

The 1954 Coup in Guatemala
and the Teaching of U.S. Foreign Relations

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When history professors talk about student writing, we too often focus on shortfalls in understanding, lapses in logic, and humorous malapropisms. I myself have quoted to colleagues student papers that mention "Custard's Last Stand" or the "Dullest" U.S. foreign policy under President Eisenhower. More seriously, I have sometimes been profoundly disappointed by my students' papers. On one occasion an otherwise good student proved ignorant of the facts and oblivious to the historical ironies involved when he wrote, in an analysis of Ho Chi Minh's 1945 "Declaration of Independence" for Vietnam, that naturally the United States supported the Vietnamese against the French in their quest for independence.

Too rarely, however, do we discuss or highlight the more sophisticated work of our students, and too rarely do we discuss what constitutes successful undergraduate work in U.S. foreign relations. Indeed, the editor of this newsletter for historians of American foreign relations has recently lamented the absence of submissions on issues of teaching in our field.¹ This essay seeks to contribute to a dialogue about teaching foreign relations by suggesting that a worthwhile culminating writing project is to have students analyze a historical issue or source in order to evaluate one or more historiographical perspectives. Perhaps especially in U.S. foreign relations, following and testing a few major themes that historians of various schools of thought have developed will be of great value to our students, who should be encouraged to see how particular "facts" fit into larger perspectives and why these larger perspectives matter. I hope that the sample student papers I include here, which were written in class for a final exam, can provide models both of how to design such assignments and of successful student work in which

we as teachers can take pride.

I also want to draw attention here to a recent work in U.S. foreign relations that I believe is perfectly suited for classroom teaching: Nick Cullather's *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954*, which was published by Stanford University Press in 1999. Both Cullather's subject matter and the highly unusual publication format of his book force students to consider interpretive issues in U.S. foreign relations, the availability of evidence from which historians can draw, and the relationship between past and present in U.S. foreign relations.

Every two years I teach a one-semester undergraduate survey course on U.S. foreign relations at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, a mid-sized regional state college, with a class capped at twenty-five students, most of whom are history majors. For the development of overviews of U.S. foreign policy that serve as themes for the course, I rely mainly on the essays included in the opening chapters of each volume of the reader, *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, edited by Dennis Merrill and Thomas Paterson and now published by Houghton Mifflin. Most helpful, in my view, in orienting students to think broadly and critically about trends in U.S. interaction with the world are the excerpts from books and essays by William Appleman Williams, Bradford Perkins, and Michael Hunt.

Williams argues, in this excerpt from his path-breaking and controversial 1959 book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, that the U.S. goal of spreading liberalism and capitalism around the world--making the rest of the world more like us--has often had negative consequences for peoples abroad, resulting in their becoming enmeshed in an open-door American imperialism. Perkins, in an excerpt from his 1993 survey of early U.S. foreign relations that my students have found difficult, analyzes the origins and implications of an

exceptionalist view among Americans--what he calls here "the unique American prism"--on the conduct of the nation's foreign policy. He seeks to explain U.S. conduct more than to celebrate or criticize it. Hunt, in an excerpt covering one major theme of his book, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987), places racist attitudes in American society at center stage in the formation of U.S. policy abroad as at home, thus adopting a critical stance, as does Williams, but one that is based on more self-evidently malevolent motives.²

The narrative textbook for the course, Walter LaFeber's *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad, 1750 to the Present* (2nd edition, 1994),³ follows to an extent the intellectual path forged by Williams, LaFeber's mentor. But LaFeber develops in his text four overarching themes that students can be encouraged to analyze as the course unfolds: territorial and commercial expansion; the "steady centralization of power at home, especially in the executive branch of government after 1890"; "isolationism," by which LaFeber means what most of us would refer to as unilateralism; and American efforts abroad, especially after 1914, to preserve the international status quo. I might add here that in the past I wished that LaFeber would not use "isolationism" as a synonym for "unilateralism," but with George W. Bush's doctrine of "preemptive war" the convergences between isolationism and unilateralism are more readily apparent.

These perspectives are challenging for my students, most of whom grew up in the very conservative region of south-central Pennsylvania. Therefore in the first week of class I also include an overview essay written from a perspective with which they are much more familiar and comfortable. Samuel Flagg Bemis's 1961 presidential address before the American Historical Association argues that the United States has played a decidedly benevolent role in spreading democracy and liberty throughout the world.⁴ Bemis's speech has the virtues of serving

as a clear counterpoint to Williams, Hunt, and LaFeber and of providing a concrete example of the type of exceptionalist thinking about foreign policy that Perkins analyses. In its impassioned call to mix "history" and "current politics," the speech reflects Bemis's belief that the history of the United States and its foreign policy wholeheartedly support the U.S. Cold War policies of his time. I suppose that Merrill and Paterson do not include Bemis's call to arms in their collection because his oh-so-dated perspective has little influence on professional historians today.

However, as a means of engaging undergraduates in thought and debate about fundamental assumptions about U.S. foreign policy and about the connections between historical scholarship and current U.S. policy, the speech is quite helpful. Moreover, Williams and Bemis were writing at more or less the same time, and students can be encouraged to see how each view has stood the test of time. One may note here that while most professional historians are skeptical of the kind of exceptionalist rhetoric about history presented by so many politicians and media commentators during the mourning period for former President Ronald Reagan in June 2004--rhetoric that resurrected Bemis's perspective--undergraduates such as mine are very much influenced by it.

Throughout the course, I encourage students to use events, documents, and more specific case studies by these and other historians as opportunities to test the conflicting perspectives we had discussed. The better students come to enjoy the spark of recognition when they see how a war speech by a president, an article from a newspaper abroad, or a debate in the Senate can be used as evidence to support one or more of these perspectives. Students are performing more sophisticated intellectual work when they have to place events and opinions in a broader theoretical or historiographical framework.

It is in the context of these course goals and procedures that I assign Cullather's brief and

clearly written book on U.S. involvement in the 1954 coup in Guatemala, *Secret History*. The CIA commissioned the study, as Cullather explains in his introduction, while he was working as a historian for the agency in 1992-93, during the brief heyday of the agency's openness policy. He notes that he had free access to hitherto blocked files, and that the plan was that this book, as well as others commissioned by the CIA on other covert operations, would eventually be published, along with "a significant portion" of the documentation on which it was based.⁵

Instead, the openness initiative soon lapsed, and outside pressure on the agency was able to secure publication in 1997 only of an edited, or redacted, version, together with "less than 1 percent" of the documents. In the introduction to *Secret History*, Cullather highlights the critique of the openness policy offered by historian George Herring, who served on the CIA's Historical Review Board. In frustration Herring calls the openness policy "a brilliant public relations snow job." Cullather also acknowledges that his study, which was designed as "a training manual, a cautionary tale for future covert operators," was by no means intended to be a full study of the CIA's role in the Guatemalan coup or a complete investigation of the agency's sources. (*Secret History* contains only 123 pages of text, plus an introduction, an impassioned afterword by historian Piero Gleijeses, and a few brief appendices.) Indeed, Cullather informs readers that the most "sensational disclosure" in his study is contained in a document on CIA plans to assassinate Guatemalan officials, a subject on which he touches only briefly in his text.⁶

In Cullather's book students have access to a well-researched and historiographically informed secondary source that includes a primary source. His introduction and many of his footnotes help students understand not only the work of the CIA in the 1950s, but also the twists and turns of its policies in the 1990s, when the agency was being pressured to open its files. More strikingly, we have a book commissioned by an agency of the U.S. government, and now

published by a major university press, that has sections of text expunged-- bringing to mind stereotypes of censored newspapers in political dictatorships. The redactions often erase merely a name of a CIA operative or contact, but at some points (for example on pages 64 and 70-71) enough material was deemed out of bounds to make a smooth reading of the narrative impossible. Sections of the timeline, and even the bibliography accompanying the narrative, have also been whited out. The effect is to make the reader wonder what he knows or does not know, based on access to documents, and whose interests are served by this continued secrecy. One need not be a postmodern literary scholar to understand that significant silences in a narrative can be just as jarring to a reader as a narrative of horrific events told in a conventional fashion.

Three specific examples of censorship may be noted--out of numerous possibilities--that should generate interest or even spirited discussion in class. On page 117, toward the end of the study, Cullather discusses how dissatisfied U.S. officials were with the Guatemalan president, Carlos Castillo Armas, and the new reactionary government they had installed. "In Guatemala, US officials learned a lesson they would relearn in Vietnam, Iran, [] and other countries: intervention usually produces "allies" that are stubborn, aid-hungry, and corrupt." The blanked-out passage leaps out at the reader: in which additional country or countries did the United States intervene, the identity of which is so sensitive that it cannot be made public even after forty years? Was it the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil, Greece, Chile, Congo/Zaire? Was there yet another major coup in which CIA intervention has not yet been firmly established, and about which the agency is making a last-ditch effort to forestall public knowledge? The very act of listing the possibilities that might fill in this blank contributes to the identification of a pattern in

U.S. foreign policy and in turn, I suggest, helps students think through some of the major perspectives on U.S. foreign policy.

Much the same can be said of the two sections of the "Study of Assassination" in Appendix C. The chilling plans in the first section, which include instructions on how to maintain what we today call "plausible deniability," are not themselves heavily censored, but in the second section there is a memo listing specific people in Guatemala who may have been targets of assassination by the CIA or its associates. At that point, under the heading "Biographic data," Cullather notes tersely that "five pages follow, redacted in full."⁷ Do the people of Guatemala not have the right to know, forty-five years after the fact, which of their leaders or prominent citizens were on a CIA hit list? Do American historians have the right to know? The impression of openness that the CIA's commissioning of Cullather's study created evaporates when one sees this insistence on continued secrecy. One of my students in the fall 2002 semester commented, with regard to this passage, that political assassination was precisely the type of behavior that led the United States to commit itself to ending Communism in East Europe. I might add that very few people reading this section today could fail to draw connections with the headlines in 2004 about torture and mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, in Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and about memos from Bush administration officials that seemed to open the door to such mistreatment.

Finally, in one of the more Kafkaesque passages in the published version of *Secret History*, Cullather's evidently brief discussion of the CIA's efforts in the 1950s to censor or cover up any hint of its involvement in the coup in Guatemala has itself been censored (page 119). This censorship serves as a graphic reminder of a point that Cullather develops through his book, and to which his title alludes on several levels: that U.S. involvement in the coup was secret, that

the sources on which this book was based were hitherto secret, and that there are still elements of this history that top officials of the CIA believe must remain secret.

Naturally, Cullather opposed the redactions, and he is sometimes able in this edition to circumvent them, at least in part, by adding a footnote quoting similar information from public sources. Analyzing these efforts can also lead to fruitful class discussions.

With regard to the standard issues involved in historical evaluations of U.S. participation in the overthrow of the government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala, Cullather has found confirmation in the CIA materials of the perspectives offered previously in greatest detail by Richard Immerman and Piero Gleijeses.⁸ Thus he argues that Arbenz was a democrat, not a Communist, and that there were no substantive ties between him and the Soviets in 1952, when the CIA began to work towards his removal. Indeed, Cullather asserts that Arbenz took inspiration for his policies in Guatemala from Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and that the land reforms he proposed, so alarming to U.S. policymakers in the early 1950s, were not that different from U.S. reforms in postwar Japan. The repressive measures that began to be apparent under Arbenz in Guatemala after 1952, according to Cullather, were reactions to real subversion organized by the CIA and its associates. Cullather details the outright lies that U.S. officials offered to the United Nations and to the press before and during the coup and describes the pressure that the United States placed on its right-wing allies in central America to participate in the violent overthrow of the elected Guatemalan government. In no way, according to Cullather, did the CIA's actions boost democracy or liberty in Guatemala. In fact, the reverse was true.

Cullather's central contention is that the CIA, like other major players in both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, ignored the local political and social conditions in Guatemala and inaccurately interpreted events in that nation as an indication of Soviet expansionism. In

addition, he argues that U.S. policymakers wanted control over conditions in Guatemala in order to enhance global stability. However, Cullather discounts the idea that U.S. involvement in the coup was mainly a result of pressure from the United Fruit Company, concerned about its immediate economic interests. He argues instead that national security considerations, inaccurate though they may have been, held sway. But he very fairly presents some of the evidence that analysts such as Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer have used to build the case for a determining role for United Fruit.⁹ My students have used Cullather's own account to argue intelligently on either side of the issue.

As noted above, Cullather's original intent was to help the CIA learn from its mistakes in Guatemala. He emphasizes that the coup very nearly failed because the invasion from the U.S.-armed rebels based in Honduras and El Salvador did not go as planned and the CIA's propaganda and psychological warfare campaign did not, as was expected, lead to the collapse of the Arbenz government. He found that after the coup the CIA was surprisingly uninterested in discerning why the Guatemalan army turned against Arbenz, thus insuring the coup's success, and he suggests that the later failure of the CIA-led invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs resulted in part from the agency's indifference to a serious analysis of what worked and what did not in Guatemala. After briefly surveying the crimes committed by Castillo Armas and his successor dictators, along with the civil wars that have engulfed Guatemala, Cullather pointedly concludes that the United States failed even to create stability in Guatemala and that the agency should therefore be wary of covert operations that might ultimately negate its goals. The picture one gets from Cullather of the CIA in the 1950s is of a sloppy organization, not committed at all to rigorous analysis or self-analysis, let alone to the spread of democracy.

Re-reading *Secret History* in the summer of 2004, I am struck more than ever by the

relevance of Cullather's brief narrative to current events. I am writing these words on a day when the lead headline in the *New York Times* reads: "Senators Assail C.I.A. Judgments on Iraq's Arms as Deeply Flawed -- Panel Unanimous -- 'Group Think' Backed Prewar Assumptions, Report Concludes."¹⁰ I look forward to seeing how my students make the connection between the CIA then and now when we read Cullather's book in the fall 2004 semester.

In class I asked my students to describe Cullather's key themes, point out the most significant passages in his book, and explain what they felt its implications were for current U.S. foreign policy. The last time I taught the course, in the fall of 2002, I also informed them that the final exam would include a question in which they had to analyze *Secret History* in light of overall course themes and use the book to evaluate some of the major historiographical perspectives we had discussed. This assignment requires students to think on several different levels, or in other words, using educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom's famous "taxonomy of educational objectives," to exhibit a hierarchy of thinking skills. Students exhibit "comprehension" when they present the salient points of Cullather's book. They show the more difficult "synthesis" when they have to interpret Cullather's ideas in light of a different theory or framework. And they demonstrate the most sophisticated intellectual skill, "evaluation," when they can use one set of data to argue for or against a certain hypothesis.¹¹

My students did not get the specific questions on Cullather in advance of the exam, but they were encouraged to refer directly to their copy of Cullather's book while they were writing. They were given two choices, as can be seen below: one in which they used Cullather's book to "test" LaFeber's four major themes, and one in which they imagined how Williams and Bemis would react to Cullather's book. (One of Bemis's earliest books, by the way, published in 1943, focused on the U.S. and Latin America.¹²) This was the third section of a two-hour exam; I

recommended that they leave forty-five minutes to address their question. I was not expecting a full term paper. Some lapses in organization and writing were inevitable, and I have made slight changes here to correct minor spelling and grammar errors.

Readers may judge for themselves how successful these essays were, and whether they justify my enthusiasm for Cullather's book and for this focus on evaluating contrasting historiographical perspectives. I will note that the three essays reproduced here were among six or seven of equally good quality, in my view.

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Endnotes:

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1. Mitchell Lerner, "The Last Word," *Passport* 35 (April 2004): 63.
 2. The sixth edition of this two-volume collection of documents and essays has just been published by Houghton Mifflin, with a copyright date of 2005.
 3. LaFeber's text is, in my view, the only good, comprehensive, reasonably up-to-date, one-volume survey text on the subject of any historiographical perspective.
 4. For one published version, see Samuel Flagg Bemis, "American Foreign Policy and the Blessings of Liberty," *American Historical Review* 67 (January 1962): 291-305.
 5. Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford, 1999), esp. vii-viii, xiv.
 6. Cullather, *Secret History*, xiv-xv. One may note that the openness policy became more closed under the administration of President Bill Clinton.
 7. Cullather, *Secret History*, Appendix C, esp. 138, 142.
 8. Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, 1982); Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, 1991).
 9. Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Garden City, NY, 1982).
 10. *New York Times*, 10 July 2004, p. A1.
 11. For in-depth discussion of Bloom's ideas, see *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*, Benjamin Bloom, ed. (New York, 1956), or *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl, eds. (New York, 2001). For briefer discussion with particular relevance to teaching history, see any social studies education textbook, such as Alan Singer, *Social Studies for Secondary Schools: Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach* (Mahwah, NJ, 1997).
 12. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Latin American Policy of the United States: An Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1943).

All too often US foreign policy has mistaken the legitimate grievances and nationalist ambitions of other nations for communist subversion, and has acted to place US business interests above respect for democracy or human rights. Guatemala is an unusually clear and uncomplicated example of this. In addition to the tragic consequences for those affected, it's not even clear that this strategy succeeds on its own terms. The 1954 coup only looks like a US victory in the very short term. After that it's a bit of a disaster. ...more. flag 4 likes · Like · see review. In many ways the US orchestrated coup in Guatemala set the stage for future US operations while simultaneously plunging the majority of Central America into thirty years of civil war. One of my biggest take aways was MUST READ.