveness.

By omitting the financial and SHERWOOD materials I could set aside a third of the records and concentrate on the question implied by the operation's codename: How does the CIA define success? The book's core audience would be CIA officers and trainees who would want to know how an operation worked from start to finish: How the agency assessed a threat and devised a plan to combat it, what kind of government and society it aimed to create, how the operation played out, and how (or whether) the outcome was measured against the original plans and goals.

As the manuscript took shape, some of the CIA's skilled specialists lent a hand. Mapmakers in the cartography lab used computers to re-

construct Guatemala's road and rail network as it looked in 1954, and then plotted the invasion route from descriptions in cable traffic. Photo researchers tracked down images of the story's characters.

Research occasionally stopped to make room for the office's other duties. Twice a year we offered a course in the history of the agency, a seminar for senior executives, and a lecture course for over 300 junior officers and staff held in the Bubble, the futuristic auditorium adjoining the Old Headquarters Building in Langley. The course itself was classified secret, but nearly all of the materials we used came from outside, "open" sources. Having done so little historical research of its own, the agency had to rely on accounts by historians with no access to classified documents, and its training program suffered from its own efforts to conceal and distort the public record. For Operation PBSUCCESS, for example, we assigned an article that I later learned was based on disinformation the agency itself spread in 1954. The CIA was reabsorbing its own hype. The classified, internal histories that each of us were writing were designed to solve that problem.

Openness had momentum in the fall of 1992. In October, the CIA hosted a conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, inviting the press to Langley and releasing a 376-page collection of documents. There was talk of opening a reading room where the public could sift through declassified materials. The inauguration of President Clinton, however, cast uncertainty on the future of openness. Although the new director, R. James Woolsey, promised a "warts and all" disclosure of historical material and made covert operations the first priority, the policy was identified with his predecessor. Clinton increased the agency's budget and the specter of a congressional push to eliminate the agency evaporated. Pressure for more releases seemed to slacken. The access managers greeted my requests more skeptically. When the history staff proposed a conference on the détente-era debate over Soviet nuclear strength (an episode known as the Team-A Team-B Experiment), higher echelons turned it down.

The changed political climate was not the only thing holding up openness. The Guatemala papers had been spared routine destruction by the lawsuit described below in chapter 4, but other covert operations had not been so lucky. Virtually all of the documents on an important

early covert operation in Iran had been burned in the 1960s when an agency official found them cluttering up his safe. The destruction was unsystematic. Instead of a deliberate effort to obliterate the historical record, the destruction resulted from a careless disregard for the past that is perhaps natural in an agency where the only valuable information is minutes, or at most hours old. There were signs that casual destruction continued to go on. In early 1993 a case officer for Tibet who was retiring after thirty years of service contacted the History Staff. A friend of the Dalai Lama, he had filing cabinets bulging with records on Tibetan operations going back to the early 1960s. When he gave notice, his supervisor dropped off some burn bags and asked him to clean out his cubicle before he left. Desperate, he wanted to know if we would take the papers that constituted his life's work.

Down the hall from our office, declassification continued at a crawl. The agency hired former officers to read and censor documents before release. They were in some ways the poorest possible choice for the task. Steeped in the culture of secrecy, they took a dim view of releasing documents. When Mary McAuliffe submitted her Cuban Missile Crisis compendium, they blacked out over nine-tenths of it. Without pressure from the director's office, there would have been nothing to release at the October conference. Almost as bad was their unhurried pace. Declassifying is hard on the eyes and demands steady attention to detail, not ideal work for men as far past retirement age as many of them were. What's more, agency policy required that they receive salaries equivalent to the highest salary they had while on duty, often twice that of a new recruit or a clerical worker. This assured that funds allotted for declassification served mainly to brighten the golden years of agency pensioners.

I left the agency in July 1993, a year and a day after I started. A week earlier I placed the manuscript of the PBSUCCESS history on McDonald's desk. It would be classified "secret" and published internally by the CIA under the title *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala, 1952-1954*. Several thousand copies, in hard- and soft-cover editions, were distributed throughout the agency in 1994.

In the following years releases on the VENONA code-breaking operation and CORONA satellite photography grabbed headlines, but

historians grew increasingly dissatisfied with the pace of the openness program. The promised disclosures on covert operations failed to materialize. Documents released for publication in the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series were heavily "redacted," edited often in ways that rendered them useless. When Clinton issued a new executive order on declassification, the agency requested exemption for 106 million pages of pre-1975 documents, almost two-thirds of the total.

Complaints about the program appear to have prodded the CIA into releasing this history. On May 20, 1997, the *New York Times* published the remarks of George C. Herring, a member of the CIA's Historical Review Panel, who called the program "a brilliant public relations snow job" that created "a carefully nurtured myth" of openness. Two days later, one of my former colleagues on the History Staff called to say that the agency was releasing my Guatemala study along with a few other papers on PBSUCCESS. I asked if he could send me a copy in advance of the release, since I had never seen the printed version. Not possible, he replied: "The press conference is going on now."

I never expected my study to be released by itself. From my earliest discussions with McDonald on, I understood that the agency planned to release a significant portion of the papers in Job 79-01025A. A few weeks before leaving the agency, at McDonald's request, I drew up a priority list for the declassification of files on Guatemala. My study was not on it. But the actual release consisted only of the published text along with some supporting documents, less than 1 percent of the total collection. In writing it, I never imagined my study as a full account or as an "official version" of PBSUCCESS. It was meant to stand alone only as a training manual, a cautionary tale for future covert operators.

What follows is that study in the form in which it was released. Although it is redacted, the narrative is substantially intact. Where cuts have occurred they are indicated by brackets, and within the limits of the typographer's art I have tried to reproduce the excisions' relative size in order to allow the reader to speculate on the contents of the missing passage. On a few occasions, the agency censored quotes taken

from commonly available materials, books or articles, and in those instances I have restored the missing words in a footnote.

The most sensational disclosure contained in the 1,400 pages of documents released along with this study concerned an aspect of PBSUCCESS that is not discussed in this narrative: agency plans to assassinate Guatemalan officials either in conjunction with the operation or in the event of its failure. Among the released documents is a memorandum entitled "A Study of Assassination." It provides a do-it-yourself guide to political murder. The documents also contain lists of Communists to be "eliminated" after a successful coup. I came across none of the assassination documents during my research, not because they were withheld from me, but probably because of my own oversight. The citations listed by the National Archives indicate that they were dispersed among the 180,000 pages of material in Job 79-01025A. The released copies are heavily redacted (the target lists, for instance, contain no names), and without an adequate context it is difficult to discern how the plots fit into the larger operation. They do, however, reveal the agency's attitude toward the use of violence in what was supposed to be a "psychological" operation, and a sample of these documents is included in Appendix C.

This morning's *New York Times* carries a story headlined "CIA, Breaking Promises, Puts Off Release of Cold War Files." It is an obituary for the openness program. Citing a shortage of money and personnel, the director of central intelligence, George Tenet, has decided to "hold the reviews of these covert actions in abeyance for the time being." Tenet had previously said that as far as he was concerned openness was over. "I would turn our gaze from the past," he told a Senate confirmation committee; "it is dangerous, frankly, to keep looking over our shoulders." The following story, I believe, shows why it is even more dangerous not to.

Nick Cullather

Bloomington, Indiana
July 1998