

Grappling with Covert Action after the Cold War

Clinton's Secret Wars: The Evolution of a Commander in Chief, by Richard Sale. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 491 pp., index.

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Former President Bill Clinton's foreign policy reputation has suffered from charges that he was disengaged, ambivalent, and hesitant to use military force. In *Clinton's Secret Wars: The Evolution of a Commander in Chief*, journalist Richard Sale attempts to refute those charges by arguing that nonpublic initiatives, especially the use of covert action, show that Clinton was more proactive and resolute in dealing with foreign policy crises than his critics have allowed. Though the book does not succeed in making this case—at least in this reader's judgment—Sale does add to public understanding of some of the lesser-known foreign policy options available and how the first president to take office after the Cold War used them.

Sale struggles, sometimes contradicting himself, to show Bill Clinton growing steadily in knowledge and fortitude through his terms of office into a man of action. In describing the period after the infamous October 1993 Black Hawk episode in Somalia, Sale writes, "Something in Clinton had hardened, and he emerged from the crisis a different man." (88) By spring 1994, "Clinton's aggressiveness had blazed like a torch...[and] his advisors caught glimpses of some fresh, inner steel." (114) Yet, Sale continues to depict Clinton as vacillating, exhibiting a caution on Bosnia, for example, that "nearly crippled him." (137) But four pages later, in discussing Clinton's actions in July 1995, Sale alludes to "new inner toughness," (144) and by August, a "new unleashed aggressiveness." (152)

Sale provides no solid evidence for all these supposed increases in toughness. By the beginning of Clinton's second term in January 1997, the United States had failed to stop Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic's forces from overrunning Srebrenica, and two timid regime change initiatives had failed in Iraq. At that point, Clinton still followed the lead of cautious allies on Iraq. With respect to countering terrorism, the administration had no real plan, even though Sale claims that by the summer of 1998, Clinton "was like a great sea bird, a storm petrel, swooping low over the waves alert for any prey." (302) The record shows otherwise: Clinton exerted little or no pressure on the Taliban or the government of Pakistan. Not until mid-1999 does the book show Clinton in full form, rallying allies to escalate a bombing campaign against Milosevic. But this was hardly a brazen stand, since everyone from France to Human Rights Watch to the Quakers supported military action.¹

Sale also is given to interpreting evidence selectively in Clinton's favor. For example, when Clinton used third countries to supply arms to Bosnia—a tactic that avoided a covert action finding and its attendant congressional oversight—the move can be seen as laudably resourceful if one is sympathetic to the subject or as subversively abusive of power if not. During the 1995 Dayton negotiations, the Clinton administration agreed to keep Milosevic in power to retain a negotiating partner who could speak for the Serbs. Sale finds this bold:

¹ On the various human rights groups supporting military action, see Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 434–35. Power's book, especially the pages that address the Clinton presidency (pages 293–502) generally support the conventional wisdom concerning Clinton's handling of foreign policy.

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“To keep the peace process alive, Clinton would use Milosevic, squeeze him like a rind, then toss him away.” (158) A more critical perspective might have been that the compromise laid at Clinton’s feet the entire record of Milosevic’s human rights atrocities from then on.

The discussion of renditions of terrorists to third countries during that period also reflects a favorable bias. Even though Clinton’s White House counsel warned that such renditions violated international law, Sale depicts them as brave, in contrast to the criticism of renditions often made of the subsequent administration. Similarly, Sale blames most of Clinton’s first-term foreign policy trials on his predecessor, George H.W. Bush, but he gives no indication that Clinton similarly burdened his successor by not curbing Iran’s influence in the region or by delaying action against al-Qa’ida. If any single sentence in the book highlights Sale’s tendency to see toughness where it might not be, it is the following quote from Clinton: “If anybody f—s with us, we’ll respond. And we’re going to get the UN to finally show up and take over.” (88)

Whether the book salvages Clinton’s foreign policy reputation or not, it does a service by exploring the important subject of covert action in the post-Cold War era. The original 1947 mandate for covert action—a US foreign policy activity in which Washington’s hand remains hidden—specified that it was to be used for countering communism. Until 1991, the goal of most covert actions—even if they were not in response to a direct communist threat—was to counter communist influence or Soviet-backed governments. The fact that the United States continued a robust covert action agenda against a complex matrix of threats after the demise of the Soviet Union makes for a fascinating field of inquiry. As Sale suggests, the process by which the US government decides to undertake a covert action program is interesting in and of itself, drawing input from some-

times competing and sometimes cooperating (although not always amicably) elements of the government, including various members of the Intelligence Community.

The relationship between intelligence and policy in the covert action context deserves study, and at times in this book Sale hints at exploring it more fully. “It is a common myth that intelligence helps shape policy,” Sale writes, “but the opposite is true. Policy, or the lack of it, usually shapes and fashions intelligence.”(43) Sale’s book also shows CIA in a role that this reviewer believes is its most underappreciated, that of serving as a shadow State Department, clandestinely engaging with foreign governments and security services on a range of unacknowledged projects and serving as a back channel to foreign leaders. This function, even if not explored in great detail, appears in the background in much of the book.

Overall *Clinton’s Secret Wars* would have been better if Sale had not tried to right a perceived wrong in prior assessments of Clinton’s foreign policy and had instead taken a more straightforward look at the use of covert action in the post-Cold War environment. This could have been done with only minor tweaks, namely, excising the effusive language about the president’s ever-intensifying focus and his perpetually rejuvenating inner steel, observations that repeatedly detract from the more interesting material on creative foreign policy options available to him. Though his successors used these policy alternatives against similar targets, it was Clinton and his team that refined and debated them for the first time after the Cold War. By taking the reader on a tour through eight years of an administration grappling with such questions in a changed world, Sale has made a significant contribution other than the one he seems most to have intended.

