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Book Review: Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics by Austin Carson

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Carson, Austin. *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018. 344 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

Of all the activities carried out by the intelligence community, none is more controversial than covert action (CA). CA is a political tool used by governments to change the course of history or political events in a country. One of the key goals of CA is the plausibility of deniability. If or when a CA is uncovered, who carried out, and who authorized it should never be attributed to the President. Given its utility and its secrecy, CA continues to be a topic of interest and controversy. In this ground breaking work, Austin Carson, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago, shows that adversaries often collude with each other to keep war in the shadows and off the escalation ladder.

Carson's main thesis is that escalation control and a shared desire to limit war can motivate covert intervention up front, collusion by major powers that detect it, and official non-acknowledgment if it is widely exposed (pg. 10). Carson's theory called the large-scale conflict escalation a mutually damaging outcome that is influenced by exposure decisions. As Carson explains, covertness and reactive secrecy are driven by the need to control escalation and avoid large-escalation conflict (pg. 3). As Carson succinctly explains, when escalation risks are significant, adversaries will tend to share an interest in prioritizing control. External military involvement in a local war raises the prospect of expansion in scope and scale. Intervening covertly, according to Carson, allows both the intervener and its rivals to better control the unfolding scenario following the intervention (pg. 3). Two key ideas in Carson's large-scale conflict escalation theory are secrecy and covertness. Carson operationalizes secrecy as "an intentional concealment of information from one or more audiences, [as] simply one way of making decisions and behaving in the world" (pg. 5). Covertness, on the other hand, is defined as

“government-managed activity conducted with the intention of concealing the sponsor’s role and avoiding acknowledgment of it” (pg. 5).

Covert action usually raises a host of issues including, but not limited to, blowback, plausibility of deniability, and attribution. But, what happens if an operation is discovered? Carson points out that, when or if an operation is discovered, any detector has two basic options: collude or expose (pg. 7). Exposure involves publicly revealing evidence that a covert intervention is underway and/or publicly validating allegations by others while collusion is the simple act of staying silent (pg. 7). Using a theater analogy to explain how international actors behave when engaged in a covert conflict, Carson argues that one advantage of the metaphor is highlighting the shared interest adversaries have in limited war, akin to the shared interest actors have in protecting the performance (pg. 13). Furthermore, limited war is also a co-produced outcome that relies on mutual restraints (pg. 13).

The theater analogy also captures the key structural feature of the strategy developed by Carson. As he explains, the backstage insulates actors from the humiliation and damage to the performance that would result if mistakes or costume changes were on the frontstage. Also, back staging an intervention similarly protects the public-facing of a limited war and helps major powers save face (pg. 14). Carson’s *Secret Wars* use of the theater analogy is an important contribution to understanding covert actions or interventions. As Carson explains, theorizing what states conceal as part of its performance is useful in its own right; it also helps shed light on the production of cohesive frontstage performances. Furthermore, conceptualizing limited war as a kind of performance recognizes that states often must work together to define the nature of their encounters (pg. 21).

Carson's *Secret Wars* uses a comparative case study design to analyze five wars: the Spanish Civil War, Korean War, Vietnam War, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the US occupation of Iraq. Each empirical chapter addresses two questions. First, Carson explains how and why intervening states adopt a particular form of military intervention based on perceived escalation features of a given conflict. Second is whether and why detector states choose to collude or expose based on the same escalation features as well as the level of exposure by other actors (pg. 16). An important contribution by Carson's *Secret Wars* is that his work draws attention to an often overlooked aspect of limited war: transgressions that are covert and unacknowledged (pg. 19).

In conclusion, Carson's *Secret Wars* is a must read for anyone interested in International Relations, Comparative Politics, and Intelligence & National Security. Carson's work shed lights on an important issue long ignored by the political science scholarship, namely, what do states do once they discovered that a foreign nation is the sponsor, either directly or by proxy, of a covert conflict in order to destabilize that government's internal affairs. As Carson shows in this seminal work, adversaries that discover covert interventions sometimes play along, keeping them secret in order to avoid pressures for counter-intervention. Covert intervention, part of the political arsenal of nation-states and a tool for both geostrategic influence and limited war, has evolved into a key part of the repertoire of major powers conflict (pg. 282). Most importantly, Carson's *Secret Wars* calls for a careful evaluation of the goals of secrecy, the dilemmas of exposure, and the promise and urgency of scholarly attention to what states do on the metaphorical backstage of the world of covert action.

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