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The American Conservative

Regime Change Is A Hard Habit To Break

Doug Bandow

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Candidate Donald Trump dismissed promiscuous war-making in the Middle East, but that didn't mean he opposed foreign intervention. Amid charges of "isolationism" from Washington's bipartisan war party, he has aggressively confronted states around the globe, intensifying antagonism and conflict, and even risking war on occasion.

For instance, he increased sanctions on North Korea and promised the latter "fire and fury." His administration continues to aid the totalitarian Saudi regime as it slaughters Yemeni civilians. He launched economic war against Iran, demanded that the regime surrender its independent foreign policy, assassinated one of the Islamic Republic's top leaders, and threatened Iran with destruction.

Trump augmented forces in Afghanistan and has kept the U.S. entangled in that nation for the 18th year of war. He launched airstrikes against Syria's government, illegally occupied Syrian territory, and seized the country's oilfields. The president enhanced sanctions against Russia and bolstered NATO. He also wrecked what little was left of Venezuela's economy and proposed military intervention.

This is a retreat from the world?

The administration is noteworthy for its incompetence, bombast, inconsistency, hubris, and recklessness, yet the president's critics demand that he do even more. Hal Brands, *Bloomberg* columnist and professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, recently proposed that Trump revive the practice of regime change.

Actually, that appears to be what the president has been doing—certainly in Iran and Venezuela—despite his disclaimers. The campaign to remove Nicolas Maduro turned comic opera with the recent "military operation" in which a score of armed men, including two U.S. Army veterans, were killed or captured when they landed near Caracas.

Their relationship with Washington was unclear. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo huffed: "If we had been involved, it would have gone differently." After the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba, disastrous failure in Vietnam, catastrophe in Iraq, and continuing chaos in Libya, one should not

underestimate U.S. policymakers' propensity for tragic ineptitude. Pompeo added to suspicions by insisting that Washington wanted the American invaders released.

The botched raid should cause people to run screaming from the room if someone proposes a similar attempt at regime change in the future. Naturally, however, that is not the response in Washington. Certainly not of Brands, who recently wrote: "Yet this trivial episode invites us to think seriously about the role of covert intervention and regime change in U.S. policy. Just as the U.S. sought to undermine or topple unfriendly regimes during the Cold War, it may look to such methods again in its increasingly heated rivalry with China."

His cheerleading wasn't particularly enthusiastic. He admitted: "History tells us that while covert intervention can sometimes be a cost-effective tool of competition, it is fraught with risks and profound moral trade-offs." Nevertheless, he viewed toppling Iran's Mohammed Mosaddegh in 1953 and Indonesia's Sukarno in 1965 as great successes. For Brands the Cold War added urgency and seriousness of purpose.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union attempts at regime change are much harder to justify even in theory. Still, might that era return? He argued: "American officials can no longer assume the inevitable emergence of a friendlier, more democratic world. U.S. competition with China (and, to a lesser degree, Russia) is intensifying and sprawling geographically. A few years from now, Washington might find itself desperately seeking covert options to prevent some important country in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East or Southeast Asia from aligning with Beijing."

There is a critical difference between preference and interest. And between peripheral and vital. When would it be imperative for America to overthrow another government? Not very often.

The two cases Brands cited illustrate the problem. Had Indonesia's Sukarno not been overthrown with America aid, would he nevertheless have remained in power and enabled a communist takeover? And would the impact have flowed over its borders? Maybe not. Yet much blood was spilled to prevent uncertainties and possibilities: The U.S. replaced one dictator with another, who consolidated power with great brutality. Brands acknowledged that "By aiding the Indonesian military in 1965, the U.S. implicated itself in horrific violence that killed half a million people."

The coup in Iran also yielded short-term geopolitical benefits—and temporarily preserved British oil investments. However, the results might have been the same had events simply taken their natural course. Mosaddegh, a man on the left but no Soviet stooge, faced significant domestic political opposition. His own people might have replaced him without leaving a well-earned legacy of hatred toward America.

Then the U.S. would not have spent a quarter-century allied with the Shah, a tyrant whose rule contrasted dramatically with Washington's democracy rhetoric. No wonder moralistic American lectures lack credibility, especially after the U.S. later supported Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, shot down an Iranian airliner, imposed endless debilitating sanctions, and constantly threatened to go to war.

Moreover, supporting the coup was merely America's first bloody step. How did the nominally liberal Carter administration try to save the Shah as protestors overwhelmed his security forces? According to the *New York Times*, special envoy Gen. Robert E. Huyser admitted "that he had

urged Iran's top military leaders to kill as many demonstrators as necessary to keep the shah in power." He labeled the top Iranian general "gutless" for failing to slaughter his countrymen.

Also consider the 1973 U.S.-backed ouster (and killing) of Salvador Allende, elected three years before. He was a bad choice who ruined his nation's economy but posed no threat to America and little danger to Chile's neighbors. The repression that followed was terrible. Even Brands admitted: "in destabilizing Allende's regime in the early 1970s, the U.S. helped extinguish Chilean democracy for nearly two decades."

Failed attempts to overthrow Cuba's Fidel Castro had a different, even more perverse impact. Wrote Brands: "The Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 pushed Castro to undertake a covert offensive of his own, meant to overthrow U.S. allies in Latin America. It also caused Nikita Khrushchev to deploy nuclear missiles to Cuba, leading to the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War." That was a very high price to pay for a whole lotta' nuttin' resulting from U.S. efforts. Yet the Trump administration keeps increasing sanctions, which have not changed Havana's government or behavior *after 60 years*.

Nevertheless, did regime change save America? Brands makes the astounding claim: "the Reagan administration used a wide-ranging covert offensive to put intense pressure on Soviet clients in Afghanistan, Nicaragua and Angola, and to drive up the costs of Moscow's global presence. Without covert action, America might not have won the Cold War." Really?

It was Moscow's weakness that made it vulnerable to U.S. pressure, not Washington's regime change operations. In Angola and Nicaragua the bad guys won with the assistance of a Soviet proxy, Cuba, which thereby repaid some of its Soviet subsidies. U.S. aid to the Afghan mujahedeen resulted in serious blowback, strengthening jihadist forces, most importantly al-Qaeda, that later attacked America.

While Brands offers a tepid case for regime change, there is plenty of evidence against it. Melissa Willard-Foster, the author of *Toppling Foreign Governments: The Logic of Regime Change*, noted that "just about every American president since FDR has attempted foreign-imposed regime change, or FIRC, in one form or another." Yet, "no matter how disastrous the last attempt was, policymakers still believe it will work."

In a Cato Institute study published earlier this year, Benjamin Denison, a postdoctoral fellow studying at Tufts University's Fletcher School, warned that such attempts "are likely to spark civil wars, lead to lower levels of democracy, increase repression, and in the end, draw the foreign intervener into lengthy nation-building projects."

Lindsey A. O'Rourke, author of *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War*, observed: "The academic literature on regime changes paints an overwhelmingly negative picture of the prospects of success: Studies have shown that foreign-imposed regime changes do not improve political or economic relations between the intervening and target states. They rarely lead to democracy, and, regardless of whether they are conducted covertly or overtly, they increase the likelihood that the target state will experience a civil war."

Washington's occasional success in ousting hostile governments was not enough. Explained O'Rourke: "Contrary to policymakers' expectations, changing the policy preferences of a foreign government requires more than simply changing the political leadership of the state."

Even the CIA is skeptical of regime change. Reported the *New York Times* in 2014, an internal study “concluded that many past attempts by the agency to arm foreign forces covertly had a minimal impact on the long-term outcome of a conflict. They were even less effective, the report found, when the militias fought without any direct American support on the ground.”

While one can always concoct a worst-case scenario to justify the attempt to overthrow another government, Washington’s record in doing so is beyond dismal. In fact, objectives are rarely important, let alone vital, and failure is not just common, but routine. Worse, the impact on foreign peoples treated as geopolitical guinea pigs is typically catastrophic. Only an overwhelming showing of vital need could warrant another try.

The Trump administration should close the age of promiscuous U.S. intervention. The American people can’t afford the human and financial costs. Washington’s victims can’t afford the murder and mayhem that so often results. Before loosing their foreign prescriptions, like the Greek Furies, upon the world U.S. policymakers should take the Hippocratic Oath: First do no harm.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.