

H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

Roundtable Review 14-24

Rory Cormac. *How to Stage a Coup: and Ten Other Lessons from the World of Secret Statecraft*. London: Atlantic Books, 2022. ISBN 978-1838955618; paper, 2023, 978-1838955649.

19 June 2023 | PDF: <https://issforum.org/to/jrt14-24> | Website: rjissf.org

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 Introduction by Sarah-Jane Corke, University of New Brunswick

Whether by design or default, or perhaps a little of both, Rory Cormac has written a book on ‘covert action’ that captures, in ways one might not imagine, the *Zeitgeist*, or perhaps more aptly, the *Daemon*, of our times. Whether we like it or not, all [hi]stories do this; some just do it better than others. As Cormac points out, “History may be about the past, but it is also about the present. It reflects our own reality as much as anyone else’s” (17). His view echoes that of Ann Hall, the chief of staff and interim director of communications at Harvard Graduate School, who suggested in 2017 that “history” has become “a pastiche of influences and sources that resonate with a culture at [a] particular moment in time.”¹ And Cormac’s history certainly resonates.

We are living in a very dangerous time; we are just coming out of a global pandemic. As of March 2023, over 6.8 million people have died.² And the death toll will continue to rise, daily. Equally important, as reviewer Stephen Long points out in his review of Cormac’s book, “COVID-19 created the perfect breeding ground for a cocktail of nationalism, racism, protectionism, fear, and paranoia to spread throughout the world; populations, media organisations and governments in the West, and indeed in the Developing World, were just as assertive as Beijing, Moscow or Tehran in engaging in and amplifying conspiracy theories, politicising inadequate domestic public health programmes, and engaging in nationalistic vaccine triumphalism.”

We are also in the midst of a (thus far) limited land war in Europe. China is also eyeing Taiwan with increasing intensity, and Israel and Iran are involved in “yearlong shadow war.”³ In all three of these conflicts, covert action continues to play a central role.⁴ To make matters worse, the United States has seemingly slipped off its axis. The Republican Party is exhibiting authoritarian tendencies. Women’s rights are under assault. Americans continue to die almost daily because of gun violence. In Cormac’s words, “the liberal international order, defined by rule of law, respect for human rights, and cooperation, is eroding before our eyes. More worrying still, it is not collapsing with a bang, something clear and obvious against which we can rally. Instead, this decline is gradual and pervasive, marked by a dissolving of acceptable and unacceptable behavior” (14). Personally, I don’t remember another time in my life where I have felt so unsettled. But here we are, living in a dark world where the dark arts have come to define us. As a result, a topic once relegated to the shadows—the missing, “missing dimension”—has now gone mainstream.⁵

¹ Ann Hall, “Reflecting the Past, Reflecting the Present: How History Is Shaped by Imagination and Perspective,” Harvard University Research Matters University, July 18, 2017; <https://gsas.harvard.edu/news/reflecting-past-reflecting-present>. Originally, in making this point, I wanted to rely on a famous quote that I have always grounded my study of historiography in. It goes something like this: “History is more a reflection of the period it was written in, than the period it was written about.” I came across this quotation as an undergraduate but have since lost the citation. If anyone does know the author of this quote, please do not hesitate to reach out. (s-j.corke@unb.ca) Much appreciated.

² Number of novel coronavirus deaths by March 28, 2023: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

³ Farnaz Fassih, Ronen Bergman and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Sends Attack Submarine to Middle East, as Tensions Rise Between Iran and Israel,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2023.

⁴ See: Julian E. Barnes, Adam Goldman, Adam Entous, and Michael Schwirtz, “U.S. Believes Ukrainians Were Behind an Assassination in Russia,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2023; and Steven Lee Myers and Damien Cave, “Would-Be Chinese Defector Details Covert Campaigns in Hong Kong and Taiwan,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2019.

⁵ According to noted intelligence historian Wesley Wark, the term “the missing dimension” was coined by Sir Alexander Cadogan of the British Foreign Office. It was subsequently “empowered by two British scholars, historians Christopher Andrew and David Dilks in a pioneering essay collection.” See Wesley Wark, “Beyond the Missing Dimension: The New Study of Intelligence,” in the *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d’histoire*, XXIV (April 1989): 82-89, 83. However, the book itself does not contain a stand-alone chapter on covert action. See Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds., *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

As Cormac points out below, we are “living through a golden age of covert action scholarship.” As an historian of American covert operations, I am not sure how I feel about this. Wait: that is a lie. I know exactly how I feel. I am both deeply troubled and somewhat pleased. This fall I will teach my first graduate course on U.S. covert operations. All my students coming into our program want to work on this subject. And I am also working on an edited collection on Western “covert operations” against the Eastern Bloc with Stephen Long and Francesco Cacciatore.⁶ For the first time in my career, my teaching and research interests will be in sync. So please do not misunderstand me here. I am not criticizing Cormac for taking on this subject. I am glad he did, and that he did so brilliantly. As he notes in his response, he has been researching this book for more than fifteen years. Instead, I am suggesting that his work, and indeed mine, are part of a larger trend in the historiography that we need to explore. As he tells us below, in his book he sought “to grapple with [the] big issues of how, why, and so what.” It is the “so what” question that keeps me up at night.

Beyond the cultural answers to this question there are also very practical reasons for our contemporary fascination with covert operations. As Long tell us, “[h]aving successfully stayed in the shadows in the pre-war and early Cold War era—presumably where many of its practitioners would like it to remain – covert action has been much more widely discussed by academics, journalists and, ironically, retired or disgruntled intelligence officials since the 1960s.” He is right, yet it wasn’t until the 1990s that scholars of American covert operations were able to approach this topic, seriously, by employing declassified documents. We, of course, owe our access to these documents, at least initially, to then-Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates, who in 1990 put in place the Gates Commission on Openness.⁷ His reforms fundamentally altered how scholars approached intelligence history. Indeed, the release of these documents ushered in a new era in scholarship on covert operations.⁸ Yet while hundreds of books and articles have subsequently been published, many historians have also pointed out that because the vast majority of the documents are still classified, we still do not have an accurate understanding of the past. In 1997 historian Warren Kimball, the Chair of the Advisory Committee on Historical Documentation, made this point in a letter he wrote to Secretary of State Madeline Albright. He argued that unless the CIA made a more concerted effort to declassify documents directly related to covert operations, “then any US government documentary compilation about our foreign policy in situations, where such activities took place, will be so incomplete and misleading as to constitute an official lie.”⁹

Stories continue to be told, however, and today if you want to understand what “covert action” is, Cormac’s book is probably where you should start. As scholar/practitioner Nicholas Reynolds argues, “*How to Stage a*

⁶ The project, tentatively titled *Western Covert Operations against the Eastern Bloc*, includes essays by Malcolm Byrne, Walter Eugene Gruden, Arne Kislenko, Philip Lesiak (with Dieter Bacher and Sabine Nachbaur) James Lockhart, James Marchio, Mallory Needleman, Christian Ostermann, Susan Perlman, Tobias Schmidt, Luca Trenta (with Doug Atkinson and Kevin Fahey) as well as Cacciatore, Long and me.

⁷ On the Gates initiative, see: Remarks on DCIA Robert M. Gates, “CIA and Openness,” Oklahoma Press Association, 21 February 1992, <https://irp.fas.org/eprint/gates1992.html>.

⁸ As Michael Warner (now a Command Historian at the US Department of Defense, but who started his career at the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence) and I once concluded, in many ways we both, in different ways, owe our career to Gates. For my contribution, see Sarah-Jane Corke, *US Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman Secret Warfare and the CIA, 1948-1953*, (London: Routledge, 2008). For Warner’s see Michael Warner, *The Rise and Fall of Intelligence: An International Security History* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2014) and Warner and John Childress: *The Use of Force and State Power: History and Future* (Camden: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Other works by scholars of a similar vintage include Scott Lucas, *Freedom’s War: The American Crusade Against the Soviet Union*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999) and Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1953* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁹ Warren Kimball to Madeline Albright, 6 March 1988, H-Diplo, 20 April 1998, <http://hnet2.msu.edu/~diplo.HAC98/htm>. See also Rita Baker, “Annual Report of the Historical Advisor Committee,” H-Diplo, 11 August 1997; <https://lists.h-net.org/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Diplo&month=9708&week=b&msg=Nm2aLE%2bvaLFAt%2b1oC5ROsw&user=&pw=>; <https://history.state.gov/about/hac/may-1999>.

Coup stands in a class almost by itself and is a welcome addition to the literature. It can serve as an introduction or overview for generalists, undergraduates, and even graduate students... [it] is a fine springboard for further research.”¹⁰ In another nod to the times we live it, it also provides, as Long points out, a “bright and breezy narrative.” All of this is hard to resist as we sit and ponder our dark days.

Nevertheless, the book also encourages us to think about what it means and where we go from here. At its core, covert action is nothing more a tool of our government. It is useful to remember that our governments, at least in democracies, are supposed to be the tools of the people who elected them to office.¹¹ That, my friends, is us. So, what does our governments’ heavy reliance on these types of activities tell us about us? And equally importantly, what does our fascination with these activities tell us about us? Here, to my mind, lies the big “so what?”

Once upon a time you could not talk about covert operations without at least addressing the question of their morality.¹² Yet of our four reviewers, only Loch Johnson chides Cormac for avoiding any discussion of this topic. And he would know. I doubt there is another scholar in the world who knows more about the ethics of the “third option” than Johnson.¹³ As he notes below, he would have liked Cormac to offer a more extensive ethical evaluation of these operations. He points to his “favorite observation” from the late Roger Fisher, a professor of law at Harvard University, who argued that “[t]o join some adversaries in the grotesque world of poison dart guns and covert operations is to give up the most powerful weapons we have: idealism, morality, due process of law, and belief in the freedom of others to disagree, including the right of other countries to disagree with ours.”¹⁴ One cannot, of course, disagree. However, it is not clear how Cormac could have included a section on this subject in this volume. It is after all, titled, with a smidge of irony, *How to Stage a Coup*. I fear a chapter on why you should *not* stage a coup would not have impressed the publisher.

This brings me to the second question, and here it is perhaps Susan Perlman who best captures the significance of Cormac’s work.¹⁵ She points out that for Cormac, “the gray zone is ‘epistemic.’” Epistemology, friends, is the study of knowledge, or how we come to know what we know. Or, possibly in the postmodern age, as Cormac points out, “what we don’t know and what we think we know.” And here I would add: what we really don’t. Covert action, like our [hi]stories, is now firmly rooted in the postmodern world. Arguably, both are “becoming messier, the subject of competing cross-cutting claims and counterclaims” where “ambiguity is everything” (12). Perhaps, then, the *Daemon* of our times.

¹⁰ During his long career Reynolds not only worked at the CIA, but he also authored several books. See Nicholas Reynolds, *Need to Know: World War II and the Rise of American Intelligence* (New York and Boston: Mariner Books, 2022); Reynolds, *Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy: Ernest Hemingway’s Secret Adventures, 1935–1961*, (Boston: Mariner Books, 2017); Reynolds, *A Skillful Show of Strength: US Marines in the Caribbean, 1991-1996*, 2 vols. (Boston: Generic, 2018); Reynolds, *Just Cause: Marine Operations in Panama, 1988-1990*, (South Carolina: Create Space Independent Publishing, 2013) and Reynolds, *Basra, Bagdad and Beyond: US Marine Corps in the Second Iraq War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

¹¹ I have no choice but to point out the irony in all this. Coups by their very nature are the antithesis of democratic values. They are always authoritarian, even if their purported objectives are to secure a democracy, which almost never happens. As Johnson points out in his review, Cormac argues that nine of the thirteen coups initiated by the CIA during the Cold War resulted in military dictatorships. And, more worrisome, according to Cormac, coups have the greatest chances of success against democracies.

¹² A good place to start is Loch Johnson, “Ethics and Covert Action: The ‘Third Option’ in American Foreign Policy,” in *National Security, Intelligence, and Ethics & International Affairs*, 3(September 28, 2012).

¹³ The “third option” is of course another euphemism of covert operation. Johnson’s most recent book is Johnson, *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁴ Roger Fisher, “The Flaw in Our Spy System,” *Boston Globe* (1 February 1976): A19.

¹⁵ Perlman’s new book has just been published by Cambridge University Press and I highly recommend it. See Susan Perlman, *Contesting France: Intelligence and US Foreign Policy in the Early Cold War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Participants:

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Review by Loch K. Johnson, University of Georgia, Athens

In this intriguing volume, Rory Cormac explores the practices and the problems that can arise when a nation turns to covert action, which is sometimes known as the “Third Option.” Secretive activities of this kind fall on the continuum of choices in international statecraft between the first option of diplomacy and the second option of open warfare. Cormac’s panoramic view presents the reader with illustrations of this approach to international relations from over the years and across the latitudes, with a concentration on contemporary variants that have arisen since World War II. The book includes an analysis of the newest modes of nonattributable interventions abroad, such as cyberattacks. The study has a novel format, written as if it were a guidebook for would-be and active practitioners of these dark arts. Throughout, the study is thoughtful and presented in a lively manner.

How does one stage a coup? Ideally, we are told at the book’s beginning, without relying on overt warfare. That route is usually noisy, messy, unpredictable, and costly in blood and treasure. Diplomacy has its drawbacks, too, especially given the glacial pace of international negotiations. One recalls how, within months of taking office in the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy became alienated from the State Department over its role in the conduct of foreign affairs. He was unhappy with its ponderous approach to international negotiations, not to mention its status quo orientation. The President began to rely instead on personal diplomacy with Russia’s leader, Nikita Khrushchev, and other foreign leaders.

In light of such frustrations and hesitations, no wonder that chief executives of the United States and the heads-of-state in other lands often find the Third Option beguiling, with its possibilities (not always realized) for lower costs, no public debate, and veil of secrecy. Covert action, which is also known as hidden statecraft, offers nations an alternative for—in Cormac’s phrase—“influencing, disrupting and communicating” in their pursuit of international objectives (4).

Jumping straight into one of the most extreme forms of the Third Option, Cormac relates what one might want to know about the possible assassination of enemies. In this opening chapter, we are informed that the most reliable method of global murder is to collude with local rebels or terrorist organizations who have the same goal of removing a particular leader from power. He warns, though, that even with helpful in-country co-conspirators, one will face “significant legal and practical problems” (33).

Cormac observes that a nation’s intelligence agencies do not possess a “*carte blanche* license to kill,” but he might have added that sometimes the agents it hires to carry out the deed are less attuned to such niceties. For example, in the plotting by America’s Central Intelligence Agency against the Congo leader Patrice Lumumba in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a hitman with the appropriate codename WI/ROGUE had an inflated interpretation of the authority granted to him by the Central Intelligence Agency. He soon attempted to form his own “execution squad,” leading the Agency’s chief of station to cable back to Headquarters: “WI/ROGUE FREE WHEELING AND LACK OF SECURITY . . . NOT WILLING TO FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS.” This soldier-of-fortune was quickly fired.¹

The Agency’s plot against Lumumba initially failed. Later, working with Belgian intelligence and local insurgents, however, the CIA finally achieved its objective in 1961: Lumumba was brutally killed, at the age of thirty-five.² (The American complicity in this assassination is left unmentioned in Cormac’s account.)

¹ *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: An Interim Report*, Report No. 94-465, Church Committee, Hearings on Covert Action,” US Senate, 94th Cong., 1st Sess. (November 20, 1975): 45-46.

² Loch K. Johnson, *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): 94-95.

Cormac notes, among other examples, that Russia's security agency, the KGB, removed the Afghan leader Hafizullah Amin in 1979, first poisoning him, then later shooting him dead when the potion failed; and, in 1982, Syrian intelligence dispatched a president-elect in Lebanon by blowing him into pieces with a well-placed bomb. As the author underscores, dramaturgy can be an important objective in assassination plots, as nations send out a memorable message through the use of high-level violence. A prominent recent example: the ghoulish murder and dismemberment of the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi intelligence operatives in 2018. Despite an occasional success, though, Cormac writes that assassinations against foreign leaders are "unlikely to work anyway." And, even if they do, they are apt to require "some sort of military action to shore things up afterwards. Covert action can only do so much" (49). Moreover, CIA chief Richard Helms (1966-1973) once raised a troubling query for those who are drawn to assassination plots: "If you kill someone else's leaders," he told an interviewer, "why shouldn't they kill yours?"³

Another form of disposing of overseas enemies that attracts the author's attention is targeted killings. These are supposedly legal murder plots because, as the author explains, they are said to be "an act of self-defence against an *imminent* threat, usually an enemy combatant in a hostile foreign environment" (53, emphasis added). This approach to foreign policy woes becomes especially ambiguous when directed against non-battlefield targets. A prime example in the annals of CIA covert action is the death-by-drone attack in 2011 of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen and Muslim religious leader who moved to Yemen and made a career of preaching a global anti-US gospel by way of social media. Awlaki was no doubt just one of thousands of Muslim clergy around the world engaged in such oratory, but high officials in the Obama administration selected him as a target. This choice demonstrates just how elastic the criterion of "imminence" can be, making a mockery out of the legalese meant to justify this approach to "neutralizing" a perceived enemy of state.

Disquieting, too, is the drone murder of the Iranian official Qasem Soleimani as he visited Iraq in January of 2020. President Donald J. Trump ordered this attack, marking the first time the United States relied on the doctrine of targeted killing to strike down a state official. As Cormac observes, the taboo against killing was rapidly eroding in the domain of international affairs, a process that was accelerated by the all-out use of covert actions for counterterrorism purposes during the Reagan administration.

What else can covert action do to change the world in one's favor? Cormac tells us that one can secretly influence others; subvert foreign governments; rig a nation's elections; stage coups; wage secret wars; and engage in cyberattacks and other forms of sabotage. For a leader with an appetite for concealed intervention into the affairs of other nations, the menu is rich.

Influence-peddling is a large part of any nation's hidden bag-of-tricks; indeed, in Cormac's view, it forms "the cornerstone of covert actions" (90). Here one enters the dizzying domain of weaponized social media in what the author refers to as "the post-truth world," where, especially as practiced by China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, a kaleidoscope of misinformation and disinformation reigns. During the Cold War, Soviet propaganda dispensed through a disguised maze of media channels claimed that (among other sins) the United States had started the AIDS epidemic. More recently, Chinese propaganda has blamed evil leaders in Washington, D.C., for the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, never mind that scientists have traced the origin of that virus back to a lab in China. Even the democracies enter into this method of covert action, secretly recruiting 'media assets' around the world to publish favorable articles in the local press. An important difference in the *modus operandi* between the autocracies and the democracies, however, is the fact that the latter distributes 'perception enhancements' (a CIA euphemism for the art form) around the world that are almost always true—with battlefield deception operations being the main exception.

³ Journalist David Frost interview with Richard Helms, *Studies in Intelligence* (September 1993): 8-12, quotation at 10.

Why hire local media to assist in secret propaganda operations when the democracies already have the capacity to swamp the world with official press releases? Cormac explains that “it is far more effective to work through groups that are perceived to have an authentic voice than it is in delivering messages stamped with government branding” (84). He argues that Germans, for instance, are more likely to read a popular columnist (covertly recruited by the CIA) who writes for the prestigious Munich-based *Süddeutsche Zeitung* than they are a State Department press release.

The importance of influence operations has been amplified, Cormac notes, by the ubiquity of social media outlets, along with new pinpointed ‘information’ targeting capabilities. An example is the Russian organized ‘Down with Hillary’ protests that took place against the 2016 Democratic Party nominee for president outside her New York City offices, one of many micro-activities that was designed to manipulate the outcome of that election in favor of Republican candidate Trump. Today, Russian and Chinese troll farms remain busy, around the clock and around the world, sowing confusion and falsehoods aimed at eroding global trust in democracy.

One of this volume’s strengths is the many illustrations it provides regarding this war of words taking place between the democracies and their authoritarian adversaries. Often at the heart of intelligence operations by Russia, China, and their autocratic allies are efforts to rig elections in the Western nations, and, on occasion, Cormac tell us, vice versa. An example of the latter, according to the author, was “an outrageously hypocritical scheme” by the United States to manipulate the 2005 Iraqi election (125). He views “meddling in elections as the easiest way to covertly remove a president or prime minister,” but correctly emphasizes that “changing a state’s foreign policy requires more than a change of leadership” (141-42).

Resonating the book’s “how-to” theme, Cormac underscores the three major and overlapping ways to rig an election: propaganda (including fake stories); the secret funding of candidates and political parties; and a jiggering with actual ballots to change the electoral outcome. This latter approach Cormac sees as both “the most difficult” and “the most effective” (134). He provides an example of a “game-changing” secret intervention during an American presidential election: when Russian military intelligence managed to acquire Democratic campaign emails in 2016 that disclosed internal party bickering and lack of faith in Hilary Clinton’s capabilities to be president.

This reviewer’s conversations with leading US intelligence figures indicate that many of them believe that Trump defeated Clinton as a result of covert Russian electoral operations.⁴ This remains a matter of debate, though, since Clinton’s campaign also had many flaws of its own making, such as her failure to spend sufficient time in key Electoral College states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.⁵

Halfway through this study, Cormac arrives at the core topic: how to stage a coup. Unfortunately for the march forward of democracies, a good many coups result in military dictatorships—nine of at least thirteen engaged in by the CIA during the Cold War, the author tells us. According to his survey of the scholarly literature on covert actions, coups have the greatest chance of success against democracies, and a poor chance against one-party states.

Vital for success is the support of key groups within the target nation. For the United States, for example: the Iranian army in 1953 or the Afghan Northern Alliance in 2001. Paramount is capture of the national broadcaster early in the plotting. Above all, the author stresses, covert action “can only exist alongside overt

⁴ Author’s interviews, Washington, D.C. (July 2022), with anonymity assured (as requested) to those consenting to an interview.

⁵ See, for example, Greg Sargent, “‘Feel the Bern’: Hillary’s Loss and Failure of the Democratic Party,” in Larry J. Sabato, Kyle Kendik, and Geoffrey Shelley, eds., *Trumped: The 2016 Election that Broke All the Rules* (Lanham, MD: Rowland & Littlefield, 2017): 112-123, with analysis on this point at 117-118.

tools of power” (164), such as political pressure and economic sanctions, and sometimes the threat of overt military intervention.

The most extreme form of covert action is the large-scale paramilitary (PM) operation. These expensive armed interventions, which do not stay secret long given their magnitude, usually rest on the recruitment of local rebels to do most of the fighting (and dying). “States seek to get as much as possible out of a conflict,” Cormac writes, “without having to assume the burden of risk associated with actually doing the fighting themselves” (174). Well-known surrogates in the CIA’s paramilitary wars have included Hmong tribesmen in Laos, Kurds in Iraq, and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. None fared well after America’s departure from the particular country at war. Often the objective, Cormac notes, is not so much regime change as it is the weakening of an enemy government by way of subversive activities: “making the target bleed,” in his words (192).

The indispensable task of finding local allies in a PM operation leads the author to offer additional instructional tips on how to pick one’s rebels. Obviously of great use would be to join with a group or groups who enjoy domestic support in the target country, and who are sophisticated and trustworthy enough to serve as reliable partners. When weighing these considerations, one must have good intelligence about the nation in question. In the case of the United States in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration and the CIA in the early 1960s had little knowledge about the conspiratorial groups surrounding the pro-US regime led by Prime Minister and later President Ngo Dinh Diem, the chosen leader (initially) of the White House to advance America’s interests in Saigon. This foggy understanding of events that were unfolding in South Vietnam contributed significantly to the chaos that enveloped US war plans in Indochina. Similarly, the Reagan administration failed to understand the viciousness of its handpicked allies in Nicaragua (the *contras*), who were unpopular local rebels notorious for engaging in widespread atrocities against civilians.⁶

More recently, in its attempts to pick local partners in Syria for the conduct of paramilitary operations against the Assad regime, the Obama White House and the CIA proved to be clueless about which factions could be counted on. At the end of this ill-fated covert action in Syria, billions had been spent on paramilitary activities, all to no avail. One group after another defected from the operation, taking with them their CIA training and weaponry. Covert action had failed and, before it even began, so had the CIA’s intelligence estimates regarding the loyalty of local Syrian groups.⁷ Cormac is spot on in suggesting that “presidents and prime ministers would be wise to pick a single group rather than hedging and supporting a bunch of different rebels” (204).

Given the difficulties and costs of major PM operations, Cormac turns next to a “shorter, sharper and more direct use of force,” namely, time-tested sabotage activities. A favorite these days is the cyberattack, which involves, for instance, infiltrating dust into a foe’s computers as a means for destroying the floppy disks, or implanting malware in the computers, among thousands of other electronic methods of disrupting an adversarial regime. In a more old-fashioned manner, one could also blow up a nation’s bridges and power generators, sink its ships, destroy oil pipelines, contaminate fuel supplies, and interfere with key bank accounts (Russian President Vladimir Putin’s billions must be stashed somewhere). The possibilities are extensive. “Sabotage will not deliver a decisive blow,” concludes Cormac (228), but it can wear down an enemy and lower morale among its citizens.

Since cyberattacks have become such a major covert threat to societies around the world, the author devotes an entire chapter to this form of sabotage. Cormac believes that a major Pearl Harbor-like meltdown of a society’s internet structure from a foreign electronic attack is unlikely, referring to this type of scenario as

⁶ Johnson, *The Third Option*: 104-105 (on Diem); and Bill Moyers, “Moyers: The Secret Government: The Constitution in Crisis,” documentary film (WNET and WETA Public Television, 1987) on the *contras*.

⁷ Johnson, *The Third Option*: 146-148.

“fearmongering” (235). He looks upon cyberattacks as just one of several features of an adversary’s efforts to harm a target nation, not something that is carried out on its own. Yet several leading intelligence officials and scholars in the United States remain concerned about the possibility in the future of a well-coordinated, widespread, simultaneous electronic assault from abroad against computers on Wall Street, as well as in hospitals, airports, train stations, schools, and government offices across the land.⁸

In summary, how does one best wield the hidden hand? Cormac would like to see more clarity in the understanding of exactly what kinds of covert actions a nation seeks to pursue. He praises the Russians for “more fluid thinking” on this subject, while the Americans have been trapped in a “clinically bureaucratic approach” (253). Exactly what this comparison means is unclear to this reviewer. One should think that Russia and China would be the perfect places to search for a stifling bureaucratic approach to practically everything. The literature on the Russian intelligence services, for instance, portrays a set of organizations mired in abject fealty to their political bosses.⁹

Next, Cormac emphasizes that secrecy needs to be calibrated. Here again, while he believes that the Russians have thought more carefully about this matter than the Americans, his description of the 2018 poisoning of a Russian intelligence defector living in Salisbury, England, and other Kremlin capers show that they are at least as madcap and lacking in secrecy as some of the CIA’s zanier stunts. On firmer ground, Cormac instructs that covert action needs to be carried out in a synchronized manner with other foreign policy tools, such as diplomacy and trade sanctions.

Further, he would like to see more coordination inside governments as they plan covert actions, as well as better liaison among nations with a common interest (such as the Five Eyes). The Third Option is complicated enough, though, when pursued by one nation against another; joint operations are all the more difficult to carry out effectively. They jeopardize covertness and precision timing even more than usual, raising the risks of failure. Finally, Cormac suggests that “we have ourselves to blame when adversaries penetrate our sovereignty,” and argues that first and foremost the democracies must “sort out their own internal divisions” (290, 295).

The democracies, though, will always have debate and differences of opinion within their societies. That is one of their most laudable attributes. Certainly the open societies must endeavor to avoid, or at least sharply reduce, the extreme polarization that has emerged recently in the United States. Fortunately, several signs indicate that the right-wing viewpoint of the Trump followers, who are advocates of the slogan ‘Make America Great Again,’ or MAGA, is waning. Several of its candidates for public office were defeated in 2022. Still, it is a given that democratic regimes will always have some exploitable differences in the opinions of their populations. The democracies must rely on counterintelligence methods, investigative journalists, government officials, and engaged citizens to discern instances of exploitation via foreign intelligence services.

In this book, one would like to have seen more digging into primary sources, since many of the most important glimpses into covert actions have been provided by investigative committees like the Church Committee and the Iran-*contra* panels in the US Congress. These and other official inquiries have yielded voluminous reports on the Third Option, but they are rarely cited here.

Moreover, one would like to have seen a more extensive ethical evaluation of covert actions. This reviewer’s favorite observation in this regard comes from the late Roger Fisher, a professor of law at Harvard

⁸ James R. Clapper, with Trey Brown, *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence* (New York: Viking, 2018): 298.

⁹ See, for example, Raymond L. Garthoff, *Soviet Leaders and Intelligence* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

University. “When we choose our weapons, let’s choose ones we are good at using—like the Marshall Plan—not ones that we are bad at—like the Bay of Pigs,” he urged. “To join some adversaries in the grotesque world of poison dart guns and covert operations is to give up the most powerful weapons we have: idealism, morality, due process of law, and belief in the freedom of others to disagree, including the right of other countries to disagree with ours.”¹⁰ Covert actions can be helpful from time to time; but, in the United States at least, they are embraced too readily and with insufficient regard for democratic principles.

These few reservations should not distract, though, from the fact that *How to Stage a Coup* is a splendid study on a subject which is difficult to research. Cormac is a knowledgeable guide, a captivating writer, and a thoughtful critic of global covert actions.

¹⁰ Roger Fisher, “The Flaw in Our Spy System,” *Boston Globe* (1 February 1976): A19.

 Review by Stephen Long, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU)

One truism of covert action is that it is as old as human history itself. In his impressive new book, *How to Stage a Coup and Ten Other Lessons from the World of Secret Statecraft*, Professor Rory Cormac (University of Nottingham) unveils this long lineage of foreign meddling through secret conspiratorial activities, giving particular focus to modern times. Cormac is a specialist in this field who has already published several important studies on the subject in recent years.¹ In his latest book, he expertly explains how covert action has been widely mythologised in popular culture, but is often misunderstood by non-specialist consumers of spy films and derring-do novels (2). *How to Stage a Coup* therefore brings us an illuminating, accessible, and valuable guide into the complex and shadowy world of subterfuge, manipulation, and intrigue. By frequently reminding the reader of its continued and abundant use by a multitude of actors in contemporary international politics, the book powerfully illustrates the pertinence of a better general understanding of the tradecraft of covert action.

In the introduction, Cormac explains that covert action “is generally understood as plausibly deniable interference in the affairs of others designed to bring about political change” (12). He does not propose his own definition, instead presenting multiple covert action formulations by prominent international practitioners, including those used by the US and Russian governments. He perhaps misses a trick by not integrating his analysis with existing conceptualisations to formulate an overarching definition of his own. For instance, there is an opportunity to recommend updating the widely used US government definition of covert action as “an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly” (12). In particular, Cormac complicates this definition by highlighting that the generally accepted notion of *plausible* deniability neglects the tradecraft’s performative quality and the frequency of implausibility and covert signalling (25, 299-300).²

The book’s prologue sets out three main arguments: First, covert action is nothing new in the modern era of international politics; the advent of the internet has not fundamentally changed the core practice. Second, it is “harder than ever before to control global events;” covert action in contemporary times is therefore “more about disruption” (4). Third, myth is just as important as reality in the covert action realm; this means that how we interpret such secretive, murky, and ambiguous events is both crucial but also problematic (3-6). The main body of the book then provides eleven chapter-length surveys of prominent and distinctive types of covert action to unpack these arguments, including everything from foreign assassinations and coups (as referenced by the book’s title) to election interference, use of foreign proxies, and covert cyberwarfare. The conclusion explores the challenges faced by states that attempt to deter or successfully counteract covert actions mounted against them, with Cormac focusing in particular on the risks and limitations associated with operational exposure. As he succinctly explains, “Revelation needs to follow” in some meaningful way, since crying foul simply rings hollow in modern times (277). The best overall defence, Cormac argues, is a “whole of government” or “even a whole of society approach:” a state must build up its internal strength and resilience with long term preventative measures to forge a united, informed state and society to negate the manipulative and subversive effects of contemporary covert action (290-294).

¹ For example, see Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Rory Cormac, ‘The Pinprick Approach: Whitehall’s Top-Secret Anti-Communist Committee and the Evolution of British Covert Action Strategy’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 16/3 (2014), 5-28.

² For more on implausible deniability and the performative aspects of covert action, see Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, ‘Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability’, *International Affairs*, 94:3 (2018), 477-94; Ariel Whitfield Sobel, ‘All the World’s a Stage: Covert Action as Theatrical Performance’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 37:4 (2022), 569-580: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2065607>

Having successfully stayed in the shadows in the pre-war and early Cold War era—presumably where many of its practitioners would like it to remain—covert action has been much more widely discussed by academics, journalists, and, ironically, retired or disgruntled intelligence officials since the 1960s.³ The subject can be found in several edited volumes and survey monographs on the topic of the secret world of intelligence agencies and individual states.⁴ Case-study analyses of individual covert action operations abound.⁵ Recent publications have added to this growing body of literature on thematic and theoretical aspects of the tradecraft as well as general overviews, such as Loch Johnson’s 2022 *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy*.⁶ Johnson and Cormac both provide excellent up-to-date analyses of covert action, with Johnson framing his study around US tradecraft, practice, law, accountability, and ethics. Cormac’s study offers a broader international perspective and weaves thematic issues such as efficacy, impact, accountability, and ethics into his chapters on the different forms of the tradecraft.

How to Stage a Coup therefore successfully positions itself within a growing academic and general market. Its core value, arguably, is to inform our knowledge of covert action’s contemporary relevance and prevalence by elaborating on numerous recent examples of the practice on the international stage. For instance, in chapters 1 and 2, Cormac focuses on coups, assassination and targeted killing, bringing together discussions of (amongst others): Russian assassination plots against targets in several overseas territories under Putin’s leadership; the concerted campaign of Israel’s Mossad to eliminate senior Iranian nuclear scientists since 2007; the US targeted killing of senior Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda’s founding leader Osama Bin Laden, and Iranian general Qasem Soleimani amongst others; dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s murder in 2018 at the hands of Saudi Arabian assassins; and North Korea’s 2017 killing of ruler Kim Jong-un’s half-brother, Kim Jong-nam (27-68). The vast range of historic and recent examples of murder, election meddling, cyber-hacking, misinformation, and coup plotting covered in the book substantiates one of Cormac’s core arguments: that covert action is nothing new. This book brings home the clear and unsettling message that covert action continues to enjoy rude health in contemporary international affairs, and shares familiar attributes with its past incarnations.

Another strength of *How to Stage a Coup* is its timely updating of the scholarship on this important topic, cutting through myth and legend as it does so. Cormac does an excellent job of contextualising and historicising covert action’s place in the modern era in a bright and breezy narrative. In doing so, the book

³ See, for example, Christopher Felix (pseudonym for James McCargar), *A Short Course in the Secret War* (E. P. Dutton and Company, New York, 1963); Kim Philby, *My Silent War* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1968); Gregory Treverton, *Covert Action: The CIA and the Limits of American Intervention in the Postwar World* (London: Basic Books, 1988); Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

⁴ For example, Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Sage, 2001), Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political Warfare: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (London: Routledge, 2019); Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World* (London: Oneworld, 2020); Richard H. Immerman, *The Hidden Hand: A Brief History of the CIA* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014); Loch K. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Athan Theoharis, ed., *The Central Intelligence Agency: Security under Scrutiny* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

⁵ For instance, Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Feet to the Fire: CIA Covert Operations in Indonesia, 1957-1958* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999); Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2003).

⁶ Some notable recent publications include Cormac, Calder Walton and Damien Van Puyvelde, ‘What Constitutes Successful Covert Action? Evaluating Unacknowledged Interventionism in Foreign Affairs’, *Review of International Studies* 48:1 (2022), 111-128: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000231>; Loch K. Johnson, *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Gregory Mitrovich, ‘Covert Action and Grand Strategy’ in Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198840299.013.26>; Michael Poznansky, ‘Revisiting Plausible Deniability’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 45:4 (March 2020), 511-533: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1734570>.

strikes a balance in terms of its appeal both to the specialist and general reader, a stated ambition of the author which is successfully accomplished (305). For example, Cormac shows how the fears of bygone governments about damaging public embarrassment resulting from the exposure of their covert operations rarely apply now in an age of “implausible deniability.” He convincingly argues that there “is too much noise” in contemporary politics, meaning that “exposure is not enough” to discredit and deter foreign states from conducting covert action as it once did (5).

The book’s thematic approach to unpacking covert action represents both a strength and a weakness. *How to Stage a Coup* excels in its sweep and scope, charting diverse historical and contemporary examples of covert action with engaging and insightful prose. For the general reader, this provides an extremely accessible way to “dip in” and learn about particular forms of covert action that might be of interest in one organised place. That said, given its wide-ranging thematic sweep of the various different types of covert action, the book might be less well suited for specialists who are looking for detailed analysis about individual operations and empirical cases. Balance and depth are sometimes lacking due to the sheer amount of empirical cases covered by the book. This is true, for example, of Cormac’s discussion about the foreign public information campaigns that were prevalent during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic in chapter 3 (69-73). Cormac limits his discussion to a narrative about authoritarian China waging an aggressive public information campaign to mislead foreign audiences about the origin of the virus and to champion Beijing’s superiority in its domestic epidemic control measures and vaccine development. The observable reality of these events is, of course, much more complex than this: COVID-19 created the perfect breeding ground for a cocktail of nationalism, racism, protectionism, fear, and paranoia to spread throughout the world; populations, media organisations, and governments in the West, and indeed in the Developing World, were just as assertive as Beijing, Moscow, or Tehran in engaging in and amplifying conspiracy theories, politicising inadequate domestic public health programmes, and engaging in nationalistic vaccine triumphalism. A more detailed and balanced account would therefore enhance Cormac’s analysis. But a book of such ambitious scope inevitably does not attempt to provide the depth and detail that could be provided, for instance, by a case study of international pandemic propaganda.

All studies of covert action are invariably hindered by the secrecy, misunderstanding, and elusiveness that surround and characterise it, as Cormac himself notes (22-26). It would be interesting to hear the author’s views on how to overcome the challenges of secrecy, ambiguity, classified sources, manipulated narratives and so on in a ‘post-truth world’ in an expanded methodology section in the book’s introduction. One approach is to build solid foundations through extensive research, and *How to Stage a Coup* contains an impressive bibliography comprising of a suitable range of sources. Journalistic accounts help to illuminate recent cases of the phenomenon where scholarly works or government files are as yet unavailable. Perhaps Cormac might have drawn more upon primary documents, including declassified files from governmental archives, to give this study a more unique flavour. It is not unusual for books with a wide thematic sweep to synthesise secondary source accounts on a particular topic—and there is, of course, an important place for secondary syntheses. Despite the limited use of primary sources, *How to Stage a Coup* still skilfully presents fresh insights which are unshackled from some of the perceived wisdoms and assumed knowledge that often characterise books of this ilk.

The book’s coverage is impressive, but one qualified limitation is its greater—but not exclusive—focus on the usual covert action suspects: the democratic western powers on one hand (the US, UK, France, and Israel in particular) and authoritarian states such as Russia/the Soviet Union, Iran, and North Korea on the other. Even then its gaze tends to be western-centric, generally questioning the impact of authoritarian states’ covert actions against western democracies, but not so much vice versa. To qualify this, the book provides several fascinating tales of widespread covert action activities amongst Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf states. Nevertheless, it could perhaps do more to decentre the scholarship by giving greater detail about the role of emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil, states which tend to receive more marginal coverage in existing published accounts. In particular, discussions about China’s use of covert action tend to be general

and mostly gleaned from journalistic accounts. Cormac acknowledges that “[l]ittle is known” about the PRC’s Ministry of State Security and military intelligence within the People’s Liberation Army (16). Herein lies the problem that explains the relative brevity and generality of Cormac’s focus on the Middle Kingdom, despite the relevance and pertinence of this actor in contemporary international affairs.

In sum, *How to Stage a Coup* is a timely and valuable addition to the growing and increasingly rich literature on covert action. Cormac’s findings and conclusions regarding the prevalence of covert action in contemporary international affairs may well be alarming, but not particularly surprising. In the modern information age, never has covert action been quite so overt and exposed to public scrutiny. And, of course, this partly explains the modern challenge of defending against it: The vast array of nefarious tools at a state’s disposal, the seemingly increased willingness of states to act undeterred, and the plethora of inimical untruths that can freely circulate and proliferate on the internet in today’s world, all mean that this ancient weapon has never been more relevant or dangerous.

 Review by Susan McCall Perlman, National Intelligence University

These days much is made in national security circles about the ‘gray zone,’ that foggiest of spaces somewhere between peace and war. It is the place where assassinations of former spies and regime critics take place, where elections are influenced, and where ‘little green men’ operate—all ostensibly deniable, though often carried out in plain sight. While there is still no firm consensus as to what exactly constitutes the range of gray zone activities, most scholars and practitioners agree that covert action, with its ambiguity and use of methods short of conventional war to influence the behavior of adversary states and movements, makes up a significant part of the gray zone. Seizing upon this national security zeitgeist, Rory Cormac seeks to illuminate this “murky subterranean world” in his superb *How to Stage a Coup* (26).

There is a robust and growing body of scholarship about covert action, and especially CIA-led or sponsored covert operations in the Cold War.¹ Thanks to historians like John Prados and Christopher Andrew, we know *what* happened in many of these cases. But the public has not yet had a good rendering of *why* leaders turn to covert action and *how* it works. Cormac takes a new tack that advances what we do know while also complicating it a bit—some of what we know we only think we know, and there is much that we do not know. For Cormac, the gray zone is “epistemic:” it is about how we perceive those actions taken by states to further their national interests (5). Moreover, much of what we think we know about covert action is “highly mythologized—and often misunderstood” (11). This makes this work even more significant, for perceptions and imagined narratives about covert action are often more important than the act itself. Cormac aims to clear these misperceptions and provide a more accessible account of covert action, a “playbook” for those wanting to know what works and what does not” (121, 158). His book proceeds in chapters dedicated to the ‘how to’ of each form of covert action, ranging from assassination, influence, subverting governments and democracy, rigging elections, waging secret wars, picking rebels, sabotage, cyberattack, and how to wield the ‘hidden hand’ to, of course, “how to stage a coup.”

Cormac calls upon history, “past and present, to offer key insights” into this world of secret statecraft (26). Drawing on a wide body of literature, Cormac retells some well-known episodes—CIA activities in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and Chile in 1973, for example—but also offers important updates to what we know about some of them, a reflection of the advancement the field has made over the past decade.² Yet he also adeptly connects the past to the present through use of contemporary press accounts to show continuity between those episodes and events we see unfolding in the gray zone today. To understand the efficacy of these actions (or the difficulty in determining their success), Cormac turns to recent scholarship in political science.

In doing so, Cormac makes three overarching arguments. First, the covert activities he describes in this book are “not new and can only be understood alongside recent history” (4). For example, he points out that for all

¹ See, for example, John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan r. Dee, 2009); Christopher Andrew, *For the President’s Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: Harper, 1996); Frances Stoner Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA in the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2nd edition, 2013); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Sarah-Jane Corke, *US Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare, and the CIA 1945-1953* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Gregory Treverton, *The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). On British Intelligence, see Keith Jeffrey, *The Secret History of MI-6: 1909-1949* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

² For example, on Brazil’s role in the Allende coup, see Peter Kornbluh and Savannah Boch (eds), “Brazil Abetted Overthrow of Allende in Chile,” National Security Archive Briefing Books, no. 753 (2021); on Idi Amin’s role in planning his own coup in Uganda, see Harriet Aldrich, “Uganda, Southern Sudan and the Idi Amin Coup,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 6 (2020): 1109-1139; on the mischaracterization of the initial aim of CIA and MI-6 operations in Albania after World War II, see Stephen Long, “CIA and MI-6 psychological warfare and the subversion of communist Albania in the early Cold War,” *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 6 (2020): 787-807.

of the focus on CIA operations in Chad and Libya, it is important to note that France had been intervening there for years (176). Likewise, the American plot to overthrow Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 had British origin (149). Second, covert action today is less about controlling events than it is about disruption. While much of earlier literature has suggested that regime change has been the objective of covert action, there are numerous examples to suggest that it is often about weakening state authority or disruption of an adversary's operations (4). For example, as Stephen Long has argued, the UK/US operation to roll back communism in Albania after the Second World War began as an attempt to disrupt supply lines running from Albania to Greece (178). Third, Cormac argues that in order to appreciate the dynamics and impact of covert action, one must understand “how it works and how it is reported...ambiguity is everything” (5). Quite often, the state or intelligence service which sets and controls the narrative about a particular operation enjoys the upper hand in managing its aftereffects. At the same time, Cormac argues that states choose to use covert action due to three factors: “insufficient clout...to intervene openly,” a “mismatch between ambition and assets,” and “reputation and risk management” (22). On the last point, he sees covert action as a “coping mechanism” for leaders who wish to intervene publicly but do not have the support to do so (169-170).

A major theme of this work is covert action as performance; that is, “it has an audience” (187). Relatedly, Cormac maintains that covert action is a “shadowy form of international statecraft,” and, at the same time, a “curious form of diplomacy.” While I would situate covert action alongside diplomacy as two forms of statecraft, Cormac's point that covert action is often designed to send a message to adversaries (don't test us) and friends (you can count on us) is well-made (12, 190, 258). Likewise, Cormac develops the concept of “implausible deniability” that he and Richard Aldrich described in their 2018 article “Grey is the New Black.”³ Secrecy, Cormac argues, is often a myth—“secret wars do not have to be all that secret” (182). To extend that line of reasoning, sometimes presidents and prime ministers have an interest in exposure, if only to send a message, manage perception, or control a narrative.

Cormac's *How to Stage a Coup* makes several important contributions to this field and to a public interested in secret statecraft. First, definitions matter. Cormac shines light on activities that are historically opaque. His approach is accessible, and he does a superb job of explaining much of what is left implied or unsaid in other works about covert action, for example, explaining what actually constitutes a coup (146). At the same time, he points out the problems that definitional differences may bring between allies, especially if one conceives of covert action as inherently restrictive, while the other has a more expansive definition (253-254). The differences are not without consequences, most especially for democracies who must band together to counter Russian and Chinese gray zone activities.

Second, interventions are “a global story playing out on a global stage” (14). Too often, scholarship on covert action has been focused on US (and British, to a lesser extent) covert action, and more specifically those activities of the CIA in the Cold War. This has been somewhat understandable thanks to the declassification of records in the United States. But very little attention has been paid to the activities of other states, and especially those of non-Western nations, and, I might add, to the responses of people, factions, and states targeted by covert action. But Cormac nimbly moves beyond the Anglosphere to illuminate covert action undertaken by other global actors: France, Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran, and Israel to name a few. And he makes the key point that the CIA is not behind every covert activity, nor is it always the place to look to determine whether assassinations or coups work (38)—there are lessons to be gleaned by broadening the scope of study.

Perhaps most importantly, Cormac draws key insights from this tour of the gray zone that are rooted in the performative nature of covert action. He cautions against exposure as a sole defense—it can make an

³ Rory Cormac and Richard Aldrich, “Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (2018): 477-494.

adversary look more powerful than it is. It also risks delegitimizing genuine grievances and concerns that may have fueled the same outcome that covert activities also sought to influence (276, 282-283). Likewise, he underscores the power of perception. For a covert action to be successful, it must exert influence to shape the course of events. It must also then influence audiences to believe that the action achieved its objective; as he notes, “covert action is what states make of it” (285). At the same time, Cormac identifies an international legal gray zone in which covert action goes unregulated. He contends that western leaders should come together to develop global norms for covert action, reform laws and standards of behavior, and come to consensus on how to punish these behaviors in the gray zone, another performative act that is perhaps less likely (as least for this cynic). Finally, Cormac rightly notes that the best defense is offense: states which can offer a compelling, positive, and unified narrative stand a better chance in challenging the altered reality of the gray zone (289-290).

At the same time, this important study underscores some of the challenges that persist in our understanding of covert action. As Cormac acknowledges, it is hard “to isolate the impact of the hidden hand” (24) when there are so many other dynamics shaping global events, and he points to episodes in which covert action may have succeeded despite or regardless of intervention (for example, Poland in the 1980s and Italy in 1948). Recent scholarship suggests that too often covert operators attribute success to the wrong dynamic and draw erroneous conclusions that serve to justify the application of the same techniques to other scenarios.⁴ It is also difficult to isolate among different hidden hands, as we learn more about the activities of other nations who meddled in the affairs of others; often, they were not alone (159). Cormac does the public a great service by pointing this out.

Finally, singular focus on covert action as a means and on the state as actor risks perpetuating a blind spot in the field that has persisted since its inception. Covert action is captivating, and, not surprisingly, it constitutes a large part of popular literature about intelligence even though, as Cormac notes, it comprises a very small percentage of the intelligence activities of any nation. While its results may be occasionally spectacular, covert action does not happen without careful intelligence work in front of, underneath, and around it. More often, it is the substantially less understood nexus between espionage and diplomacy—the influence of transnational networks of public, private, official, and informal sources, the intelligence gathered, and the lenses through which human analysts and decisionmakers view it—that has, in my view, the most profound effect on relations between states. To be fair, Cormac’s aim is not to write to scale; he clearly seeks another purpose: “to demystify, elucidate and provoke” a public that is bombarded daily with tantalizing hints of the secret world (4). He has surely succeeded here—masterfully so—and we are all the better for it.

⁴ See Kaeten Mistry, “Approaches to Understanding the Inaugural CIA Covert Operation in Italy: Exploding Useful Myths,” *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no. 2-3 (2011): 246-268.

Review by Nicholas Reynolds, Independent Scholar

Rory Cormac has succeeded at a task that would have frustrated many a lesser scholar, namely surveying covert action around the world. After defining his subject as “plausibly deniable interference [by one state] in the affairs of other... [countries in order to] bring about political change,” he focuses mostly on the twenty-first century and offers a set of lessons in dark arts grouped in “how to” chapters, each devoted to a particular genre (12).¹ His basic argument is that this complementary policy tool, covert action, is here to stay. It has had a long, worldwide history, and “will continue, even increase in our era of implausible deniability” (5). That being the case, it is incumbent on governments to better understand how it works (22). The author’s somewhat casual yet substantive and even-handed style suggests that his message is more for concerned citizens and government officials than fellow academics.

The “how to” chapters are not actually step-by-step procedural guides, as one might find in a manual, but sets of observations that reflect the author’s breadth of knowledge. They cover just about every kind of covert action, including the obvious choices such as how to influence others, how to assassinate your enemies, how to subvert governments, how to rig an election, and how to cyberattack. There is, almost of necessity, a chapter on how to stage a coup. Each chapter typically features brief case studies—such as the poisoning of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny with the nerve agent Novichok (27)—followed by commentary. Many of the author’s other cases will be familiar to readers—like the US in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Russian interference in the US presidential election in 2016—while some will be new even to seasoned practitioners (including your reviewer). One example is French covert action in Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1960s and 1970s “to maintain post-colonial influence” (152).

A chapter near the end of the book, “How to Wield the Hidden Hand,” is a useful summary of lessons learned from the case studies; the author sets out to distill “some broad insights from history about what works and what does not” (273). The concluding chapter, “Defense Against the Dark Arts,” is arguably the most important in the book. It addresses countermeasures that a government can take to protect itself. Finally, there are thirty pages of endnotes along with a comprehensive twenty-one-page bibliography. The author relies primarily on a sound mix of secondary sources along with documents that are available online.

The author’s general conclusions are also sound. He reminds the reader that the hidden hand that takes action is attached to the body politic; covert action is ideally synched to a government’s other policies (260). “To be successful...propaganda, subversion, and sabotage are simply one part of a broader strategy” (263). Similarly, he advises harnessing “existing forces rather than trying to establish something from scratch” (268). That is, standalone covert actions, and one-of-a-kind silver bullets, stand less of a chance of success than actions that are just one plank of a larger platform. As for defense, his recommendations start with education and awareness; he wants to develop an informed citizenry as well as a corps of experts who can advise their governments. He discusses proactive measures, especially inter- and intra-government coordination, as well as when and how a victim should expose an enemy attack. His point is that timing matters: act too early and there may not be much to expose, act too late and the attacker may have achieved some of his objectives. The author concludes that defense “should involve attempts to disrupt the adversary at every stage in the covert action life cycle” (295).

¹ This differs slightly from the official US Government definition of covert action found in the National Security Act Sec. 503 (e) which the author quotes (12): “An activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly.” Quoted and discussed in Eric Rosenbach and Aki Peritz. “Covert Action.” Memorandum, “Confrontation or Collaboration? Congress and the Intelligence Community,” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, July 2009. In most definitions, only states can conduct covert action.

The author's approach comes with a couple of downsides. One is that the boundaries between the types of cases are not always distinct; the various activities can bleed into one another. Trying to keep them in one category can oversimplify; intelligence is an inherently messy business. (As more than one practitioner has observed, if we knew the answers, we wouldn't need intelligence agencies; their purpose is to probe the unknown.) A related downside is that a general survey can only take a reader so far. It will be hard for the uninitiated to make sense of a complex operation like the Bay of Pigs operation without immersing themselves in a detailed history, like Jim Rasenberger's *The Perfect Disaster*² or the CIA's own in-house history.³ *How to Stage a Coup* arms readers with the right questions to ask about an operation, but then it is time for the longer, more focused works. In an article that he published jointly with two other respected scholars, the author himself suggests a useful line of questioning, namely how to evaluate success in covert action.⁴

There are a great many other articles and books that treat covert action but tend to differ in type from *How to Stage a Coup*. One approach is to see covert action as a subset of general intelligence studies. A good example is Mark Lowenthal's *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, a mainstay in many classrooms where it has been a foundational text. Lowenthal's book explicitly eschews the "how to" approach, and embraces the goal of increasing the general understanding of intelligence.⁵ For Lowenthal, covert action is just one of many subjects in his introduction to the profession. Another approach is to analyze a single country's practices. An example of this genre is William Daugherty's *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency*, which looks at various American presidents, their directors of central intelligence, and the way that they made and executed foreign policy, especially covert action.⁶ Professor Loch Johnson has recently published a similar volume entitled *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy*.⁷ Shifting gears somewhat, many academics treat the subject more as a part of history than as political science, embedding covert action in national history. Christopher Andrew is perhaps the leading practitioner of this approach, with such classics as *For the President's Eyes Only*, which addresses how American presidents from George Washington to George Bush have approached intelligence.⁸ Andrew has also addressed the history of British and Soviet intelligence in well-sourced but readable tomes.⁹ Cormac, and his past co-author Richard Aldrich, have written a number of books that are generally in the same vein as Andrew's.¹⁰

To sum up: with its up-to-date, wide-ranging focus, as well as its approach to classifying the various types of covert action, *How to Stage a Coup* stands in a class almost by itself and is a welcome addition to the literature. It can serve as an introduction or overview for generalists, undergraduates, and even graduate students. Being well-documented and current, *How to Stage a Coup* is a fine springboard for further research. At the same time,

² Jim Rasenberger, *The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs* (New York: Scribner, 2011)

³ Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: New Press, 1998)

⁴ Rory Cormac, Calder Walton, and Damien Van Puyvelde. "What Constitutes Successful Covert Action? Evaluating Unacknowledged Interventionism in Foreign Affairs." *Review of International Affairs* (2021): 1–18.

⁵ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2022), xi.

⁶ William Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006). For an earlier, more critical view of the same topic, see John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago: Ivan Dee Publishers, 2006)

⁷ Loch Johnson, *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford, 2022). The three options here are the treaty power, the war power, and the spy war (covert action).

⁸ Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

⁹ Andrew, *KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

¹⁰ See for example Richard Aldrich and Rory Cormac, *The Black Door: Spies, Secret Intelligence, and British Prime Ministers* (London: William Collins, 2017).

it is easy to imagine a policy-maker using this survey to broaden his/her horizons and better understand the secret hand.

Response by Rory Cormac, University of Nottingham

I would like to thank all four reviewers for engaging so thoughtfully with the book, and the H-Diplo editors for arranging this roundtable. Putting any book into the public domain will always be a wonderful but slightly terrifying experience, and I very much appreciate the generous praise from such an astute and experienced panel of readers.

I set out to write a book, aimed at the wider public rather than academic specialists, to demystify the world of covert action. It is a horrible cliché, but I wanted to ‘get behind the headlines.’ Sabotage, secret wars, electoral interfering, cyberattacks and (attempted) assassinations have featured prominently in the international news media over the last few years. This prominence created an interesting paradox, in which supposedly secret activity was being discussed publicly, and, more oddly still, was often framed as successful despite being exposed. The book seeks to grapple with these big issues of how, why, and so what, whilst moving the literature on from historical studies of particular (usually American) operations. At the same time, public discussion is dominated by myths and narratives derived from fictional spies like James Bond and Jason Bourne, and so the book also sought to cut through the fiction.

In many ways it was an especially difficult book to write, given its ambitiously wide parameters (all forms of covert action, around the world, past and present) and my desire to write in an engaging, publicly accessible manner (whilst maintaining rigour and full academic references).

I am pleased—and relieved—to read that the reviewers agree that I met my brief. Whilst not primarily aimed at academic specialists, I am glad that such a seasoned scholar as Nicholas Reynolds found plenty of unfamiliar empirical material in the book. We are living through a golden age of covert action scholarship,¹ and the book seeks to bring recent interdisciplinary research, covering multiple states, to a wide audience. Both Susan McCall Perlman and Reynolds noted the range of literature on which the book draws. I was also pleased to read Reynolds’s comment about the book’s appeal to policymakers. Indeed, I have been pleasantly surprised by informal feedback from around the world—although, it is not of course (as the reviewers point out), an actual manual on how to stage a coup!

Two intersecting themes cut across the reviews: method and scope. Stephen Long would have preferred more reflection on methodology, especially issues around secrecy.² Access to source material of course affects research into covert action. It skews us towards paramilitary operations, which are more visible than intangible influence operations; towards failures (which are also more visible); and towards those states which declassify records, notably the United States. As a result, the literature is often biased towards the US experience and towards failed secret wars.

I tried to break free from this prism by taking a more global approach, by emphasising the relative importance of influence operations, and by problematising success. This, of course, comes with methodological risks. Loch K. Johnson criticises the book for not drawing on the primary sources of the Church Committee, but doing so would have led to a book which has been written many times before. This is

¹ For recent examples see: Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018); Dov Levin, *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Melissa M. Lee, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020); Lindsey O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018); and Michael Poznansky, *In the Shadow of International Law: Secrecy and Regime Change in the Postwar World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

² This is a challenge with which, of course, having written on the CIA in the early Cold War, he is familiar. See Stephen Long, *The CIA and the Soviet Bloc: Political Warfare, the Origins of the CIA and Countering Communism in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

old ground, which Johnson himself first expertly ploughed and has reploughed—still expertly—on multiple occasions since.³ The challenge (as faced by recent books on the CIA⁴) is to cover familiar cases—such as the 1953 coup in Iran or the 1980s resistance in Afghanistan—which need to be included in such books, in a fresh manner. There is new source material here, including primary sources, and a range of innovative interpretations drawn from recent secondary literature. I'm glad Perlman notes this, and much appreciate Reynolds's comment that the book stands "in a class almost by itself."⁵ As such, there is more than enough material to offer robust conclusions, especially regarding historical activity.

Dealing with states beyond the US offers a greater methodological challenge. Again, there is a growing and surprisingly large range of literature on which to draw. Just this year, for example, scholars published a new dataset on Indian support for insurgencies.⁶ Other recent publications draw on archival material to offer thorough accounts of Stasi operations.⁷ There is plenty out there. It is important to move beyond the "Intelligence Studies" literature, which is dominated by the Anglosphere, and consider, for example, proxy warfare literature (where there is plenty of material on the Horn of Africa or on Iran),⁸ contemporary cyber-security literature,⁹ or French-language history books which cover Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ Much of the most innovative material is written by people who would not identify as being scholars of covert action or intelligence. Clearly, there are evidence gaps—especially when going into operational detail beyond the scope of this book—but that does not mean we should not ask the right questions. Scholars must of course use their judgement and training to critically evaluate source material, and triangulate it as far as possible, but a great deal of material exists—more than many people expect.

The bigger and less obvious methodological problem, as pointed out in Perlman's review, derives from isolating the parameters of covert action and, more problematic still, isolating its impact. I spare the reader in the book, but I tend to favour an interpretivist method analysing the construction of narratives as outlined—for those interested—in a recent article I co-authored on evaluating covert actions.¹¹ 'How we know what we know' is as interesting as the 'what we know.'

Linked to methods and sources is the issue of scope. The book seeks to go beyond the usual suspects of the US and Russia to demonstrate that unacknowledged interference is a form of global statecraft. As such, I appreciate Perlman's comment that "Cormac nimbly moves beyond the Anglosphere to illuminate covert action undertaken by other global actors: France, Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran, and Israel to name a few." I tried to take the literature in a new direction and, likewise, Reynolds acknowledges the breadth of knowledge

³ See for example Loch K. Johnson, *America's Secret Power: The CIA in a Democratic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴ Loch K. Johnson, *The Third Option, Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford, 2022); Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *A Question of Standing: The History of the CIA* (New York: Oxford, 2022).

⁵ Both reviewers have great experience in uncovering new sources and in providing novel and accessible interpretations of well-trodden ground. See Susan McCall Perlman, *Contesting France: Intelligence and US Foreign Policy in the Early Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) and Nicholas Reynolds, *Need to Know: World War II and the Rise of American Intelligence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022).

⁶ Avinash Paliwal and Paul Staniland, "Strategy, Secrecy, and External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Studies Quarterly* 67:1 (2023): sqad001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad001>

⁷ See, for example, Douglas Selvage, "'Operation 'Denver': The East German Ministry for State Security and the KGB's AIDS Disinformation Campaign, 1986–1989 (Part 2)," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 23:3 (2021): 4–80.

⁸ See, for example, Vladimir Rauta, "'Proxy War'—A Reconceptualisation," *Civil Wars*, 23:1 (2021): 1–24; and Rauta "Framers, Founders and Reformers: The Generations of Proxy War Research," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42:1 (2021): 113-134.

⁹ For example, Lennart Maschmeyer, "The Subversive Trilemma: Why Cyber Operations Fall Short of Expectations," *International Security*, 46:2 (2021): 51–90.

¹⁰ See Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart: Politique française en Afrique, 1959 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

¹¹ Rory Cormac, Calder Walton, and Damien Van Puyvelde, "What Constitutes Successful Covert Action? Evaluating Unacknowledged Interventionism in Foreign Affairs," *Review of International Affairs*, (2021): 1–18.

and cases. Against this backdrop, I was slightly surprised by Long’s criticism of the book focusing on “the usual covert action suspects” and his point about the need to decentre the West. The book explicitly seeks to do this by, for example, as Perlman again notes, making “the key point that the CIA is not behind every covert activity.” It internationalises even those covert actions most heavily associated with the CIA. Covert action in 1980s Afghanistan, for example, involved the Chinese, Pakistanis, Egyptians, French, Saudis, and British. It also discusses cases in which the West—broadly defined—does not appear at all (for example, examples from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere). Going further than this is of course a laudable aim and, to achieve what Long seems to have in mind, would go well beyond the scope of a single-authored study. Linking back to sources, it would also require a more liberal approach to declassification worldwide. It is easy to knock the literature as being US-centric, but the US declassifies far more sources than states in the Global South. I hope this book sits at the start of a new wave of literature taking a more global comparativist approach, including scholarship on the Global South. Indeed, a book project edited by Genevieve Lester, Magda Long, Mark Stout, Damien van Puyvelde and me is currently under contract with Georgetown University Press, bringing together multiple authors to look at multiple states’ approaches to covert action. Watch this space.

Reynolds, Long, and Perlman highlight the inevitable downsides of the survey approach. Intelligence scholars too often write about their subject in isolation, as if it was still the missing dimension that it was back in the 1980s. Scholars, myself included, write histories of the CIA or MI6, or, in this case, covert action, which end up inadvertently overplaying the exceptionalism and distinctiveness of intelligence. They (we) often do try to put it in the broader context, point to limitations, and weave in international history, but ultimately these books are about intelligence. We need more histories of the US, UK, or books on foreign policy with the intelligence material woven in rather than being the driving force. It is a difficult balance to achieve. Some of the most interesting material here is coming from International Relations scholars who examine intervention on a spectrum of secrecy and why states choose to intervene covertly or overtly, and the comparative consequences of doing so.¹² Intelligence is no longer the missing dimension, and scholars specialising in intelligence risk writing only for themselves.

Likewise, structuring the book around types of operations—electoral interference, coups and so on—oversimplifies the boundaries of each, and neglects the idea that they can blur into each other. I try to make the point that, say, influence operations underpin coups but, as Reynolds states, the structure only allows this qualification to gain so much traction.

Similarly, the survey approach can only go so far. This is a broad sweep, designed to draw patterns and bold conclusions from a wide variety of global activity, past and present. Whilst well-researched (research for this book goes back almost fifteen years), each case study is inevitably short. I hope that the book encourages people to read more about individual cases using the comprehensive bibliography and endnotes. I entirely agree with Reynolds that “*How to Stage a Coup* arms readers with the right questions to ask about an operation, but then it is time for the longer, more focused works.” This was always the intention.

A response to reviewers is rather like a covert action, in that we end up dwelling on the downsides and drawbacks. I will therefore end by reiterating my gratitude to the reviewers for their kind words, especially Reynolds’s line that the book’s style is “casual yet substantive”: the ultimate compliment for any academic seeking to write for wide audience, and my new career motto.

¹² See, for example, recent work by Dov Levin on electoral interference, which spans the overt and covert divide: *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). Likewise, Paliwal and Staniland do similar work in “Strategy, Secrecy, and External Support for Insurgent Groups.”