

*Secret Wars: Covert Conflicts in International Politics*. By Austin Carson (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018) 325 pp. \$35.00 cloth

This is an interesting, original study of how covert (and not so covert) war signals national intentions, if it can be communicated effectively and if the adversary can read such coded communications. While based in the field of international relations, this book will appeal to historians and political scientists. Austin Carson sets up international politics as a theatre with the stage visible to all, while backstage, hidden from view, the actors prepare. Carson is interested in this unseen (or partially visible) world and its role in the overall theater of international politics. It can be the main performance but is not easily viewed or must be inferred by the overt action. By looking at the hidden backstage and what states conceal, Carson sheds light on the production of the cohesive frontstage performance. This book senses the tension between the overt and covert spheres of international relations through analysis of four key historical episodes of covert conflict and diplomacy to test this theory on the power of hidden war: the Spanish Civil War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (and America's covert war there under Ronald Reagan). The idea here is that the mishandled escalation of July 1914 that tipped Europe into the Great War resulted in the great powers after 1918 looking to other ways of managing conflicts, ones that bypassed dangerous appeals to their (often hawkish) domestic populace. Carson sets up a 'newness' here after World War One in how states handled conflicts directly and indirectly, while recognizing that piracy, say, in the early modern period fulfilled a similar function between warring European states.

Carson's conclusion is that covert action, paradoxically, usually limited war, helpfully managed escalation, and stymied hawkish domestic lobbies. This is an interesting thesis. Secret actions and communication channels blocked those wanting to widen the war as much as they deceived anti-war protestors. Where Nixon used secrecy to minimize anti-Vietnam war protests, Johnson as president before him had done the

same to try and keep the war localized to Vietnam. The empirical case studies build on useful new primary research (as well as treading on more well-worn history) to show the reader how covert action shades into 'visible covert' before becoming overt. Adversaries with knowledge of opponents' domestic politics can and will play covert wars as 'open secrets.' This is a book about the observable unobservable, about non-acknowledgement of the known (but letting the opponent know that you know), about information manipulation – in short, it creates a puzzle of enemies colluding over open secrets, some of which are so open that they are known to the general public. Carson challenges the idea that 'secrecy is a plague on peace' (p. 309) and leads to unnecessary wars and feeds escalation. Instead, curtailment of public knowledge can help to control dangerous escalation. Arguably, it is public knowledge that fuels escalation, while covertness and collusion help adversaries reach a better understanding (p. 13) 'in part *because* it is observable to the adversary.' Put simply, secret wars limit bigger wars. The book argues that authoritarian leaders from Hitler to Stalin have through the covert sphere used a surprising degree of cautious statecraft. For democratic states, covert action is a problem for domestic accountability, as the Pentagon Papers proved.

New technologies after World War One such as aircraft and submarines prompted states that were already minded towards covert action to limit escalatory urges. Airpower and submarines could hide the national origins of the personnel involved in covert operations. This began with the Spanish Civil war and each war thereafter build on previous experience, from Korea onwards. In Spain, secrecy and non-acknowledgment were key tools to keeping the civil war contained to Spain. Later, in Korea, Truman was anxious to get public support for the war but without succumbing to domestic hawkish constraints demanding an early attack on China or the USSR. What resulted was the air war over Korea that, as Carson argues, was a major unacknowledged confrontation between US and Soviet pilots. The communists knew what Truman was doing, proving that knowledge of the enemy's domestic politic space was crucial for effective

communication and crisis management. Covertneſs and collusion helped limit the war in Vietnam too, in Carson's view. The book ends with ſocial media today. Does this not make keeping ſecrets impossible, what has been called 'extreme Glasnost'? After all, local Pakistanis were playing battle noises from the SEAL attack on Osama bin Laden in real time. Not ſo, argues Carson, pointing inſtead to how ſtates will adapt and how they will move to open ſecrecy or 'widely viſible covert action' (p. 303).

Carson is to be congratulated for a ſcholarly ſtudy with broad appeal that preſents a new perſpective on international politics, and one that overturns many commonly held aſſumptions about information, power and eſcalation.

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