

Beyond Oversight: Deception, the CIA, and Covert Regime Change in the Early Cold War

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INTRODUCTION

Two FA-18 fighter jets, each costing sixty-seven million dollars. Seven Reaper drones, totalling over two hundred million dollars. Thousands of munitions worth between one and two billion dollars. The end of any illusion of American deterrence in the broader Red Sea region. These were the costs of Operation Rough Rider, launched by the United States military in 2025 with the stated goals of restoring “freedom of navigation” in the Middle East and reestablishing an image of strength in the eyes of the Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen (Johnsen 2025). Since the onset of Israel’s war against Hamas, the Houthis, under the guise of Palestinian solidarity, have maintained a vice grip on one of the world’s most vital shipping lanes through their relentless bombardment of container ships passing through the Red Sea. They have also posed an immense security threat to America’s closest regional ally, Israel, constantly sending ballistic missiles its way. When the Trump administration took office in January 2025, it quickly redesignated the Houthis as foreign terrorist organization, indicating intent to “eliminate the Houthis’ capabilities and operations, deprive them of resources, and thereby end their attacks on U.S. personnel and civilians, U.S. partners, and maritime shipping in the Red Sea” (White House 2025). Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told the world in his now-notorious Signal chats that President Trump wanted to “restore freedom of navigation and re-establish deterrence” (Johnsen 2025). And then, it all went wrong.

After fifty two days of bombing and over eleven hundred individual strikes, regional experts estimate that “Houthi power remains entrenched, [and] its drone and missile capabilities weakened, but intact” (Johnsen 2025). After vastly underestimating Houthi defense capabilities and resilience, the US was forced to settle on a deal that protected US-flagged ships in the Red Sea but left global shipping as well as Israel vulnerable to further Houthi aggression. According to the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, “the general view of specialists is that the United States failed to defeat, decisively deter, or even significantly degrade the group.” The Houthis declared victory, claiming that the US backed down, and pledged to continue attacking Israel (Johnsen 2025). Deterrence, far from reestablished, became weaker than ever, and the United States suffered an embarrassing strategic and financial loss. How could the outcome of this operation be so far removed from the stated goals of the White House and the Secretary of Defense? How could the US possibly have engaged in such a drastic degree of foreign intervention while operating on such obviously incomplete intelligence? These questions, unfortunately, have haunted US foreign policy for decades.

The United States’ conduct during the Cold War showcased a more aggressive foreign intervention thesis than has been seen from the US before or since. During the Cold War, the CIA engaged in six overt and sixty four covert attempts at regime change, with a US-backed government assuming power in twenty

nine of them (O'Rourke 2018). These operations were a crucial component of the US strategy to contain the USSR's sphere of influence, ensuring that pro-Western governments acted as a buffer between the two superpowers and that capitalism and democracy kept pace with communism and authoritarianism in the battle for global influence. However, some of these operations had detrimental unforeseen consequences or were costly and embarrassing failures based on faulty/incomplete intelligence, with glaring gaps in information often resulting from a deliberate misrepresentation of events by those orchestrating the operations in order to advance their personal foreign policy agendas.

The goal of this paper is to argue that, while the Executive Branch was largely aware of broader foreign intervention goals, it was intentionally misled about operational specifics by key decision makers, namely brothers Allen Dulles (Director of Central Intelligence, 1953-1961) and John Foster Dulles (Secretary of State, 1953-1959). This will be proven by examining the CIA's plausible deniability doctrine and the fragmented bureaucratic architecture it created as well as three key early Cold War case studies: Operation Ajax (Iran, 1953), Operation PBSuccess (Guatemala, 1954), and Operation Pluto (Cuba, 1961). These three cases have been selected due to their chronological proximity, ensuring similarities in both domestic and global geopolitical conditions, and demonstrable significance to the CIA's broader foreign intervention thesis during the early Cold War. The primary research method for this paper is declassified archival materials and correspondence between involved parties accessed online. Historical context has also been provided to frame the motivating factors behind each operation.

PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY: AVOIDING ACCOUNTABILITY

The plausible deniability doctrine, or the principle that the instigator of covert operations can obscure its role by pinning its actions on other parties, was the central underpinning of CIA covert regime change operations. This concept was generally applied vis-a-vis other countries and foreign actors in order to keep them in the dark about US involvement abroad. However, some scholars and high-ranking officials allege that this plausible deniability doctrine was applied by the intelligence community domestically as well in order to shield the CIA from oversight and accountability. Senator Frank Church, chairman of a 1975 Senate investigation into covert operations, famously labelled the CIA as a "rogue elephant, rampaging out of control" (U.S. Senate 1976). The Church investigation found that only fourteen percent of CIA covert actions had been vetted and approved by the National Security Council (NSC) between the years 1961-1975 (O'Rourke 2018). The report alleged that "loose understandings rather than specific review formed the basis for CIA accountability for covert operations" and that, while the CIA acted based on general directives from the NSC, operational details were left entirely up to CIA discretion (O'Rourke 2018). In addition, a scathing post-Bay of Pigs memo from Special Assistant to the President Arthur Schlesinger Jr to President John F. Kennedy contends that "CIA operations have not been held effectively subordinate to US foreign policy," that "clandestine intelligence collection [was], by charter, free from State Department control," and that the CIA was able to "seize the initiative in ways which reduce [The State Department's] role almost to that of a rubber

stamp.” Schlesinger even goes so far as to intimate that the CIA engaged in covert operations “for the joy of it,” illustrating the ease and lack of oversight with which the CIA operated during the early Cold War (Schlesinger 1961). These analyses are alarming and pose uncomfortable questions about the degree to which unelected officials played a role in crucial foreign policy decisions. In other words: were the American people voting into the void when it came to international relations? As the following three case studies will demonstrate, the answer, sometimes, was yes.

CASE STUDY #1 - Operation Ajax (Iran, 1953)

In the early 1950s, Iran faced a critical crossroads. Countries across the Middle East were beginning to renegotiate their petroleum sharing arrangements with Western imperial powers, revolutionizing the industry away from its previously exploitative status quo. In 1950, facing the threat of Saudi oil field nationalization, the United States’ Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) agreed to a 50:50 profit split with the Saudi government, increasing Saudi oil revenue by about fifty percent (Ross 1951). In response, the Iranian government attempted to negotiate the terms of its agreement with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), owned fifty one percent by the British Empire. The presiding arrangement only gave Iran sixteen percent of oil profits. Iran’s largest oil refinery, at Abadan, had been occupied by Britain since 1933 and was managed strictly by AIOC, which maintained all executive decision making power and often relegated Iranian workers to lower-tier roles (Taafe-McMenamy 2015). Iran and the AIOC reached a deal known as the Supplemental Agreement, which was intended to increase Iran’s profit share to twenty percent and provide added

opportunities for native workers. Future Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, appointed to monitor the agreement, determined the terms to be insufficient, and fomented a flare-up of Iranian nationalism. This ultimately led to the assassination of the previous pro-Imperial Prime Minister and ushered Mossadegh into office, where he promptly nationalized the Iranian petroleum industry despite AIOC’s eventual concession to a 50:50 profit share (Taafe-McMenamy 2015). The British Empire promptly levied sanctions and mulled military action against Iran, whose new regime was supported by the USSR-backed Tudeh Party. Communist sympathizers rapidly gained power amidst the chaos, and the US feared a full communist takeover should the regime collapse, an event which would have given the USSR control over sixty percent of the world’s petroleum supply (Taafe-McMenamy 2015). So began Operation Ajax.

During the Truman administration, covert and foreign intervention operations were preemptively analyzed by the Office of National Estimates (ONE), an office that worked under the Directorate of Intelligence whose sole purpose, according to the CIA, was to produce “national intelligence estimates” and “essential intelligence backing for US policy and planning at the highest level of government” (Central Intelligence Agency 2025b). Its function was to evaluate the intelligence gathered by the CIA and its contractors and present decision makers with a suite of options accompanied by all relevant advantages and risks as well as odds of success. Under Eisenhower, however, ONE’s role was essentially eliminated. Motivated by a desire to combat the spread of Communism and keep military costs down under the New Look policy, Eisenhower turned to brothers John Foster Dulles, who he

appointed Secretary of State, and Allen Dulles, who became Director of the CIA. The Dulles brothers blurred the line between analyst and policymaker into nonexistence, and, based on their alarmist positions on the “communist threat,” gave heavily biased guidance to the Oval Office despite their responsibility to remain objective (Taafe-McMenamy 2015). Allen Dulles never tasked ONE with calculating the probability of success of Ajax nor espoused the estimates of the intelligence community over the best course of action in Iran; intelligence personnel assessed in National Intelligence Estimate 75 that, while regime collapse was a possibility, a communist Tudeh takeover was unlikely (Taafe-McMenamy 2015). Dulles, however, described the adverse outcome as “probable” at the 135th National Security Council (NSC) meeting in 1953, a statement that has been characterized by some Cold War historians as “a deliberate misrepresentation of the threat” in order to “carry out the policies of the Dulles brothers” (Taafe-McMenamy 2015).

The fraternal relationship between two of the most powerful men in the world, combined with their tendencies to select their staff with an eye for loyalty over competence, created a powerful echo chamber within the CIA and State Department that led to a phenomenon coined by intelligence scholar John A. Gentry as “politicization by omission” wherein policymakers deliberately omit data/information that will vex political officials, thereby shaping their decisions (Gentry 1993). Eisenhower approved the operation in 1953, allowing the CIA to foment rebellion amongst anti-regime and popular religious elements and supply them with weapons, training, and organizational assistance. Mossadegh’s government

was overthrown and replaced by the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a pro-Western monarch who ruled until the 1979 Islamic revolution. A communist takeover was avoided, a Western-friendly government was installed, and petroleum flowed freely into the so-called “free world.” However, while Operation Ajax definitively fit within the Eisenhower administration’s foreign policy doctrine and achieved many beneficial short and medium term goals, the exclusion of ONE and accompanying ignorance of alternative options and long term risks/benefits represents deeply flawed decision making at the highest levels of government, and definitively proves that the Executive branch was deliberately misled by the very same advisors and intelligence community upon which it relied so closely. The very next year, though, the Dulles brothers expanded their deception to the halls of Congress as well, fabricating a communist takeover narrative so compelling that Congress was ready for war.

CASE STUDY #2 - Operation PBSuccess (Guatemala, 1954)

In 1950, Guatemala was on the cusp of major political reform. Jacobo Arbenz had just won the presidential election on promises to “transform Guatemala from a backwards, semi-feudal economy into a modern capitalist economy” and passed laws giving Guatemala’s government the authority to expropriate land on estates larger than two hundred and twenty three acres. This massively impacted the United Fruit Company (UFCO), an American corporation which had seventy percent of its land holdings, equalling one seventh of all arable land in Guatemala, repossessed by the government (O’Rourke 2018). The Truman administration, pressured by UFCO’s immense lobbying power, briefly considered a covert regime operation

codenamed PBFORTUNE, but scrapped it over concerns that its cover had been blown (Trenta, Fahey, and Atkinson 2024). Early into the Eisenhower administration, however, the President was keen on reviving the operation. The motivations behind this initiative are among the most hotly debated topics in Cold War history. Some scholars assign almost purely economic intent to the overthrow, citing Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' close ties with UFCO and tremendous revenue loss as a result of Arbenz's policies¹ (Trenta, Fahey, and Atkinson 2024). Others look to CIA Director Allen Dulles' personal militancy against communism, direct line of communication with President Eisenhower, and willingness to exaggerate the threat of a communist takeover in order to advance his own foreign policy goals.

In 1953, several journalists and members of Congress made visits to Guatemala, often financed and coordinated by UFCO and its connections. Allen Dulles was eager to debrief with legislators after their visits and do what he could to convince them to throw their weight behind a covert regime change operation, writing in a memo that “the chances of success would be greatly enhanced if there were a coordinated effort in the political field” (Dulles 1953). Indeed, after one such visit made by Congressman Bourke Hickenlooper in late 1953, Dulles provided him with “notes” to include in his speech on the floor of Congress about the state of affairs in Guatemala “tailorized to fit the PBSUCCESS overt themes in order to gain the profits of bringing before the Congress and the people of the United States the true danger to the

latter of unbridled communist activity on its doorstep” (Central Intelligence Agency 1953). Ignoring Arbenz's insistence on ushering Guatemala into a capitalist economy, Hickenlooper's speech, largely shaped by CIA talking points, “painted a terrifying picture, a full-blown ‘Kremlin conspiracy’ taking over Guatemala and the rest of the region. ‘All in all’, the notes summarised, ‘Guatemala looms as a formidable communist bastion and cancer in the Americas’, a ‘soft underbelly’” (Trenta, Fahey, and Atkinson 2024; U.S. Government 1953; Central Intelligence Agency 2025a). Senator Alexander Riley was also identified as a candidate for amplification of the thesis behind PBSuccess. After his own trip coordinated by UFCO representatives, he gave a now-famous speech that later became a twenty-two page pamphlet detailing the communist threat in Guatemala, with much of the evidence cited, as made clear by Riley's notes, collected by United Fruit (Trenta, Fahey, and Atkinson 2024).

Over the following year, the Dulles brothers' plan of stirring up bipartisan support for intervention in Guatemala worked so well that he was forced to backtrack due to some hawkish contingents of Congress advocating for overt, rather than covert, military action. Facing criticism from Congress for what appeared to be inaction against the communist threat, Allen Dulles elected to share information on the progress of PBSuccess with a Special Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee (Trenta, Fahey, and Atkinson 2024). In contrast to Ajax, where Dulles' deliberate exaggeration of the threat was necessary for the operation to be approved, PBSuccess actually came in danger of being nixed because Dulles' overstatements of Guatemala's communist ties were received too readily. The White House, sold on

¹UFCO made sixty five million dollars a year before the reforms, more than twice the revenue of the Guatemalan government

Dulles' characterization yet committed to Eisenhower's New Point plan to fight communism while keeping military budgets down, was determined to preserve PBSuccess, and fought to keep Congress in line by reassuring them that the CIA knew "whenever the Reds make a move" and that the US had "a good man in Guatemala and . . . he is watching the situation very closely and giving us constant reports" (Hagerty 1954). Once consolation failed to extinguish the ever-growing war frenzy Dulles had ignited, Eisenhower snuffed out proposed Congressional investigations into US action in Guatemala and the Dulleses silenced dissenting voices amongst the Legislative Branch and the press. Congress stayed the course and Operation PBSuccess was launched on June 18, 1954. After ten days of supporting the small rebel militia of Castillo Armas through psychological warfare and precision airstrikes, the Guatemalan military laid down its arms and Arbenz resigned. Armas assumed power and the coup was complete (Trenta, Fahey, and Atkinson 2024). The Executive and Legislative branches, sold on the version of events sold to them by the Dulles brothers, stood together, sharing information throughout the process and collaborating to a degree as yet unseen in covert regime change operations, albeit after heavy pressure from Eisenhower to disregard more hawkish sentiments and the proposed military action that accompanied them. However, despite the undeniable operational success, the process leading up to its approval was marred by subterfuge and deceit, with the Dulles brothers doing everything in their power to first cause and then limit alarmist views of the communist influence over Guatemala. Facts were twisted, information was withheld, and the CIA once again leveraged Eisenhower's implicit trust to paint an exaggerated

picture and pursue Allen Dulles' personal foreign policy agenda. PBSuccess was, unquestionably, a victory for Dulles, but the next time he tried pushing an operation through by misrepresenting the reality on the ground, it ended in the greatest foreign policy failure in American history.

CASE STUDY #3 - Operation Pluto (Bay of Pigs, 1961)

At the end of Eisenhower's second term in 1960, the foundation for an armed invasion of Cuba was already being worked on by the CIA. Castro's communist regime had grown in power and support both from the Cuban populace and the USSR, and posed a very present threat to US security and interests. Castro had already moved to nationalize US businesses in Cuba and appeared to be invulnerable to popular revolution due to his immense approval amongst his people. Eisenhower instructed Dulles to find a way to neutralize Castro and essentially wrote him a blank check to do so without any knowledge of operational specifics (Prados 2017). Dulles settled on an armed invasion carried out by a US-trained militia of Cuban exiles, designed to ignite anti-Castro sentiments in the country which would swell the ranks of this invading force. The newly elected John F. Kennedy inherited this plan upon his inauguration in January 1961. The week after his inauguration, he ordered the Joint Chiefs to evaluate the operation, at the time known by the cryptonym JMATE. The briefing given to them by CIA Manager of Operation Tracy Barnes was only verbal, as both Cuban spies and the press had picked up the scent of the operation during the transfer of power between administrations, and communication of the particulars was poor. The lead officer on the Joint Chiefs panel gave the operation only a thirty percent chance of success, a fact that was omitted from the

report sent to Kennedy about the briefing (Prados 2017). His national security advisor McGeorge Bundy pushed him hard to approve the operation, stating that the CIA has “done a remarkable job of reframing the landing plan so as to make it unspectacular and quiet, and plausibly Cuban in its essentials.... I have been a skeptic...but I now think we are on the edge of a good answer” (Dylan, Gioe, and Goodman 2020). Kennedy greenlit the operation soon after, and fourteen hundred and fifty Cuban exiles began to be trained in third-party countries around Latin America.

In briefings leading up to the operation, Allen Dulles repeatedly stressed that there was “a great increase in opposition” to Castro’s regime in Cuba and reassured Kennedy about the likelihood of a popular uprising once the spark was lit in the form of the invasion (Barrett 2017). Very few written manuscripts of Dulles’ briefings exist due to the security concerns at the time, but one partial transcript of a briefing he gave to the House Armed Services subcommittee on the CIA survives. In it, Dulles describes a three-pronged attack on the Castro regime. The first component was propaganda, which he described as “very effective,” although relative to PBSuccess the psychological warfare efforts made in Cuba were minimal. (Barret 2017; Dylan, Gioe, and Goodman 2020). The second was political, with Dulles asserting that despite there being “over 100 separate, different Cuban groups, all of which aspire to leadership” and “at least 100 people that think they ought to be the next president of Cuba,...we really feel now there is some ground for hope” (Barrett 2017). The third was military, with Dulles describing the thousand-man force as “probably the best force to ever develop in Latin America, as far as its firepower and its maneuverability and all is

concerned” (Barrett 2017). Congressman Frank Osmers, normally mild-mannered, repeatedly pressed Dulles on the feasibility of a force of just over a thousand men taking on a militia of over two hundred thousand, despite the massive amount of material and political support it was receiving from the US. Dulles promised that he had sought and received the “very highest and most effective support” from the US military regarding operational specifics. There is no evidence this took place, however, and Dulles denied the CIA’s Intelligence Directorate any significant analytical role in planning the operation due to Deputy Director Robert Amory’s very public skepticism about its viability (Barrett 2017).

Fueled by wishful thinking and riddled with operational shortcomings, Operation Pluto was launched on April 17, 1961 and was a colossal failure, leading to the deaths of four Americans and one hundred and fourteen Cubans. The beachhead was never entrenched, air support was never established, and popular support failed to materialize in any form. The United States was embarrassed on the world stage, and Kennedy, in his anger over being misled about the operation’s prospects, expressed a desire to “scatter the CIA to the wind” (Dylan, Gioe, and Goodman 2020). Allen Dulles and his deputy were fired and left to hold the blame for the spectacular failure that was the Bay of Pigs invasion, a folly propped up by faulty intelligence, misguided optimism, and a lack of honesty and accountability at the highest levels of government. Dulles’ deception, instead of resulting in operational success or harmful consequences over two decades later, was an immediate and highly visible failure, ending his CIA career and deeply shaking the trust between the

Executive branch and its premier intelligence resource.

CONCLUSION

The three aforementioned case studies, while all occurring in different geopolitical conditions and resulting in radically divergent outcomes, are all united by a common thread: their approval process was tainted and expedited by the deception of the Dulles brothers. Systemically misleading the White House and Congress allowed the Dulles brothers to pursue personal foreign policy agendas while stripping the American people of their constitutional right to decide the future direction of their country. The ability for select individuals to have unilateral decision power on foreign intervention operations, facilitated by the fragmented bureaucracy and limited oversight created by the plausible deniability doctrine, is a stain on American history and foreign policy. That being said, after Allen Dulles' removal in 1961, the CIA expanded its power, continuing to employ covert regime change operations and ramping up surveillance both domestically and abroad. A potential future area of research is the evolution of the CIA after 1961 to warrant Congressman Frank Church's "rogue elephant" designation in 1974 and the extent to which its foreign intervention thesis and deception of the White House and Congress changed after the departure of Dulles and his cabal. Despite the Bay of Pigs failure, the US conducted forty four foreign regime change operations from 1961-1974 (O'Rourke 2018). Were these operations also orchestrated by unelected officials? How much longer were foreign policy decisions taken away from the American people and those elected to represent them?

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