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The study of covert action—the deniable or unacknowledged interference in the affairs of others—is beset with intellectual difficulties. Secrecy may be the most obvious challenge, but it is far from the only one. Covert action is wildly mythologised, under-theorised, and inherently difficult to conceptualise. It blurs with intelligence activity and with foreign/defence policy, making parameters difficult to set; it exists to nudge pre-existing developments along, making it difficult to isolate agency and consequence.

The literature has long been dominated by historians narrating cold-war operations whenever files become released, by insider memoirs and insiders-turned-academics, and by more breathless popular accounts.¹ This is beginning to change. A new generation of scholars is building on the pioneering archival histories. Political scientists are turning them into data sets to provide bigger picture quantitative analysis of this form of state intervention;² others are using familiar historical case studies to take a more conceptual or theoretical turn;³ others still are demonstrating that historical analysis can now extend beyond the classic case studies of the Cold War.⁴ All three streams feeding into this scholarly wave are taking the field in an exciting and innovative direction.

¹ See for, example, Richard J. Aldrich's pioneering account, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (London: Overlook Press, 2001). Gregory Treverton is a good example of an insider-turned academic and wrote the influential *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Post-war World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), or for an example of a memoir (more prominent in the US tradition than elsewhere) see Richard M Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

² See Dov Levin, "A Vote for Freedom? The Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions on Regime Type," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 63:4 (2019), 839-68; Lindsey O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

³ See Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in Secret Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Rory Cormac, *How to Stage a Coup and Ten Other Lessons from the World of Secret Statecraft* (London: Atlantic, 2022); Michael Poznansky, *In the Shadow of International Law: Secrecy and Regime Change in the Postwar World* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁴ See, for example, Christopher J. Fuller, "The Eagle Comes Home to Roost: The Historical Origins of the CIA's Lethal Drone Program," *Intelligence and National Security*, 30:6 (2015): 769-792.

Magda Long's article fits into the latter two categories. Long demonstrates that, despite inevitable issues around sources, the rigorous and robust study of covert action post-9/11 is possible. She also offers theoretical advances by thinking carefully about the relationship between covert action and diplomacy.

Long argues that two types of diplomats exist: "diplomatic activists" who supported and advanced covert action post-9/11 and "traditionalists" who opposed it (380). Tension between the two camps, she argues, has long existed but a new status quo emerged after 2001 largely in favour of the activists. Long recognises that we cannot understand the evolution of US counterterrorism—and indeed use of covert action—without thinking about the relationship between the CIA and State Department (394).

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Let us take the article's historical contribution first. Long acknowledges the constraints of secrecy, but her range of sources is impressive. The article draws on memoirs, government records, oral histories, and media reports. When it comes to US activity, there is far more out there than most scholars—and plenty of former practitioners—realise. Indeed, practitioners can sometimes be snippy about the academic study of covert action, especially more recent activities, assuming that outsiders cannot know enough to offer serious contribution. Long's article demonstrates the opposite. This is not about unearthing new operational detail: such a feat would neither be possible nor desirable given the security implications. However, Long mines and synthesises her sources ably to offer some fascinating snippets about US operations and the personnel implementing them. It is a tried and trusted method, but it is encouraging to see it used to analyse more recent events.

The article provides insight into US clandestine diplomacy in Afghanistan in the early post-9/11 era, in which CIA officers—rather than diplomats—worked with local politicians. She describes how, in some of the hottest trouble spots, activist diplomats worked closely with the CIA. In Pakistan, for example, the US ambassador frequently discussed drone strikes with the CIA chief of station (388). In Syria, the ambassador risked his life to meet rebels fighting Assad (388-9). These examples are important. First, Long does diplomats a credit by highlighting this dangerous part of the job, reminding readers that diplomats do more than observing and reporting, and examining tangible outcomes of diplomatic presence. Second, Long underscores how covert action—and the CIA more widely—does not exist in isolation. Counterterrorism required (and still requires) an interplay between the overt and covert. Covert action cannot succeed if it operates in isolation from foreign policy.

The article does leave open the question about the novelty of this activist versus traditionalist divide. Long makes brief contextual reference to perceptions of the relationship between intelligence and diplomacy back in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. She provides a few helpful examples of US clandestine diplomacy pre-9/11 as a benchmark to understand the more recent activity. Even so, I was left wondering whether this divide has always existed in the US (or at least since the creation of the CIA), and how the equilibrium has shifted over time. One wonders how it compares to the so-called Golden Age of the CIA in the 1950s, or 'secret' wars in places like Laos, or during Vietnam. This would help us better understand change and continuity in the episode described. Is this a transtemporal—even universal—divide among diplomats? Or is it something that emerged specifically in the US as a consequence of a specific event and specific legal framework?

Similarly, is this something unique to diplomacy? Or, to play devil's advocate, is it a more obvious point about a controversial form of statecraft? Some people are more amenable to covert action than others. This same divide exists within the CIA itself, with some officers open to taking an active role in fighting terrorism,

including through targeted killing, whilst others are keen to return to the core business of gathering and analysing intelligence.

Let us now consider the conceptual contribution: unpacking the relationship between diplomacy and covert action. Long points out the ‘arduous task’ of distinguishing secret diplomacy from presidentially approved covert action (382). Even Congressional investigations—with access to far more evidence than academics can hope for—have proved inconclusive on the question (382). President George W. Bush’s broad-brush approval of covert action post-9/11 complicated matters further, in theoretical terms anyway (382).

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It is not surprising that overlap exists. As Amy Zegart reminds us, covert action is not some unique and mysterious dark art. Most covert activities have overt counterparts.⁵ Targeted killings by drone strikes are conducted both openly and covertly; propaganda is both attributable (white) and unattributable (grey/black depending on the source); economic influence can be achieved through sanctions or through counterfeiting currencies. It figures that the same applies to diplomacy. As Long points out, National Security Presidential Directive 9 called for the employment of “all instruments of national power and influence” to combat terrorism (382). Her article therefore helpfully challenges the neat overt/covert divide prevalent in many studies on covert action. Too often, histories focus on the covert and the CIA, assuming that these operate in isolation from the wider policy context. This leads to a mythologisation of covert action and a misunderstanding of what it can (or cannot) achieve. Long offers a helpful corrective.

Long recognises the role of activist diplomats in ensuring that covert action is properly integrated into wider foreign policy. In doing so, she helps offer a more nuanced and holistic appreciation of secret statecraft. It is helpful in another way too. Where academics and commentators have previously examined interdepartmental issues, their focus has almost universally been on relations between the CIA and the Pentagon post-9/11,⁶ or, more recently still, the National Security Agency (NSA).⁷ This is unsurprising given the rise of drone strikes and offensive cyber respectively, but by inserting the State Department into the picture, Long offers another welcome corrective. It might have been helpful to look a bit more widely though rather than focusing on individual ambassadors in particular states. What does this reveal about the relationship between the State Department and CIA? According to Loch K. Johnson, the State Department can initiate a covert action and has input into the proposed action before it goes off to the National Security Council and ultimately the President.⁸ Long seems to add State into the implementation side of things as well, whereas Johnson writes only of CIA Field Stations in this regard.⁹ How much input does State have in the whole process? This, one assumes, would affect the role and agency of the ambassadors discussed here. The impact of these diplomats on the success/failure of US covert counterterrorism is overlooked but, in fairness to Long, is incredibly difficult to measure.

⁵ Amy B. Zegart, *Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 175.

⁶ Jennifer D. Kibbe, “CIA/SOF convergence and congressional oversight, Intelligence and National Security”, (2022): DOI: [10.1080/02684527.2022.2104015](https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2104015)

⁷ Herbert Lin and Amy Zegart, eds. *Bytes, Bombs, and Spies: The Strategic Dimensions of Offensive Cyber Operations*. (Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

⁸ Loch K. Johnson, *The Third Option: Covert Action and American Foreign Policy* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 196.

⁹ Johnson, *The Third Option*, 196.

The article offers helpful conceptual clarity about clandestine diplomacy. According to Long, if the activity influences adversaries abroad, is deniable, and is sanctioned through a presidential finding then it constitutes covert action. If not, then it is “just another track two diplomatic method” (385). This seems a perfectly reasonable distinction, but it does risk being rather tautological. Covert action then, for Long, is something authorised by the president as covert action. Once more, this raises questions about the wider conceptual relationship between diplomacy and secret statecraft beyond the very narrow US definition. It may be beyond the scope of a single case study article, but generalisability is left open. Does this article offer any broader insight into the nature of diplomacy or is this merely an American legal and bureaucratic tangle—especially relevant given Long’s definition of when clandestine diplomacy becomes covert action.

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Long has done an excellent job in framing the issue, offering conceptual clarity on the US system, and demonstrating rigour in researching recent covert actions. This article is helping to set the intellectual agenda and, for all the difficulties surrounding the subject, the future of the study of covert action is in safe hands.

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