

OBJECTIVES OF LEADERSHIP ATTACKS

The United States has long attempted to use leadership attacks to shape the policy and behavior of enemy states and other hostile actors. Over the years, both overt and covert operations have been mounted in attempts to kill enemy leaders directly or to secure their overthrow either by indigenous coup or rebellion or by external invasion. Through such attacks, the United States has variously sought to (1) compel enemy states to abandon policies and behavior injurious to American interests, (2) deter adversaries from making future assaults on those interests, (3) depose potentially dangerous regimes, and (4) degrade enemy capabilities to wage war and engage in terrorism.¹

¹While not the focus of this study, it is important to note that the United States has also frequently employed nonviolent means to shape the policy and behavior of enemy states and to encourage and facilitate the ouster of regimes whose foreign or domestic behavior was considered inimical to U.S. interests and values. These measures have often served as corollaries to the violent operations that the United States has mounted and supported to remove enemy leaders and governments. Among other actions, the United States has sought to coerce, weaken, and stimulate domestic opposition to hostile and repressive regimes by (1) withdrawing or threatening to withdraw U.S. recognition and support, (2) promoting the imposition of trade sanctions and arms embargoes, (3) acting to deny credits from international lending institutions, (4) fostering condemnation and isolation in international forums, (5) disseminating antiregime information to indigenous domestic audiences, and (6) when circumstances have permitted, providing political, financial, and other nonmilitary aid to indigenous opponents. As an incentive to regime opponents, the United States has also held out the promise of early recognition, economic and military assistance, and reintegration into the international community once the offending regime was removed. While such pressures and inducements by themselves have generally proved insufficient to bring down hostile heads of state, they have on occasion con-

Compel Changes in Enemy Policy and Behavior

One of the most ambitious objectives of past leadership attacks has been to cause a hostile actor already engaged in military aggression or terrorism to cease such activity and accede to other demands posed by the United States and its allies. The 1986 air attack on Muammar al-Qaddafi's residence in Tripoli aimed to persuade the Libyan leader to cease his use and sponsorship of terrorism. The attacks on leadership-related targets in Iraq were directed first at inducing Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait and later at encouraging him to permit unfettered UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspections of possible Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) sites. The 1999 NATO air attacks on Milosevic's various residences in Serbia were part of a broader air effort to persuade him to accept NATO's terms for a resolution of the crisis in Kosovo.

Leadership attacks provide several potential mechanisms for bringing about policy change in an enemy state. First, the hostile leader advocating the policy and behavior that the United States finds abhorrent may be eliminated or incapacitated and replaced by a successor whose policy orientation may be more compatible with U.S. interests. Second, the targeted leader may find the prospect of U.S.

tributed to the downfall of leaders the United States wished to see removed. In the case of Slobodan Milosevic, for example, the continued economic hardships imposed on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia by international sanctions and loan denials and the prospect that these penalties would remain in place so long as Milosevic held power undoubtedly contributed to the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia president's electoral defeat on September 24, 2000. It is also probable that the financial and other aid the United States provided to the Yugoslav opposition political parties, the independent media, and the youth protest movement *Otpor* ("Resistance") also played a role in opposition candidate Vojislav Kostunica's victory. However, other factors appear to have been more decisive to Milosevic's electoral defeat: His years of rule had produced a "succession of lost wars, hundreds of thousands of Serbs uprooted, an economy ruined, [and] wages slashed," and a region once considered relatively prosperous "turned into a conspicuous center of poverty." (Roger Cohen, "After the Lost Wars and the Ruined Economy, 'the Greater Slobo' Falls Silent," *New York Times*, October 6, 2000a, p. A14.) The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's economic decline was greatly intensified by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing, and the loss of Serb control over Kosovo severely undercut Milosevic's stature as a statesman and nationalist leader. Finally, in a departure from previous national elections, Milosevic confronted a largely united opposition that funneled most anti-Milosevic votes to Kostunica. See R. Jeffrey Smith and Peter Finn, "How Milosevic Lost His Grip," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2000, pp. A1, A30; David E. Sanger, "The Plan: He Steps Down, They Step Up, U.S. Lies Low," *New York Times*, October 6, 2000, p. A15, and Roger Cohen, "Who Really Brought Down Milosevic?" *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 2000b, pp. 43–47, 118, 148.

attacks on his person and power to be so threatening that he will accede to U.S. demands to ward off future attacks. Third, the elimination of a leader may engender a succession struggle or other division within the enemy camp and force the successor leadership to seek a respite from conflict and agree to a settlement acceptable to the United States.

Deter Assaults on U.S. Interests

Deterrence has been another major objective of U.S. leadership attacks. Washington decisionmakers have sought to send a “signal” both to the targeted leader and to other would-be aggressors that the United States would impose a heavy cost in the event that other assaults were made against U.S. interests. This type of generic signaling was part of the rationale for the U.S. air attacks on Qaddafi and on General Mohammed Farah Aideed and the other Somali National Alliance (SNA) leaders in Mogadishu. Washington’s desire to demonstrate that terrorists “have no place to hide” was also a motivating factor in the U.S. cruise missile attack on Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan.

Depose Potentially Dangerous Regimes

Occasionally, U.S. decisionmakers have concluded that a regime posed a sufficient threat to U.S. national interests that it merited overthrow. During the Cold War, concerns about expanding communist lodgments in the Third World led the United States to seek the ouster of governments deemed already committed to Moscow or likely to fall within the Soviet orbit. This was the rationale underlying the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)–supported overthrows during the Eisenhower administration of the Mossadeq regime in Iran and the Arbenz government in Guatemala. It also underlay the Kennedy administration’s abortive attempts to oust the Castro regime in Cuba. More recently, in the post–Cold War era, Clinton administration officials publicly called for Saddam Hussein’s and Slobodan Milosevic’s removal from power.

Degrade Enemy Capabilities

An objective present in most leadership attacks is to degrade the enemy’s capability to wage war or mount terrorist operations. In

wartime, attacks on enemy leaders and their command, control, and communications (C³) facilities aim to reduce the enemy leader's ability to see the battlefield, maneuver his forces, and react promptly to friendly threats. Such attacks often force enemy leaders to disperse to alternative command sites, which may degrade their communications and make them more vulnerable to friendly intercept. The killing or disabling of enemy leaders may also diminish the quality of the enemy's command and control by conferring command on less competent personnel. Finally, the loss of leaders may serve to demoralize enemy military forces and civilian populations.

STUDY APPROACH

The scope and focus of the research documented in this report differs significantly from the earlier literature relating to leadership attacks. Whereas previous works have concentrated on a single form of leadership attack (e.g., coups in Latin America), a particular U.S. or foreign operation, or a set of U.S. covert activities over a limited time frame, this report systematically examines and evaluates the entire spectrum of violent leadership attacks that the United States has mounted or supported during the past half century. Again, in contrast to most earlier works, the report seeks to distill from this historical experience policy and operational lessons that should help guide U.S. decisionmakers and military commanders contemplating the use of such attacks in the future.

The study assesses the political-military efficacy of leadership attacks aimed at three of the objectives discussed above: the coercion, deterrence, and ousting of enemy regimes. Three basic concepts of operation for conducting such leadership attacks are examined. These are to cause or threaten to cause a leader's removal by

- conducting a direct attack on his person
- facilitating a coup or rebellion against his continued rule
- using external military force to take down his regime.

To gain insight into the potential efficacy of these concepts of operation, the author examined 24 cases of past leadership attack (see Table 1.1). Included in these cases were the principal leadership attacks conducted by the United States since World War II and sev-

Table 1.1
Cases of Proposed or Executed Past Leadership Attacks Examined

Target	Attack Directly	Foster Coup	Foster Rebellion	Take Down by Invasion
Yamamoto (1943, Bougainville)	X			
Mussolini (1943, Italy)		X	X	
Hitler (1944, Germany)	X			
Hirohito (1945, Japan)	X			
Hoxa (1950s, Albania)			X	
Mossadeq (1953, Iran)		X		
Arbenz (1954, Guatemala)			X	
Ben Bella (1956, Algeria)	X			
Sukarno (1956–1958, Indonesia)			X	
Castro (1960s, Cuba)	X	X	X	
Diem (1963, South Vietnam)		X		
Palestinian terrorists (1967–2001, Mideast)	X			
Kabul regime/Soviets (1980s, Afghanistan)			X	
Dos Santos (1980–1981, Angola)			X	
Hudson Austin (1983, Grenada)				X
Qaddafi (1986, Libya)	X	X		
Sandinistas (1980s, Nicaragua)			X	
Noriega (1989, Panama)		X		X
Saddam (1991–1999, Iraq)	X	X	X	
Aideed/SNA (1993, Somalia)	X			
Cedras (1994, Haiti)				X
Dudayev (1996, Chechnya)	X			X
Osama bin Laden (1998, Afghanistan)	X			
Milosevic (1999, Serbia)	X	X	X	

eral of the most prominent cases of leadership attack conducted by foreign powers. Because they illustrate some of the potential pitfalls of leadership attack, the author also assessed several leadership attacks that were proposed or planned by U.S. or allied officials but never actually executed.

In addition to the cases arrayed in Table 1.1, the author also examined operations where the United States supported rebel groups for

purposes other than leadership removal. Finally, the author surveyed the literature regarding political assassinations for the insights it might provide about the policy effects of leadership attacks.

SOURCES

Leadership attacks typically fall in the domain of covert or otherwise closely held operations, and governments are reluctant to openly admit, much less provide evidence of, their involvement in such operations. Such inhibitions, however, tend to erode with the passage of time, and a substantial body of credible information concerning the cases examined in this report is now available in the open literature.

Among other sources, the author has been able to draw upon recently declassified official histories and critiques of past U.S. and U.K. covert operations; the memoirs and statements of U.S. civilian and military officials who directly participated in the oversight, management, planning, or conduct of U.S. operations to remove enemy leaders or who were conversant with policy discussions relating to proposed operations; congressional assessments of U.S. involvement in attempted assassinations and other leadership attacks; and histories and other documented analyses of particular types and cases of leadership attack. Journalistic accounts have also provided credible source materials when such accounts have been informed by interviews with government officials or other persons who were knowledgeable about the conduct and effects of the leadership attacks under discussion.

While the physical success or failure of a particular leadership attack can usually be easily demonstrated, it is more difficult to document the possible psychological effects of an attack, such as whether an attack so frightened an enemy leader that it made him more prone to compromise. Except for the instances where we have testimony about the presence or absence of such psychological effects from credible sources close to the targeted leader, conclusions about the possible intimidatory or deterrent effects of a particular leadership attack must be inferred from an analysis of the enemy leader's subsequent behavior.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

The following chapters analyze the three concepts of operation for leadership attack: attacking the leader directly (Chapter Two), facilitating coups or rebellions (Chapter Three), and taking down regimes with external military force (Chapter Four). Each concept of operation is examined in terms of the assumptions likely to underlie its adoption, the constraints that may circumscribe its employment, its past effectiveness in securing intended objectives, and its potential coercive and deterrent value for shaping enemy policy and behavior. The potential contributions and prerequisites of the effective use of air power in each of these concepts of operation are also examined.

The report concludes with brief summary observations (Chapter Five) about the comparative efficacy of different concepts of operation, the circumstance under which attacks are most likely to be sanctioned, the prerequisites of the effective use of air power, and the deterrent and coercive effects of threats to remove leaders.