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Lindsey A. O'Rourke. ***Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War.*** Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781501730658 (hardcover, $41.95); 9781501761737 (paperback, $26.95).

5 November 2021 | https://issforum.org/to/ir13-3
Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Michael Horowitz | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by Joshua Rovner, American University 2
Review by Ryan Grauer, University of Pittsburgh 4
Review by Jenna Jordan, Georgia Institute of Technology 10
Review by Jon R. Lindsay, Georgia Institute of Technology 14
Response by Lindsey O'Rourke, Boston College 17

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Introduction by Joshua Rovner, American University

The United States repeatedly tried to overthrow foreign governments during the Cold War. More often than not, U.S. leaders chose covert regime change rather than overt military intervention. Their persistence suggests that the story of the Cold War has as much to do with secret maneuvers as it does with nuclear strategy or conventional military force. Again and again, Washington opted for the dark arts, despite its rhetorical commitment to liberal norms. There was something irresistible about manipulating foreign politics without claiming credit.

What was it? Why was the United States committed to regime change? And why did it choose covert action, given that its powerful military could easily have overwhelmed much smaller states? Lindsey O'Rourke's new book offers a novel theory, grounded in realism, to answer both questions. The United States opted for regime change not for ideological reasons, she concludes, but because it satisfied the demands of national security. U.S. leaders chose covert action based on their calculations of the costs, the stakes, and the expectations of success. Yet this seemingly rational decision-making process led to a surprising empirical pattern: O'Rourke's careful research shows that covert regime change usually failed.

The implications are important for theory, history, and contemporary national security policy. In his review, Jon Lindsay notes that O'Rourke has added to a recent burst of scholarship on the intersection of intelligence and international relations. The fact that states have long used secret services for the purposes of statecraft is not news, of course, but it has been under theorized. Digging into the details of covert action also sheds light on a key aspect of the Cold War competition. Scholars may have been dissuaded from investing their efforts in an inherently difficult area of study, but O'Rourke shows what is now possible through diligent historical gumshoe work. Finally, the focus on covert political manipulation speaks to contemporary issues. As Lindsay notes, modern technologies have lowered the barriers to foreign election meddling, though analysts disagree about whether they are likely to succeed.

The reviewers in this roundtable praise O'Rourke for her theoretical clarity and empirical rigor. For Ryan Grauer, the book makes a "compelling argument and a wealth of evidence accounting for variation in the incidence of and conduct in an array of American regime change operations during the Cold War." Jenna Jordan similarly calls it a "compelling, sophisticated, and original analysis of a state's decision to initiate overt or covert regime change and the consequences of doing so."

The reviewers also praise the ambition of the book. O'Rourke sets out to deliver new theory of covert regime change, a series of carefully designed case studies to test it, and an evaluation of the success rate during the Cold War. Lindsay notes that the focus on regime change, as opposed to other intelligence activities, makes the project tractable. That said, it opens up other questions, because regime change efforts involve espionage in the target country, analysis of local and regional conditions, and subterranean diplomacy with the would-be regime replacements. "The choice to focus on regime change is wise," he writes, "not only because it narrows the scope of a tractable research design, but also because it casts in sharp relief issues that are relevant for other forms of covert action and intelligence as well." IR scholars will benefit from O'Rourke's work as they grapple with the possible ways that intelligence informs state decisions – and the ways it affects international politics.

Path-breaking books answer some questions and inspire others. The reviewers suggest two areas that deserve more attention. First, O'Rourke's realist account makes sense inasmuch as it focuses on national security motives rather than ideological drivers of regime change. But structural theories are unconcerned with regime type or, indeed, the nature of particular leaders. Security-seeking states shouldn't care so much about the nature of particular governments abroad. As Grauer puts it, "If the anarchic structure of the system, combined with the capabilities of others, is what drives states' behavior, it is unclear why swapping out one set of leaders for another would plausibly result in a meaningfully altered security environment." Lindsay similarly notes the "variation in security motives that make one regime more attractive as an ally than another." Realist theory can't easily account for that variation, and structural realism can't explain why leaders care about variation in the first place.

Second, covert action's poor track record is puzzling, given O'Rourke's argument that the United States chose covert regime change as part of a rational calculation of means and ends. It failed repeatedly, and sometimes spectacularly. Grauer notes

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the "remarkable persistence with what was, much more often than not, a losing strategy," which highlights "the awkward fit between the rationalist assumptions undergirding O'Rourke's realist orientation and the historical record." The reviewers appreciate O'Rourke's book for dealing with the problem directly, though they do not find the discussion completely satisfying. More theoretical work may be needed to explain why policymakers find covert action so appealing, despite its disappointing success rate.

Perhaps the answer has to do with plausible deniability. Leaders may be more likely to take risks if they believe they can avoid taking the blame. They may knowingly gamble on covert long shots if they can disclaim responsibility for disaster. But this idea is not central to O'Rourke's argument. "Plausible deniability is essential in the decision to initiate regime change and the decision to use covert or overt operations," Jordan notes, but "while plausible deniability is central to all of the cases, the concept is based upon domestic level variables that fall outside of the theory's systemic framework." Integrating plausible deniability into a broader argument about national security motives may produce a more complete picture of when and why leaders opt for covert action. This will not be easy, however, because it will require merging a theory of international politics with a theory of foreign policy.

In the meantime, O'Rourke's book provides a wealth of important detail on the history of covert action in the Cold War. Such details will likely inspire continued work by the new generation of historians and IR theorists. Those who are interested in the role of subterranean statecraft will have a lot to work with.

Participants:

Lindsey O'Rourke is Associate Professor of Political Science at Boston College. Her research and teaching interests focus on international security, international relations theory, U.S. foreign policy, and military interventions. O'Rourke's first book, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2018) won the 2020 Best Book Award by the International Security Section of the International Studies Association. Associated research from that project has appeared in *International Security*, *Security Studies*, and other venues.

Joshua Rovner is associate professor in the School of International Service at American University, and the managing editor of *ISSF*.

Ryan Grauer is an Associate Professor of International Affairs in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. His research examines the sources and use of military power in the international arena. He is the author of *Commanding Military Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) and his work has been published in *World Politics*, the *European Journal of International Relations*, and *Security Studies*, among other outlets. At present, he is working on questions about the creation, organization, and operation of multinational coalitions in battle.

Jenna Jordan is an Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her book, *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations* with Stanford University Press (2019), evaluates the efficacy of leadership targeting as a counterterrorism strategy. Her work has been published in *International Security*, *Security Studies, Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic, Foreign Policy, CTC Sentinel, The National Interest, The Washington Quarterly*, among others.

Jon R. Lindsay is an Associate Professor at the School of Cybersecurity and Privacy and the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He is the author of *Information Technology and Military Power* (Cornell University Press, 2020) and an editor of *Cross-Domain Deterrence: Strategy in an Era of Complexity* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *China and Cybersecurity: Espionage, Strategy, and Politics in the digital Domain* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

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Review by Ryan Grauer, University of Pittsburgh

The systematic study of patterns of actors' behavior and outcomes in the field of International Relations (IR) is inherently dependent on scholars' ability to observe phenomena of interest. With the partial exception of counterfactual reasoning, all methods of IR inquiry require investigators to detect, scrutinize, and report on the choices, actions, and outcomes of relevant individuals, organizations, and states. For this reason, until very recently, scholars of interstate hostility and conflict have focused almost exclusively on dynamics and outcomes that were readily apparent in the historical record. Secret uses of force, which for classification restriction and other reasons have long been largely absent from that record, were only rarely investigated.[1] Lindsey A. O'Rourke's book on the drivers, conduct, and consequences of covert regime change is thus a welcome and important addition to the newly burgeoning literature on secret actions undertaken by states in the international system. In it, she not only offers what is to date the most robust catalogue of the United States' attempts at overt and covert foreign regime change during the Cold War, but also offers a largely compelling theoretical framework through which such actions can be understood. It is an impressive piece of scholarship that will serve as an essential part of the foundation on which future scholars of secret and covert action will build.

In investigating covert regime change, O'Rourke develops an argument that, while novel to the phenomena she investigates, is explicitly situated squarely in the realist IR tradition. States launch regime change operations, she argues, "to secure their national security interests in the intense security environment of the international system" (35). They choose to do so either covertly or overtly after rationally and carefully weighing tactical and strategic considerations like the costs, the likelihood of success, and the broader geopolitical value of such operations (48). And the outcomes of foreign regime change efforts must be understood in terms of whether the threat posed to the intervening state by the target state is ameliorated over the short- and long-term (75, 83). Security—as opposed to normative considerations of the goodness and badness of others, preferences for the specific form of governance in other states, economic interests, and bureaucratic pathologies—is the key she uses to unlock understanding of covert foreign regime change.

Turning first to the question of why states attempt foreign regime change at all, O'Rourke contends that security concerns motivate states to consider such actions (as opposed to leveraging economic or diplomatic pressure, threats of military force, limited military actions, or full-fledged war) in three circumstances: when replacing leaders abroad can help transform a currently hostile actor into a more quiescent one; prevent an actor from taking threatening actions in the future; or preserve the initiator's dominance over the target. The specific logic O'Rourke develops to connect regime change to an anticipated improvement in the intervener's security environment is slightly different in each scenario, but the essential unifying link is that, by replacing leaders who pursue policies which the intervener dislikes with other leaders who are likely to pursue policies more in line with the intervener's preferences, current, near-term, and longer-term security threats can be damped down.

If the desire to replace current or potentially hostile actors with less threatening alternatives was all that it took to drive states to pursue foreign regime change, we might expect to see untold numbers of such operations. In fact, however, we don't. Though, as O'Rourke points out, the United States was active in the pursuit of foreign regime change during the Cold War—initiating sixty-four covert and six overt operations between 1947 and 1989—one could imagine many more that, based simply on the desire to resolve real or potential threats, it could have undertaken. It did not, she argues, because two factors beyond a general security motivation are jointly required—but may not be sufficient—to push a would-be intervener into action: "chronic divergence of policy preferences between the intervening and target state," and "a plausible domestic political alternative to the target regime" (44).

[1] For a few notable prior efforts at systematic investigation of covert action, see Stephen Van Evera, "The Case Against Intervention," *The Atlantic Monthly*. 266 (July 1990): 72–80; David P. Forsythe, "Democracy, War, and Covert Action," *Journal of Peace Research* 29:4 (November 1992): 385–395; Patrick James and Glenn E. Mitchell II, "Targets of Covert Pressure: The Hidden Victims of the Democratic Peace," *International Interactions* 21:1 (February 1995): 85–107.

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Once a state decides that, for the noted reasons, it will undertake foreign regime change, it must then choose whether to do so in the open for all to see or in such a way that its participation in the replacement of leaders abroad remains secret. Here, as with the decision to intervene, O'Rourke argues that states are forward-thinking and rational in their calculations: they carefully consider the tactical and strategic merits of different courses of action and then act in accordance with the most beneficial, and least costly, option. The most significant tactical trade-off to consider when choosing between overt and covert operations is the cost of carrying out the attempt and its likelihood of success. Overt operations, because they tend to involve relatively large numbers of forces, substantial build-up times, and considerable diplomatic wrangling prior to their initiation, tend to be more costly than covert operations, which can avoid many of these hurdles. However, precisely because of their large numbers, extensive preparation, and diplomatic justifications, open efforts are also more likely to succeed than are secret operations. Because there is no a priori way to adjudicate the relative balance of costs and the chances of success, strategic considerations must be introduced into the equation to help make the final determination between overt and covert methods. How important is the success of the operation to the geopolitical positioning of the intervening state? Does projecting an appearance of restraint or resolve better serve the intervening state's signaling interests? The more important the success of the operation and the projection of resolve are for the intervening state, the more likely it is that the state will discount the costs of the operation and act overtly rather than covertly.

O'Rourke tests these arguments in three sets of case studies of American regime changes operations: a comparison of efforts in Albania, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia in the early years of the Cold War, an in-depth examination of actions in Vietnam between 1954 and 1964, and a similar in-depth examination of covert and overt actions undertaken against the Dominican Republic during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations. The cases are well-chosen for the purposes of assessing the logic and power of her theory. The Eastern European cases, for example, allow O'Rourke to assess both instances when regime change was attempted (Albania and Ukraine) and when it was not (Yugoslavia) in a single region during a defined period of time, permitting careful consideration of her security-oriented explanation alongside normative, governance-centric, economic, and bureaucratic pathology alternatives. Similarly, the Vietnam case allows O'Rourke to hold the would-be intervener and target constant over time as the relative degree of policy diverges between the two and the existence of a plausible domestic replacement varies. The Dominican Republic case, for its part, combines elements of both of the previous sets of cases and allows for variation in how interventions were conducted, with the United States attempting overt action, assassination, support for coup d'état, the backing of dissident groups, and secret support for preferred candidates during regularly scheduled elections at different points in time.

Beyond their analytical utility, these three sets of cases are well-executed. O'Rourke brings to bear a host of archival evidence, much previously released but a lot newly declassified as a result of her myriad FOIA requests, and the evidence is largely supportive of her claims. She carefully traces the dynamics of each case, showing how fluctuating security considerations in the context of the broader Cold War, the weighing of costs and the chances of success, and the relative importance of each potential target to American decision makers conditioned their decisions on whether and how to intervene. At the same time, her careful treatment demonstrates the implausibility of normative, governance-centric, economic, and bureaucratic pathology claims to account for American behavior, even in Eastern Europe, where normative and governance-centric claims should be on firm ground, and the Dominican Republic, which is often held up as a case of the CIA's bureaucratic pathologies driving attempts at regime change. Additionally, it should not go without mention that the cases are well-written and worth reading in their own right; the new historical information presented on these difficult-to-study cases is a boon to scholars.

Most authors (and readers) would be satisfied with a book that presents and tests a novel theory of covert foreign regime change. O'Rourke is not. Deploying her newly created dataset of American attempts at foreign regime change, she also assesses the consequences of such operations and finds that, whether success rates are measured over the short or long term, they are unlikely to achieve their intended goals. In the short term, only 39% of covert actions succeeded in replacing targeted leaders. Moreover, the United States was most likely to succeed when it moved against weak states that were both democratic and an ally—targets that were perhaps not the most pressing threats that the U.S. confronted during the Cold War. Over the long term, the consequences of attempted foreign regime change appear even more bleak. When foreign leaders were successfully toppled, the replacement regimes were no less likely to engage in a militarized interstate dispute (MID) with the United States over the following decade than were states against which no regime change attempt was

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made. When regime change efforts failed, though, the surviving state was considerably more likely to engage in a MID with the United States. Successfully installed regimes were also no more or less likely to cast United Nations votes with, adopt a similar foreign policy portfolio to, or increase trade with the United States. Those that survived a regime change attempt, however, were all significantly more likely to diverge from American preferences. Perhaps more troubling, targeted states, especially those that survived an attempted regime change, were more likely to experience a civil war and/or mass killing in the years following the American operation. The United States' foreign regime change efforts, which were intended to replace leaders pursuing policies the U.S. disliked with those more likely to pursue policies it did, were exceptionally poor bets.

O'Rourke thus offers a compelling argument and a wealth of evidence accounting for variation in the incidence of and conduct in an array of American regime change operations during the Cold War. As one of the first movers in the area of inquiry, she has articulated an argument with which future scholars will necessarily have to contend. However, like the first soldiers going over the top on the Western Front during World War I, O'Rourke's claim is also an attractive target at which others can and will take aim. To my mind, there are a few outstanding questions about her argument and evidence, the answers to which are not readily apparent. These questions are primarily bound up with O'Rourke's explicit situation of her claim within the realist tradition, though they do not center on whether realism, per se, is an appropriate analytical framework through which to analyze covert regime change. Rather, the point I wish to raise is that if one takes realism, and especially offensive realism, seriously, the incidence, conduct, and consequences of American attempts at covert regime change during the Cold War still seem somewhat perplexing after reading her book.

There are many variants of realism, but the core tenets to which virtually all realists subscribe are that states are the primary actors in an anarchic international system, and that states are rational actors that behave strategically in pursuit of the accumulation of power sufficient to, at minimum, ensure their own survival vis-à-vis other states of varying levels of military capability.[2] Offensive realists further contend that other states' intentions are unknowable and, as a consequence, states are compelled to maximize their military power, rather than settle for capabilities sufficient to ensure survival.[3]

Starting from this basic realist perspective on the nature of international relations, the fact of foreign regime change is itself a curious puzzle. If the anarchic structure of the system, combined with the capabilities of others, is what drives states' behavior, it is unclear why swapping out one set of leaders for another would plausibly result in a meaningfully altered security environment: the newly installed regime would face the same structural incentives as the displaced regime and one would expect behavioral patterns to persist. To her credit, O'Rourke acknowledges the point. Her response to the objection is not fully satisfying, though. She notes that, despite realist expectations of states' agnosticism about other states' specific regime configurations and leaders, "the frequency with which states launch regime changes suggests that leaders [of intervening states] care a great deal about regime change and believe that by changing the leadership of another state, they can change that state's behavior" (36). The fact that leaders believe regime change will affect the behavior of troublesome others is almost certainly true (and is much in evidence in the case studies presented in the book), but it undercuts the power of realist underpinnings of the argument's logic to a degree: even if the latent desire to do something about an actual or potential threat is fostered through the admixture of anarchy and states' differing capabilities, we still lack a specific explanation of what it is that is driving interveners' choice to engage in this specific type of behavior. This tension is especially apparent in hegemonic regime change operations.[4] O'Rourke explicitly invokes offensive realist logic to explain

[2] Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Perennial, 2001); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson, 6th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979).

[3] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

[4] O'Rourke designates as hegemonic those actions that are undertaken in pursuit of regional preponderance. Instances of this type of operation total nearly one third of all U.S. covert and overt regime change attempts during the Cold War. These efforts are in contrast to offensive operations, which are undertaken to replace governments of states that are current military threats, and preventive

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such efforts but, by the tenets of the claim alone, one would expect existing or aspiring hegemons to weaken or seek to overawe potentially troublesome neighbors, not open the black box of the state and try to align policy preferences through regime manipulation. It is unclear from a theoretical standpoint why good security-seeking realist states should ever believe that changing out regimes should result in improved security environments. Accordingly, realism can only offer a partial explanation for why states pursue regime change.

If selection into foreign regime change operations were the only way in which O'Rourke's argument sat uncomfortably within the realist tradition, one might simply dismiss these qualms as theoretical quibbles that impose an undue purity test on the claim, especially given her occasionally eclectic drawing upon non-realist arguments like those offered by Alexander Wendt and Daniel Freidheim on intersubjective structures of authority, Robert Keohane on the use of norms and institutions to increase transparency in the intentions of others, and John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan on the socialization of leaders to bolster the theory.[5] Yet there also seem to be incongruities between realist expectations for patterns of state behavior and the conduct of foreign regime change operations. Specifically, the United States did not seem to have behave terribly rationally in this realm over the course of the Cold War.

O'Rourke convincingly demonstrates that the United States routinely failed to achieve its objectives in replacing targeted regimes. For example, with respect to the question of whether or not targeted regimes were replaced, in operations launched for offensive purposes, the United States failed in its first eighteen attempts and did not see success until the Soviets withdrew from, and American-backed dissidents came to power in, Afghanistan in 1989 (103). That is, virtually the entirety of the Cold War passed without a single success in the many United States' offensive covert regime change attempts. The picture is less grim in its operations launched for preventive and hegemonic operations, where the United States successfully replaced regimes in approximately half of its attempts (109, 117), but the success rate is still far from encouraging. If states behave as realists expect and rationally consider their options and pursue the path most likely to result in the acquisition of power sufficient to ensure survival (or more, for offensive realists), they should take prior experiences into account when making future plans. In such a world, the continued American reliance on an infrequently successful tool is difficult to explain.

The awkward fit between the rationalist assumptions undergirding O'Rourke's realist orientation and the historical record is most apparent in the United States' conduct of offensive covert attempts intended to change Communist regimes during the first fifteen years of the Cold War. These instances are precisely those in which, if the tenets of realism can help explain state behavior in the covert realm, the theoretical approach should offer the most insight: the United States was engaged in a global bipolar rivalry with the Soviet Union, overt action to overthrow regimes allied to Moscow would almost necessarily risk escalation, potentially to nuclear levels, and blown or failed covert operations could generate many of the same risks. Careful, sober, rational calculation of the costs, likelihood of success, and strategic implications of such efforts should be expected. While O'Rourke shows the United States to have carefully weighed the costs and benefits of covert regime change in the case studies presented, it is important to note that all of the examined incidents took place early in the Cold War. There is considerably less evidence in the book that the United States continued to carefully consider its options—and rationally integrate acquired knowledge about the conduct of foreign regime change operations—over time. As detailed in Table 5.1 (103), the United States began fifteen offensive covert regime change operations in 1949 and 1950, with thirteen

operations, we are undertaken to prevent potentially threatening states taking unwanted actions. Both offensive and preventive operations constituted approximately one third of the United States' total number of covert regime change efforts during the Cold War.

[5] G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization* 44:3 (Summer 1990): 283–315; Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, "Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empire and the East German State," *International Organization* 49:4 (Autumn 1995): 689–721; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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ending in failure by 1956.[6] Despite this spectacularly bad track record, the United States appears not to have learned how to more accurately assess the likelihood such efforts would succeed and began three new, also unsuccessful, offensive covert regime change operations between 1958 and 1961. Neither does the United States appear to have learned how to gauge the costs and capabilities of specific regime-change tactics: in each of these eighteen cases, support for dissident groups was the modus operandi.[7] It is commonly, if inaccurately, said that one definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results. The United States seems to be guilty of irrationality by this standard, throwing into question realist claims regarding the rationality of states in their decision-making as they seek to navigate the treacherous waters of international relations.

Perhaps, one might argue, the change of presidential administrations, the secrecy involved, and the relative newness of consistent American use of the method renders fifteen years insufficient time for the United States to have learned the lessons of failure and updated its beliefs about the costs and likelihood of success of covert foreign regime change operations. The behavior of the United States in subsequent decades does not inspire confidence that the significant learning realists would expect took place. In the last decade of the Cold War, for example, the United States launched sixteen new covert regime change operations: five offensive, six preventive, and five hegemonic. Nine of the sixteen attempts featured the provision of support for dissidents[8] and only six succeeded. Given the remarkably poor track record of American regime change operations to that point—and especially the repeated failure of efforts reliant on support for dissidents—the number and type of these attempts is surprising. At the very least, the United States does not seem to have significantly improved its ability to weigh the costs and judge the chances of success in each case.

What explains this remarkable persistence with what was, much more often than not, a losing strategy? Several possibilities exist, a few of which I note here, but none seem particularly capable of reconciling realist expectations and American behavior. First, it is possible that the United States was engaged in some geographic updating about the likelihood of success of offensive and preventative covert regime change attempts—the majority of the early operations were conducted in Europe while the majority of the later attempts were made in Africa and Asia. Yet early failed actions in China, North Korea, and Indonesia and an aborted attempt in Syria should have helped signal the fraught general, rather than regional, dynamics at play. Second, it might be that, though O'Rourke distinguishes between offensive, preventive, and hegemonic covert regime change operations, American policy makers did not. Though offensive covert regime change attempts consistently failed during the first fifteen years of the Cold War, three of the five preventive attempts and the sole hegemonic attempt launched and were completed before 1958 succeeded. The United States' overall success rate for covert regime change operations that were launched and completed between 1947 and 1958 thus stood at four of nineteen. However, that record, while offering some hope for success in the following years, is still quite dismal and offers only a slender reed of support for the notion that the United States was rationally updating its assessments based on prior experience when considering the costs and likelihood of success in later operations.

Third, it could be that the United States, by virtue of its status and power in the international system, was relatively indifferent to the costs and low likelihood of success in covert regime change operations, and especially offensive actions. If this is the case, though, it undermines the realist-derived strategic logic of the endeavor: if changing the regime of a hostile Communist state aligned with the Soviet Union would be desirable to achieve but failure of such an attempt would be only marginally inconveniencing, it is difficult to argue that systemic pressures compelled the United States to do something—especially something as hostile and risky as regime change—about the troublesome others. Finally, it could also be that near-pathological hostility toward Communism animated several successive American administrations and covert regime change

[6] The other two—operations carried out against the leadership of China and the Soviet Union—would carry on for a few more years before ultimately failing.

[7] Cuba is a partial exception; assassination attempts on then-Prime Minister Fidel Castro were made alongside the provision of support to dissidents.

[8] Three of the nine also involved democracy promotion and one involved support for dissidents paired with a coup attempt.

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operations offered the presidents an outlet to 'do something' without incurring too much risk. But that sort of psychological explanation would clearly fall afoul of realism's rationality dictate. The answer to the question of why the United States stubbornly persisted in its conduct of foreign regime change operations over time when the revealed costs, likelihood of success, and strategic consequences of both successful and unsuccessful actions should have led to significant updating about the virtues and methods of such efforts is unclear.

All of this is a circuitous way of arriving back at O'Rourke's argument that chronic policy friction and the presence of plausible alternative leaders are the extra something that drive otherwise good realist states to pursue regime change. These factors seem plausible—and, indeed, in the case studies appear well-supported—but they are relatively untethered from the corpus of realist theory. Accordingly, it is not clear when and why security-seeking states should take these specific factors into account when deciding whether, in general, regime change is an appropriate course of action. And it is unclear what the thresholds should be for policy friction to count as "chronic" and alternative leaders to count as "plausible" in particular cases. Should we expect that states have relatively constant thresholds, or should we expect such standards to vary over space and time? If, as the United States discovered early in the Cold War, covert regime change operations prove more difficult than anticipated, should states' subsequent judgments of sufficiently chronic policy differences and acceptably plausible leadership alternatives rise such that future potential interventions have a higher threshold to meet before they are executed? If standards do rise, how do we think about the relative rationality of operations carried out at different points in time? If standards do not rise, what does that imply about the rationality—and realist orientation—of states carrying out foreign regime change operations? Such questions seem essential to answer in future work on covert foreign regime change.

These questions aside, O'Rourke's book is a signal contribution to the study of secrecy in international relations. In offering and testing one of the first systematic theoretical explanations for covert regime change operations, it both demonstrates that the serious study of hidden behavior is possible and sets the stage for much future work in what is arguably the most exciting developing literature in IR—two achievements to be roundly lauded.

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Review by Jenna Jordan, Georgia Institute of Technology

Lindsey O'Rourke's *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* is an impressive work on regime change. It offers a compelling, sophisticated, and original analysis of a state's decision to initiate overt or covert regime change and the consequences of doing so.[1] O'Rourke examines covert and overt cases of regime change initiated by the United States between 1947 and 1989. Of these operations, twenty-five covert operations resulted in a U.S.-backed government assuming power, while thirty-nine failed to achieve their goal. The book presents a theoretically grounded argument for the causes and consequences of regime change and uses both quantitative analyses and detailed case studies of U.S. efforts at regime change in Albania, Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Vietnam, and the Dominican Republican. O'Rourke argues that regime change offers a potentially more effective solution to difficult interstate conflicts than other foreign policy initiatives, such as negotiation, brute force, or coercion. Regime change holds the possibility of installing a foreign government that shares the intervening state's preferences and interests, essentially transforming adversaries into allies.

O'Rourke develops a realist explanation for regime change. She argues that states pursue regime change "to increase their relative power within the international system – by overthrowing current militaries, dividing enemy alliances, and ensuring that their existing allies and states within their sphere of influence are governed by leaders who will remain committed to that alliance" (14). Accordingly, O'Rourke identifies two necessary, but not sufficient, preconditions for intervention. First, the dispute must be based on the perception of divergent and irreconcilable national security interests. Second, the intervener must be able to identify a plausible political alternative to the government it is trying to overthrow and replace. While these broad systemic factors create incentives for policy makers to pursue regime change and form the basis of the realist argument, the case studies focus on domestic level variables to account for variation in the decision regarding whether to engage in regime change and whether that effort should be overt or covert. I do not mean to claim that these explanations are not accurate or unconvincing; O'Rourke makes an excellent case for her arguments in the case studies, tracing the causal mechanism in each chapter. I simply mean to note the levels of analysis tension between the theory and the empirics.[2]

O'Rourke argues that states carry out regime change operations, "to secure their national security interests in the intense security environment of the international system" (35). Explanations that focus on domestic politics, norms, economics, and regime type are driven national security concerns, yet there is also an important theoretical distinction between international structure and a state's security interests. In this account, a state's the decision-making processes are based on the internal stability of the target state, leadership alternatives, and the domestic political climate in the intervening state. The initial decision to overthrow a target state's government may be driven by national security concerns, which are distinct from structural concerns consideration. In O'Rourke's discussion of containing and rolling back the influence of the Soviet Union, it was clear that attempts at regime change were a way for states to balance in a bipolar system. This was also true of in the case of the Dominican Republic. While these are both examples in which the United States understood national security as a function of the balance of power, within the context of the Cold War, it is not clear how regime change in a different context would be driven by concerns about relative power, particularly when intervening in a weaker state. How do states evaluate relative power? What factors do they consider?

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[1] For other studies of covert intervention see Michael Poznansky, *In the Shadow of International Law: Covert Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Michael Poznansky, "Feigning Compliance: Covert Action and International Law," *International Studies Quarterly* 63:1 (March 2019): 72-84; Alexander B. Downes and Mary Lauren Lilley, "Overt Peace, Covert War?: Covert Intervention and the Democratic Peace," *Security Studies* 19:2 (2010): 266-306.. or a study why state covertly intervene in foreign wars, see Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[2] For examples of other studies that utilize domestic determinants in systemic theories of international relations see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Rachel Whitlark, *All Options on the Table: Leaders, Preventive war, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence Organizations, and Assessments of Intentions in International Relations.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

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O'Rourke identifies three types of regime change –offensive, preventive and hegemonic. Offensive operations are driven by a revisionist strategy to replace existing governments with less hostile regimes in order to decrease the threat posed by an adversary. Within the context of U.S. efforts at regime change during the Cold War, offensive operations were part of the larger strategy of rolling back Soviet influence, increasing U.S. relative power, and gaining access to strategically important territory. Preventive operations target states that do not pose a major military threat, and may even be allies, but decision makers believe that they could become a future threat. The motivation for preventive regime change is to maintain the status quo and ensure that the intervener does not suffer a decline in relative power. Finally, states can engage in regime change in pursuit of regional hegemony. Hegemonic regime change can be offensive in order to attain a dominant position over a weaker state, or defensive to protect oneself from external threats. O'Rourke writes that the defining feature of hegemonic regime change is the "desire to maintain a hierarchical relationship between the intervener and target state as part of the former's efforts to establish regional hegemony" (40).

Offensive operations target current threats while preventive operations target future threats. Both operations involve replacing regimes with which the U.S. has a dispute in order to mitigate a threat and maintain a favorable balance of power, but it is the severity and immediacy of the disputes that differ. As a result, much of these differences hinge on the intention of the initiator rather than strictly speaking, the difference in threat or power as a realist theory would posit. According to a realist theory of international politics, whether an operation is preventive or offensive, states should seek to maintain or achieve a favorable balance of power in the pursuit of regional hegemony. O'Rourke's theory is therefore stretching the boundaries of traditional realist canon. Doing so is perfectly acceptable, though the book would benefit from being explicit about this move.

The theoretical arguments presented in this book are broadly focused on explaining the causes and consequences of regime change, and O'Rourke identifies three conditions under which decision makers choose to carry out the operation – the predicted cost of the mission, the likelihood of its success, and its strategic benefits. States intervene overtly when the costs of operations will be low and its strategic benefits will be high. Additionally, while states may prefer overt operations under these conditions, if prior covert operations have failed then they will also choose an overt policy. Policymakers may also be more likely to use overt means if public opinion supports an operation, and finally they may conduct operations overtly if decision makers feel that the operation needs to be conducted quickly and that they do not have the time to acquire the intelligence necessary to conduct a covert operation. By contrast, O'Rourke skillfully examines the potential benefits in conducting a covert operation. However, an important question remains: how do states weight material costs against ideological considerations such as the benefit of containing the spread of communism? While states will carry out covert operations when it pays to do so and when they want to reserve the right to plausible deniability, the decision itself rests more upon internal variables than assessments regarding relative power and threat.

Plausible deniability is essential in the decision to initiate regime change and the decision to use covert or overt operations. O'Rourke claims that plausible deniability is difficult against a powerful adversary such as the Soviet Union, which often has extensive networks of intelligence operatives. And yet, the cases under examination all occur within the context of balancing the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and thus plausible deniability would be hard to maintain. While history may not allow for the variation we would want, it would have been useful to explore at least in a small way, cases demonstrating the possibility of real plausible deniability.

O'Rourke concludes that covert conduct is generally the preferred method of intervention. However, the decision is driven by the belief that while a covert operation "*moderately* decreases the likelihood that an operation will succeed, it *dramatically* decreases it costs, leading policy makers to conclude that they might as well attempt an operation even if it appears unlikely to succeed" (60, emphasis in original). This is an intuitive argument, but it is theoretically unsatisfying. Why would policy makers pay even minimal costs if the odds of success were low? It seems that while security concerns would come into play, O'Rourke argues that policy makers might use a different calculation when considering offensive or preventive measures, but this is not explored fully. In order to provide further significance to the classification of regime change, it would be interesting to consider whether the metrics for success and the means by which policy-makers weigh these tactical and strategic considerations differ across operation type. While covert operations have lower costs, they also have a lower chance

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of success. Given the focus on covert regime change, a more theoretically grounded argument for why a state decides to conduct covert operations seems quite important.

Moving to the empirical work, O'Rourke conducts an impressive empirical analysis to examine whether and when regime change is successful and makes a distinction between the short-term objectives of overthrowing the target regime and the long-term consequences of these operations. She finds that in 39% of cases, U.S.-initiated covert regime change succeeded in replacing the targets, compared to 66% of overt operations. When evaluating long-term consequences, the data show that while regime change is rarely effective, covert regime change was successful against weak governments with little geostrategic value. The empirical findings are rich and instructive, and the concept of long-term success is conceptually fascinating. Developing and evaluating measures of effectiveness is a challenge facing policy makers deciding whether to initiate covert operations. O'Rourke's study underscores the importance of developing clear metrics for evaluating how scholars and decisions makers evaluate long-term success and identifying the theoretical tradition guiding those decisions. At the same time, and harkening back to theoretical considerations noted above, the argument that states would spend precious resources and pay costs to overthrow a government with little geostrategic value seems inconsistent with a realist take on regime change.

O'Rourke references several measures to evaluate the efficacy of regime change, including the nature of the U.S. relationship with the target state, the likelihood of cooperation, the ability to undermine Soviet influence, the creation of allies, and the preferences of the target state. In quantitatively evaluating the consequences of regime change, she examines whether the U.S. successfully overthrew a target government, and the long-term effects that regime change has had upon militarized interstate disputes, democratization, civil war, and mass killing. These outcomes are clearly specified, yet they are not examined within the context of measures of regime change efficacy. For example, the occurrence of conflict is important, but it does not address whether efforts at regime change succeeded in altering the actual policy preferences and interests of the target state. If the underlying goal of regime change is to increase cooperation with the U.S., then the long-term measures are not the correct metric for evaluation. Part of this problem is the difficulty in identifying the goals of the operation, a particular challenge facing studies of covert operations, and despite this difficulty, *Covert Regime Change* advances the knowledge of how to evaluate and understand the goals and process of regime change.

In O'Rourke's view, policy makers expect that successful regime change will alter the policy preferences of a target state. The logic is simple; once a new government is in place, it should pursue the intervener's preferred policies. She writes that a "relationship is transformed into a cooperative one" (42). More specifically, the process of regime change should alter the underlying policy preference of a foreign government. Once states have mutual interests and shared values, then regime change can reduce uncertainty about the intentions of adversaries. The argument that states would prefer other states to have similar preferences and interests is intuitive and appealing, yet there are some key challenges in assessing the outcomes and effectiveness of regime change.

First, O'Rourke claims that regime change is better suited to conflicts with a long history of disagreement. However, in many cases the dispute was driven by concerns about the spread of the Soviet Union and Communism, not by misaligned policy preferences. As a result, the metric by which regime change is evaluated seems more specific to the overall Cold War and less about specific long-standing disputes. Second, the book examines containment against Albania, Yugoslavia, and Ukraine as examples of offensive regime change, the case of rollback in Vietnam as preventive regime change, and the actions in the Dominican Republic as an example of hegemonic regime change. O'Rourke argues that U.S. efforts in the Dominican Republic were driven by the desire to maintain regional hegemony. She writes, "US policymakers feared that if a communist government came to power there, their success could inspire a series of defections from the US-led regional order" (224). However, this is somewhat indistinguishable to the concerns facing policy makers within the context of containment – fear about the spread of Soviet power and Communism. Conceptually, the additional category of hegemonic regime change seems to be subsumed by rollback and containment. Furthermore, regional aspirations appear to have driven all of the cases of regime change, both offensive and preventive. O'Rourke's realist account begins with the assumption that states want global hegemony and are satisfied with regional hegemony. Thus, whether the U.S. was rolling back or containing the Soviet Union, regional hegemony seems to have been a constant concern.

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Finally, in chapter eight on rollback, O'Rourke argues that while many of the U.S. covert operations behind the Iron curtain had the objective of regime change, "the objectives for these interventions may have fallen short of regime change and instead sought to raise the costs for the Soviet Union of its continued domination of the region" (136). Measures of effectiveness shifted to the slowing down of Soviet exploitation of human and material resources in the satellites, ensuring popular resistance and non-cooperation with Soviet policies, and strengthening forces to minimize Soviet assets in the case of war. These goals were clearly important and were integral to U.S. Cold War efforts, but this shift in goals highlights the difficulty in evaluating effectiveness. In theory, the measures of efficacy were articulated as a change in policy preferences and interests in order to create regimes favorable to the U.S. with the goal of encouraging cooperation, while in practice, the goals of regime change were largely context specific.

Overall *Covert Regime Change* provides an outstanding and convincing study of regime change with important theoretical and policy contributions. It is the most comprehensive study of its kind and advances our knowledge on a much understudied and important topic, which O'Rourke address with a compelling and thoughtful analysis. She presents a strong case for understanding why states prefer covert regime change and why it is often not effective. The tensions that the reader encounters are understandable as any study exploring a challenging topic must wrestle with similarly thorny matters. Nevertheless, these challenges are only one of the reasons why this comprehensive study of the causes and consequences of regime change should be required for scholars interested in the conduct of foreign policy and the history of regime chance. Likewise, policy makers would be well advised to consider O'Rourke's research when weighing the costs and benefits of regime change.

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Review by Jon R. Lindsay, Georgia Institute of Technology

Lindsey O'Rourke has written a terrific book that should be required reading for anyone hoping to understand the secret side of statecraft. The information revolution has dramatically increased the opportunities for deception and subversion, so there ought to be more and more people seeking such an understanding. Her book is part of an emerging wave of scholarship that explores the role of intelligence and covert action in international relations.[1] They have always been important in practice but have not always received the attention they deserve, in part because of the secret and deceptive nature of the phenomena. The contemporary significance of secret statecraft is sometimes obscured by the fact that we have invented a new concept—cybersecurity—to describe the fact that a lot of covert operations today are conducted by, with, and through information technology, and not just by state agencies.[2] Thus it is refreshing to read a book that focuses on the political logic of covert action rather than its technological manifestations.

That political logic could not be more relevant. O'Rourke's book was released in the midst of what is perhaps the most significant espionage scandal in American history—Russia's covert influence campaign in support of the presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump in 2016 and its reverberating repercussions in the wake of the report from special counsel Robert S. Mueller, III. One might ask what a study of American regime change efforts during the Cold War has to teach us about Russian cyber operations targeting the United States itself in the twenty-first century. The answer, as it turns out, is quite a lot. As O'Rourke points out, "history is so rife with cases of covert regime change that it is difficult to imagine the modern world without it" (2).

Intelligence consists broadly of three different activities: the collection and analysis of information about foreign actors, the covert influence or disruption of those actors, and counterintelligence activities to block foreign collection of data and influence. O'Rourke focuses on the second of these, and only a subset therein—covert regime change. Covert action can also aim to change policies without changing the regime, or more directly to advance goals like counterproliferation or counterterrorism, either in opposition to a target or in secret collusion. Yet the choice to focus only on regime change is wise, not only because it narrows the scope of a tractable research design, but also because it casts in sharp relief issues that are relevant for other forms of covert action and intelligence as well. The political stakes of regime change are high, for the target regime threatened with its demise certainly, but also for the intervening state that feels compelled to maintain a low profile in order to preserve options and avoid escalation. Covert regime change highlights the political and operational constraints that make any type of intelligence a difficult business. Secret operations are tantalizing because they seem to offer policymakers a set of low-cost, high-payoff political options. In rare cases they do indeed; consider, for example, the Zimmermann Telegram that hastened American entry into World War I or the signals intelligence that confirmed Japanese plans for Midway. More often than not, however, the practice of intelligence is a cumulative activity full of friction and unintended consequences.

The political paradox at the heart of O'Rourke's book is that policymakers are more attracted to covert rather than overt regime change even though it is less likely to succeed. She documents 64 covert interventions by the United States from 1947 to 1989, as compared to 6 overt attempts, a ratio of 10 to 1. She codes only 25 of these as a nominal success (because the U.S. client assumed power), but several of them created some dismal blowback. To change a regime, covert action

[1] See, inter alia, Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Michael Poznansky, *In the Shadow of International Law: Covert Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[2] Arguing that cybersecurity is best understood through an intelligence lens, see Thomas Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place* (London: Hurst, 2013); Jon R. Lindsay, "Cyber Espionage," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cybersecurity*, ed. Paul Cornish (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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appears to be a second-best option. The best option in terms of effectiveness, if not efficiency, would be overt military intervention, because it mobilizes sufficient resources and audience costs to enhance both the capacity and the commitment to follow through. States that do not care enough to send the very best, however, either because they are deterred by the prospect of escalation or simply do not value the policy object enough, may instead choose to gamble on a low-cost covert option (so long as they meet O'Rourke's threshold conditions of irreconcilable interests and an available local client).

The covert actor's sensitivity to potential escalation and embarrassment is consistent with an important argument made by Austin Carson in another recent book on covert action.[3] O'Rourke, however, points toward a different and more tragic signaling mechanism. Whereas Carson highlights the ability of covert action to signal both resolve and restraint, O'Rourke highlights the possibility that covert action may just as likely signal a lack of resolve by a state unwilling to go all in for regime change. A target facing covert intervention, who is necessarily all in, thus has all the reason in the world to resist it vigorously, and to disclose the effort publicly, secure in the knowledge that it cares more about the stakes than the intervener does.

If covert regime change faces steep odds at the get-go, the operational difficulties of covert action compound the problems. Policymakers like the idea of getting something for nothing, but that means that the covert operation will probably receive limited resources. Policymakers like the idea of plausible deniability, but that means that covert operators will likely receive ambiguous directions and must take pains to maintain cover. Policymakers like the idea of maintaining the fiction of moral righteousness, but the proxies who are available to do the job will often get their hands dirty. Policymakers like the idea of changing the preferences of a recalcitrant regime, but that means that the target adopts robust counterintelligence measures against such an eventuality. According to O'Rourke, "the combined effect of these four factors"—ambiguous direction rooted in a desire for deniability, poor oversight and agency problems, a tendency to abandon of covert allies, and counterintelligence efforts in the target state— "is that policymakers often pursue covert regime changes that are doomed to failure from the start" (56).

In case after case, O'Rourke describes underfunded operations by the CIA making common cause with unsavory characters, like the organization run by Reinhard Gehlen, who was the chief of Wehrmacht intelligence in Eastern Europe during World War II. Gehlen employed many former Nazis, including Gestapo and SS officers guilty of war crimes, and Nazi sympathizers in Albania and Ukraine. As O'Rourke points out, "US Army officials agreed not to charge Gehlen or his associates with war crimes in exchange for his expertise, his files, and access to his contacts" (132). Yet the return on investment of this Faustian bargain was poor. The Gehlen organization's operations with the CIA tended to fail miserably as its agents were captured, killed, or paraded in public mock trials. The embarrassment of failure in morally ambiguous gambles, O'Rourke implies, tends to heighten the stink of hypocrisy. In sum, the risks of covert regime change will often be higher than contemporaries may be willing to acknowledge in advance.

O'Rourke's realist theory of covert regime change raises a certain puzzle that she readily acknowledges: "Why would a state care who is in charge of a foreign government if domestic politics are irrelevant for explaining international relations?" (13). Realism, especially in its structural varieties, emphasizes that states respond to incentives that are rooted in the international balance power for enhancing their security and/or power. Yet regime change aims to interfere in the domestic politics of the target state. One question is why realist policymakers should be attracted to regime change if they understand that states are motivated by realism. O'Rourke points out that one reason that even nominally successful interventions fail to deliver policy goals is that the new regime often finds itself confronted with the same structural position as the old one. It isn't completely clear whether her theory depends on ignorance, misperception, megalomania, or false hope on the part of policymakers, or whether it entails a more substantive critique of realism itself. O'Rourke's argument is generally convincing in asserting that covert regime change is motivated by security (rather than ideology, democratic norms, rogue intelligence agencies, or economic opportunity), but this move only highlights variation in security motives that make one regime more

[3] Carson, *Secret Wars*.

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attractive as an ally than another. This begs the question of whether some regimes are more or less likely to prefer covert action in the first place.

If a theory of international politics motivates covert regime change, it seems that it must run through a theory of foreign policy. I would argue that this conclusion is more broadly relevant for the study of intelligence. Intelligence operations, to a degree that is unequaled in overt diplomatic and military operations, are bound up with the organizational and cultural institutions of the target, as well as, increasingly, shared material infrastructure and information systems. Intelligence is concerned with sociotechnical institutions precisely because intelligence aims to exploit or subvert them. As shared institutions and infrastructures become more important, then intelligence becomes more important too. Institutions can be important as a source of preferences, which is what O'Rourke emphasizes, and they can also be important as a source of power, for instance the "modern system" doctrine of force employment.[4] If institutions are a source of power and preferences, then it stands to reason that hard-nosed realists would want to influence them, and would be sensitive to attempts at influence. Moreover, the operational constraints of working within institutions (to maintain secrecy, access, deniability, stability, etc.) makes it that much more difficult to change them. There is a self-limiting dynamic that emerges from the structure of the intelligence problem. A larger story remains to be told about why realist competition in an institutionally dense environment so often takes the form of intelligence, in all of its forms.

O'Rourke's book has broader implications even as its empirical scope is limited to American interventions during the Cold War. Methodologically this choice enables a tidy research design that combines quantitative comparison and qualitative case studies, drawing on an impressive set of primary sources from an era that is far enough in the past to get over the self-hiding aspect of much covert action. Questions remains unanswered about how and whether the causes, conduct, and consequences of covert regime change vary with different actors and different technologies of intelligence. Do more conspiratorial political cultures in the Middle East or the former Soviet sphere have more or less propensity for engaging in regime change, or achieving any success? Certainly, their paranoia makes them harder targets. Longitudinally, skullduggery and courtly machinations, as alluring as they are unreliable, have been a feature of international politics for millennia, but to what degree? Is covert regime change on the rise or ebb as political norms and technologies change?

My hunch based on O'Rourke's logic is that it is a little bit of both. If technology is providing more opportunities to interfere with elections and such at lower cost, then it will be more attractive to states seeking to shape the preferences of their competitors. Yet by the same token these efforts ought to have even less of a chance at success. The lower barriers to entry for covert action ought to select for even less resolved attempts at regime change. As a result, we should expect to see more attempts at influence yet less influence, precisely because the sociotechnical institutions that both enable and constrain intelligence are so much more sophisticated. This perspective has important implications for thinking about so-called gray-zone conflict in the modern era, exemplified by Russia's combination of unmarked special-forces and cyber operations in its near abroad. Russia's interventions are highly constrained by its concerns about confrontation with the West. Gray-zone conflict is a sign of weakness as much as a display of strength. The detection of an attempted covert regime change by a competitor should, ironically, offer some solace to the target: it could be worse.

[4] Stephen D. Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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Response by Lindsey O'Rourke, Boston College

I am extremely grateful for and humbled by the three thoughtful reviews of my book. It is clear from each reviewer's comments that they not only carefully read my book but also took the time to expertly grapple with its theory, case studies, and policy implications. My sincerest gratitude to Joshua Rovner for his incisive introduction, to Ryan Grauer, Jenna Jordan, and Jon Lindsay for their excellent reviews, and to Michael Horowitz and H-Diplo/ISSF for organizing this exchange. Although each reviewer approached the project from a different research background, I found that they all summarize the book's theory fairly, raise numerous legitimate criticisms, and thoughtfully extend its arguments to their own areas of expertise. Rather than responding to each review on a point-by-point basis, I will for the sake of space and clarity organize my response around one dominant theme within all of the critiques: my theory's relationship to realism.

Is My Theory Really Realist?

All three reviewers point out that while I explicitly position the project within the realist tradition (13), some aspects of my argument potentially contradict the theory's core theoretical assumptions.[15] Jordan writes that "the theory does not seem to be a realist explanation for regime change." Grauer concurs, noting, "the point I wish to raise is that if one takes realism, and especially offensive realism, seriously, the incidence, conduct, and consequences of American attempts at covert regime change still seem somewhat perplexing after reading her book."[16] Although I do briefly acknowledge these theoretical tensions in the book (36), I welcome this opportunity to more fully respond to the reviewers' insightful comments regarding my theory's relationship with realism.

In my analysis of the causes of regime change, I asked two questions: 1) what interests drive states to pursue regime change? And 2) how do policymakers expect regime change to secure those interests? While my answer to the first question regarding *ends* fits squarely within the realist paradigm, all three authors asked whether my answer to the second question regarding the *means* of regime change does as well.

To briefly recap my theory: In relation to the question of *ends*, I argue that states pursue regime change to "increase their relative power within the international system – by overthrowing current military adversaries, dividing enemy alliances, and ensuring that their existing allies and states within their sphere of influence are governed by leaders who will remain committed to that alliance" (14). That these motives are consistent with realism should be no surprise, as they consciously mirror many long-standing realist explanations for balancing and war (4-5, 35-41).

Problems arise, however, in relation to the second question of *means*. Here I argue that regime change holds a unique appeal to policymakers compared to other foreign policy tools – coercion, economic sanctions, brute force, etc. – because it offers states the possibility of installing foreign leaders with similar policy preferences to their own. In theory, this enables them to replace a hostile foreign adversary with a friendly ally, thereby breaking a cycle of conflict and significantly improving relations between the two states (6-7, 42-47). Each reviewer asked whether the *means* of regime change – meddling in the domestic politics of another state – is compatible with realism, which focuses on the structure of the international system, rather than the domestic affairs of individual states. As Grauer writes, "It is unclear from a theoretical standpoint why good security-seeking realist states should ever believe that changing out regimes should result in improved security environments. Accordingly, realism can only offer a partial explanation for why states pursue regime change." Jordan objects that "The

[15] For foundational works on structural realism see: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

[16] Although I do not explicitly describe my argument as being an offensive realist argument, I repeatedly cite offensive realists, most notably John Mearsheimer, favorably throughout the book so my theory's specific relationship to offensive realism is a reasonable question to raise. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics.*

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actual mechanisms regarding the decision-making processes in O'Rourke's account are based on the internal stability of the target state, leadership alternatives, and the domestic political climate in the intervening state."

These points are well-founded. Indeed, they explicitly served as one of the motivating puzzles behind the project (36). Nevertheless, I stand by my decision to describe my theory as realist for two reasons.

First, while my theory's invocation of domestic-level variables to explain America's foreign policy choices is not strictly compatible with structural realism, it is compatible with the other realist scholarship, particularly neoclassical realism. As Gideon Rose explained in his foundational description of the school:

"Neoclassical realism… explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical."[17]

Since my book seeks to provide a middle-range theory of when and why states pursue a particular foreign policy tool (covert regime change), it is perhaps best situated within the neoclassical school (238). Mirroring Rose's two-tiered distinction, I explain that "in my telling, systemic factors – such as the distribution of the balance of power – create the broad incentives for states to pursue regime change, while factors internal to the intervening and target states – such as policymakers' perceptions regarding the efficacy of different military strategies and the availability of foreign opposition groups to support – affect the specific foreign policy decisions regarding the time and conduct of regime changes" (14).

While structural realist accounts explain when and why states will find one another threatening, they are often silent about the specific foreign policy decisions that states make in their efforts to balance these threats. That is, when a state is confronted with a new military threat or rising power, policymakers consider a variety of potential responses. Should they go to war? Weaken their adversary with economic sanctions? Threaten it with coercive diplomacy? Try to contain its economic growth? Overthrow the regime? Because the viability of these different policy options will be contingent on specific characteristics of the intervening and target states, middle-range theories regarding these foreign policy behaviors – such as my own – frequently incorporate domestic-level variables into their analyses to explain variation in the selection and timing of these behaviors. Indeed, for this reason, Kenneth Waltz argued in *Theory of International Politics* that he was not aiming to create a "theory of foreign policy," which could explain the specific foreign policy choices of individual states. Instead, he wrote, "What [structural realism] does explain is the constraints that confine all states. The clear perception of constraints provides many clues to the expected reactions of states, but by itself the theory cannot explain those reactions. They depend not only on international constraints but also on the characteristics of states."[18]

Amongst realists, I am certainly not alone in including domestic-level variables to explain a state's foreign policy decision-making. Many prominent neoclassical realist texts have similarly included domestic and individual-level variables to explain specific foreign policy behaviors, including works on leadership misperception, decision-making pathologies within the foreign policy establishment, domestic mobilization constraints, and so forth.[19] Taking the anarchic international system as a starting point, these accounts incorporate domestic variables to explain variation in states' foreign policy responses to

[17] Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51:1 (1998): 144-172, 146.

[18] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* 122.

[19] For a good summary of this literature see: Norrin M. Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.36.

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systemic pressures. "Attempts to construct a neoclassical realist theory of foreign policy," Nicholas Kitchen explains, "are therefore grounded in the desire to fill a gap within structural realism. While Waltzian realists understand that policy results from complex political processes, structural realism says nothing about how states go about processing the pressures and incentives structure creates, or varying their strategic responses."[20]

Second, the domestic-level variables included in my argument are theoretically consistent with realism – outside of the fact that they exist at the domestic level. Neoclassical realist accounts have occasionally been criticized for stretching realism "beyond all recognition or utility,"[21] incorporating domestic variables in an unfalsifiable, "ad hoc manner,"[22] and incorporating variables that are "logically incoherent."[23] To the best of my ability, I tried to avoid these hazards. Towards that end, my theory regarding the causes of regime change incorporates one domestic-level precondition for intervention:

"the intervener must be able to identify a plausible alternative to the government that it is trying to overthrow. The best alternatives have both the capacity to administer the target state and preexisting support from the state's population. Most importantly, from the perspective of the intervening state, the alternative regime must also share similar foreign policy preferences" (6).

To avoid the charge that I invoked this variable in an unfalsifiable, ad hoc manner, each case carefully study process-traces how "variation in the availability of these leaders over time was one of the key factors determining when Washington intervened" (7). Similarly, to avoid the charge that my theory is logically incoherent, I show that contrary to the predictions of competing IR grand theories like liberalism, constructivism, and Marxism, America's determination of what constituted a "plausible alternative to the current regime" was not governed by ideology, regime type, economics, or norms of justified intervention (24-34), thereby avoiding factors that would have been logically incompatible with the realist underpinnings of my theory.

Why Would A Realist Policymaker Launch A Regime Change?

This leads to a second question raised in all of the reviews. Lindsay asks, "why realist policymakers should be attracted to regime change if they understand that states are motivated by realism." He goes on to note that "O'Rourke points out that one reason that even nominally successful interventions fail to deliver on policy goals is that the new regime often finds itself confronted with the same structural position as the old one."

Herein lies the realist twist in my argument. In my telling, policymakers pursue regime change towards realist ends – that is, "to secure their national security interests in the intense security environment of the international system" (35). Yet, had these policymakers been better realists in the first place, they would have realized that many regime changes were bound to fail from the start (36). Because a state's policy preferences have deeper roots than any individual leader, I argue that changing the policy preferences of another state is more difficult than simply replacing that state's leadership. Prior to intervention, many U.S.-backed leaders promised that they would pursue America's interests if given the opportunity to rule. Once in power, however, these same leaders faced the same political pressures as their predecessors and soon found

[20] Nicholas Kitchen, "Neoclassical Realism as a Theory of International Politics." *International Studies Review* 36:1 (2020): 1-28.

[21] Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24:2 (1999): 5-55.

[22] Stephen M. Walt, "The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition," in Ira Katznelson and Hellen V. Milner ed. *Political Science: State of the Discipline III,* (New York: WW Norton Company, 2002): 197-230.

[23] Kevin Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Critique of the Newest Realism." *International Security* 42:2 (2017): 155-190.

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themselves reneging on their earlier promises (83-89). Consequently, I conclude that regime changes are unlikely to improve interstate relations in situations when the international system exerts significant pressure on the target regime to act against the intervener's interests.[24]

As evidence of this phenomenon, chapter 4 provides a number of statistical models illustrating that, contrary to the expectations of American policymakers, attempting to overthrow another state actually increased the likelihood that the United States would become embroiled in a military interstate dispute with that state in the future (85-88), while decreasing the similarity of that state's foreign policy portfolio and UN voting behavior to the United States (88-89).

In her review, however, Jordan flags these variables as poor ways to measure the efficacy of regime change, writing "the occurrence of conflict is important, but it does not address whether efforts at regime change succeeded in altering the actual policy preferences and interests of the target state." This is a valid objection; I agree that the recurrence of conflict does not perfectly capture whether the actual policy preferences of the target regime changed following the regime change. My logic in selecting these variables, however, is that, for the purpose of large-N statistical analyses, they are reasonable proxies for the quality of interstate relations between the intervening and target states, and thus can serve as fair barometers for whether the regime change worked as policymakers intended.[25]

So why didn't American policymakers see these failures coming? Lindsay writes, "It isn't completely clear whether [O'Rourke's] theory depends on ignorance, misperception, megalomania, or false hope on the part of policymakers, or whether it entails a more substantive critique of Realism itself." This is a smart question and one that I grappled with significantly while writing the book.

First, it is important to remember that this dynamic did not play out in every case. As I explain in the book, some U.S.-backed regime changes actually achieved their foreign policy objectives – such as in Italy, France, and Japan during the early Cold War – precisely because the United States backed foreign leaders who were domestically popular in their own right and the structure of the international system favored an alliance with the United States (225-226).

The question remains, however, of why realist policymakers would attempt regime change in cases where the structural conditions appeared less conducive to success, such as America's numerous failed efforts to fracture the Soviet bloc. In their critiques, Lindsay and Grauer hypothesize a number of potential policymaking pathologies to explain this discrepancy – misperception, a pathological hatred of communism, hubris, ignorance, geographic updating, miscalculation, etc. So which one was it? Although theoretically unsatisfying, my honest answer is a little of all the above. I entitled my book's introduction, "The False Promise of Covert Regime Change," because I believe regime change holds a unique and powerful – but false – allure for policymakers. Because the logic of covert regime change is simple, plausible, and compelling, policymakers view it as a tantalizing way to dramatically remake their relationships with adversaries at low costs. In the case of America's covert interventions during the Cold War, these tendencies were amplified in many cases by poor intelligence, exaggerated estimates from the United States' foreign allies of their domestic support, recurrent underestimations of Soviet

[24] See also: Alexander B. Downes and Lindsey A. O'Rourke, "You Can't Always Get What You Want: Why Foreign-imposed Regime Change Seldom Improves Interstate Relations." *International Security* 41:2 (2016): 43-89.

[25] For more on this specific criticism see: Michael Poznansky, Alexander B. Downes, and Lindsey A. O'Rourke. "Friends, Foes, and Foreign-Imposed Regime Change." *International Security* 42:2 (2017): 191-195.

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power, and a misguided tendency to assume that Communist governments were guided by a monolithic communist foreign policy (54-57).[26]

Does the fact that the American policymakers in my telling recurrently chose a suboptimal foreign policy pose an implicit challenge to the rational actor assumption inherent in some structural realist accounts? Here the reviewers raise another interesting theoretical question. Although it is frequently asserted that all structural realist accounts include an assumption of rationality, a closer look at their work shows that structural realists vary significantly in their understanding of the concept.[27] Mearsheimer, for instance, includes a rational actor assumption;[28] Waltz does not.[29] I purposefully did not include a rational actor assumption in the book because I believe that there are a variety of theoretical and empirical reasons to be skeptical of the claim that states consistently act in a rational manner. Nevertheless, one could argue that my theory is largely compatible with a thin or expansive conception of rationality: the policymakers in my story purposefully weighed the costs and benefits of different foreign policy options and acted strategically to maximize their expected utility, albeit under conditions of incomplete and misleading information, circumscribed policymaking processes, and with high levels of uncertainty, which often led them astray.

Why Would Realist Policymakers Keep Making the Same Mistakes?

While misperception and miscalculation might explain one or two failed interventions, Grauer points out that the fact that American policymakers attempted 64 (!) covert regime changes during the Cold War despite the tactic's overall losing record poses a new problem for my theory. He writes, "If states behave as realists expect and rationally consider their options and pursue the path most likely to result in the acquisition of power to ensure survival (or more, for offensive realists), they should take prior experiences into account when making future plans." He adds that "in such a world, the continued American reliance on an infrequently successful tool is difficult to explain."

This is another great question. In fact, I conclude the book by noting, "perhaps the most remarkable feature of America's Cold War behavior is that despite having been warned time and again, policymakers continued to pursue covert regime changes" (236). I could easily extend this argument into the post-Cold War era. President Barack Obama, for example, opted to covertly arm anti-governments rebels in Syria (2011) despite his vocal skepticism of covert regime change and specific briefings from intelligence analysts about the tactic's low success rate. What could explain this behavior? Although I did not attempt to answer this question in the book, I suspect that three factors are most directly responsible.

First, I argued that Washington pursued numerous covert regime changes despite a low expectation for success (53-57) simply because the low costs of the operation (49-53) made it a worthwhile gamble. I wrote, "they [policymakers] believe that whereas covert conduct *moderately* decreases the likelihood that an operation will succeed, it *dramatically* decreases its costs, leading policymakers to conclude that they might as well attempt an operation even if it appears unlikely to succeed" (60, emphasis in original). However, Jordan writes, "This is an intuitive argument, but it is theoretically unsatisfying. Why would policy makers pay even minimal costs if the odds of success were low?" My answer is that for a state as rich and

[26] On this last point regarding the tendency of American policymakers to view the Soviet alliance bloc as monolithic see: John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[27] John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism." *International Relations* 23:2 (2009): 241-256; Charles Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Alen Shadunts, "The Rational Actor Assumption in Structural Realism." *E-International Relations* (2016): 1-9.

[28] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* 31.

[29] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* 118.

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powerful as the United States, Washington simply could afford to pursue numerous failed covert interventions and still win the Cold War. After all, most of the costs and risks of covert operations fell upon on the U.S.-backed forces within the target state – not American troops.

Second, and relatedly, launching a covert regime change gives policymakers the ability to do something in response to a foreign threat without really committing themselves to fight. Covert regime changes can thus provide a prudent middle option for policymakers who do not want to appear weak in front of foreign or domestic audiences, but also do not want to risk American boots on the ground. To this point, I concur with Lindsay's brief point about how my theory differs from that of Austin Carson on the potential signaling messages of a covert action.[30]

Finally, it is important to remember that many covert operations do not start out as particularly large or aggressive. Instead, small covert interventions often swell over time from mission creep. The problem, as National Intelligence Council Chair Gregory Treverton explains, is that "once covert interventions begin, no matter how hesitantly or provisionally, they can be hard to stop. Operation realities intrude, with deadlines attached. New stakes are created, changing the balance of risks and rewards as perceived by political leaders." Once this happens, "the burden of proof shifts from those who would propose covert action to those who oppose it."[31]

Why Call My Theory Realist?

One final question raised by the reviews is why I would apply any grand theoretical label to my argument at all? At various points in the dissertation/book project, advisors, colleagues, and anonymous reviewers all suggested that I remove the realist label from my theory. Why offer a "realist" theory of regime change, they asked, when I could have just offered my theory of regime change? The benefits of calling myself a realist, they suggested, are simply outweighed by the baggage that comes with the term, particularly from a career advancement perspective. On the one hand, I open my work up to purity tests from other realists for being insufficiently structural in my outlook. On the other hand, my work might attract the ire of non-realists, who may have been more sympathetic to my argument had I not explicitly positioned myself within an opposing theoretical camp. Both concerns are legitimate and they likely are reflected in the general trend within the field of IR toward non-paradigmatic research agendas.[32]

Nevertheless, if I may push back on this perspective, allow me to explain why I think it is useful for scholars like myself, who find themselves largely aligned with an IR paradigm, to explicitly embrace that title. IR grand theories provide frameworks that allow us to make sense of the incredibly complicated, multicausal phenomenon of international relations by focusing on the most influential explanatory variables. Of course, any simplification of reality will inevitably sacrifice some explanatory power, and no theory can explain every case. Nevertheless, given the complexity of the international system, IR theory is vital to understand, make, and evaluate the effectiveness of any foreign policy.

Moreover, in my opinion, realism provides a more useful framework for understanding America's covert regime changes than its main theoretical rivals – liberalism, constructivism, and Marxism – for reasons that I explained in detail in Chapter 1. Consequently, I hoped that by positioning my theory within the realist school, I could accomplish four goals. First, I hoped that embracing realism would help extend the relevance of my theory beyond the narrower debate regarding the causes of regime change into the larger theoretical discussion of how states respond to military threats. Second, I hoped that my argument could help spark interesting theoretical discussions – such as this one – regarding the strengths and weaknesses

[30] Carson, Austin. *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[31] Treverton, Gregory F. *Covert Action: The Limits of Interventions in the Postwar World* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 1989), 85.

[32] Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney. "International Relations in the US Academy," *International Studies Quarterly* 55:2 (2011): 437-464.

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of structural versus neoclassical realist approaches. Indeed, although I have never adopted the moniker myself, Grauer correctly deduced during his careful reading of my book that I am quite sympathetic to offensive realism. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined above, I also believe that it can often be difficult to translate structural accounts, such as offensive realism, into mid-range theories of foreign policy without invoking domestic-level variables. Third, I hope that explicitly acknowledging my realist background will provide the reader with insight into my overall worldview, including whatever potential biases and myopias that come along with it. Finally, embracing theory helped to theoretically inform many of the empirical tests in my book, regarding the causes and consequences of regime change.

In conclusion, I would like to once again thank Grauer, Jordan, and Lindsay for their thoughtful critiques of my book as well as Michael Horowitz and H-Diplo/ISSF for organizing this roundtable. While I stand by my decision to characterize my theory as realist, each of the reviewers has highlighted a number of legitimate concerns and potential theoretical problems that arose from that decision.

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