



The United States of America has long been known for its championing of democracy and human rights around the world, writes Barun Gupta. However, America's foreign policy has a darker side that is frequently overlooked.

The United States of America took a number of covert actions throughout the world during the Cold War, frequently in direct opposition to the very ideals it professed to uphold. While publicly denouncing the Soviet Union for its human rights abuses and lack of transparency, the US engaged in covert actions that were just as nefarious, if not more so. In the cause of advancing its own perceived interests, the US subtly interfered in the affairs of other nations, overthrowing democratically elected leaders and funding barbaric regimes.

Those who have suffered as a result of these actions are well aware of the irony of this hypocrisy. Today, as conflicts continue to rage in places like the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, it is worth examining the legacy of America's Cold War interventions and considering how they continue to shape global politics today. Scrutiny of the hypocrisy of the US may hold lessons for policymakers and citizens alike.

IRAN +

In 1953, the US government (using its relatively new CIA) and the UK orchestrated a coup d'etat in Iran to overthrow Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected Prime Minister. Mossadegh was popular among the Iranian people for his policies to nationalise the country's oil industry, which had previously been controlled by foreign companies. The US considered this to

be a danger to their essential economic advantages. They used covert tactics to overthrow Mossadegh and establish a puppet government that would serve their interests better. The upset prompted the ascent of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a ruler with tyrant inclinations, as the new head of Iran. The people of Iran were not happy with this decision and staged protests against the US-backed government.

This led to the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a religious and moral leader, whose followers eventually overthrew the Shah in 1979 and established the Islamic Republic of Iran. Fast forward to today, Iran and the world are still dealing with the fallout from the US intervention in 1953 (including the first nuclear research at Tehran University). The theocratic government is hostile to the US and has been a source of tension in the region for decades. Since the revolution in 1979, the United States and Iran have had a hostile relationship, and the United States has for years imposed sanctions on Iran to try to stop their nuclear programme.

## GUATAMALA +

The CIA's involvement was not limited to Iran in the early 1950s. Guatemala was ruled by a left-leaning government led by President Jacobo Árbenz. Árbenz's government implemented a series of land reforms that redistributed land from the wealthy elite to the poor. These reforms were popular with the majority of the population, but they were opposed by the United States, which saw them as a threat to its economic interests in the region. In order to remove Árbenz from power, the CIA launched a covert operation to support a rebellion led by Colonel Carlos

Castillo Armas. The CIA provided funding, weapons, and propaganda to the rebels, and it also trained and supported a group of exiles who were to be used as a propaganda tool.

The CIA's efforts were successful, and in 1954, Árbenz was overthrown and replaced by Armas. A series of military dictatorships and a bloody civil war that lasted more than three decades followed the coup. Because it provided a pretext for the military to take control and suppressed the democratic aspirations of the people of Guatemala, the U.S. intervention in Guatemala was a major factor in the country's extended instability and violence.

## CUBA +

The CIA's involvement in the removal of democratically elected leaders sent a message that the U.S. was willing to support authoritarian regimes as long as they were aligned with American interests. The hypocrisy of the United States in its covert action in Cuba during the Cold War is a textbook case of the old adage "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." The Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, in which the CIA attempted to topple the Castro government by bringing an army of exiled Cubans to the island, was one of the most extreme instances of this. Almost 1,100 men were apprehended and imprisoned as a result of the operation, which was a total military and PR failure. The Cuban Missile Crisis the next year took the world to the brink of armageddon.

The U.S. government's denial of involvement with the exiles simply made matters worse and damaged the nation's credibility and reputation. Long-term effects of the Bay of Pigs assault included worsening ties to Cuba and the rest of the region and increasing Castro's grasp on power.

Only now is Cuba is currently at a turning point. The Cuban people want change, but they want it on their terms. They do not want any outside forces, particularly the United States, to interfere. The U.S. must first acknowledge and respect Cuba's right to self-determination if it is to support democracy in Cuba.

CHILE +

The brutal dictator Augusto Pinochet replaced the democratically elected President of Chile, Salvador Allende, through a covert operation orchestrated by the US government. Thousands of people were brutally tortured, executed, and vanished under Pinochet's rule. In addition to ignoring these atrocities, the US government actively supported Pinochet's regime. Human rights abuses were exacerbated by the widespread poverty, inequality, and social unrest brought about by US-backed economic policies and neoliberal reforms. Chile still struggles with the effects of this dark time in its history today. Those who were hurt by Pinochet's regime are still seeking justice.

AFGHANISTAN +

The covert action that the United States took in Afghanistan during the Cold War was a rollercoaster ride that resulted in both short-term victories and long-term consequences. Little did they know that they were indirectly paving the way for the rise of radical Islamic extremist groups in the region, despite the fact that their initial objective was to support the resistance forces fighting the Soviet Union. Even though the CIA's support for the mujahideen was the single largest covert operation in its history, it was also plagued by corruption and inefficiency, preventing progress and overall success.

The covert - and not-so-covert - support for the Northern Alliance enabled it to drive the Taliban away from the major cities and cause Bin Laden to flee across the border into Pakistan. The CIA then waged almost unlimited drone wars across a swathe of Africa and Asia.

The 21st century irony that emerged was the nation that once provided the Taliban with funding and training to drive out the Soviets, then waged war against them, in turn fled ignominiously (but with much more TV coverage). As US military personnel were leaving Afghanistan, the scenes that were playing out before the world's eyes were heartbreaking as people tried to escape the violence and chaos that had once more engulfed their homeland. As in the Iraq invasion, the United States of America appeared not to have thought about the long-term effects of its actions when it intervened; nor indeed its own broader interests. Today, the nation is in strife, the Taliban are back in power, and the causes on which the USA spent over two trillion dollars over 20 years are almost back to square 1.

## VIETNAM +

The covert action that the US government took in Vietnam was justified publicly as a means of containing communism and preserving freedom. Be that as it may, the truth was a long way from it. To sway Vietnam's political landscape, the CIA orchestrated coups, assassinations, and propaganda campaigns. Over 7 million tonnes of bombs dropped by the US military on the nation resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens across Indo-China. Despite this, the US government asserted that it was fighting for democracy and freedom. The legacy of US intervention affects the political situation in Vietnam today. It took a long time to recognise that Vietnam was different to China. Despite the country's shift to a more market-based economy, the Communist Party still controls the government and suppresses opposition. While ignoring its own role in Vietnam's past and present, the US government has continued to use human rights as a tool to criticise the country.

## NICARAGUA +

The United States supported the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s, yet another example of covert action during the Cold War that had negative effects for the "target" nation. The Contras, who were known for their violations of international law and human rights, received funding and weapons from the United States in an effort to oppose the socialist Sandinista government - which is still in power at the time of writing, having won flawed elections as late as November 2022. Covert interference had contributed to Nicaragua's ongoing civil war and destabilisation. The original support for the Contras resulted in long-term widespread suffering and violations of human rights for the Nicaraguan people, with at least 200,000 fleeing the country for exile.

## ANGOLA +

In addition, the covert action that the United States took in Angola in the 1970s and 1980s, including providing support for the rebel group UNITA, was also unsuccessful. This support contributed to the destabilisation of the region, civil war in Angola, over half a million dead and a million internally displaced.

## THE LEGACY +

Today, as tensions continue to simmer in hotspots like the Middle East, Afghanistan and Ukraine the legacy of US covert actions is still felt and is a stark reminder of the consequences of deception and blowback. The rise of ISIS in Iraq, the ongoing civil war in Syria, and the instability in Afghanistan can all be traced back to US interventions in those regions. In addition, the recent crisis in Ukraine, which has parallels to the Cold War, serves as a reminder of the risks associated with interfering in the affairs of other nations which had so starkly been seen over decades across South America.

Although covert action may have been deemed necessary to safeguard national interests from time to time, the US has frequently acted against its stated values and principles. And its actions have mainly failed in their own terms. In addition the absence of transparency and accountability has frequently resulted in unintended consequences and damaged the United States' credibility on the international stage. If policymakers prioritise legal and ethical approaches to foreign policy, and acknowledge the inherent risks and limitations of covert

action, the US can regain its moral authority and thus more effectively advance its interests in a complex and ever-changing world.

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Suggested further reading

" ABYSS - the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962" by Max Hastings

"The Cold War: A New History" by John Lewis Gaddis

"Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956" by Anne Applebaum

"The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times" by Odd Arne Westad

"The U.S. and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947" by John Lewis Gaddis

"The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History" by Don Munton and David A. Welch

"A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev" by Vladislav M. Zubok

"The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War: Calling the Tune?" by Hugh Wilford

"Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II" by William Blum

"The Cold War and the Making of the Modern World" by Martin Walker

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