

Review - Confront and Conceal

Written by Andrew J. Gawthorpe

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ANDREW J. GAWTHORPE, JUL 26 2012

Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power

By David E. Sanger

Random House, 2012

Henry Kissinger, although he never held office during the sort of financial crisis that one can confidently predict will decisively influence American foreign policy for decades to come, often worried about a recurrent cycle whereby the United States over-committed its resources and power around the world and then retreated too fully back to its own shores.[1] Any reader of David E. Sanger's *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* must come away from the experience with the sensation of, for good or ill, having seen this cycle illustrated on the page, heard its gears shift, and wondering where exactly the cycle will stop this time around.[2]

Sanger is the chief Washington correspondent for *The New York Times*, and hence impeccably connected – although as with all such works of reportage, we cannot help but wonder connected to who, and which sides of the story his connections omit to mention. He is the author of a previous book on the national security challenges facing the Obama administration, and returns now to give us the “story of a presidency in midstream” (xx) .[3] He focuses mostly on the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the covert war against Iran's nuclear programme, and Washington's

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response to the recent tumult in the Arab world.

The result is a series of vignettes, stories of how the administration responded to crises and opportunities as they arose around the world – in other words, not a bad insight into the way that American presidents usually make national security decisions, especially in times of domestic crisis. If the book has an overarching theme, then it is that the Obama administration made national security policy in recognition of the fact that the U.S. can no longer “afford to do everything, fight every war, remake every failed state” (419).

If the expansive goals of the Bush administration are to be jettisoned, then what will replace them? In the author’s judgement, Obama “has not successfully explained an overarching strategy” (426), but has focused on ad hoc and cheap solutions to crises as they arose – “leading from behind” in Libya, attacking Iran’s nuclear programme with cyber-weapons which delay it but cannot cripple it, and eventually embracing an Afghan war strategy whose name, “Afghan Good Enough” (15), says all we need to know about its aims.

What all of these strategies towards particular countries and conflicts have in common is that when you examine them closely, they turn out not to be strategies but rather means towards limited, immediate ends – slowing down the Iranian nuclear programme, stopping a lopsided slaughter in Libya, and doing what can be done in Afghanistan within one election cycle. Nor does the Obama White House seem keen to claim great consistency or strategic vision – accused of having enunciated an “Obama Doctrine” by intervening in Libya, Sanger says the White House “steadfastly refused” to call it that (336).

Such caution is wise in an era of such great change and such limits on America’s capabilities. But nor should we forget that in the beginning there was a strategy – and the strategy was, quite literally, the word. Obama entered office touting a strategy of engagement, attempting to use his biography and personal appeal to reap strategic benefits. Let us remember, to begin with, his speech at Cairo University in June 2009, intended to “clear the air” in America’s relations with the Muslim world (277). Sanger concedes that, in light of the forthcoming Arab Awakening, Obama’s “discussion of the need to promote democracy for the region was underwhelming” (278 – 9). At the time, of course, this was precisely the point: to reassure the Arab world that the days of Bush’s meddling, which mainly took the form of various means of democracy promotion, were over.

We learn from Sanger that one year after his Cairo speech, Obama was “deeply disappointed in how little got done” to achieve the aims he set out in it (279) – quite what one speech was supposed to achieve is left unclear. The Arab Awakening, to which the administration responded erratically, still torn as it was between the desire to promote change and the fear of looking imperialist, followed soon after, and would have done Cairo speech or no. Obama’s attempts at rhetorical outreach to Iran fared little better in terms of their impact on events – his letters to the Supreme Leader were derided and met with racist abuse.

The benefits of this strategy of engagement was that it was, as talk is, cheap – and as administration officials claimed, the outreach to Iran may have made it easier to sign allies up for a tougher approach further down the line (157). But the drawback to the strategy was that when it failed, it had no legs – further speeches and further letters to the Supreme Leader were unlikely to further influence events.

And so the administration was pushed back onto the incremental strategies, or rather tools, which it applied across the board – tools whose prime characteristic was that they were almost as cheap as talk, but at least slightly more effective. Cyber-weapons and no-fly zones and drones are ingenious, technological solutions to problems; exactly the sort of solution at which America has always excelled. But their application is guided by what is possible, not by strategic necessity – thus they can slow down Iran’s nuclear programme but they cannot stop it, and they can help unseat Muammar Al-Gaddafi and send Osama bin Laden to the bottom of the sea but cannot deliver influence over events in Syria or Egypt, which go to the heart of American interests.

History will doubtless say of Obama that he did what he could with what he had, which was very little. The global economy is in a tailspin and Americans are a deeply divided people, unable to decide on solutions that might give them respite. Foreign policy receives very little attention in American domestic politics now, creating another

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incentive to favour cheap solutions and avoid difficult decisions. Sanger is generally praiseworthy of his subject, stressing above all the limitations on Obama's actions, although his book suffers from not situating foreign policy among the other policy priorities which distracted attention from it. Nevertheless, any student wishing to understand the limitations on American power and how difficult the foreign policy-making process will be in an age of austerity would do well to consult this first draft of history.

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[1] The classic account of his concern is Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969 – 1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For a discussion of a particular case study, see Andrew J. Gawthorpe, 'The Ford Administration and Security Policy in the Asia-Pacific after the Fall of Saigon', *Historical Journal* 52, 3 (2009), pp. 697 – 716.

[2] David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown 2012). Subsequent references to pages from this volume are in brackets in the main text.

[3] David E. Sanger, *The Inheritance: A New President Confronts the World* (London: Black Swan, 2010).

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