

Book Guide from [Foreign Policy](#)  
Book Guide

# Losing the Long Game

An insider's perspective on why U.S. policymakers repeatedly underestimate the costs and consequences of intervention to both the United States and the people of the Middle East.

## Summary

In *Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East*, Philip H. Gordon candidly assesses the wishful thinking and faulty assumptions underlying every U.S.-led attempt at regime change in the Middle East over the last seventy years. Dr. Gordon offers an insider's perspective on why U.S. policymakers repeatedly underestimate the costs and consequences of intervention to both the United States and the people of the region.

Since the 1950s, the United States has set out to replace governments and transform political systems in Iran, Afghanistan (twice), Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. The rationales behind U.S. interventions have included countering anti-communism, geopolitical competition, fighting terrorism, and promoting democracy, while the methods used to pursue regime change run the gamut of coup, military invasion and occupation, armament of opposition fighters, and diplomacy and sanctions. Common to all operations, however, is that they failed to achieve their ultimate goals and produced unintended and even catastrophic consequences with extraordinary financial and human costs.

A scholar of international relations and Middle Eastern affairs and former senior official in the Obama administration, Dr. Gordon argues for an alternative set of policies—based on engagement, diplomacy, support for allies, investment, and deterrence to produce better outcomes for both the United States and the region.

### Main Takeaways:

- *Removing a regime is often easy—putting better governments in its place is far more difficult:* When an existing regime is destroyed, a security vacuum is created and a cutthroat competition for power emerges, both among rival groups within the target country and among neighboring states. If not successfully managed this can lead to enduring violence and chaos.
- *The costs of conflict following regime change can be worse than the original regime:* In places such as Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States successfully ousted hostile regimes, but then found itself coping with decades of conflict, losing thousands of lives, and spending trillions of dollars to deal with the aftermath.
- *Local allies or “clients” do not always share U.S. interests:* Although new leaders after regime change often initially work well with the United States, they inevitably pursue their own interests which are often different from those of Washington. Nationalism, and the need to build legitimacy and political support at home, almost always leads the country's new leaders to distance themselves from the United States.
- *U.S. staying power is limited:* American support for U.S. civilian and military personnel deployed abroad erodes once it becomes clear that the administration oversold the benefits and downplayed the costs and risks of intervention. As violence escalates and U.S. casualties rise, public disapproval of keeping troops in costly conflicts undermines the administration's objectives and limits its policy options.
- *Democracy is elusive, especially in the Middle East:* Democratic institutions and traditions take decades to develop and sustain and cannot easily be imposed from abroad. The absence of factors that foster the transition to democracy in the

Middle East—high levels of economic development; ethnic and cultural homogeneity; and existing democratic norms, practices, and institutions—inhibit the growth of democracy.

- *Diplomacy, deterrence, and engagement are the elements of a better approach*: While there are no easy solutions to the immense challenges the United States faces in the region, engagement, diplomacy, and containment have proven far more effective than regime change in the greater Middle East.

This book is suitable for the following types of undergraduate and graduate courses:

- U.S. Foreign Policy
- International Relations
- Middle East Studies

## Discussion and Essay Questions

### Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy

1. To what extent can the United States satisfy its interests in the Middle East and work with existing dictatorial regimes, such as in Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia?
2. What role should human rights and U.S. values play when considering forcible intervention in the domestic affairs of a foreign country?
3. U.S. policymakers don't always intend to overthrow existing regimes at the outset of an intervention, even if they result in regime change, such as when the United States armed the Afghan mujahideen or when the U.S.-led coalition destroyed Qadhafi's forces that were advancing on Benghazi. How can policymakers exert disciplined control after initiating an intervention?
4. One of the main lessons of *Losing the Long Game* is the risk of moral hazard. When faced with a pressing humanitarian or geopolitical crisis, should U.S. policymakers consider how their decisions might affect other countries?
5. In many cases explored in the book, U.S. administrations faced pressure to act immediately to address the geopolitical, moral, or political interests at stake, even if clear objectives, national interests, and strategies were not yet identified. What can be done to quickly identify U.S. objectives and strategies during international crises?
6. To what extent were the U.S. regime change failures in *Losing the Long Game* the result of structural deficiencies in policymaking? Were mistakes made by the National Security Council, Department of State, intelligence, and military branches, or by individual actors, such as advisors, policymakers, and the President?
7. How much importance should U.S. policymakers place on protecting U.S. credibility and the word of administration officials? Explore this question through examples in the book such as –Obama's redline in Syria or the United States' reputation as a defender of democratic principles and human rights in Libya and Egypt.
8. After the United States intervened in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, was there a moral responsibility to stay and "finish the job"?
9. Many analysts and commentators argue that the United States does not have the same core interests in the Middle East as it once did. How does *Losing the Long Game* address the question of U.S. interests in the region?
10. Compare and contrast the cases of Iran in 1953 and Syria in 2011. What are the main takeaways and implications?
11. In what ways can the lessons of *Losing the Long Game* be applied to U.S. interventions (or interventions by other states) outside the Middle East?
12. How did administration officials, members of Congress, and pundits attempt to frame and influence public debate regarding intervention in Iraq, Libya, and Syria?

### Courses on International Relations

1. What effect did U.S. interventions in the Middle East have on great power competition?

2. What are the roles of allies and regional partners in U.S. diplomatic and military campaigns? Can U.S. policymakers rely on allies and partners to perform primary or peripheral roles in U.S. campaigns overseas?
3. What can the United States do to help multilateral institutions (the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, etc.) play a more assertive role in responding to regimes that flout international norms? Is this a realistic objective? Why or why not?

## Courses on Middle East Studies

1. What do Middle Eastern governments, as in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, need to do to promote the economic, political, and social reform necessary to preclude civil unrest or revolution in the future?
2. Democratic transitions can take decades or centuries to consolidate, as in the United States, France, or South Korea. Is it a fair assessment to say that the democratic transitions explored in the book—despite being imposed from abroad—are failures? What are prospects for bolstering democracy in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya in the next several years?
3. Are there historical or cultural factors that make democracy in the Middle East more difficult than elsewhere? If so, which?

## Supplementary Materials

Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2017).

Peter Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).

William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of U.S. Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2019).

Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York, Penguin Press, 2018).

Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

Steven Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rouge CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times* (New York: Grove Press, 2007).

Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (New York: Little, Brown, 2019).

David M. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008).

Brendan R. Gallagher, *The Day After: Why America Wins the War But Loses the Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

Michael J. Mazarr, *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America's Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

Lindsay O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Samantha Power, *The Education of an Idealist* (New York: Harper Collins, 2019).

Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018).

Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (New York, Penguin Books, 1980).

Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).

Dominic Tierney, *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (New York: Hachette, 2010).

[Visit Book Page](#)