

Death to a banana democracy

Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala
by Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer
Doubleday, \$21.95

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

*'Tis an unweeded garden
that grows to seed;
things rank and gross in nature
possess it merely.*

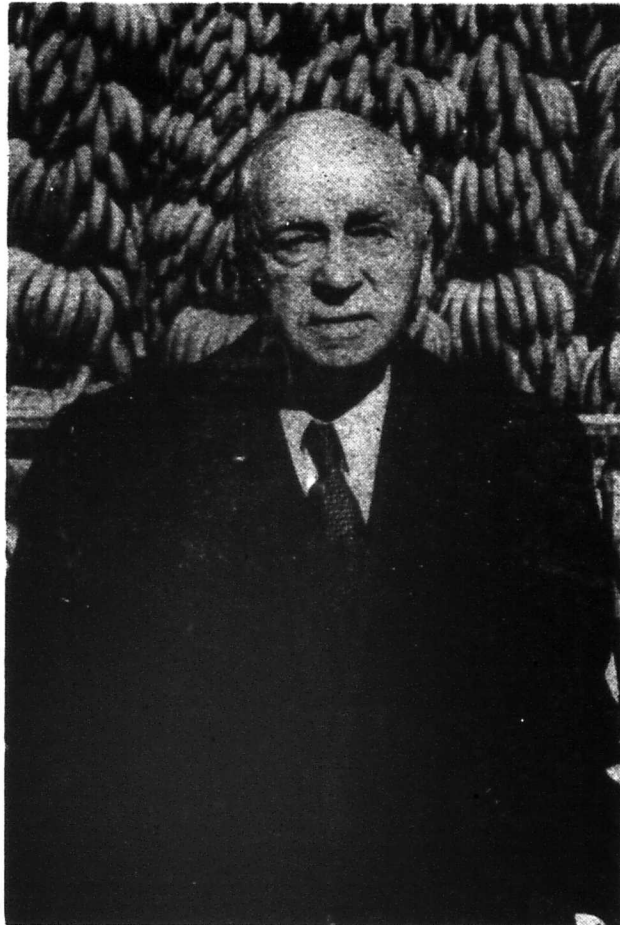
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

WITH JOHN le Carré apparently having retired George Smiley from active service, avid consumers of the espionage genre may consider their reading to have entered a vacuum. All those in such a void can do no better than to turn to *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*. An exemplary piece of investigative journalism undertaken by two distinguished American reporters, the book is a web of intrigue, deceit and double-dealing; certainly the equal of anything in the pages of Messrs. Deighton, Follett, and Forsyth et. al.

Political sabotage is the name of the game, in which a democratically elected government not to the liking of the United States is deliberately destabilized and removed from office by an American orchestrated coup d'état code-named Operation Success. The "liberator," hand-picked for his devout anti-communist convictions, is a corrupt lackey later gunned down in the presidential palace by one of his own bodyguards. Other protagonists include one macho American ambassador who is seldom unarmed and another who, although his country's highest representative in a Central American state, speaks no Spanish.

The plot is elaborate and intricate: Covert action, psychological as well as physical warfare, campaigns of misinformation, bribes, payoffs, arms shipments, secret memos and the recruitment of mercenaries all figure prominently. There are even two bizarre suicides, one by the 25-year-old daughter of the deposed president (who shoots herself in a crowded restaurant after quarrelling with her boyfriend, a bullfighter) and another by a shady but demented businessman (who throws himself from his office window to the street, 44 floors below): The ousted president, an idealist who sought only to give his impoverished people a better lot, himself dies mysteriously in exile, drowning in a bathtub in Mexico. These are scenarios and characters that would not be out of place in a James Bond movie. Also, they spring not from the fertile imagination of Ian Fleming, but from the tragic reality of twentieth century Latin America.

The last pages of *Bitter Fruit* is an account of the events and circumstances of a ten-year period (1954 to 1964) in Guatemalan history from which the country has yet to recover. During this brief decade, Gu-



In Guatemala, 1951: Sam 'banana man' Zemurray, a United Fruit Company kingpin

atemala embarked on a course little charted by Latin American nations, that of attempting meaningful social change within a political context created not by dictatorship but by democracy.

In 1944, popular unrest and a revolt by enlightened junior officers in the armed forces led to the overthrow of General Jorge Ubico, a strong arm *caudillo* (tyrant) who had ruled Guatemala for 14 years. Free elections held the following year saw Juan José Arévalo, a liberal-minded schoolteacher, sweep into power with more than 85 per cent of the (literate male) vote. During his six-year term of office, from March 1945 until March 1951, Arévalo was guided by four over-riding priorities: agrarian reform, protection of labor, a better educational system and consolidation of Guatemala's fragile political democracy.

The last intent in particular was not easily attained, but having survived plots by dissident right-wing factions to dislodge him, Arévalo, after another unfraudulent and untainted election in November, 1950, was able to hand over the presidency to Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, a progressive member of the military who assumed office by gaining some 65 per cent of the popular vote.

Central to the designs of Arbenz for a new Guatemala was an agrarian reform which sought to reduce chronic landholding disparities and the appalling social and economic inequalities that accompanied them.

In 1950, agricultural workers could expect an annual income of around \$87. According to a census taken that same year, 2.2 per cent of the nation's landowners managed 70 per cent of Guatemala's total arable land. Most of these landowners raised commercial crops such as coffee, bananas and sugar cane for export abroad, and therefore did not use their land to feed the malnourished and undernourished local population. Of approximately four million acres in the hands of these plantation owners, less than one-quarter were actually under cultivation at any given time. American corporations invested heavily in Guatemalan agribusiness, to the tune then of some \$120 million. The largest and most powerful American corporation was the United Fruit Company, known in Guatemala either simply as *la Frutera* (The Fruit Company) or, perhaps more accurately, *el Pulpo* (the octopus).

In June 1952, Congress approved legislation devised by Arbenz which empowered the government to expropriate uncultivated portions of large plantations and to turn them over to landless campesinos. The value of expropriated land was related directly to its declared taxable worth, a provision which disturbed certain targets, particularly United Fruit, since for years its property had been deliberately undervalued in order to reduce substantially the company's tax liability.

Over the next 18 months, some

100,000 poor Guatemalan families received a total of 1.5 million acres of formerly uncultivated land, for which the reform authorities paid \$8.3 million in government bonds. Arbenz expropriated about 400,000 acres of land from United Fruit, offering in return \$1.25 million, a figure based entirely on the company's own taxation records. United Fruit's response was one of the most audacious acts in all of Latin America's sordid history.

By careful manipulation of its clout in the United States, *la Frutera* was able to convince Washington that a "Red Menace" in Guatemala threatened American business and security interests. It then wooed the Central Intelligence Agency into masterminding, at an estimated cost to U.S. taxpayers of \$20 million, the overthrow of Arbenz, ushering into power a repressive military junta headed by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, whose forces invaded from neighboring Honduras and protected by American air strikes. The wife of John Peurifoy, the American ambassador to Guatemala and among those largely responsible for the success of the coup d'état, immortalized the moment in a few lines later published in *Time* magazine:

Sing a song of quetzals*,
pockets full of peace!
The junta's in the palace,
they've taken out a lease.
The commies are in hiding,
just across the street;
To the embassy of Mexico
they beat a quick retreat.
And pistol-packing Peurifoy
looks mighty optimistic
For the land of Guatemala
is no longer Communist!

(*Guatemala's national bird and symbol, and also the unit of national currency.)

In a final broadcast to the Guatemalan people, one that Salvador Allende was to repeat to the Chilean people 20 years later, the shattered Arbenz declared:

"Our only crime consisted of decreeing our own laws and applying them to all without exception. Our crime is having enacted an agrarian reform which affected the interests of the United Fruit Company. Our crime is our patriotic wish to advance, to progress, to win economic independence to match our political independence. We are condemned because we have given our peasant population land and rights."

It is impossible to read this, and so much else in *Bitter Fruit* and not feel a deep sense of rage. Although United Fruit has long since departed, the legacy of authoritarian protection of corporate interests that it and its offspring imposed on Guatemala continue to this day, inflicting on the hearts and minds of thousands of innocent people wounds that will never heal. If the United States had allowed the Guatemala of Arbenz to exist, had the process he was part of been encouraged and fostered rather than sabotaged and violated, then the carnage of the past few years would not have taken place. But a seed, once planted, bears fruit; and a people must eat it, if given nothing else, in order to survive. The after-taste lingers. And poisons still.

W. George Lovell is the Killam Research Assistant specializing in Latin American Studies, in the Department of Geography, Queen's University.