

# WAR ON THE ROCKS

## Covert Wars, To What End?

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In a scene from the film adaptation of George Crile's *Charlie Wilson's War*, the Texas congressman meets with the CIA station chief at the U.S. embassy in Pakistan. Wilson, played by Tom Hanks, had earlier that day visited a refugee camp housing some of the tens of thousands fleeing the Soviet war in neighboring Afghanistan. It is late in the evening, and the station chief makes it clear he is annoyed with Wilson's demand for the full dog-and-pony briefing on the war, including a detailed breakdown of Soviet operations on the ground and from the air. After a few minutes, Wilson cuts him off.

*Wilson: I want to know why they [the Afghans] haven't shot down a helicopter.*

*CIA guy: The Soviet Hind gunship has been specially armor plated to resist —*

*Wilson: Yeah. I know. So you tell me what you need to shoot 'em down.*

*CIA guy: What do you mean?*

*[...]*

*Wilson: Tell me what you need and I will go about getting it for you.*

*CIA guy: I appreciate your generosity, Congressman, but a sudden influx of money and modern weaponry would draw attention.*

*[...]*

*Wilson: It would attract attention?*

*CIA guy: Yes*

*Wilson: I don't even understand [...] — this is the Cold War, everybody knows about it.*

*[...]*

*Have you been to the Khyber Pass? Have you heard these stories?*

Of course, U.S. government officials *had* been to the refugee camps, and they had heard the horrible stories of the Soviet campaign there — but they were anxious to prevent America from being drawn into a wider war. Upon realizing this, Wilson storms off in a huff.

Nothing like this late-night exchange appears in Crile's book, but screenwriter Aaron Sorkin accurately captured the prevailing views within the U.S. government in the early 1980s. Officials

in Washington tried to divert attention away from the conflict, and were anxious to keep what little assistance they were providing to Afghan resistance fighters out of public view, out of concern that any revelation that such assistance was being funneled through Pakistan might have precipitated a Soviet attack on that U.S. ally.

Eventually, U.S. policy changed. In March 1985, President Ronald Reagan signed off on National Security Decision Directive 166 (NSDD-166), authorizing the provision of more sophisticated weapons to the Afghan insurgents. The decision also signaled a pivot away from mere harassment to a much more ambitious objective: forcing a Soviet withdrawal. But the Reagan administration continued to conceal some of its activities in a bid to prevent the war from escalating further.

According to Austin Carson, most attempts at concealment aren't successful. The belligerents and their supporters know who is involved. The secrecy mostly applies to the public. But keeping this assistance to what Carson calls "the backstage" tamps down escalation pressure.

"In Clausewitzian terms, war tends toward escalation," Carson writes in *Secret Wars*. And the problem has grown more acute since World War I. While "war has become unacceptably costly," individual leaders' ability to control escalation "has been simultaneously weakened." Though this is caused by several factors, Carson focuses on "constraints created by domestic hawks and misunderstandings about adversaries about the value of limited war."

To the extent that "domestic politics...undermine" leaders' ability to control escalation, Carson argues, secrecy can be a critical factor in helping to preserve their control. "Secrecy is alluring to democratic leaders," Carson writes, "seeking to insulate themselves from hawkish reactions that would make limiting war more difficult."

In that sense, U.S. government officials' behavior vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in Afghanistan mirrored that of other public figures during other wars — from German, Italian, and Soviet covert involvement in the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1939, to Iranian support for co-religionists in Iraq in the present era. These and other cases are explored and explained in *Secret Wars*.

Indeed, the most surprising finding in this well-researched book is neither that major powers routinely intervene in others' disputes, nor that they do so covertly — those two facts are widely known — but rather that strategic competitors often collude to keep such interventions hidden. According to Carson, an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago, they do so to prevent small-scale conflicts from escalating into much larger ones.

For example, after the Harry S. Truman administration dispatched troops to repel North Korea's invasion of the South, U.S. officials anticipated that Soviet leaders would be reluctant to respond in kind. "The Kremlin undoubtedly realizes," the State Department's John Davies explained, that "it is playing with the volatile fire of American democracy."

This prediction proved correct. The Soviets did intervene, but Joseph Stalin went to extreme — and occasionally absurd — ends to conceal the Soviet role in the war. One "obviously impractical order," Carson explains, instructed Soviet pilots "to conduct intense aerial dog fights while only communicating with a set of memorized Chinese words." A Soviet veteran recalled

years later “it worked until the first real fight in the air, when we forgot not only our Chinese commands but Russian words too — except for dirty language.”

But U.S. officials were also playing with fire. Paul Nitze, in his role as director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, fretted that hawkish voices would push the United States to undertake further military operations in Korea despite the fact that a wider war was not in America’s strategic interest.

Some Americans, no doubt, were anxious to beat back the Reds after the humiliations of the late 1940s, but one wonders if Truman, Nitze, and others might have safely ignored the hawkish voices and listened to a less bellicose public — or even their own voices from less than six months earlier, when they had concluded that Korea was not worth a war. By choosing to intervene against these better judgements, they whipped up nascent hawkish sentiment. A more measured response, or none at all, might have passed without much notice. After all, the United States didn’t send troops to fight in Colombia’s civil war (*La Violencia*) that erupted around the same time.

### **A Clear Pattern of Failure and Hypocrisy**

Why policymakers choose to intervene is the central puzzle. The expected pay-offs would have to be substantial — and the chances of success high — given that the risks of failure are so momentous.

But Lindsay O’Rourke, an assistant professor of political science at Boston College, demonstrates that covert interventions fail “more than 60 percent of the time,” “most operations failed to remain covert, and many sparked blowback in unanticipated ways.” For her book, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War*, O’Rourke compiled an original dataset of U.S. regime-change operations carried out between 1947 and 1989, including 64 covert cases. These efforts ran the gamut from “successful and failed attempts to covertly assassinate foreign leaders” and coups d’etat, to election interference and various other efforts to “incite popular revolutions, and support armed dissident groups in their bids to topple a foreign government.”

Consistent with Carson’s findings, O’Rourke explains that covert intervention can reduce the likelihood of retaliation or escalation by avoiding a direct challenge to adversaries’ reputations. Interveners often seem more interested, however, with preserving their own reputations. Although overt intervention often afforded operational advantages, intervening covertly, O’Rourke explains, “enables the intervener to behave hypocritically by secretly acting in ways that contradict its purported values or public positions.”

Take, for example, the 21 interventions (18 covert, 3 overt) undertaken within the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War. Notwithstanding Franklin D. Roosevelt’s pledge to pursue a “good neighbor policy” toward other countries in the region, “every Cold War president except for [Gerald] Ford authorized hegemonic regime changes in pursuit of Monroe Doctrine goals.” One may believe that such meddling advanced American security, but no fair-minded reading of O’Rourke’s book could lead one to conclude that U.S. officials were *actually* upholding Roosevelt’s stated commitment to respect “the rights of others.”

Indeed, regime-change operations were also inconsistent with America’s supposed liberal values. Of the covert cases explored in the book, O’Rourke observes, more than two thirds (44 of 64)

were undertaken in support of authoritarian forces, “including at least six operations that sought to replace liberal democratic governments with illiberal authoritarian regimes.”

### **Subverting Democracy at Home, Too**

One of the more troubling implications of both books is the extent to which government officials view democracy and self-determination as a threat to peace — and subvert it a solution. Carson makes this point explicitly, arguing secrecy insulates democratic leaders “from hawkish reactions that would make limiting war more difficult.”

But U.S. officials also came to appreciate how covert operations allowed them to evade constitutional limits on their power. In addition to routine censorship, concealment, and outright deception, the Korean War also involved practically unlimited executive war-making. One State Department memo advised, “We should leave ourselves free to take limited military action against Soviet forces without” obtaining a formal war declaration from Congress. It continued, “We have considerable maneuverability for this purpose.”

This pattern has continued well into the post-9/11 era, with the White House claiming authority to wage much more than merely “limited military action.” Gene Healy, author of *The Cult of the Presidency*, caustically notes that “three presidents in a row have warped” the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force “into an enabling act for globe-spanning presidential war, broad enough to cover everything from airstrikes in Waziristan to boots on the ground in Tongo Tongo.” The Donald Trump and Barack Obama administrations both effectively concluded, Healy explains, “that Congress already had its debate on war powers ... and it’s One Congress, One Vote, One Time.”

If such operations were generally advancing American safety, then perhaps the White House and its enablers in Congress wouldn’t be afraid of a fresh debate. And many of the military operations undertaken since 9/11 have been focused on killing actual or would-be terrorists, and not aimed at overturning an established political order in a sovereign state. But some have, and some still are. O’Rourke’s work provides ample evidence that such attempts at forcible regime-change are unlikely to achieve desired ends at a reasonable cost.

### **Secrecy and Democracy**

It isn’t obvious, therefore, that cutting the public out of the conversation is such a good idea. The marketplace of ideas might actually function better with more information available to more people, and policymakers subjected to greater oversight. Related, Carson may have misconstrued what *actually* drives policymakers to conceal activity that often leads to unpleasant ends. Indeed, if the dangers of escalation are as grave as he claims, one might ask why it is worth taking *any* risk at all? And especially when the stakes for most of the major parties are so small?

O’Rourke contends that states initiate regime change operations, both overt and covert, out of a fairly straightforward desire to “increase their security and the security of their allies,” but few would characterize the cases explored in either of these books as anything other than peripheral for the intervening states. The survival of Hitler’s Germany, Mussolini’s Italy, and Stalin’s Soviet Union was never contingent upon whether Republicans or Nationalists emerged victorious in the Spanish Civil War. Likewise, the question of who ruled the Dominican Republic in 1965, and whether they did so poorly or well, mattered greatly for the people there. But it meant little to the nearly 200 million people living in the United States at the time. And

given that the Soviet Union's misbegotten adventure in Afghanistan hastened the end of Moscow's decrepit empire, it seems obvious that the costs of trying, and failing, to reshape Afghanistan's political order was far more damaging than anything that the rulers in Kabul could have done to a vast, nuclear-armed nation spanning 11 time zones.

This tendency for foreign powers to interfere in other countries' affairs — even when the stakes are low and the likelihood of failure high — may have less to do with a supposedly reflexively hawkish public demanding blood or vengeance, and more about a prosaic temptation to *do* something. My colleague [Emma Ashford at the Cato Institute](#) [warned last year](#) that American officials seem particularly afflicted by a generic action bias. “Political pressure and criticism from opponents, combined with the news media's habit of disparaging inaction, can render even the most cautious leaders vulnerable to pressure,” Ashford writes. “America's overwhelming military strength and the low cost of airstrikes only add to the notion that action is less costly than inaction.”

Not named in this bill of particulars? The supposedly hawkish public. That may be because most normal men and women are more cautious than those who purport to lead them, and each successive generation of Americans appears to be becoming more sensible when it comes to the promiscuous [use of force](#). Oftentimes, elites out-hawk the public.

Take, for example, most Americans' response to Iran's intervention in Iraq. As Carson reports, the Bush administration had initially concealed Iran's role in fueling the insurgency, but it reversed course in 2007. This attempt to shift public sentiment failed to generate a [groundswell](#) in favor of escalation, let alone support for taking the fight all the way to Tehran. If the average American were as reliably hawkish as Carson's theory supposes, disclosure of Iran's culpability in the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of U.S. military personnel should have boosted pro-war sentiment.

### **The Inability to Learn**

O'Rourke concludes that Washington has “learned that changing the policy preferences of another state is more difficult than simply replacing that state's leadership.” Alas, it's not clear that that's accurate. To be sure, there have always been skeptics. For example, Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State Christian Herter argued “History has shown that efforts to impose democracy in a country, by force and from outside, can easily result in the mere substitution of one form of tyranny for another.” More than three decades later, former CIA director [Richard Helms](#) [looked back on his experience in government and warned](#) “Today's world is far too sophisticated to permit covert action to be wielded about like an all-purpose political chain saw.”

But the fact that at least two generations of U.S. policymakers were aware of the long odds, and yet their successors still stumble — or charge headlong — into these foolhardy ventures anyway suggests that O'Rourke's optimism is misplaced.

For example, notwithstanding Trump's promise as a candidate to “stop looking to topple regimes and overthrow governments,” as president, Trump has shown himself willing to at least contemplate easy regime-change fixes. Within a few weeks of his inauguration, he [hosted members of the Venezuelan opposition in the Oval Office](#) and others in his administration met with military [officers seeking U.S. support for a coup](#) against President Nicolas Maduro. He later

appointed convicted Iran-Contra co-conspirator Elliott Abrams to oversee U.S. policy in the region. Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton, meanwhile, has long supported efforts to change regimes by force, including most recently in Iran. If Trump were as skeptical of intervention as his campaign rhetoric suggested, he almost surely would have sought out other advisors.

But it could be that the learned skeptics, informed by O'Rourke and others' research, are in short supply. Trump's predecessor, after all, secured the Democratic Party's presidential nomination by excoriating "dumb wars" and later scorned the bipartisan foreign policy establishment for its interventionist ways. As president, Obama engineered the overt overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and engaged in several other covert interventions aimed at removing from power (or at least severely weakening) foreign leaders, including Syria's Bashar Assad. Few believe that such efforts advanced the cause of democracy and human rights; even fewer can plausibly argue that they delivered security for the United States.

Given this sorry track record, the burden of proof should be on those making the case for interference in foreign countries' politics. Both of these books provide additional evidence that non-interference is the better course. But the deliberate effort to conceal efforts at regime change and other involvement in civil wars virtually ensures that such meddling will continue.

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