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A Century of Interventionism and Regime Change **by Anthony Gregory**

Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq by Stephen Kinzer (New York: Times Books, 2006); 400 pages; \$27.50.

Since September 11, the U.S. government has overthrown the governments of Afghanistan and Iraq. Most Americans appear to think of these actions as defensible in principle and, at any rate, see them as reactions to the terrorist aggression of 9/11.

The overwhelming history of U.S. conduct in other countries rarely occurs to the average American. Aside from some obvious instances, such as the Vietnam War and the nearly universally approved U.S. intervention into World War II, the history of U.S. foreign policy does not get the attention and consideration it deserves.

So when the World Trade Center and Pentagon were hit by hijacked commercial airplanes nearly five years ago, the majority of the American public reacted with shock and surprise, as well as anger and fear. It was as though history had begun with those terrorist attacks. Americans were genuinely confused as to why innocent America would be the target of any such murderous assault. The only explanation that many were prepared to believe was that terrorists hate Americans for their freedom, and thus the war on terror would be a war to defend and reaffirm such freedom.

Indeed, with the continuing calamity in Iraq making the daily headlines, many Americans have traded one misconception for another. Whereas five years ago, they had thought that the United States was a more or less innocent, benign, or even benevolent force in world affairs, and so the militaristic response to such anti-American terrorist attacks represented some sort of anomalous behavior, many who have turned against the Iraq War have stumbled into a similarly formed but quite different misunderstanding.

How could George W. Bush have done this? many wonder. This president has attacked a country that did not attack the United States or pose any threat to American freedom or American lives, has overthrown a sovereign government, has unleashed catastrophe in the region, has

radicalized America's enemies, and has all the while, it now seems, been less than forthcoming about his reasons for doing so. Now it is President Bush who is the anomaly. His partisan detractors criticize him as though he were the only man in the White House ever to do such an outrageous thing.

This misconception is perhaps as dangerous as the one that led so many Americans to believe that terrorists struck on 9/11 because they hated American liberty. To understand America's current challenges in the world requires context that, unfortunately, all too many Americans do not have.

We can all better comprehend why it is that so many foreigners hate us when we look carefully at the history of U.S. foreign policy, and we can better know what to do about it if we do not blame all of our current difficulties on the person of George W. Bush.

We should all be grateful, then, for Stephen Kinzer's new book, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*. In it we see how history has unfolded over the past century with repeating patterns emerging with frightening frequency.

A history of interventionism

Kinzer sketches out an engaging, very tightly written narrative of U.S. involvement in overthrowing the governments of Hawaii, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Iran, Guatemala, South Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In nearly every historical case, we can see parallels to the contemporary interventions in Afghanistan and especially Iraq.

In sketching out the beginning of America's hyper-aggressive foreign policy, Kinzer touches on something that is rarely touched on in public schools or political speeches. Americans at one time, by and large, maintained a philosophical aversion to imperialistic adventures. Granted, they were not always peaceful, but they had no pretensions of being the global cop. There had been the Mexican War and the sweeping across the middle of North America in the spirit of Manifest Destiny. But "the idea of going farther ... was something quite new." As the author explains, there was a consensus against seizing Hawaii in 1893, which struck Americans as imperialistic, even un-American.

Five years later, this consensus evaporated. Almost overnight, it was replaced by a national clamor for overseas expansion. This was the quickest and most profound reversal of public opinion in the history of American foreign policy.

Public sentiment is crucial in determining how much politicians can achieve in the realm of their imperial ambitions. And just as a public favorable toward intervention will translate into more intervention, the ravages of war can corrupt public morality. This is perhaps most evident in the American counter-insurrection in the Philippines in the immediate aftermath of the Spanish-

American War, where, as in Cuba, Americans initially claimed to be fighting to defend the rights to self-determination of a colonized people against the Spanish, only later to renege on their promises and impose their own occupation in Spain's stead.

The pretext had changed to one of civilizing the uncivilized. Americans saw Filipinos as savages, hardly human. And after multiple reports of terrible torture, abuse, and massacres of innocent Filipinos, which some pundits came to see as a sign that Americans had become what they claimed to be fighting against, the defenders of U.S. conduct overseas responded in a manner similar to what we hear from defenders of the Iraq War.

Extreme conditions, they insisted, had forced soldiers to act as they did. The *New York Times* argued that "brave and loyal officers" had reacted understandably to the "cruel, treacherous, murderous Filipinos." The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* said that ... "the transgressions have been extremely slight." ... A second theme that echoed through the press was that any atrocities committed in the Philippines had been aberrations. They were "deplorable," the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* conceded, but had "no bearing on fundamental questions of national policy."

Interventionism and torture

Such lines of argument seem remarkably close to the reactions of certain right-wing radio hosts following revelations of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal and the Haditha massacre. "The scandal over torture and murder in the Philippines ... might have led Americans to rethink their country's worldwide ambitions," writes Kinzer, "but it did not. Instead, they came to accept the idea that the soldiers might have to commit atrocities in order to subdue insurgents and win wars." Perhaps the next torture-and-murder scandal will snap Americans out of their acceptance of the U.S. empire, but at this point it seems doubtful.

Such brutality runs through most American interventions, to varying extents. On top of all the "collateral damage" in these interventions — from the innocents slaughtered in a mental hospital during Reagan's invasion of Grenada to the innocents killed in Bush's Shock and Awe — U.S. soldiers have committed nefarious acts, once in the corrupting atmosphere of the battlefield. Just as horrifying, the U.S. government has bankrolled murderous regimes, from Iran to Chile, and has even funded their campaigns of terror against sympathizers of political programs considered too radical by the United States. In Guatemala, starting in 1960,

[many] were tortured to death on military bases. In the countryside, soldiers rampaged through villages, massacring Mayan Indians by the hundreds. This repression raged for three decades, and, during that period, soldiers killed more civilians in Guatemala than in the rest of the hemisphere combined.

During this time, “the United States provided Guatemala with hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid. Americans trained and armed the Guatemalan army and police” and otherwise supported the terror. This was all because during the Cold War being anti-communist was a key to support and acceptance from Washington, even if one’s regime was truly tyrannical, and being perceived as sympathetic to communism was a cause to be overthrown, even if such perceptions were dubious.

The rationales for intervention

The reasons for such rampant American interventionism, as Kinzer argues, fall mainly into two categories: economics and ideology. Corporate interests have exercised enormous power over U.S. foreign policy, contributing hugely to why William Howard Taft overthrew Zelaya’s government in Nicaragua, why the Eisenhower administration overthrew Arbenz in Guatemala and Mossadegh in Iran, and why Richard Nixon overthrew Allende in Chile.

The importance of private interests in public policy is paramount, and libertarians and free-market thinkers would do themselves well to see the frequency of conspiracy between the U.S. warfare state and big corporations, which are not, despite the common misconceptions, overwhelmingly favorable toward free markets. On the contrary, the neo-mercantilism so prevalent in the history of U.S. foreign policy — from United Fruit in Latin America to Halliburton in Iraq — benefits big business by socializing costs and risks, thus forcing taxpayers and foreigners to pay for corporate profits.

Kinzer touches on the contradictions in government-advanced capitalism practiced in the name of “free enterprise.” In the case of Honduras, the

suffocating control that Americans maintained over Honduras prevented the emergence of a local business class. In Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, coffee planters slowly accumulated capital, invested in banks and other commercial enterprises, and went on to assert civic and political power. That never happened in Honduras. The only option available to energetic or ambitious Hondurans was to work for one of the banana companies. The companies were triumphs of the American free market, but they used their power to prevent capitalism from emerging in Honduras.

The only problem with this analysis, of course, is that the companies were most certainly *not* triumphs of the American free market, but rather depended on corporate welfare and U.S. intervention abroad to maintain their economic power.

Money is not the only reason the U.S. government has overthrown foreign states. Corporate

influence alone ... was never enough. Americans overthrew governments only when economic interests coincided with ideological ones. In Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Nicaragua, and Honduras, the American ideology was that of Christian improvement and “manifest destiny.” Decades later, in Iran, Guatemala, South Vietnam, and Chile, it was anti-Communism.

In the case of anti-communism, private enterprise supported by the state often coincided easily with an opposition to leftist socialism abroad. This did contradict principles of the free market, but perhaps the promotion of “democracy” has been the greatest of the frauds in selling U.S. imperialism to the American public. In three cases — Iran, Guatemala, and Chile — the United States overthrew a socialistic but nevertheless popularly elected head of state and replaced him with a right-wing tyrant friendly to the U.S. government who came to rule his nation through incredible violence and terror.

From a moral perspective, the socialistic tendencies of those replaced — most notably, the desire to nationalize assets owned by Western companies — could not justify such intervention, any more than Franklin Roosevelt’s comparable socialization of the American economy during the New Deal could justify a foreign invasion of America and the installation of a puppet regime friendly to a foreign power. Putting it in these terms might help Americans to understand how farcical is the claim that U.S. wars are all about promoting democracy.

Even when the United States helps to establish elections or new civic institutions, it typically imposes far more control over its occupied countries than anyone in America would tolerate from a foreign power. The Platt Amendment in Cuba after the Spanish-American War, which gave the U.S. government all manner of de facto control over the “independent” Cuban people, and the recent U.S.-regulated deliberations in Iraq illustrate this.

Interventionism and blowback

Aside from violating the principles of the free market, democracy, and nonintervention, U.S. adventures overseas have also produced terrible backlashes. This happened throughout Latin America, as revolutionaries such as Che Guevara became radicalized at the sight of U.S. disasters in his region. We see it today in the war on terror, with al-Qaeda active in Iraq, a country where it previously was nowhere to be found.

But such backlash is probably clearest in the example of Iran, where, as Kinzer reminds us, the U.S. government overthrew the democratically elected leader in favor of its ally, the shah. This created such anti-American sentiment in Iran and the rest of the Middle East, culminating first in the radical Iranian revolution in 1979, which very likely produced far worse results than we would have seen had the United States left Iran alone, and leading to the current conflicts between the United States and the Middle East. As Kinzer sums it up, the shah’s

repression ultimately set off a revolution that brought radical fundamentalists to power.... [These] radicals sponsored deadly acts of terror against Western targets.... Their example inspired Muslim fanatics around the world, including in neighboring Afghanistan, where the Taliban gave sanctuary to militants who carried out devastating attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001.

The patterns continue. Kinzer does a great job of exploring the issues of the Afghanistan and Iraq interventions as well, but the most fascinating material, and the least discussed in other books coming out these days, concerns earlier interventions where we see so many of the same themes repeating over and over — ones that are uncomfortably evocative of U.S. foreign-policy crises today. The answer to those problems is for America to adopt a noninterventionist foreign policy as quickly as possible. As bad as things look now, they could get worse. Kinzer informs his readers that, during the crucial deliberations over U.S. policy in Vietnam in the Kennedy White House, officials came to decide “between two awful alternatives”: either supporting Diem, the U.S. ally who was losing his grasp on South Vietnam, or overthrowing him.

The United States could simply have washed its hands of the crisis and left it for the Vietnamese to resolve. That would probably have led to the establishment of Communist or pro-Communist rule over the entire country, but that is what ultimately happened anyway. A withdrawal at this point would have saved hundreds of thousands of lives, avoided the devastation of Vietnam, and spared the United States its greatest national trauma since the Civil War.

Instead of pulling out of Vietnam, the U.S. government chose to overthrow its ally and ended up in an escalating and terrible war. Today, we see a perverse situation in the Middle East, where the United States has remarkably empowered the radical mullahs in its ousting of the same secular regime it had previously supported because the radical mullahs were supposedly not so bad. If the United States isn't yet involved in another Vietnam, now is the time to prevent it. It is time to get out. For this to happen, Americans must reclaim the anti-interventionist leanings they abandoned sometime around the Spanish-American War. Kinzer says the anti-interventionists lost that battle, and thus the struggle over America's foreign-policy orientation, “not because they were too radical but because they were not radical enough.”

To win the debate, to help restore America to its proper place as a country of peace and freedom, we must be radical in our opposition to U.S. interventionism. *Overthrow* is a very important piece of intellectual ammunition for this battle.

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