

# CIA Blocked Father of Newly Elected Guatemalan President Bernardo Arévalo from Coming Into Power in the Early 1960s

Will They Try to Make Life Difficult for His Son?

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*On August 20, Bernardo Arévalo was [elected president of Guatemala](#), defeating conservative Sandra Torres. An anti-graft crusader, Arévalo has promised to root out corruption and create a large public jobs program by improving services like water sanitation.*

Political analyst Edgar Ortiz Romero [called Arévalo](#) "the most progressive candidate to get this far since 1985" when democracy was restored to Guatemala after three decades of military rule following a 1954 CIA-orchestrated coup.

Arévalo, 64, is the son of Juan José Arévalo, Guatemala's president from 1945 to 1951, who is exalted for creating Guatemala's social security system and guaranteeing freedom of speech.

A philosophy professor, Arévalo was elected as Guatemala's first democratic leader following a popular uprising against U.S.-backed dictator Jorge Ubico who served the interests of the United Fruit Company in Guatemala, which owned most of the country's best land.

Advocating for a “spiritual socialism,” Arévalo refused international loans that would compromise Guatemala’s national sovereignty, and increased Guatemala’s government budget from \$24 million in 1945 to \$60 million, directing the extra funds into building new roads and schools and providing better social services.

In 1951, Arévalo ceded power to Jacobo Arbenz, who angered the United Fruit Company by trying to purchase some of their fallow land, and was overthrown in the 1954 CIA coup.



Mural in Guatemala City on 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CIA coup. [Source: [sott.net](http://sott.net)]

Born in 1959, Bernardo Arévalo grew up in exile because his father was forced to flee Guatemala after the coup.

In 1956, Juan José Arévalo published a devastating indictment of U.S. imperialism in Latin America, *The Shark and the Sardines* (an English version of the book appeared in 1961). It lamented the “subordination of the White House” to a “syndicate of millionaires” that were intent on plundering Latin America’s natural resources in order to sustain North America’s industrial productivity and get even richer.

Arévalo wrote that, beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. “became great while progress in Latin America was brought to a halt. And when anything or anyone tried to interfere with the bankers or the companies, use was made of the Marines,” including in “Panama, 1903, Nicaragua, 1909, Mexico and Haiti, 1914, [and] Santo Domingo, 1916.”

A key case study in the book was Nicaragua, where Arévalo detailed how Brown Brothers came to dominate Nicaragua’s economy and pushed for regime change and the sending of the Marines.

The shark tried to swallow the sardines again in Venezuela to enforce the interests of the Rockefellers’ Standard Oil dynasty after Venezuela’s first freely elected President Rómulo Gallegos stood against them.

According to Arévalo, Gallegos was “the finest, most honorable and most generous man who could be imagined in politics” who was “torn down from the presidency by the force of dollar guided guns and bayonets.”<sup>[1]</sup>

According to historian Stephen G. Rabe, U.S. officials resented Arévalo’s bitter critique of U.S. foreign policy in *The Shark and the Sardines* and blamed Arévalo for Guatemala’s leftward drift during the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>[2]</sup>

In November 1959, the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, Lester D. Mallory, the architect of the U.S. embargo policy on Cuba, informed Guatemalan President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes that the prospect of Arévalo coming to power or even being physically present in Guatemala would be “nothing short of disastrous.”<sup>[3]</sup>

In August 1961, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Edwin Martin concluded that “there was no proof that he [Arévalo] was a communist but reason to suspect that he would be more open to both their ideas and party members than we would like a Guatemalan president to be.” President John F. Kennedy in turn judged Arévalo to be “quite a risk,” while Secretary of State Dean Rusk called him “a menace.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The CIA consequently kept Arévalo under tight surveillance while he was living in Mexico City and immediately informed U.S. national security officials when he arrived in Guatemala on March 27, 1963, after flying in on a private airplane.

The CIA was angry that Ydígoras Fuentes had allowed Arévalo into the country, saying that he had acted duplicitously, and supported a military coup against Fuentes led by Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia.

According to Rabe, the Kennedy administration went through the motions of disapproving the coup and very briefly suspended diplomatic relations, but on the day of the coup inquired whether the new regime needed equipment to put down potential public disorder. As Assistant Secretary Martin put it: “We were disposed to want to be helpful.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Between 1961 and 1963, the Kennedy administration sent \$4.3 million in military aid to Guatemala, compared to \$950,000 in military aid that Eisenhower delivered between 1956 and 1960, and began providing Guatemalan military officers with counterinsurgency training in a new center established in Guatemala. The U.S. also continued to provide Alliance for Progress aid after the coup, though it was understood that the military regime would block land and tax reform and universal public education as “communist.”

The State Department tried to pressure Peralta to restore constitutionalism, leading to the election of a “non-extremist liberal government,” and precluding the election of Arévalo “or any other extremist or pro-communist candidate.” The Guatemalan officer corps eventually scheduled an election, which led to the victory of Julio César Méndez Montenegro, a political moderate, in March 1966, though Guatemala subsequently descended further into civil war.<sup>[6]</sup>

The political landscape has changed considerably since the 1960s as the political left in Guatemala was crushed during the years of civil war and U.S.-backed genocide in the 1980s.<sup>[7]</sup>

Though influenced by his father, Bernardo Arévalo is less of a threat to the U.S. because there does not exist a strong left-wing movement pushing him to undertake major economic reforms that would undercut U.S. business interests in Guatemala, including by amending a [corporate friendly tax system](#).

Fighting a rear-guard battle against the extreme right, Bernardo Arévalo's platform is [center-left](#), focused on fighting corruption and initiating modest social improvements and public works projects.

Arévalo at the same time has not denounced U.S. imperialism in terms similar to his father, and has [criticized alleged human rights abuses in socialist Venezuela](#) and the supposed authoritarianism of Daniel Ortega's left-wing government in Nicaragua.<sup>[8]</sup>

Ortega was the leader of the 1979 socialist Sandinista Revolution which overthrew the U.S.-backed Somoza dynasty and survived a U.S. coup attempt in 2018.

He has helped Nicaragua assert its economy autonomy and is a symbol of resistance to Yankee imperialism. Juan José Arévalo as such would have celebrated him, given the history of U.S. imperialism in Nicaragua that he reviewed in *The Shark and the Sardines*.

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## Notes

1. Juan José Arévalo, *The Shark and the Sardines* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1961).
2. Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 74.
3. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 74. Ydígoras Fuentes was a representative of the oligarchic elite who had served in the regime of Jorge Ubico. John Muccio, the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala and former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, said that President Ydígoras reminded him of Syngman Rhee because "he'd say yes to everything, as long as he was on the receiving end." Rhee was installed by the U.S. in the late 1940s and terrorized the political left, killing around 100,000 of his own people. State Department officials said that Ydígoras's government suffered from "run of the mill graft, maladministration, and some disregard for personal liberties." Although the antithesis of the "decent democrat" called for in the Alliance, the Kennedy administration tolerated President Ydígoras because he fervently supported its Cold War policies, according to Rabe. In 1960-61, he permitted the CIA to use a political crony's private estate on the southern coast of Guatemala to train Cuban exiles in preparation for the Bay of Pigs invasion.

4. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 74.
5. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 75.
6. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 77.
7. See Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, rev ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
8. While campaigning, Arévalo [said of the situation in Nicaragua](#): “We think it is a disaster. Our foreign policy will be to promote democracy, always, both abroad and at home.” Arévalo [also](#) criticized Russia over the war in Ukraine and has no stated plans to recognize China over Taiwan. Asked for a leader he admires, he named José Pepe Mujica, the progressive ex-president of Uruguay, where he was born during his father’s exile.

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