

America's Legacy of Regime Change

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For most of history, seizing another country or territory was a straightforward proposition. You assembled an army and ordered it to invade. Combat determined the victor. The toll in death and suffering was usually horrific, but it was all done in the open. That is how Alexander overran Persia and how countless conquerors since have bent weaker nations to their will. Invasion is the old-fashioned way.

When the United States joined the race for empire at the end of the 19th century, that was the tactic it used. It sent a large expeditionary force to the Philippines to crush an independence movement, ultimately killing some 200,000 Filipinos. At the other end of the carnage spectrum, it seized Guam without the loss of a single life and Puerto Rico with few casualties. Every time, though, U.S. victory was the result of superior military power. In the few cases when the United States failed, as in its attempt to defend a client regime by suppressing Augusto Cesar Sandino's nationalist rebellion in Nicaragua during the 1920s and 30s, the failure was also the product of military confrontation. For the United States, as for all warlike nations, military power has traditionally been the decisive factor determining whether it wins or loses its campaigns to capture or subdue other countries. World War II was the climax of that bloody history.

After that war, however, something important changed. The United States no longer felt free to land troops on every foreign shore that was ruled by a government it disliked or considered threatening. Suddenly there was a new constraint: the Red Army. If American troops invaded a country and overthrew its government, the Soviets might respond in kind. Combat between American and Soviet forces could easily escalate into nuclear holocaust, so it had to be avoided at all costs. Yet during the Cold War, the United States remained determined to shape the world according to its liking — perhaps more determined than ever. The United States needed a new weapon. The search led to covert action.

A news agency

During World War II the United States used a covert agency, the Office of Strategic Services, to carry out clandestine actions across Europe and Asia. As soon as the war ended, to the shock of many OSS agents, Harry Truman abolished it. He believed there was no need for such an agency during peacetime. In 1947 he changed his mind and signed the National Security Act, under which the Central Intelligence Agency was established. That marked the beginning of a new era. Covert action replaced overt action as the principal means of projecting American power around the world.

Truman later insisted that he had intended the CIA to serve as a kind of private global news service.

“It was not intended as a ‘Cloak & Dagger Outfit!’” he wrote. “It was intended merely as a center for keeping the President informed on what was going on in the world ... [not] to act as a spy organization. That was never the intention when it was organized.”

Nonetheless he did not hesitate to use the new CIA for covert action. Its first major campaign, aimed at influencing the 1948 Italian election to ensure that pro-American Christian Democrats would defeat their Communist rivals, was vast in scale and ultimately successful — setting the pattern for CIA intervention in every Italian election for the next two decades. Yet Truman drew the line at covert action to overthrow governments.



The CIA’s covert-action chief, Allen Dulles (image on the right), twice proposed such projects. In both cases, the target he chose was a government that had inflicted harm on corporations that he and his brother, John Foster Dulles, had represented during their years as partners at the globally powerful Wall Street law firm of Sullivan & Cromwell. In 1952 he proposed that the CIA overthrow President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala, whose government was carrying out land reform that affected the interests of United Fruit. By one account, State Department officials “hit the roof” when they heard his proposal, and the diplomat David Bruce told him that the Department “disapproves of the entire deal.” Then Dulles proposed an operation to overthrow Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh of Iran, who had nationalized his country’s oil industry. Secretary of State Dean Acheson flatly rejected it.

White House resistance to covert regime-change operations dissolved when Dwight Eisenhower succeeded Truman at the beginning of 1953. Part of the new administration’s enthusiasm came from Allen Dulles, Washington’s most relentless advocate of such operations, whom Eisenhower named to head the CIA. The fact that he named Dulles’s brother as secretary of State ensured that covert operations would have all the necessary diplomatic cover from the State Department. During the Dulles brothers’ long careers at Sullivan & Cromwell, they had not only learned the techniques of covert regime change but practiced them. They were masters at marshaling hidden power in the service of their corporate clients overseas. Now they could do the same with all the worldwide resources of the CIA.

It was not only the Dulles brothers, however, who brought the United States into the regime-change era in the early 1950s. Eisenhower himself was a fervent advocate of covert action. Officially his defense and security policy, which he called the “New Look,” rested on two foundations, a smaller army and an increased nuclear arsenal. In reality, the “New Look” had a third foundation: covert action. Eisenhower may have been the last president to believe that no one would ever discover what he sent the CIA to do. With a soldier’s commitment to keeping secrets, he never admitted that he had ordered covert regime-change operations, much less explained why he favored them. He would, however, have

had at least two reasons.

Since Eisenhower had commanded Allied forces in Europe during World War II, he was aware of the role that covert operations such as breaking Nazi codes had played in the war victory — something few other people knew at the time. That would have given him an appreciation for how important and effective such operations could be. His second reason was even more powerful. In Europe he had had the grim responsibility of sending thousands of young men out to die. That must have weighed on him. He saw covert action as a kind of peace project. After all, if the CIA could overthrow a government with the loss of just a few lives, wasn't that preferable to war? Like most Americans, Eisenhower saw a world of threats. He also understood that the threat of nuclear war made overt invasions all but unthinkable. Covert action was his answer. Within a year and a half of his inauguration, the CIA had deposed the governments of both Guatemala and Iran. It went on to other regime-change operations from Albania to Cuba to Indonesia. Successive presidents followed his lead.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was once again free to launch direct military invasions. When it found a leader it didn't like — such as Saddam Hussein or Muammar Qaddafi — it deposed him not through covert action, but by returning to the approach it had used before World War II: the force of arms. Covert efforts to overthrow governments have hardly ceased, as any Iranian or Venezuelan could attest. The era when covert action was America's principal weapon in world affairs, however, is over. That makes this a good time to look back.

Metrics for covert action

Books about the Cold War heyday of covert action era are a mini-genre. Lindsey A. O'Rourke's contribution is especially valuable. Unlike many other books built around accounts of CIA plots, *Covert Regime Change* takes a scholarly and quantitative approach. It provides charts, graphs, and data sets. Meticulous analysis makes this not the quickest read of any book on the subject, but certainly one of the best informed. Chapters on the disastrous effort to overthrow communist rule in Eastern Europe, which cost the lives of hundreds of deceived partisans, and on the covert-action aspects of America's doomed campaign in Vietnam are especially trenchant.

O'Rourke identifies three kinds of covert operations that are aimed at securing perceived friends in power and keeping perceived enemies out: offensive operations to overthrow governments, preventive operations aimed at preserving the status quo, and hegemonic operations aimed at keeping a foreign nation subservient. From 1947 to 1989, by her count, the United States launched 64 covert regime-change operations, while using the overt tool — war — just six times. She traces the motivations behind these operations, the means by which they were carried out, and their effects. Her text is based on meticulous analysis of individual operations. Some other books about covert action are rip-roaring yarns. This one injects a dose of rigorous analysis into a debate that is often based on emotion. That rigor lends credence to her conclusions:

- When policymakers want to conduct an operation that they know violates international norms, they simply conduct it covertly to hide their involvement.
- Covert missions typically have lower potential costs than their overt counterparts, but they are also less likely to succeed.
- Can interveners acquire reliable allies by covertly overthrowing foreign

governments? Overall, I find the answer is no. Covert regime changes seldom worked out as intended.

- The new leader's opponents often accused him of being a U.S. puppet and, in some cases, even took up arms against the regime. In fact, approximately half of the governments that came to power in a U.S.-backed covert regime change during the Cold War were later violently removed from power.
- States targeted in a covert regime-change operation appear less likely to be democratic afterward and more likely to experience civil war, adverse regime changes, or human-rights abuses
- Covert regime changes can have disastrous consequences for civilians within the target states. Countries that were targeted by the United States for a covert regime change during the Cold War were more likely to experience a civil war or an episode of mass killing afterward.
- Even nominally successful covert regime changes — where U.S.-backed forces came to power — seldom delivered on their promise to improve interstate relations.

Although these conclusions are not new, they have rarely if ever been presented as the result of such persuasive statistical evidence. Yet even this evidence seems unlikely to force a reassessment of covert action as a way to influence or depose governments. It is an American "addiction." The reasons are many and varied, but one of the simplest is that covert action seems so easy. Changing an unfriendly country's behavior through diplomacy is a long, complex, multi-faceted project. It takes careful thought and planning. Often it requires compromise. Sending the CIA to overthrow a "bad guy" is far more tempting. It's the cheap and easy way out. History shows that it often produces terrible results for both the target country and the United States. To a military and security elite as contemptuous of history as America's, however, that is no obstacle.

Although covert regime-change operations remain a major part of American foreign policy, they are not as effective as they once were. The first victims of CIA overthrows, Prime Minister Mossadegh and President Arbenz, did not understand the tools the CIA had at its disposal and so were easy targets. They were also democratic, meaning that they allowed open societies in which the press, political parties, and civic groups functioned freely — making them easy for the CIA to penetrate. Later generations of leaders learned from their ignorance. They paid closer attention to their own security, and imposed tightly controlled regimes in which there were few independent power centers that the CIA could manipulate.

If Eisenhower could come back to life, he would see the havoc that his regime-change operations wreaked. After his overthrow of Mossadegh, Iran fell under royal dictatorship that lasted a quarter-century and was followed by decades of rule by repressive mullahs who have worked relentlessly to undermine American interests around the world. The operation he ordered in Guatemala led to a civil war that killed 200,000 people, turning a promising young democracy into a charnel house and inflicting a blow on Central America from which it has never recovered. His campaign against Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, which included the fabrication of a poison kit in a CIA laboratory, helped turn that country into one of the most violent places on Earth.

How would Eisenhower respond to the long-term disasters that followed his covert action victories? He might well have come up with a highly convincing way to excuse himself. It's now clear, he could argue, that covert action to overthrow governments usually has terrible

long-term results — but that was not clear in the 1950s. Eisenhower had no way of knowing that even covert regime-change operations that seem successful at the time could have devastating results decades later.

We today, however, do know that. The careful analysis that is at the center of *Covert Regime Change* makes clearer than ever that when America sets out to change the world covertly, it usually does more harm than good — to itself as well as others. O'Rourke contributes to the growing body of literature that clearly explains this sad fact of geopolitics. The intellectual leadership for a national movement against regime-change operations — overt or covert — is coalescing. The next step is to take this growing body of knowledge into the political arena. Washington remains the province of those who believe not only that the United States should try to reconfigure the world into an immense American sphere of influence, but that that is an achievable goal. In the Beltway morass of pro-intervention think tanks, members of Congress, and op-ed columnists, America's role in the world is usually not up for debate. Now, as a presidential campaign unfolds and intriguing new currents surge through the American body politic, is an ideal moment for that debate to re-emerge. If it does, we may be surprised to see how many voters are ready to abandon the dogma of regime change and wonder, with George Washington, "Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground?"

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