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Interview Richard M. Bissell, Jr.  
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Bissell's Comments on  
Guatemalan episode

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fashionable interest. I have no way of knowing to what extent his actions represented or followed the views of the President. I assume they did to at least an acceptable degree. I did get the impression that in his role as chief disarmer, which really as I remember it followed his position as Mutual Security Administrator, that he aroused jealousy in the State Department and probably a certain amount of concern in the Department of Defense, and generally was neither popular in that role nor really very effective within the administration. In short, by that time at least, his personal authority in the administration had been quite well eroded, and his disarmament role served to erode it further. But I think here I'm talking more as an outside observer than speaking of anything that grew out of my contacts.

Q: To come up to the CIA period, the Guatemalan episode, was the Guatemalan government completely taken over by the Communists at this time?



Bissell: I think it's fair to say that it was. Now, to be sure, this doesn't mean for a moment that all of the bureaucracy, all of the officials, certainly it doesn't mean that a majority of the military officers had suddenly become Communists by conviction. I think, quite the reverse. But there's no doubt that Arbenz was a convinced Communist, to the extent I would say that Castro is today, and there's no doubt that two or three of the key

people around him were people that he had brought in, who were of the same persuasion. And the Communists were well on their way to consolidating their hold on the country.

Q: In any event, they controlled the key parts of the bureaucracy.

Bissell: They controlled the levers of power, in effect, yes.

Q: How much of a calculated risk was this, looking back? What were the chances of any overt intercession finally becoming necessary?

Bissell: Well, Allen Dulles is fond of quoting an interview he had with the President, and my recollection is that Allen quoted the odds as less than even that we would be successful. I think he said, better than 40 percent but less than even. He's also fond of saying that the President said, "If you've got odds that favorable in a military operation, go ahead and give it a try," or words to that effect. I think if you'd ask my judgment, as best I can remember it, before the event, I would have quoted it less than even, or maybe about even, but no better than even.

Q: So Allen Dulles may have been hedging just a little bit.

Bissell: Just a little bit, but not very much. I think it's fair

to say that -- to make the inevitable comparison -- that the responsible people close to the Guatemalan operation would have given it, before it occurred, a lesser chance of success than similar people would have given the Bay of Pigs operation, before it occurred.



Q: What were the major factors militating against success?

Bissell: Oh, merely that the rebel force under (Carlos) Castillo Armas was so extremely <sup>[small]</sup> fall and ill-trained. My recollection is that the so-called land force that invaded Guatemala was less than 200 people, and there were about four obsolete small aircraft in operation at any given time. I don't remember four in the air at once. I mean there were probably four in repair on any given day. They used to fly over Guatemala and drop a few bombs, and intersperse these quite liberally with empty Coca Cola bottles which made the same sound and were about as effective, I think. So it was this sort of operation. This was the reason. ~~2/2/2~~ The Guatemalan Army, at least on paper, was a substantial force, and at least as well armed, if not better armed. It is true that the Arbenz regime wasn't able to contest control of the air, such as it was, or at least didn't.

Q: On the other side of the question, what were the crucial factors giving the Castillo Armas forces and your effort strength?

Bissell: The victory came about, in that operation, when Arbenz' nerve went, when his nerve cracked, when he decided he couldn't win. There were, I think, two major developments that brought that about. I think the most decisive was the bombing that I've described. This bombing did extraordinarily little damage to anything, but there were aircraft over his capital city, in the air, and they were dropping things that made a loud noise. Then you remember the climax of this was a successful bombing of a military fortress or citadel where a lot of munitions had been moved up from that Swedish vessel on the Atlantic coast, and this made a big explosion. I don't think it killed more than three or four people, military people, and no others. I don't know how serious the actual loss of the munitions was. I'm sure it was not decisive. But this was a very psychologically impressive event, a demonstration of the potential power of air, even this primitive air force.

Now, the other thing that happened was that there was actually a little fighting on the ground at that location, about 100 or 75 miles away from Guatemala City, where the invasion came in. There's a junction there on the International Central American Railway. And after this fight, a train pulled into Guatemala City with I guess a few bodies and quite a number of wounded government troops. I have always felt, myself, that this vivid evidence that there was a real fight, that this was not a mere paper exercise, that this was not going to be a case of sort of an

18th century confrontation, with the two armies drawn up and the stronger one is conceded the field. I've always felt that this had a major impact on Arbenz' nerve.

Now, there is one other thing, and that is that his entire communications were disrupted, so he didn't know what was going on at the front. He heard confused rumors going back, and as in any such situation, wildly different rumors. It is my belief that at a time when he was in the greatest uncertainty, and I'm sure that there were some reports that a whole well-equipped division of troops was coming in, and there were other reports that not much was happening -- and then suddenly wounded began to arrive. I believe this sequence of events had a very powerful impact.

I think finally that one thing we all of us tended to overlook, when in advance of the event we thought that there was no better than an even chance of success, if that -- I think we tended to overlook simply the massiveness of US power, viewed from Arbenz' position. Sitting around in Washington, we were all aware of the limitations on the use of force. We were running a supposedly unavowed little military operation. We knew how difficult it was even to get two more aircraft down there and in action, using the channels that we had to use to replace one that ran off a runway and another one that was damaged. We knew how few, and what low quality people, Armas had recruited. We knew how little they were trained. All of these things were very vivid in our eyes. I think it was easy for us to forget that Arbenz felt himself up

against the might of the United States, and quite possibly the impact on him of the specific events, local events that I've described, was that it may simply have persuaded him that the US was in earnest, and if these means proved to be insufficient, then other stronger means would be used. This may have contributed to the collapse of his nerve. But it was the breaking of his nerve that ended this fight.

Q: Was he pretty much calling his own shots at that time? There wasn't a cluster of men behind him?

Bissell: There were two or three, but I believe he was the undisputed boss.

Q: Is it your understanding that the United States would have intervened if this effort had failed?

Bissell: Far from it. I think that was anything but settled. Anything but.

Q: Actually there was no decision?



Bissell: There was no decision, but even that, from my recollection, would be inaccurate, because that implies that the alternative,

Direct open US intervention, had already been discussed, considered and planned for, as a possible alternative, and I think that's not the case. The policy guidance we had was that there was not to be direct US intervention.

Q: You mentioned that Arbenz was not getting communications. This was because rebel action had cut them?



Bissell: In part, yes. And in part some jamming that we did.

Q: In your taking another look at these factors, you've expressed some qualifications that seem to be based on just how much you really did find out about what was going on down there. Was this a continuing problem, not being able to get as thorough Intelligence as you needed, either before or during such an operation, or even afterwards in a post-mortem sense?

Bissell: I think we had pretty good Intelligence, but you see the US Embassy in Guatemala City remained open throughout, so there were really continual conversations with people still officially in the Arbenz regime. I think therefore that we were able, as the operation progressed, to take the pulse of the other side pretty well. My main doubts are that I think it's very hard to tell what went on in the minds of one or perhaps as many as two or three key people, and what were the impulses that

led them to decide at a certain point that they were licked.

Q: Do you recall the names of the other one or two leading persons?

Bissell: I don't. I'd have to do some looking up to remember those, or find them.

Q: What kind of a measure were you able to take of public opinion or popular opinion within Guatemala, as far as the Arbenz regime goes and the Armas rebels?

Bissell: I think really, very little reliable measure. We were, of course, in communication, clandestinely, with lots of individuals and groups in Guatemala that were opposed to Arbenz. At the same time, it was pretty clear that he had numerically quite a lot of support from labor and some from the peasants, not very much, I think, because the peasants in most of these countries are a very inarticulate element of the population, with very little independent political involvement of their own. I think, therefore, I repeat that we were aware of a fair number of dissidents, but I don't think that we were in any position to estimate that such and such a percentage of the population was in support of Arbenz or opposed to him.

Q: Were you even in a position to determine what proportion of



them knew what kind of a government he was trying to bring about?

Bissell: If you say, determine rough proportions, that may imply even more accuracy than we could achieve. I think we did feel that there was a large and growing circle of the relatively small literate class in the country, or politically active class in the country, who knew that he was a Communist and was in alliance with Communism. However, many of them not themselves Communists in any doctrinaire sense probably were sufficiently anti-American so that they found this an acceptable political coloration. So I think you have to distinguish between an awareness of at least Communist support for Arbenz, and a conscious opposition to him on those grounds.



Q: Had the schism among the Communists taken place in Guatemala at that time?

Bissell: This was before the beginnings of any break between the Russians and the Chinese. That was not a factor.

Q: During this period, to what extent if any were you in touch with key leaders in other Latin American countries? One name comes to mind, a man such as Jose Figueres of Costa Rica.

Bissell: I can't tell you in Figueres' case. There was one office

within the Agency that in later years was quite close to Figueres and others of the Latin American liberals, and I'm sure those contacts existed at the time of the Guatemalan incident. They were not, I think, very active, and I have little recollection of our receiving intelligence as to the state of mind of these Latin American liberals -- and I'm using the term "liberal" here to talk about people like Figueres who are definitely non-Communist but slightly left of center.

Now, we were in touch, of course, with governing elements in both Honduras and Nicaragua, as adjoining countries, so we knew pretty well what their views were. Of course, the Nicaragua regime was Somoza, and well to the right, and the Honduras government at that moment, as I remember, was rather shaky. I think its political complexion was moderately, mildly pro-US at that point. We were concerned about the attitude of Mexico. The Mexican government was fairly critical of the attack on Arbenz. But beyond these immediately surrounding countries, I just plain don't remember how much contact there was. I'm sure there was some, but I don't know how much.



Q: As far as the Arbenz forces went, did he have anything at that time similar to the guerilla forces which the Communists subsequently developed?

Bissell: Not that I was aware of. I think the answer is, no. //

*p 22. Negative. They played no part in this in any event.*