



## How to Stage a Coup: and ten other lessons from the world of secret statecraft

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'Special operations doesn't [sic] mean going in with all guns blazing', said Neil Burnside, the fictional Director of SIS's Special Operations Section in Ian Mackintosh's cult 1970s British television drama *The Sandbaggers*. 'If you want James Bond, go to your library', suggests Burnside, 'But if you want a successful operation, sit at your desk and think. And then think again'.<sup>1</sup> Rory Cormac has produced a book that requires us to think, then think again, about the hidden hand. Covert action, also referred to as special operations and a range of euphemisms covering such activity, is an area wrapped up in Bond-like mystique. 'Covert action is highly mythologized – and often misunderstood', Cormac writes (p. 11). Building on his 2018 book *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces, and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy*,<sup>2</sup> Cormac's latest study on this subject is a useful tome in understanding this most secret, and controversial, of intelligence-related activities. From targeted killings to electoral interference, online disinformation campaigns and secret wars, Cormac argues that the 'hidden hand' is of increasing importance at a time of growing state competition. Worse, meddling elsewhere will become less secret, more diverse and exploit growing divisions in society, and is here to stay.

For many, covert action conjures up images of Bond-like officers with a 'license to kill', bearded CIA special operations operatives in dusty locations, or Russia's engaging in 'wetwork' (from the Russian *mokroye delo*). For policymakers, too, covert action – more than any other form of intelligence-related activity – can be seen as an attractive option, allowing them, it seems, to obtain influence on the cheap without political backlash. But Cormac rightly points out that, on too many occasions, the impact of the hidden hand is easily overplayed. Too often, policymakers, practitioners and even commentators have been quick to cite successes, whereas the history of secret statecraft is a 'catalogue of errors and excess' (p. 35). The study also rightly points out that covert action cannot, and should never be, an end in itself. The killing of a terrorist leader, the disruption of a nuclear programme, or manipulation of a foreign election might make leaders happy they are doing something, yet such activities should always be part of a broader strategy, as Cormac writes: 'covert action has inherent limitations. It can only achieve so much on its own and so must be properly integrated with more conventional measures' (p. 263). Additionally, we should not overplay the impact. Take, for example, Russian and Chinese interference, and the gradual drip-drip effect of misinformation in western democracies. The threat is undoubtedly real, but foreign states often exploit existing divisions in society. The antidote to disinformation is 'for states to sort out their internal divisions ... Division and inequality create a breeding ground for foreign subversion, exacerbated by culture wars and toxic public discourse' (p. 290).

*How to Stage a Coup* is also useful in giving us a global study of the dark arts. Too often, studies of covert action (and intelligence generally) have rarely strayed beyond the Anglosphere, and Cormac deserves praise for meticulous scholarship that broadens the study of covert action beyond the well-trodden paths. Equally important is the debunking of Bond-like *clichés*. Assassinations and 'targeted killings' are just the most extreme part of the covert action spectrum, whereas most efforts to undermine governments are 'nebulous, gradually chipping away at authority' (p. 107). Cormac is also excellent at demolishing the much hyped 'cyber-9/11' and 'cyber-Pearl Harbor' narratives. For many, cyber remains an impenetrable subject they know little about and leave to the 'techies'. The cyber threat may seem inaccessible to some, given the newness and of all this and language, but cyber needs to be 'understood within the historical context of subversion and wider covert activity'

(p. 242). For all the hype, cyber can only achieve so much, and the 'tweed-wearing, elbow-patched historian inside all of us' should point out that while the language of cyber seems different, and the technology is new, the principles of cyber activity should come as little surprise to anyone reading about covert action.

The history of covert action is difficult to navigate and easy to overhype. Cormac's book is a valuable contribution to the literature, and the global nature of this study provides lessons for others to take in and build on in time. The fact that popular culture still shapes our understanding of the hidden hand is worrying, and Cormac deserves praise for producing a book that offers a mature, scholarly work that provides a much-needed correction to the prevailing view of secret statecraft. Moreover, Cormac writes on a tricky subject in a way that is easily accessible to many, and the book is a must read for those interested in intelligence, secret warfare and the hidden hand more generally.

## Notes

1. *The Sandbaggers* (1978–1980).
2. Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny* (2018).

## Bibliography

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