

How Effective Was US Involvement in Covert Coups in Containing the USSR?

Written by Patrick Hoveman

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PATRICK HOVEMAN, MAY 14 2015

During the Cold War period, US involvement in covert coups were practised regularly to maintain their containment policy against communist threats. Coups became a vital tool for America to retain their position against the Soviet Union; practices that escalated after the successful implementation of a puppet government in Iran in 1953 (Little, 2004, p666). The circumstances of the Cold War period ending in the manner it did supports the effectiveness of covert operations in foreign countries. The coups instilled during the period brought a vast amount of benefits towards containing the Soviet Union. Exploring why said coups were effective is vital in understanding how US containment policy maintained its rigidity through times of uncertainty. A main factor of this efficiency being the speed and costs of coups, allowing the US to focus on alternative aspects of the Cold War whilst maintaining their containment policy. The ability of coups to be underdone hastily allowed American influence to be executed rapidly, acting as a beneficial deterrent against the Soviet Union. Similarly the practice of coups both in the Middle East and in Latin America resulted in communist activity receding before any Soviet influence could be cemented. The fact that coups were covert and cost effective also meant that the US could focus on other vital factors during the Cold War, such as the Korean War during the Iran coup and the Vietnam War during Chile. The involvement of coups also opened a window of opportunity for the US to gain and maintain influence in states they previously had no control over; a premise which aided Soviet Containment further through knock-on effects such as oil control in the Gulf. Although the coups presented mainly beneficial qualities to containing the Soviet Union, limitations to their effectiveness can be perceived through their domestic consequences. The long term ramifications of the coups created distrust and hatred against the US, particularly shown in Latin America and Iran today. This being said, it could be argued that containment policy would not have been allowed to remain so strong without the implementation of covert action, a contentious topic needing unpacking.

The most convincing argument to show the effectiveness of coups in containing communism can be explored through the successes of various US interventions. Although there were some notable consequences from most of the illegal coup d'états, most of them achieved their initial objectives of either expelling communist threats or containing and strengthening states affiliated. The Iranian coup for example managed to last 26 uncontested years of containment, a time in which there was absolutely no conflict between either the US or the Soviet Union. Wilber claimed that Iran was in serious danger of falling behind the Iron Curtain, which would have meant a large victory for the Soviets and a major setback for the West in the Middle East (Wilber, 1954, p3). As well as Iran, coups in Latin America such as Chile and Guatemala both achieved their initial goal of ousting their communist targets. All of these operations showed the effectiveness at maintaining containment policy during the Cold War. However despite their effectiveness in containing the Soviet Union it could be argued that, as a practice, may not have been the best solution in the long term. The result of the US led coup in Iran for instance spurred the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a nationalist opposition against the US governed Shah. The meddling of Middle Eastern affairs, put forward by Little, created bitter resentment in Muslim capitals as 'naked imperialism' (Little, 2004, p664). Furthermore in the case of Guatemala, Cullather has similar views and stressed that by removing Arbenz, PBSUCCESS 'thwarted the long-term objective of producing a stable, non-communist Guatemala' (Cullather, 1994, p91). Both these arguments put forward the notion that although the coups were successful tools for containing communism, they carried a limited effectiveness due to the repercussions dealt to the states affected.

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A primary factor that suggests coups were effective in containing communism can be explored through their small costs and swift installation. It is important to take into account that finance was paramount during the Cold War in order to fund operations and wars in order to maintain the war effort. Coups being a cheap and effective alternative meant that they often became the forefront of policy suggestion when tackling communist insurgency. Operation PBSUCCESS, the 1954 Guatemalan operation to overthrow Colonel Jacobo Arbenz carried a \$2.7m budget (Doyle & Kornbluh), an insubordinately small amount compared to the billions it would have costed to deploy ground forces. Furthermore the Iranian coup, according to George Will, costed a mere \$200,000 and took only two months to implement (Will, 2003). Even the covert invasion to oust Arbenz during the 1954 Guatemalan coup only required the support of 150 men (LaFeber, 1997, p2). All three examples stress the efficiency of coups in comparison to direct involvement through the use of military means.

With regards to Iran, it could be argued that the US financially benefited significantly from the coup. McGlinchey argued that arms relations between the Shah and the US resulted in a 'win-win scenario for both nations' – allocating the military strength the Shah desired for Iran whilst the US benefited from its arms sales (McGlinchey, 2014, p25). This added revenue for the US budget could arguably have contributed to the Cold War effort, strengthening the US economy whilst transforming Iran into a regional hegemony. Cullather on the other hand gives insight that coups consisted of detrimental characteristics for the US, claiming that Guatemala 'quickly came to depend on handouts from the United States' (Cullather, 1994, p89). He continues to claim that the intervention in Guatemala 'shaped the attitudes and stratagems of an older generation', one of those influences being upon a notorious communist and Soviet sympathiser Fidel Castro (Cullather, 1994, p89). This argument suggests that although the coup quelled the communist insurgency, it allowed men like Castro to learn from the experience, limiting the efficiency of containing communism to a certain degree. Painter's claim supports Cullather's work, stating that although the US was able to reverse the Guatemalan revolution, 'social, economic, and political change in Latin America continued to undermine US allies and influence throughout the Cold War' (Painter, 2007, p543). However, one could claim that the benefits from such an arms deal like Nixon's Blank Cheque in Iran vastly outweigh the externalities that arose from the coup in Guatemala. Linked to the fact that coups were extremely cost efficient, their low budgets and little physical interaction allowed the US to continue fighting in larger conflicts during the Cold War, contributing greatly to the successful containment of the Soviet Union.

Another core benefit that coups brought to containing communism for the US was their ability to intervene in states they previously had no influence over. Pushing infringements to sovereignty aside, interventions in Latin America and the Middle East allowed the US to maintain an effective level of control on communism whilst protecting interests arguably vital to the victory of the Cold War. The most prominent examples of these can be explored by looking into Iran. The Gulf contained the world's largest pool of oil, the steady supply of which was paramount to keep the Western European economies fuelled (McGlinchey, 2014, p24). US policymakers saw economic growth as essential to preventing the recurrence of deep ideological divisions and the ascendance of the Soviet Union (Painter, 2007, p531). This being said, it could be argued that the Iranian coup was particularly effective as it protected and maintained the distribution of oil for the European economy, strengthening the Iron Curtain and capitalist states from communist ideology. Painter agrees with this concept, claiming that US control of oil 'not only helped contain Soviet power but also underpinned US hegemony within the world system (Painter, 2007, p533). He also stated that to fuel economic recovery and to prevent Western Europe from becoming dependent on the Soviet Union for energy, the US sought to ensure this critical area received what it needed (Painter, 2007, p532). Both points complement the argument that coups efficiently allowed the US to retain control of vital oil supplies in order to strengthen her capitalist allies and to solidify their containment policy across the globe. However the retention of these states does not necessarily mean coups were efficient. As Stuster has stressed, the result of the Chilean coup consisted of 'severe human rights abuses'; information that was very much known about by the CIA (Stuster, 2013, p2). This information contributes to the limited effectiveness of covert coups, despite their success at containing communist threats. One could argue that these abuses were a small price to pay for containing communist insurgency, a premise that may have consisted of larger consequences for Latin America.

An important point to mention regarding the effectiveness of the coups in containing the Soviet Union can be expressed by their ability to be carried out in such a simple manner that more pressing instances during the Cold War period could be focused on. The Iranian coup for instance took place during the Korean War, a conflict which directly

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involved the deployment of large quantities of US armed forces and apparel. Stuster claimed that because of the tensions of the war in Korea, America became compelled to initiate a coup in Iran to execute their objectives, on the grounds that it wouldn't disrupt the conflict whilst achieving their containment objectives (Stuster, 2013, p1). The fact that coups were so easy to operate and required such little manpower respective to their outcome meant that the US could achieve containment on a systemic scale whilst juggling a multiplicity of issues. Similarly the Chilean coup took place during the Vietnam War, a conflict that required extreme mobilisation. The fact that coups could be instilled during such a conflict suggests they were effective tools in containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

In conclusion the effectiveness of covert operations both in Latin America and the Middle East have proved to be extensive. The cost and durability of the coups allowed them to be flexibly underdone, allowing the US to refocus their financial costs on more prerogative issues. These issues in some circumstances were conflicts; the Korean and Vietnam War were allowed to remain America's primary focus whilst their coups maintained their containment policy throughout. Coups were also effective in establishing successful containment in states which they had very little influence over; a factor allowing them especially in the case of Iran and oil to retain benefits of that state. Of course the simple case that the Cold War was effectively won by the US shows that their involvement in these operations was worthwhile. This all being said, the effectiveness of the coups in relation to their consequences despite being efficient up keepers at containment is questionable. Most authors, despite describing the benefits these interventions had, always expressed the American stain left as a result of the covert operation. Even in the same hemisphere, Cullather strongly argues that the Arbenz regime's demise 'left an enduring legacy of anti-Americanism' (Cullather, 1994, p86). This resentment of US imperialism was a direct result of unspeakable accounts of sovereignty infringement, acts which in the case of Chile resulted in human rights abuses in concentration camps and the Iranian hatred of the West in times today. The effectiveness therefore of covert coups in containing the Soviet Union is questionable. Their ability to be carried out with little manpower and with such small resources whilst maintaining US containment policy is certainly strong proof that coups were effective tools. However their weakness to being effective lies in the long term effects of these operations; bitterness from states involved and consequences America has to face today. As Cullather nicely put it, 'Intervention produces "allies" that are stubborn, aid hungry, and corrupt' (Cullather, 1994, p91).

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Written by: Patrick Hoveman
Written at: UWE Bristol
Written for: Dr Stephen McGlinchey
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