

Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq

by Stephen Kinzer

About the author

During the 1980s Kinzer covered revolution and social upheaval in Central America. In 1990, the New York Times promoted Kinzer to bureau chief of its Berlin bureau. Kinzer was the New York Times chief in the newly established bureau in Istanbul (Turkey) from 1996 to 2000.

Upon returning to the United States, Kinzer became the newspaper's culture correspondent, based in Chicago, as well as teaching at Northwestern University. Kinzer then took up residence in Boston and began teaching journalism and United States foreign policy at Boston University. Kinzer also contributes columns to the New York Review of Books and The Guardian. He is a visiting scholar at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

Summary

"History teaches us that countries that have the power to interfere in foreign lands almost always do." In this book, Kinzer documents and analyzes the consequences of the US overthrowing regimes in 14 nations since 1893. The book is divided into three sections, Imperial Era, Covert Action, and Invasions.

Factors that led the US to embrace the idea of "regime change".

1. A means to shape the world events that did not involve old-style colonialism.
2. The rise of giant corporations able to finance election campaigns and buy political power.
3. A belief that God wants the US to combat evil forces in the world.

Reasoning behind US intervention

- America has had the opinion that it has the right, even the obligation, to depose regimes we considered evil.
- We believe that the US is a nation uniquely endowed with virtue.
- Americans feel that by bringing their political and economic system to others, we are doing God's work.
- Americans have believed that they deserve access to markets and resources in other countries. When we are denied that access, we take what we want by force.
- US leaders have realized that they can gain support if they present invasions as motivated by benevolence, self-sacrificing charity, and a noble desire to liberate the oppressed.

The result of US intervention

- Most American-sponsored "regime change" operations have, in the end, weakened rather than strengthened American security. Most overthrows have turned the country, and sometimes the region, into violent anti-American sentiment.
- Most often, the US does not stay to positively engage with the country that was overthrown. Looting and anarchy follows.
- Promoting democracy in a new regime does not always lead to a pro-American country.

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US Action

The Imperial Era

- 1893 - Hawaii - (Harrison-R) - Overthrew the queen
- 1898 - Cuba - (McKinley-R) - Helped Cuba push out Spain and then immediately took over.
- 1903 - Panama - (Teddy Roosevelt-R) - Took Panama from Colombia so that the canal could be built
- 1909 - Nicaragua - (Taft/Knox-R) - Overthrew nationalist government to secure US business interests
- 1907 - 1909 - The Great White Fleet (Teddy Roosevelt-R) - Navy tour of the world to show our nation's ambition as a world power.

Covert Action

- 1954 - Iran - (Eisenhower/Dulles-R) - details follow
- 1954 - Guatemala - (Eisenhower/Dulles-R) - CIA overthrow to support United Fruit Co.
- 1956 - South Vietnam - (Eisenhower/Dulles-R) - Did not hold elections to unify country
- 1964 - Chile - (Kennedy-D) - Covert CIA action to influence elections
- 1970 - Chile - (Nixon/Kissinger-R) Defeated Allende and put Pinochet in power

Invasions

- 1983 - Grenada - (Reagan/George H.W.Bush-R) Overthrow of the Leninist government during civil unrest (Beirut suicide-bomb attack; US needed a win)
- 1989 - Panama - (George H.W. Bush/Quayle-R) - Remove Noriega
- 1980-2001 - Afghanistan
 - 1980s - (Carter-D, Reagan-R, George H. W. Bush-R) - Supported and trained Afghan Islamist fundamentalists to fight against Russia. Money sent through Pakistan.
 - 1996 - (Clinton-D) - After Russia left, the Taliban was supported by US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and bin Laden.
 - 2001- (George W. Bush-R) - 9/11 and US war in Afghanistan
- 2003 - Iraq - (George W. Bush-R) WMD?

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Overthrow of Iran - Covert Action

Political Environment

Early 1950s

Spread of Communism. Soviet Union imposed rule on Eastern Europe, tested an atomic bomb, and attempted to starve West Berlin into submission. A Communist army had seized power in China, and another had tried to do so in Greece. Communist parties were strong in France and Italy. Americans had been killed in Korea. Sen. Joseph McCarthy had charged that Communists even infiltrated the US Army and State Dept.

1952 election. Dulles made a series of speeches accusing the Truman administration of being weak in the face of the Communist advances and promised that a Republican White House would "roll back" Communism and liberate the nations that had fallen victim to its "absolute power and godless terrorism."

John Foster Dulles - Secretary of State 1953-1958

Shaped by 3 powerful influences:

1. A uniquely privileged upbringing
2. A long career advising the world's richest corporations
3. A profound religious faith

His Style

- Solitary style of decision making
- Stiff and confrontational
- Compulsive oversimplifier
- Sought immediate and tangible results

Dulles's mission

Those who found a good way of life had a duty to help others to find the same way. In the 1950s, he was looking for a way to channel his "Christian insight and inspiration" into a fight against "the evil methods and designs of Soviet Communism." He thought the best way to do that would be to become secretary of state and got that opportunity under Eisenhower.

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Mohammad Mossadegh - Prime Minister of Iran (April 1951 - Aug. 1953)

On his mother's side, he descended from Persian royalty. His father was from a distinguished family and was Iran's finance minister for more than 20 years. He was the first Iranian to receive a doctorate in law from a European university. He had been in politics for a lifetime.

His style was emotional, honest and frugal.

Time magazine named him Man of the Year in 1951 over Churchill, MacArthur, Truman and Eisenhower, calling him an "obstinate opportunist", "the Iranian George Washington" and "the most world-renowned man his ancient race had produced for centuries."

British Oil Interests in Iran

Britain needed Iranian oil to project military power, fuel its industries and provide its citizens a high standard of living.

Since 1901, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co (British Petroleum), principally owned by the British government, had a monopoly on the oil. Iran received only 16% of the profits.

Sequence of Events

1951 - Mossadegh became prime minister of Iran and the Iranian parliament voted to nationalize the oil industry.

Oct. 16, 1952 - After learning that the British were bribing people to overthrow his government, Mossadegh ordered the British embassy shut down.

Jan. 20, 1953 - Eisenhower took office.

March 1953 - Dulles convinces Eisenhower to support the overthrow of Mossadegh.

July 19, 1953 - Kermit Roosevelt was sent by the CIA to Iran.

August 3-10, 1953 - Mossadegh called a national referendum and the bribed members of parliament were out of power. Passed with 99.9% of the vote.

August 14, 1953 - The Shah's firman (decree) was delivered to Mossadegh and loyalist soldiers captured the Shah's general.

August 19, 1953 - Riots in the streets and Zahedi became prime minister. (1953 - 1955)

Resulting History - not part of the book

1953 - Zahedi declared martial law.

The control of the petroleum industry was split between British, Dutch, French and US companies with 50% of the profits given to Iran.

The Shah supported the US and the US support the Shah.

1979 - The Iranian Revolution - Ayatollah Khomeini came to power and set up an anti-American Islamic Republic.

Youtube video - U.S. and Them: Operation Ajax - Iran and the CIA Coup (2 parts - ~15 minutes)

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John Foster Dulles's Background

Dulles was born to international privilege

Dulles's Grandfather, John Watson Foster

Took him under his wing

He was a treaty negotiator, the minister to Russia and Spain and secretary of state under Benjamin Harrison where he worked with Lorrin Thurston in 1893 on the unsuccessful campaign to annex Hawaii.

Also an international lawyer and involved with many presidents, including Taft, Cleveland, Wilson, McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt.

Foster got Dulles his first job after law school at Sullivan & Cromwell. Sullivan had persuaded Congress to build the Central American canal in Panama instead of Nicaragua. Within 16 years (1927), Dulles was the sole managing partner and one of the highest-paid lawyers in the world.

Dulles's Uncle - Robert Lansing

In 1915, his uncle, Robert Lansing became secretary of state. This provided Dulles with another mentor who gave him diplomatic assignments. From the rich and powerful international people he met, Dulles developed his "rather simplistic" view that American foreign policy needed to support American business and economic interests.

His clients at Sullivan & Cromwell were the biggest multinational corporations. He spent much of 1934 in Germany supporting Hitler. His partners forced him to close the Berlin office in 1935. After WWII, he was quicker to find Communism to be evil.

In 1949, Gov. Thomas E. Dewey appointed Dulles to fill a vacant US Senate seat in New York. He did not win the seat that fall in the election with the slogan "Enemy of the Reds" and decided that if he wanted to exert political influence, he should pursue appointive positions.

He had a deep Christian faith that grew into an very anti-Communist zeal. He was expected to follow his father, a Presbyterian minister, and his paternal grandfather, a missionary in India, into the ministry. In later years, he was an elder in the Presbyterian church and member of Union Theological Seminary BOD.

Sequence of events

Surge of nationalism across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Idealistic Iranian, Mohammad Mossadegh, came to power in 1951.

He believed passionately in nationalism and democracy. He was determined to expel the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co and nationalize the oil industry, using the money to develop Iran. He also felt that political power should be with the elected parliament and prime minister, rather than the monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

1951 - Both houses of parliament voted unanimously to nationalize the oil industry. Britain resisted, considering bribing Mossadegh, assassinating him, or launching a military invasion. Truman was totally against that. Britain sabotaged their own installations at Abadan, blockaded Iranian ports and appealed unsuccessfully to the UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice. They resolved that they had to organize a coup.

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Britain had bribed a variety of military officers, journalists, religious leaders and others who could overthrow a government if that need arose. British set the plot in motion, but Mossadegh found out. On Oct. 16, 1952, he ordered the British embassy shut and all employees out of the country. That included the intelligence agents who were organizing the coup and made the invasion impossible.

Eisenhower was elected and Dulles became secretary of state. Chief of CIA operations in the Middle East was Kermit Roosevelt, Teddy's grandson.

Roosevelt met with British counterparts in London who wanted the CIA to carry out the coup that they could no longer execute. Roosevelt knew that Truman would not approve, but thought that perhaps Eisenhower might after his inauguration. The British wanted to move immediately and sent their top intelligence agent to Washington DC to talk with Dulles. The British knew that their reason for the overthrow would not make Americans want to help so they told Dulles that Mossadegh was leading Iran towards Communism. There was a Communist party in Iran, but they were not a threat to Iran's democracy.

The State Department did not have the capacity to overthrow a government, so Dulles needed to use the CIA for this. The CIA was formed in 1947 and had not been used to overthrow a government yet.

Reasons to use the CIA.

1. American could no longer send troops and seize a country since the Soviet Union was a counterbalance to US aggression. Could lead to a nuclear war.
2. ****The director of the CIA was Dulles's younger brother, Allen.

Eisenhower resisted in a National Security Council on March 4, 1953 but Dulles convinced him that if Mossadegh was assassinated or removed from power without a plan for succession, Communist might easily take over and the oil would not be available. In addition, other areas of the Middle East would fall to the Communists.

Allen Dulles started planning with British counterparts.

1. An Iranian, Faziollah Zahedi was chosen as the "leader" of the coup.
2. \$1 million was sent to the CIA in Tehran to use for this purpose.
3. Dulles directed the American ambassador in Tehran to contact people in Iran that would be interested in helping out.
4. Two secret agents from the CIA and the British Intelligence Service, went to Cypress to devise the plan for the coup.

Plan - Operation Ajax

1. Americans would spend \$150,000 to bribe journalists, editors, Islamic preachers, and other opinion leaders to "create, extend and enhance public hostility and distrust and fear of Mossadegh and his government.
2. They would hire thugs to stage attacks on religious figures and other respected Iranians, making it seem that Mossadegh had ordered them.
3. General Zahedi was given \$130,000 to "win additional friends and influence key people."
4. \$11,000 / week was used to bribe members of the Iranian parliament.

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5. On "coup day", thousands of paid demonstrators would converge on parliament to demand that it dismiss Mossadegh.
6. The Parliament would respond with a "quasi-legal" vote.
7. If Mossadegh resisted, the military would arrest him.

Not everyone liked the plan.

1. Goiran, the chief of the CIA station in Tehran, quit.
2. Neither of the State Department's principal Iran experts were informed until it was about to happen. Truman's ambassador to Iran had documented that over 95% of the country supported Mossadegh and that he was a conservative, patriotic Iranian nationalist with no reason to be attracted to socialism or communism.

CIA sent Kermit Roosevelt.

July 19, 1953 - He slipped into Iran.

1. Immediately started anti-Mossadegh protest with Iranian agents and spending lavish amounts of money.
2. Parliament withdrew their support and denounced Mossadegh with wild charges.
3. Religious leaders gave sermons calling him an atheist, a Jew and an infidel.
4. Newspapers were filled with inflammatory articles and cartoons.

Mossadegh was committed to respecting political and civil rights, allowing due process of the law and did nothing to stop the discourse.

August 1953 - Mossadegh learned that foreign intelligence agents were bribing members of the parliament to support a no-confidence motion.

1. He called a national referendum on the proposition that would allow him to dissolve parliament.
2. The vote passed and the bribed members were out of power.

Roosevelt's new plan

1. The Shah would sign royal decrees (Firmans) dismissing Mossadegh and appointing General Zahedi as the new prime minister. (Quasi-legal)
2. Roosevelt realized that Mossadegh would refuse to step down since he was the country's best-educated legal scholar.
3. A squad of royalist soldiers would deliver the firman and when he rejected it, he would be arrested.

Obstacle - The Shah

1. The Shah hated Mossadegh, who was turning him into a figurehead.
2. The Shah was afraid of losing his throne if the plot did not work.
3. Roosevelt met with the Shah late at night in the backseat of a car parked near the royal palace but failed to get him to join the coup.
4. Roosevelt flew the Shah's twin sister back from the French Riviera to appeal to the Shah, after she received money and a mink coat. That also failed.
5. Roosevelt sent two Iranian agents to assure the Shah that the plot was good. That failed.

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6. Roosevelt sent General Norman Schwarzkopf Sr., who had spent years in Iran running an elite military unit. (His son would lead the Desert Storm invasion in Iraq 40 years later.)
 - The Shah was afraid there were microphones in the walls of the palace and would not speak.
 - They moved a table to the middle of the room and climbed on it.
 - Schwarzkopf made it clear that both the British and the US were behind the coup and he had no choice except to cooperate.
 - The Shah told Roosevelt he would sign the firmans if he could immediately fly to his retreat on the Caspian Sea. If there were any problems, he would fly to Baghdad.

August 14, 1953 - Delivery of the firman to Mossadegh

1. Colonel Nassiri, commander of the Imperial Guard, lead a squad of men to Mossadegh's house late at night.
2. He told the gatekeeper he needed to see Mossadegh immediately.
3. A company of loyalist soldiers emerged and took Nassiri prisoner. Mossadegh had discovered the plot in time.
4. Radio Tehran broadcast the news that a coup by the Shah and "foreign elements" was crushed.
5. The Shah flew to Baghdad and then to Rome.

Roosevelt was told to return home, but he decided to try once more.

1. He told his two top Iranian agents, who had excellent relations with Tehran's street gangs, to have the gangs set off riots around the city.
2. The agents said they could no longer help him because of the risk of arrest had become too great.
3. He offered the agents \$50,000 to continue to work with him. They refused.
4. He added the if the men refused, he would kill them. They took the money....
5. Leaders from both side were working for Roosevelt to create the chaos.
6. That week the gangs broke shop windows, fired guns into mosques, beat passersby, and shouted "Long Live Mossadegh and Communism."
7. Other thugs claiming allegiance to the Shah attacked the first ones.
8. Mossadegh's supporters wanted to organize demonstrations in his support, but Mossadegh did not want them to fight in the streets.
9. Mossadegh sent the police, not realizing they were also bribed.
10. Leaders of Iranian's communist party asked for weapons so that they could attack the mobs, but Mossadegh was horrified. He would not arm a political party.

August 19, 1953 - Roosevelt chose it as the climactic day

1. Thousands of demonstrators rampaged through the streets demanding Mossadegh's resignation.
2. Radio Tehran was seized.
3. The offices of the pro government newspaper was burned.
4. At midday, bribed military and police stormed the foreign ministry, the central police station and the headquarters of the army's general staff.

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5. Roosevelt drove to the safe house where General Zahedi was kept. Zahedi played the role of Iran's savior.
6. He rode with his supporters to Radio Tehran and proclaimed that he was "the lawful prime minister by the Shah's orders.
7. Attackers tried for two hours to storm Mossadegh's house. A column of tanks were sent by commanders who were part of the plot. Mossadegh and the defenders fled over the back wall.. The house was entered and looted.
8. The Shah was amazed and returned home from Rome to claim the throne.
9. Mossadegh surrendered.
10. Zahedi became the new prime minister.
11. Roosevelt visited the Shah in the palace. General Zahedi joined them. They were among the few that knew the real story behind the overthrow