



Academics Say U.S. Interventions to Force Regime Change Often Fail

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There is a long history of countries overthrowing other countries' governments to get what they want. There is an equally long history of such efforts ending in abject failure, ranging from the American morass in Vietnam to the botched Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (a mistake some experts say the U.S. repeated after 9/11).

Yet the idea of forcible regime change continues to hold sway in U.S. foreign policy circles despite more recent disasters, including the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq championed by President George W. Bush in 2003 and the military intervention in Libya in 2011 spearheaded by Bush's successor, Barack Obama, that left the North African nation effectively lawless.

President Trump rode into office on a pledge to end America's "endless wars" in the Middle East and eschew the interventionist policies of his predecessors in favor of an "America First" approach.

And he has worked to fulfill that promise by withdrawing troops from Syria and, most recently, Afghanistan, where his administration hammered out a deal with the Taliban earlier this year in the hopes of withdrawing all U.S. troops there within 14 months.

Yet even Trump has at times warned that the U.S. could intervene militarily to overthrow unfriendly regimes in North Korea, Iran and Venezuela, and his campaign of choking the latter two's economies with sanctions is designed to do just that.

A February [panel at the Cato Institute](#), moderated by Christopher Preble, the libertarian think tank's vice president for defense and foreign policy studies, put forth the argument that forcible regime change typically fails to achieve a country's larger goals. Yet leaders cling to it as a strategy to push U.S. interests abroad.

Why, then, does this strategy persist despite few success stories? The academic panelists theorize that decision-makers fail to think about the actual costs and consequences of overthrowing a foreign government, making rosy assumptions that regime change will be quick and cheap, when in fact the opposite is often true.

Abysmal Track Record

The U.S. has been engaging in regime change operations since at least 1898, said Benjamin Denison, a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Strategic Studies at the Tufts University Fletcher

School of Law and Diplomacy. The Cato Institute published Denison's recent paper, "The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Failure of Regime-Change Operations."

Denison argues that the historical record on armed regime change is clear. "Whether trying to achieve political, security, economic, or humanitarian goals, scholars have found that regime - change missions do not succeed as envisioned," according to his paper. "Instead, they 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."

Denison told the Cato audience that "while it might be in the interest of American officials to promote democratic institutions around the world, using armed force to promote more favorable regimes is often detrimental to this end."

This probabilistic failure boils down to the U.S. and the target state having different priorities.

Since end of the Cold War, the U.S. has focused on promoting democracy around the world as a foreign policy goal, and it has overthrown governments, both covertly and overtly, to achieve that goal.

"It's not simply about whether or not you can overthrow the government," Denison said. "The United States is actually pretty good at overthrowing a government if it wants to. The bigger issue to ask is: Does the regime change mission actually achieve the political goal it set out to achieve by overthrowing that government?"

Denison's answer is: "very rarely."

"Democracy is actually one of the toughest goals to try promote, and yet the United States keeps trying to impose democracy at gunpoint," he said. "And it's one of the toughest goals to achieve because there's an inherent tension between the United States overthrowing a government and expecting the leader to respond to [its] prerogatives as opposed to what their domestic constituents actually want."

Denison pointed to Hamid Karzai as an example. Karzai was handpicked by Washington to lead the Afghan government after the U.S. invasion, but very quickly, a large gulf emerged between the two sides

The U.S. accused Karzai of bowing to the country's warlords and presiding over a government rife with corruption. Karzai counters that it was the U.S. that bred corruption by pouring too much money into the country and making the government too dependent on the U.S. military for its survival.

Afghanistan has now held several elections, which fits with the U.S. goal of promoting democracy, but the country is still mired in violence and dysfunction (the latest election is still being contested months after the fact). Throwing money at the problem hasn't solved it, either. Denison noted that, adjusted for today's dollars, the U.S. has already spent far more on reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq than it invested in the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II.

Prerequisites for Regime Change

On that note, Preble joked that if, "I had a nickel for every single time I heard Germany and Japan mentioned in the same breath as Afghanistan and Iraq, whew!"

Indeed, post-World War II Germany and Japan are often cited as success stories of regime change. Denison said policymakers point to these examples to “show that if you invest enough resources or have the right strategy, you can do regime change successfully.”

But what made these countries different were two conditions, according to Denison: the pre-existing strength of local government bureaucracies (such as tax collection systems) and, perhaps more importantly, the presence of the Soviet Union.

Democracy took root fairly easily in Germany and Japan because the bureaucracy in each country was strong enough to encourage stability in the transition to democracy. Also, during the Cold War, the German and Japanese people decided that their interests aligned more with the U.S. than with Soviet communism, Denison said.

Today, the countries where the Trump administration would love to see a change at the top — Venezuela, North Korea and Iran — all lack strong institutions to help political change take hold.

Other factors influencing the degree of stability after regime change are the level of a country’s economic development and what the local military will do after the government is overthrown — both huge unknowns in the case of Venezuela, Denison noted.

As Alexander Downes, associate professor of political science and international affairs at the George Washington University, put it: “Success in implanting democracy happens in places where conditions are right: high wealth, low levels of ethnic heterogeneity, previous strong institutions.”

Unintended Consequences and Costs

But what about when an intervention doesn’t entail massive, Marshall Plan-type spending? “You could make the point that even if regime change is unlikely to succeed but it didn’t cost very much, it still might be worth giving it a try,” Denison said.

But he cautions that forcible regime change is almost never “quick and easy,” and that because policymakers often fail to ask the “tough questions about what happens the day after,” the short-term effect is almost always chaos and high costs.

“The most resounding finding is that when regime change operations take place, the probability that a civil war is going to break out in that country greatly increases,” Denison said. “Because of this, there’s much more instability, worse security in the country and also the human rights situation gets much worse because the government is trying to suppress the rebels that are rising up to overthrow the newly imposed government.”

According to Downes, chaos can ensue when the ousted leader escapes and organizes a resistance against the new government, or when the military disintegrates, which creates “the possibility for an instant civil war, an instant insurgency,” he said, adding that this is particularly likely in countries hollowed out by dictators — for example, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

In Iraq, President George W. Bush made the fateful decision early in the war to disband the Ba’athist Sunni military formed by strongman Saddam Hussein that had ruthlessly kept a lid on sectarian strife. But the administration had no strategy for what to do with the suddenly unemployed Sunnis who feared being persecuted by the newly empowered Shiite majority. The result: the rise of the Iraqi insurgency, which later morphed into the Islamic State.

Obama summed up what he saw as the major lesson of the military intervention in Libya, which he later considered a big mistake of his presidency: You must have a plan for the day after.

Denison said this lack of planning often forces the U.S. into nation-building projects it had hoped to avoid to shore up weak institutions and stave off full-blown civil war.

He added that while the long-term effects of regime change are less clear, one consequence is it breeds mistrust of U.S. intentions — which in turn can hamstring U.S. goals.

Denison cited the examples of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela, all of whose governments have expressed concerns that America's support for democracy-building organizations, economic sanctions and humanitarian aid are in fact "the first step toward a regime change operation."

"Most notably we see this in nuclear arms control talks, where there's been increasing fears that because the U.S. has a propensity to engage in regime change, it actually causes states to be less willing to have arms control conversations with the United States — and in fact are more likely to go for their own domestic nuclear weapons programs," Denison said.

Denison pointed out that nuclear negotiations with Kim Jong-un were nearly derailed when then-National Security Advisor John Bolton said the Libya model could work with North Korea. "Of course, the problem with the Libya model is that Libya gave up its nuclear weapons program and then a decade later, the United States engaged in a regime change operation against Qaddafi."

Because it makes countries suspicious of the U.S., Denison said that "regime change actually makes it harder for the United States to promote democracy and human rights abroad."

An Open Secret

Lindsey O'Rourke, whose work focuses on covert rather than overt military operations, agrees that in the long run, regime change is often anathema to U.S. interests.

Countries are more likely to experience a civil war or mass killings after an attempted overthrow, according to O'Rourke, an associate professor at Boston College and author of "Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War." States are also less likely to be democratic, and relations with the U.S. typically do not improve, her research shows.

O'Rourke conducted a study of declassified U.S. documents and discovered 64 cases of the U.S. attempting to covertly overthrow another country's government during the Cold War, with 25 of these cases resulting in the U.S.-backed forces assuming power (the other 39 failed).

O'Rourke wondered why the U.S. kept embracing covert regime change operations despite overwhelming evidence that they rarely worked.

"American policymakers believed that covert operations were going to be so cheap that they're willing to try them even if they were unlikely to succeed," she said, noting that during the Cold War, the U.S. attempted 10 times the number of covert regime changes as opposed to overt military campaigns.

The assumption, she said, is that covert action offers the benefit of lower military costs and plausible deniability for the U.S. by shifting the burden onto foreign actors, who can then take the blame if things go wrong.

But this strategy rarely worked, according to O'Rourke. "There's a fundamental tradeoff between size and secrecy. A covert regime change can only become so large before the cover of the operation seems to be inevitably blown."

O'Rourke found that the only nominally successful interventions were "against weak states of little geostrategic importance," or in countries where the U.S.-backed forces were already likely to assume power anyway.

Even in these cases, however, O'Rourke found they didn't achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives because eventually, American meddling spurred local backlash and destabilization — a prime example being the 1953 CIA-backed coup that installed the Western-friendly Shah Pahlavi in Iran.

Catch-22

Downes of the George Washington University said the U.S. has been the most frequent "intervener" of the last 200 years, removing about 30 to 35 foreign leaders, and that the majority of the time, it has installed autocratic leaders.

This leads to a catch-22, Downes said. "They're interested in their own political survival. Once you put them in power, they want to survive. So they're going to have to listen to their domestic audience. They also have to listen to you. So they're kind of stuck," he said.

"And the more they go toward the domestic audience's preferences, the more the intervener is likely to come after them. The more they lean toward the intervener, the more domestic constituents are going to be unhappy. And so what you get is simultaneously the increased likelihood of internal resistance and external conflict."

This ensuing turmoil acts against U.S. interests in subtle ways. Looking at Latin America, for example, Downes said his research showed that U.S. regime change there "actually reduced imports from and exports to the U.S. in those countries" simply because "regime change is associated with a lot of turbulence, and that can scare away foreign business."

Denison said policymakers need to make an honest assessment of all the various costs involved in overthrowing a government and reverse the fundamental mindset by "assuming that all regime change operations are more likely to be failures than they are successes."

"If you're thinking about this in the beginning," he said, "you're much more likely to say, 'Is this worth it or not worth it?'"

Iraq Redux?

While you'd assume policymakers would learn the lessons of past failures such as the 2003 intervention of Iraq, history has a way of repeating itself. During his introduction, the Cato Institute's Preble wasted no time taking a shot across the bow at [John Hannah](#), an advocate of the Iraq War who served as Vice President Dick Cheney's national security advisor from 2005 to 2009.

"As if on cue ... Foreign Policy online published an essay by John Hannah calling for regime change in — wait for it — Iraq," Preble said animatedly to a few laughs in the audience. "Why? Because the person chosen by Iraq's democratically elected parliament to be the next prime minister was, in Hannah's estimation, 'a dead end for Iraq and the United States alike.'"

“Hannah, by the way, is a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, which seems ironic, but I digress,” Preble said.

To be fair, Hannah did not outright suggest military intervention (although he didn’t rule it out either). Rather, he urged the U.S. to support the legions of Iraqis who have protested their government’s failure to deliver economic prosperity or stability after years of political dysfunction.

Preble himself said that “we can understand a desire on the part of policymakers and many Americans to want to help foreign peoples throw off the yoke of oppression and tyranny.”

But he argues that instead of turning to military action, “other ways are more humane, more consistent with liberal principles and more likely to actually endure.”

In his Feb. 20 article titled “[Iraq Needs Regime Change Again](#),” Hannah said the U.S. should “invest less in the Iraqi government and more in the protest movement.”

He suggested that together with allied governments, Washington should sponsor resolutions at the U.N. Security Council, assist NGOs “working discreetly with the protesters” and sanction “protesters’ oppressors.”

It’s a familiar pattern. The road to war with Iraq was similarly paved with U.N. resolutions and sanctions.

His final recommendation, however, hints at a violent outcome. Hannah concluded that the U.S. “should make necessary adjustments now to its troop deployments in Iraq to limit their exposure during the country’s present upheaval while maintaining maximum flexibility to fulfill essential counterterrorism missions and respond aggressively to Iranian provocations.”

Hannah also blasts Tehran and its proxies for commandeering Iraqi politics. “The protests laid bare for all to see the unholy alliance that now exists between the post-2003 Iraqi governing class and the regime in Iran,” he wrote.

Yet he pointedly fails to mention that the origins of this alliance lie in the U.S.-led invasion, which ousted the Sunni-minority government and created an opening for Iran to expand its influence in the Shiite-majority nation.

Virtual Intervention

Today, however, neither large-scale military invasions nor covert operations may be necessary to influence another country’s political system. One audience member asked about the rising role of social media in this age when information both factual and false spreads so quickly.

Social media lowers the cost even more for regime change efforts, the panel replied. The most prominent example is Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when propaganda ads proliferated on Facebook and other social media platforms designed to stoke political tensions and, according to U.S. intelligence agencies, give Trump an edge over Hillary Clinton. No foot soldiers were necessary. Russian operatives did their work online.

It is impossible to know if the results of the presidential election would’ve been different had Russia not interfered, so it can’t definitively be said that Russia accomplished what we traditionally consider “regime change” in 2016. But the damage remains, along with the question

of whether Russia paved the way for the U.S. leader of its choice to win the 2016 election — and whether it will try to do so again in 2020.

“In terms of broader goals, in terms of sowing confusion and delegitimizing American democracy, I think they have been successful,” O’Rourke said. “And I would imagine that the Russians will continue to meddle in future elections.”