

REPORT

# Mapped: The 7 Governments the U.S. Has Overthrown

Yes, we now have confirmation that the CIA was behind Iran's 1953 coup. But the agency hardly stopped there.

By [J. Dana Stuster](#)

**My FP:** Follow topics and authors to get straight to what you like. Exclusively for FP subscribers. [Subscribe Now](#) | [Log In](#)

AUGUST 20, 2013, 3:00 AM

The era of CIA-supported coups dawned in dramatic fashion: An American general flies to Iran and meets with “old friends”; days later, the Shah orders Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh to step down. When the Iranian military hesitates, millions of dollars are funneled into Tehran to buy off Mossadegh’s supporters and finance street protests. The military, recognizing that the balance of power has shifted, seizes the prime minister, who will live the rest of his life under house arrest. It was, as one CIA [history](#) puts it, “an American operation from beginning to end,” and one of many U.S.-backed coups to take place around the world during the second half of the 20th century.

Several national leaders, both dictators and democratically elected figures, were caught in the middle of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War — a position that ultimately cost them their office (and, for some, their life) as the CIA tried to install “their man” as head of state. The U.S. government has since publicly acknowledged some of these covert actions; in fact, the CIA’s role in the 1953 coup was [just declassified this week](#). In other cases, the CIA’s involvement is still only suspected.

[googlemaps <https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msa=0&msid=213559362522542994464.0004e452f611e6ba81313&hl=en&ie=UTF8&t=h&ll=14.604847,7.03125&spn=136.80146,340.664063&>

The legacy of covert U.S. involvement in the seven successful coups below (not to mention a number of U.S. military interventions against hostile regimes and U.S.-supported insurgencies and failed assassination attempts, including a [plan](#) to kill Fidel Castro with an exploding cigar), has made the secret hand of the United States a convenient bogeyman in today’s political tensions. Even now, despite [waning U.S. influence](#) in Cairo, conspiracy theories suggesting that both the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) and the [military-backed government](#) are in cahoots with the United States abound in Egypt.

Here’s a brief history of the *confirmed* cases of the CIA’s globe-spanning campaign of coups.

**Iran, 1953:** Despite [continued speculation](#) about the CIA’s role in a 1949 coup to install a military government in Syria, the ouster of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh is the earliest coup of the Cold War that the U.S. government has acknowledged. In 1953, after nearly two years of Mossadegh’s premiership, during which time he challenged the authority of the Shah and nationalized an Iranian oil industry previously operated by British companies, he was forced from office and arrested, spending the rest of his life under house arrest. According to the just-declassified CIA-authored [history](#) of the operation, “It was the potential ... to leave Iran open to Soviet aggression — at a time when the Cold War was at its height and when the United States was involved in an undeclared war in Korea against forces supported by the U.S.S.R. and China — that compelled the United States [REDACTED] in planning and executing TPAJAX [the code name of the coup operation].”

**Guatemala, 1954:** Though the United States was initially [supportive](#) of Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz — the State Department felt his rise through the U.S.-trained and armed military would be an asset — the relationship soured as Árbenz attempted a series of land reforms that threatened the holdings of the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company. A coup in 1954 forced Árbenz from power,

allowing a succession of juntas in his place. Classified details of the CIA's involvement in the ouster of the Guatemalan leader, which included equipping rebels and paramilitary troops while the U.S. Navy blockaded the Guatemalan coast, came to light in 1999.

**Congo, 1960:** Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Congo (later the Democratic Republic of the Congo), was pushed out of office by Congolese President Joseph Kasavubu amid the U.S.-supported Belgian military intervention in the country, a violent effort to maintain Belgian business interests after the country's decolonization. But Lumumba maintained an armed opposition to the Belgian military and, after approaching the Soviet Union for supplies, was targeted by the CIA once the agency determined he was a threat to the newly installed government of Joseph Mobutu. The Church Committee, an 11-senator commission established in 1975 to provide oversight of the clandestine actions of the U.S. intelligence community, found that the CIA "continued to maintain close contact with Congolese who expressed a desire to assassinate Lumumba," and that "CIA officers encouraged and offered to aid these Congolese in their efforts against Lumumba." After an aborted assassination attempt against Lumumba involving a poisoned handkerchief, the CIA alerted Congolese troops to Lumumba's location and noted roads to be blocked and potential escape routes. Lumumba was captured in late 1960 and killed in January of the following year.

**Dominican Republic, 1961:** The brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, which included the ethnic cleansing of thousands of Haitians in the Dominican Republic and the attempted assassination of the president of Venezuela, ended when he was ambushed and killed by armed political dissidents. Though the gunman who shot Trujillo maintained that "Nobody told me to go and kill Trujillo," he did in fact have the support of the CIA. The Church Committee found that "Material support, consisting of three pistols and three carbines, was supplied to various dissidents.... United States' officials knew that the dissidents intended to overthrow Trujillo, probably by assassination..."

**South Vietnam, 1963:** The United States was already deeply involved in South Vietnam in 1963, and its relationship with the country's leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, was growing increasingly strained amid Diem's crackdown on Buddhist dissidents. According to the Pentagon Papers, on Aug. 23, 1963, South Vietnamese generals plotting a coup contacted U.S. officials about their plan. After some fits and starts plus a period of U.S. indecision, the generals seized and killed Diem on Nov. 1, 1963 with U.S. support, which by some accounts partially came in the form of \$40,000 in CIA funds.

"For the military coup d'etat against Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S. must accept its full share of responsibility," the Pentagon Papers state. "Beginning in August of 1963 we variously authorized, sanctioned and encouraged the coup efforts of the Vietnamese generals and offered full support for a successor government.... We maintained clandestine contact with them throughout the planning and execution of the coup and sought to review their operational plans and proposed new government."

**Brazil, 1964:** Fearing that the government of Brazilian President Joao Goulart would, in the words of U.S. Ambassador Lincoln Gordon, "make Brazil the China of the 1960s," the United States backed a 1964 coup led by Humberto Castello Branco, then chief of staff of the Brazilian army. In the days leading up to the coup, the CIA encouraged street rallies against the government and provided fuel and "arms of non-US origin" to those backing the military. "I think we ought to take every step that we can, be prepared to do everything that we need to do," President Lyndon Johnson told his advisors planning the coup, according to declassified government records obtained by the National Security Archive. The Brazilian military went on to govern the country until 1985.

**Chile, 1973:** The United States never wanted Salvador Allende, the socialist candidate elected president of Chile in 1970, to assume office. President Richard Nixon told the CIA to "make the [Chilean] economy scream," and the agency worked with three Chilean groups, each plotting a coup against Allende in 1970. The agency went so far as to provide weapons, but the plans fell apart after the

CIA lost confidence in its proxies. U.S. attempts to disrupt the Chilean economy continued until Gen. Augusto Pinochet led a military coup against Allende in 1973. The CIA's official account of the seizure of power on Sept. 11, 1973, [notes](#) that the agency “was aware of coup-plotting by the military, had ongoing intelligence collection relationships with some plotters, and — because CIA did not discourage the takeover and had sought to instigate a coup in 1970 — probably appeared to condone it.” The CIA also conducted a propaganda campaign in support of Pinochet's new regime after he took office in 1973, despite knowledge of severe human rights abuses, including the murder of political dissidents.

**My FP:** Follow topics and authors to get straight to what you like. Exclusively for FP subscribers. [Subscribe Now](#) | [Log In](#)

---

**J. Dana Stuster** was an assistant editor at *Foreign Policy* from 2013-2014. Twitter: [@jdanastuster](#)