

Is the Central Intelligence Agency's foreign regime interventionism motivated by the official mission of 'safeguarding national security,' or the covert interest of establishing US world dominance?

Outspoken leaders replaced by subordinate rulers, developing nations devastated by wars and authoritarians, governments and economies destabilized to the point of anarchy and turmoil—these are common patterns following the intervention of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) around the world. For decades, historians have debated the motives behind such regime changes, presenting evidence that results in differing conclusions. CIA, the world's premier foreign intelligence agency, has the protection of the United States “at the heart”¹ of its mission: to “further the U.S. national security objectives,” It claims to collect “foreign intelligence that matters,” “safeguards the secrets,” produce “objective all-source analysis”, and conduct “effective covert action as directed by the president.”² But is this Company truly defending the safety of the American citizens, or pursuing the interests of its leaders, often even eliminating indirect potential threats? Understanding the incentives behind the CIA's involvement in regime changes across the globe, from Chile to Cambodia, is monumental for the appropriate evaluation of this inquiry. Analyzing various occasions of the Agency's interference with the leader-determining processes in foreign states reveals patterns, particularly the establishment of pro-US puppet governments and the deliberate weakening of antagonistic

¹ Central Intelligence Agency, “We Are the Nation's First Line of Defense,” CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/>.

² Central Intelligence Agency, “About CIA — Mission and Vision,” Central Intelligence AgencyIA, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/about/mission-vision/#:~:text=Our%20Mission,-At%20the%20CIA&text=Collecting%20foreign%20intelligence%20that%20matters,help%20keep%20our%20Nation%20safe.>

countries. Such trends identify the downfall trajectory following the CIA's involvement and punctuate the power abuse in actions motivated by the government and the Agency's economic and political benefits. Despite its official mission of securing US citizens, the CIA's abundant involvement in foreign regime change exposes the clandestine goal of eliminating the opposition to the US government, fueled by the aspiration to establish global dominance.

To appropriately interpret the CIA's actions, it is crucial to connect them to US foreign policies. The top focus of American international relations since 1968 could be divided into three distinct periods: the Cold War era defined by the containment policy, the 'Years of Sabbatical', which were interrupted by the 9/11 tragedy, and the subsequent War on Terror.³ During the Cold War, the CIA's main efforts were directed towards containment – they went beyond the Agency-sponsored anti-Soviet propaganda, going as far as to initiate wars. The US resistance to the spread of communism in Indochina has been particularly devastating, including the infamous confrontation with North Vietnam, the secret war in Laos, and the destructive bombing of Cambodia. Particularly, the Angolan intervention was a significant conflict of the period. It was not only poorly justified by Kissinger, but also resulted in the Congress decision to shut down the operation for the first time, after millions of ineffective spending and thousands of casualties.⁴ The 'Years of Sabbatical' marked a decline in CIA activity, as intelligence spending decreased by over 30% during the 1990s.⁵ The major activity of the foreign intelligence service during this period was the involvement in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Lastly, in the aftermath of the

³ Bruce Schulman, Boston University, "2024: Contemporary America in Historic Perspective," 25 April 2024.

⁴ Mark Zepezauer, *The CIA's Greatest Hits* (United States: Odonian Press, 2012), 27-28.

⁵ Brendan McGarry and Emily Morgenstern, "Intelligence Community Spending: Trends and Issues," Every CRS Report - EveryCRSReport.com, November 6, 2019, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20191106_R44381_e1859aa317403b44879021ecaf27f57451e0180e.html.

tragic September 11 attacks, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) engulfed Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite current withdrawal from these countries, GWOT continues and will not “end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”⁶ A covert operation in Afghanistan that escalated as containment efforts after the Soviet invasion of ‘79 became the CIA’s largest operation, which “succeeded, turning Afghanistan into a quagmire for the Soviets and eventually leading to their defeat”, but elements of the guerrilla groups armed by Carter’s administration, “eventually morphed into al-Qaeda.”⁷ The mixed successes of the prior involvement in Afghanistan connect to the equivocality of the CIA’s participation in the War on Terror, as “waging two decades of war has taken time and talent away from the agency’s original purpose of preventing strategic surprise.”⁸ “The tactical tilt” in the form of GWOT led to “a diminished ability to understand, anticipate and counter longer-term threats” from nations like China and Russia, which “threaten American lives and interests far more than terrorist plots.”⁹ The endangerment of American citizens, caused by the Agency’s misplaced priorities, raises a questions about how said shift transitions to the defining tradition of the US foreign policy, from the unilateral self-interested Realist theory to more ‘altruistic’ Wilsonianism. Campaigning for the presidency as a realist, George W. Bush demonstrated his priority in boosting the global influence of the US. This international relations theory suggests that major powers should act as

⁶ George W. Bush, “Freedom at War with Fear,” *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People* (speech, Capitol, September 20, 2001).

⁷ Amy Zegart, “Opinion | the CIA Spent 20 Years on the Front Lines of the War on Terror. It’s Time for That to Change. - Politico,” Politico, September 11, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/11/9-11-america-spycraft-510880>.

⁸ Zegart, “The CIA Spent 20 Years on the Front Lines of the War on Terror.”

⁹ Ibid.

a counterforce to comparable competitors, while only “balance against hostile minor powers” if they “inhabit strategically important regions of the world.”¹⁰ The CIA actively intervened in even the smallest countries, such as Fiji and Vanuatu in the Pacific,¹¹ not because of the threat they posed to American civilians, but the Agency’s own interests like the use of the area as its nuclear test grounds. An unordinary change came as a consequence of 9/11, as Bush proclaimed that the US would support the growth of democratic movements and end tyranny around the world, which signaled a transition to Wilsonian theory based on values, and with the country taking the role of an ‘international actor’.¹² The GWOT, despite harmful effects on the areas of its interference, is significantly more representative of the Company’s official mission. The Central Intelligence Agency employed similar tactics in reaching its goals throughout the three latest main periods of international relations, yet the focal foreign policy of the US has changed, which affected the countries of its interference. Wilsonianism in the War on Terror only seemingly puts the CIA closer to the goals of safeguarding American citizens and supporting the growth of world democracy, and historically, it constantly prioritized the American dominance, even if it came at the cost of numerous democracies.

Manipulating elections is just one of the anti-democratic approaches utilized by the Agency with the goal of annihilating opposition and securing the power of the United States. The CIA’s covert foreign electoral interference ranged from sponsoring vote-changing propaganda, doxing, and financial support to gerrymandering polling results. The intelligence service “hardly

¹⁰ Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, “A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 (December 2011): 803–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592711003963>, 803.

¹¹ Mark Zepezauer, *The CIA’s Greatest Hits*, 39-40.

¹² Schulman, “Contemporary America in Historic Perspective.”

ever altered votes directly,” as claimed CIA historian David Robarge, which however implies that it sometimes did.¹³ Since its very creation through the National Security Act of 1947, the CIA began its questionable actions in the name of ‘national security’ by manipulating the elections in Italy, collaborating with neo-Nazi groups to prevent a likely victory of the unfavored communist candidate. In the following two decades, the Agency interfered with election in Guatemala, placed Ngo Dinh Diem in power in South Vietnam, intervened in two rounds of elections in Chile, and disrupted the ‘67 elections in Greece.¹⁴ “Some of those operations manipulated ballots directly; others manipulated public opinion; all were designed to influence election outcomes.”¹⁵ After the 1983 US invasion of Grenada, the CIA financed propaganda and managed the nation through polling, to assure victory of “a strongly pro-US candidate,”¹⁶ shares Bob Woodward, whose books the Agency claimed “harm U.S. security” by hurting its relations with “other countries through exposure of things we (CIA) did to those countries.”¹⁷ This statement is an additional endowment of the Company’s official mission—it appears unlikely that disclosing its covert efforts, which were directed towards protecting American citizens, would significantly damage its ties with other states. Yet if these efforts are more often channeled towards amplifying its power and hurting civilians of those other countries, the CIA’s concern

¹³ Jack Goldsmith, “Does the US Still Interfere in Foreign Elections?,” Project Syndicate, January 11, 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/does-united-states-still-interfere-in-foreign-elections-by-jack-goldsmith-2020-10>.

¹⁴ Zepezauer, *The CIA’s Greatest Hits*.

¹⁵ David Shimer, “When the CIA Interferes in Foreign Elections,” Dış Politika Enstitüsü, June 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.org.tr/when-the-cia-interferes-in-foreign-elections/>.

¹⁶ Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

¹⁷ “Woodward Books Seriously Harms U.S. Security,” Central Intelligence Agency, December 22, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90-00965r000807540021-8>.

would make more sense, and exceed the risks of ‘simply’ uncovering techniques of intelligence collection. After the conclusion of the Cold War, “the transition from containing communism to promoting democracy made electoral interference a riskier proposition.” The CIA’s electoral interventions decreased yet considered twice in the 21st century. In Serbia in 2000, “the debate turned into action, as the CIA spent millions of dollars working against the tyrant Slobodan Milosevic.” President Clinton admitted authorizing the intelligence service to “interfere in the 2000 election in favor of Milosevic’s opponents,” as he believed this was promoting Serbia’s democracy rather than hurting it, due to the war criminal status of the Yugoslav president. The major involvement of the CIA in the election was focused on “influencing minds rather than altering ballots” and the CIA Balkans-based operations officer, Douglas Wise, expressed that “all the instruments of our national power to create an outcome that was pleasing for the United States.”¹⁸ The Agency’s latest known foreign electoral interference could be perceived as an action motivated by securing the US, as well as other nations and the extremity of Milosevic’s government justifies it. However, struggling to justify the Iraq War, as Hussein’s government was quickly overthrown and no weapons of mass destruction were discovered, Bush emphasized the promotion of Iraqi democracy. As it became clear that Bush’s preferred candidate Allawi wasn’t going to win, election interference was considered, but later aborted. The primary reason for the abortion was not the CIA’s realization that elections in Iraq does not protect US citizens, but the growing difficulty in protecting the secrecy of the operations. Since then, similar interventions have been largely managed by Reagan.¹⁹ Another CIA involvement in foreign elections is the

¹⁸ Shimer, “When the CIA Interferes in Foreign Elections.”

¹⁹ Dan Kovalik, *The Plot to Control the World: How the US Spent Billions to Change the Outcome of Elections around the World* (Skyshore Publishing, 2018).

clandestine financial support for the Mauritian Labour Party in the 1982 vote, motivated by the fear of losing the ports on the islands,²⁰ which has little to do with the safety of the Americans. This operation again exposed the imperialist ambition of the United States. In most electoral manipulations, the CIA was acting in the interest of American Exceptionalism, “the idea that the US is a unique force for democracy and freedom in the world.” The CIA frequently interfered with foreign elections, largely motivated by the intention to amplify American political strength, despite the collateral damage to other democracies. If the strategy of electoral interventions failed, the CIA would transit to more extreme methods, such establishing puppet states, starting coups, and obliterating the country entirely. All this presents the motivation behind the CIA’s regime-shift method of gerrymandering elections as establishing the US world dominance rather than fulfilling its official mission of protecting civilians.

Another approach used by the Central Intelligence Agency in overthrowing regimes is supporting pro-US leaders, and it is an interjacent method between electoral intervention and deliberate destabilization. The endorsement for governments or political parties that align with the interests of the US ranges from overthrowing unfavorable leadership to funding and establishing puppet states. Under the Reagan administration, the CIA transferred over \$10 million to Solidarity, a self-governing trade union, which played a key role in ending Communist rule in Poland in the 1980s. Such covert actions are representative of the Agency’s efforts in support of political sides, whose leadership benefits the United States. This approach in North-Central Africa is labyrinthine, as “Nixon and Kissinger lifted nary an eyebrow at Qadaffy's ouster of the pro-Western Libyan monarch” and then continued to purchase more expensive oil,

²⁰ Larry Bowman, *Mauritius: Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 78-80.

the earnings from which Qadaffy used to “purchase billions in US arms, which he used to fulfill his role as regional policeman for the US.”²¹ The idea of the CIA’s suspected support for al-Qadaffi to control the region, even despite the greater US principles, is furthered by the indictment of two CIA agents who provided weapons and training to the Libyan regime. What convolutes this, is that only a year later, the CIA conducted a clandestine operation, providing support for pro-American Hissene Habre in Chad, the purpose of which “was to bloody Qadaffi’s nose.” Chad won the war against Libya with the help of US aid, which the CIA continued to provide in millions yearly “even after it became clear that Habré was committing atrocities against his own people.”²² This complex line of actions again demonstrates the Agency’s neglect for the well-being of another nation in pursuit of its interests, which again hardly connected to its national security. A prior case of endangering a country while working towards its goals took place in Cambodia as the CIA deposed Prince Sihanouk by a “CIA puppet Lon Nol, who immediately began committing Cambodian troops to the war in Vietnam,” which was the US objective that led to the destruction of the country, and the rise of Khmer Rouge.²³ Another complicated sequence of the regime changes the CIA holds authorship of, dates back to the days of Manuel Noriega in the School of the Americas, the knowledge from which he employed in the assassination of his predecessor Torrijos, consolidating power and rising to his dictatorship while on the Agency’s payroll. The CIA turned a blind eye to Noriega’s drug smuggling and ignored his violence towards the opposition. What jeopardized Noriega-CIA tie was his involvement in

²¹ Zepezauer, *The CIA’s Greatest Hits*, 33.

²² Reed Brody, “Justice Comes to Chad,” JusticetoChad, March 20, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080412210047/http://www.hrw.org/editorials/2002/justicetochad.htm>.

²³ Zepezauer, *The CIA’s Greatest Hits*, 22-23.

the Iran-Contra affair, where in defiance of laws, the Company trained Nicaraguan Contra in opposition to leftist Sandinista, which the Agency eventually defeated by covertly funding the election of favorable Violeta Chamorro.²⁴ As the Contra scandal escalated, Noriega's disobedience became too threatening and in the 1989 invasion, which resulted in US civilian casualties, he was arrested and then replaced by an obedient pro-US government. The Senate Committee on International Operations concluded that "the saga of ... Noriega represents one of the most serious foreign policy failures for the United States."²⁵ and criticized the CIA for disregarding his corruption. Supporting pro-American leaders is the CIA's approach to regime , which was rarely associated with the protection of its citizens, but a method of the power consolidation for the United States, which resulted in the endangerment of thousands of Americans and a major contribution to the drug trafficking in the United States.

Deliberate destabilization is another approach the Central Intelligence Agency used to reach its goals, and it takes various forms such as as making the economy 'scream', pitching countries against their neighbors, and culminating in facilitating a coup. The ultimate purpose of this strategy is to weaken the 'enemy' by causing chaos. War on and suffocation of the Nicaraguan economy, which the CIA by Chile's example 'made scream', climaxed in a bloody coup, as intended by Kissinger's and Nixon.²⁶ One of the most common scenarios of the CIA resorting to this tactic is sabotaging smaller nations if they are against US interests. When Bishop came to power in Grenada in 1979, the CIA "embarked upon a path of internal destabilization

²⁴ Ellis Cose, "The CIA on the Stump," Newsweek, March 14, 2010, <https://www.newsweek.com/cia-stump-204476>.

²⁵ Simon Tisdall, "Manuel Noriega: Feared Dictator Was the Man Who Knew Too Much," The Guardian, May 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/30/general-manuel-noriega-feared-panamanian-dictator-cia-asset>.

²⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, Economic War Against Nicaragua Counterspy § (2010).

and international isolation”²⁷ of Grenada, ultimately leading to his assassination and an American invasion. The CIA propagated the threat of Grenada in justification of the casualties in the operation, but ironically Grenada “mired in poverty and hopelessness.” Ever since the event.²⁸ A similar fate befell on Jamaica, where “mild reforms” of US-objectionable Michael Manley “were sufficient to lead to destabilization efforts against the ‘democratic socialist’ experiment,” as the CIA created financial instability, generating an internal crisis that “resulted in conditions that forced Jamaica to go to the IMF for loans.”²⁹ In 1982, this tactic was, for once, used against the enemy of American national security, as “Reagan approved a CIA plan to sabotage the economy of the Soviet Union through covert transfers of technology that contained hidden malfunctions.”³⁰ Finally, the Agency’s plot to collude with countries in the Mideast with the goals of “provoking a war” and sending “a message to Third World leaders”³¹ was exposed by Iraqi’s ambassador: “Kuwait had been conspiring with the CIA to destabilize Iraq.”³² The CIA’s method of intentional dissemination of instability through various approaches in situations that present no threat to American national security is another incrimination of the intelligence service’s main motive being the inauguration of the US world dominance.

²⁷ James L. Dietz, “Destabilization and Intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Latin American Perspectives* 11, no. 3 (July 1984): 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x8401100301>, 11.

²⁸ Zepezauer, *The CIA’s Greatest Hits*, 34.

²⁹ Dietz, “Destabilization and Intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean,” 11-12.

³⁰ David E. Hoffman, “CIA Sabotage ‘Helped Crush Soviet Economy,’” *The Moscow Times*, March 1, 2004, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/archive/cia-sabotage-helped-crush-soviet-economy>.

³¹ Zepezauer, *The CIA’s Greatest Hits*, 42-42.

³² George Lardner Jr, “Iraqi charges alleged Kuwaiti memo proves a CIA plot against Baghdad,” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/11/01/iraqi-charges-alleged-kuwaiti-memo-proves-a-cia-plot-against-baghdad/8938a9c4-192c-40eb-a6b3-ab166acc609f/>.

To finalize the debate, all of the considered Agency's approaches to regime overthrows would be reviewed in a 'case study' of Chile, concluding with the CIA's last tactic of obliterating the nation. In Chile, "to prevent the accession to the presidency of Marxist Salvador Allende, the total amount spent on covert action ... during 1970-73 was"³³ \$8 million, as the CIA conducted a massive propaganda campaign in support of opposition media and backed the resisting political parties, such as PDC, in both Congressional and presidential elections. In their first 'track', the Company attempted a 'Frei re-election gambit' for the pro-US candidate, utilizing both the method of corrupting elections and supporting subordinate leaders. "That approach having failed, the CIA was ordered to create a 'coup climate' by 'making the economy scream,'"³⁴ which is its third regime-shifting strategy. The monumental operation to prevent Allende's victory by electoral interference, and then the creation of a puppet state and destabilization, serves as "an enduring symbol of Washington's hegemonic arrogance toward smaller nations," especially considering its ultimate failure, which then escalated into a "clandestine effort ... that led directly to the 1973 military takeover led by General Augusto Pinochet."³⁵ Pinochet's dictatorship, a making of the CIA-backed coup d'état, devastated Chile, turning "a democratic, peace-loving nation into a slaughterhouse,"³⁶ thus eliminating the list of threats to the Agency's interests. Kissinger's deputy at the NSC, Viron Vacky, questioned if the threat of Allende's government "outweighed the dangers and risks" of the US intervention, stating that it violated US "principles

³³ Senate, Frank Church, and John G. Tower, *Covert action in Chile, 1963-1973: Staff report of the Select Committee to study Governmental Operations with respect to intelligence activities*, United States Senate § (1975), 13.

³⁴ Zepezauer, *The CIA's Greatest Hits*, 19.

³⁵ Peter Kornbluh, "'Extreme Option: Overthrow Allende,'" National Security Archive, September 15, 2020, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/chile/2020-09-15/extreme-option-overthrow-allende>.

³⁶ Zepezauer, *The CIA's Greatest Hits*, 20.

and policy tenets,” as there was no grave danger. Considering that the main threats associated with Allende were his potential push toward socialism and Nixon’s concern that “Allende’s free and fair election would become a model for other nations . . . , threatening U.S. control and alliances,”³⁷ substantiates that the consolidation of US power defined the CIA’s effort in Chile. Another scenario of the Agency’s demolition of a country is Afghanistan, where with the intention “simply to humiliate the Soviets,” “it succeeded in creating chaos, but never developed a plan for ending it.” And “when the ten-year war was over, a million people were dead, and Afghan heroin had captured 60% of the US market,”³⁸ which demonstrates how in non-essential containment efforts, the CIA endangered Americans with drugs, and later Afghan terrorist groups. Cambodia is the most illustrious example proving that destroying a country was a CIA tactic and not an outcome of its other approaches. There, the methodical destruction of a country, first through the bombing and then the CIA-orchestrated deposition of Sihanouk “dramatically strengthened the Khmer Rouge insurgency.” “US crimes helped nurture and sustain the KR” and monstrous Pol Pot who led the devastating Cambodian genocide, while supported by the CIA. After the failure of Vietnam, the CIA observed the tragedy in Cambodia with satisfaction, as forever scarring the nation and keeping its stronghold in ex-Indochina was its initial goal. Similarly, the destruction of Iraq “set the stage for the rise of ISIS,”³⁹ which majorly harmed the Agency’s official mission of ‘national security’. Because of the harm that is impossible to keep

³⁷ Kornbluh, “Overthrow Allende.”

³⁸ Zepezauer, *The CIA’s Greatest Hits*, 38-39.

³⁹ Brett S. Morris et al., “Nixon and the Cambodian Genocide,” *Jacobin*, April 27, 2015, <https://jacobin.com/2015/04/khmer-rouge-cambodian-genocide-united-states>.

in secrecy, the method of obliteration is the rarest, yet its use proves that in pursuit of its interests, the CIA harms not only unfavorable regimes but also Americans, and the whole world.

The Company's involvement in regime changes presents abundant evidence where the CIA outrightly defies its mission and intervened in areas that are with little to no interest to the Americans. It often resulted in disastrous consequences, and even put US national security at risk. One could argue that the approach through the review of the Agency's tactics doesn't support this conclusion, however, even the War on Terror, one of the CIA's activities most closely related to its authorized mission, has negative effects on the US public right now, as it stimulated Israeli militarization and hostility towards Palestine while committing the US to support Israel, which created one of the major national struggles of today. Another "enduring legacy of the GWOT is an approach to intelligence that doesn't serve U.S. national security interests as it once did," with the CIA overtly distracted from its "primary mission."⁴⁰ The statistics are undeniable and they show that "CIA-sponsored regime ... caused large declines in democracy scores, rule of law, freedom of speech, and civil liberties."⁴¹ "The U.S. government created (CIA) to secure dominance over the 'free world' nations, which supply the U.S. corporations."⁴² Its purpose is presented as safeguarding American national security, but in reality, the Agency is guided by the 'plot to control the world' and the goal "to undermine and overthrow governments dedicated to progressive and necessary change, all in the name of

⁴⁰ Zegart, "The CIA Spent 20 Years on the Front Lines of the War on Terror."

⁴¹ Samuel Absher, et al., "The Consequences of CIA-Sponsored Regime Change in Latin America," *European Journal of Political Economy* 80 (December 2023): 102452, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2023.102452>.

⁴² Central Intelligence Agency, *Economic War Against Nicaragua*.

‘freedom,’”⁴³ as its foreign policy “cloaked in the language of democracy and human rights” remains Imperialist. “Despite its name,” and official mission, “the Central Intelligence Agency's main purpose is – and has always been – carrying out covert operations involving economic warfare, rigged elections, assassinations, and even genocide.”⁴⁴

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<https://www.cia.gov/about/mission-vision/#:~:text=Our%20Mission,->

⁴³ Dietz, “Destabilization and Intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean,” 8.

⁴⁴ Zepezauer, *The CIA's Greatest Hits*, 3.

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