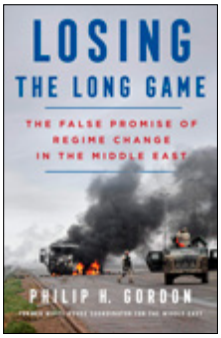
Book Review



Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East

By Philip H. Gordon

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Biography: Luke Botting is currently finishing his PhD in International Relations at the University of Oxford. He holds a BA (Hons) in International Relations from the University of St Andrews and an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Oxford. He has served in the Royal Air Force and will shortly begin working at NATO.

Introduction

Philip Gordon is currently Deputy National Security Adviser to Vice President Kamala Harris, previously serving in the Obama administration as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs (2009-13), and White House Co-ordinator for the Middle East (2013-15). He has also worked as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. *Losing the Long Game* follows from his previous works, notably *Winning the Right War: The Path to Security for America and the World* (2008), by asserting that 'incompetent officials from both major parties [fail] to find the magic formula for making [regime change] a success' but that there is also 'something inherently difficult and inevitably costly about removing Middle Eastern governments and institutions and replacing them with something better' (p. 11). In short, both flawed decision-making and the inherent limitations of the concept of regime change contribute to US failures in the Middle East. *Losing the Long Game* is temporally limited to the post-war era, with Gordon forcefully arguing that US attempts at regime change have resulted in regional instability and undermined US interests. The aim of the book is to explain why these failures have occurred, with Gordon offering 'lessons' in the conclusion; what he does not do is offer

a coherent alternative US policy towards the Middle East (and, indeed, there is some confusion in the book as to whether he supports regime change efforts conducted in a more appropriate manner, or a much reduced US presence in the Middle East).

The book is a combination of a historical description of US efforts at regime change in the Middle East – from the Iranian coup (1953) to the Syrian Civil War (2011-present) – with a theoretical analysis of the causes of US failures. Each of the seven main chapters deals with a specific case study, while the conclusion distils eleven 'lessons' about the limits of US power in the Middle East. It is written in a clear, concise manner using endnotes, which makes it suitable for a general audience. Gordon also captures the *zeitgeist* in which US interventions in the Middle East – especially in support of regime change – are viewed as a distraction from re-emerging state-based threats to the international order. The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in August 2021 (which occurred after the book was published) will therefore further vindicate his argument and expand the appeal of the book to policymakers and those interested in the broader dynamics of US policy in the Middle East.

As a work of history, *Losing the Long Game* limits itself to the Middle East region from the beginning of the Cold War to the present day, taking an explicitly US perspective. Gordon makes good use of archival materials and, where relevant, his own personal experience to offer a detailed and illuminating account of the US decision-making process in the seven cases of regime change he explores. This approach necessarily de-emphasises other historical features of these cases, such as local actors or broader international dynamics, but this is not to Gordon's discredit given the broader focus of the book (works which better capture such aspects are more specific to particular conflicts, such as Steve Coll's *Directorate S*). In line with his previous works, then, Gordon captures the risks of misplaced assumptions about the nature of ideology and security, an over-reliance on the use of force, a gap between means and ends, and a sense of over-confidence, all of which contribute to dysfunctional US policymaking.

As a theoretical analysis of US failures in Middle Eastern regime change efforts, *Losing the Long Game* encounters problems, largely methodological. Most significantly, key terms such as 'regime change', 'the long term', 'national interest', 'success' and 'failure' are not defined. This raises issues about case selection – why, for example, is President Barack Obama's phone call to Hosni Mubarak urging him to step down treated as an instance of regime change comparable to the 2003 invasion of Iraq? It also means that it is difficult to judge what constitutes a successful case of regime change for Gordon; by leaving the timeframe for and definition of success vague, he can shift the goalposts for success and so fit the facts to suit his argument that US efforts have necessarily been failures. This is most evident in his discussion of the 1953 Iranian coup which he describes as a failure in part because it did not prevent the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Such an argument would require a far stronger elucidation of causal links than Gordon provides. There are some hints towards definitions in the book – a list of US national interests is provided as being 'preventing the proliferation of

weapons of mass destruction, containing terrorism, ensuring the free flow of oil, preventing mass refugee flows, and saving human lives' (p. 23), and it is implied that failed regime change is 'far more costly than predicted, [fails] to bring about stability […], and [produces] a wide range of unintended, and undesirable, consequences' (p. 243). But these are lists from which goals can be picked to suit the argument, rather than definitions in themselves (in some cases, they are also incompatible, insofar as, for example, preventing mass refugee flows may endanger rather than save human lives). The overall result of these methodological problems is a disjunct between the concluding 'lessons' Gordon offers and the historical examples he provides.

That said, given that *Losing the Long Game* is directed more towards a general audience and policymakers, its analytical strengths lie specifically in its examination of recent efforts at regime change. The chapters on Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and Syria (2011-present) are the most convincingly argued (and the longest of the case study chapters). It is notable that Gordon draws on direct experience in the US administration for the latter two of these cases. Consequently, the 'lessons' for US failure he provides in the conclusion are particularly relevant to contemporary US foreign policy in the Middle East, even as the book's broader scholarly contribution remains limited by the aforementioned issues. In this regard, *Losing the Long Game* should be read in conjunction with Gordon's earlier book, *Winning the Right War*, which engages with similar issues in the context of the War on Terror. In light of the recent fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, *Losing the Long Game* is worth reading for those interested in how the US decision-making process contributed to the failure of regime change in the Middle East, with a recognition that Gordon is not trying to provide a comprehensive account of US Middle Eastern policy nor offer an alternative guide to action.