Stephen Kinzer: The History & Evolution of U.S. Regime Change

Stephen Kinzer is an award-winning foreign correspondent who has covered more than 50 countries on five continents. Kinzer spent more than 20 years working for the New York Times, most of it as a foreign correspondent. Kinzer discusses more than a century of how the US regime change operations evolved. Overthrow: https://www.amazon.com/Overthrow-Americas-Century-Regime-Change/dp/0805082409 Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X /Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL

#Glenn

Welcome back. Today we're joined by Stephen Kinzer, an award-winning author and foreign correspondent who spent 20 years working for the New York Times and also for the Boston Globe. Now he's a senior fellow at the Watson School for International Studies at Brown University. So thank you for coming on. I've been looking forward to discussing not just your book *Overthrow: The History of U.S. Regime Change Operations*, but also how we've gotten to where we are today. Again, it's an older book, but it becomes no less relevant year by year. So thank you for coming on.

#Stephen Kinzer

Well, I'm an admirer of your work and of many of the guests you've showcased, so it's good to be with you.

#Glenn

Well, thank you very much, I appreciate that. In *Overthrow*, you trace more than a century of interventions. I was wondering if you could map out some of these ideas—the history as well as the evolution of U.S. regime change operations—and how they've been carried out over time.

#Stephen Kinzer

Americans have always been an expansionist power. That's how we got here from Europe, and that's what the Pilgrims did when they moved from Plymouth to Boston. So this has been an impulse deeply ingrained in us. That was the same impulse that led us to try to fulfill what was called our "manifest destiny"—our destiny to fill up the continent of North America from the Atlantic to the

Pacific. In 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau declared that the frontier was closed; North America had been settled. In effect, we had fulfilled our manifest destiny. Then we had to ask ourselves: what do we do now? Do we devote ourselves to building a virtuous society in the hope of being a model for the rest of the world?

Or do we continue doing what we've been doing ever since we became a country—and even before—and that is, try to push on to other lands? Now, there had never been an example in world history of a former colony that became a colonizing power, so this was a big psychological leap for Americans. The first real breakthrough came at the end of the 19th century in what became known as the Spanish-American War, and it actually set a pattern that we have followed, in one sense, ever since. The Spanish-American War began as a rebellion of Cubans against Spanish rule. Americans decided to send troops to help the Cuban revolutionaries overthrow Spain. To our shock, the Cuban revolutionaries were reluctant to accept our help because they feared what it might mean to have an American army on their soil.

So the United States Congress passed a law called the Teller Amendment, in which we vowed that the moment Spanish rule in Cuba was overthrown, Americans would go home and allow Cubans to have their own island. But after the Spanish were thrown out, the United States began to realize what the revolutionaries in Cuba actually wanted. They wanted a form of national sovereignty that could conflict with American economic interests. Specifically, they wanted to limit the amount of land foreigners could own in Cuba. That directly affected United Fruit and many other American corporations. They also wanted to build a tariff wall around Cuba to encourage domestic manufacturing.

Ninety percent of the manufactured goods in Cuba at that time were made in the United States. So the Americans decided to ignore that promise—or effectively repeal it—and impose our own system of government on Cuba under another amendment called the Platt Amendment. That’s the one under which we allow local people to rule, but they have to accept our guidance. And that’s become a template. The one through line, I think, that you can see from that point all the way through to today is that the countries on the receiving end are all characterized by defiance. They have all refused to accept the American project.

American exceptionalism tells us that we’ve finally succeeded in discovering the formula for a happy, prosperous life on Earth, and we want to share it with other people. We want to redeem the world. It’s just a step beyond Calvinist Protestantism, which wanted to go out and convert the heathens. So this missionary instinct, combined with the view every empire has of itself—that we’re different from other empires, that we don’t exploit—allowed the United States to veer into this century of regime change. And I’ll tell you, you’re right: this book *Overthrow* that I wrote was published more than ten years ago, and suddenly it’s back in fashion.

And I want to tell you something that happened to me when that book came out and I was doing what we used to do in those days—go on a book tour. That book tells the stories of fourteen times

the United States overthrew foreign governments. So I'd go around, give my speech, and then afterwards, very often, somebody from the audience would come up to me and say, "I like your book, but you missed one. There's one overthrow you didn't talk about." And I'd ask, "Which one was it?" And they'd say—depending on their background—"It was my country. Like… Portugal. What do you think the Carnation Revolution was?"

That was all planned in the U.S. Embassy. Or Turkey—the 1980 coup—come on, that came from Jimmy Carter. Or how about Greece, the colonels? That was all an American project. So even the ones that don't get included in my book are believed by many people in those countries to have been fomented by the United States. There's an old joke that there could never be a coup in the United States because there's no American embassy there. But it's certainly true that the United States, over a longer period of time than any other country, has intervened in more nations, farther from our own shores, than anyone else.

#Glenn

Well, when you mentioned this idea of manifest destiny pulling west toward the Pacific, I was thinking about Frederick Turner and what's called the frontier thesis. He had this very influential thesis back in 1893. The argument was that the frontier, as the U.S. expanded westward toward the Pacific, had a profound influence on the American economy, identity, and mindset. It helped shape democracy because it promoted independence and self-governance. It created a very unique American character that made Americans more inventive, individualistic, and optimistic about the future as new lands were discovered.

It was a safety valve, as social and economic tensions could be released there at the frontier. The main concern in the frontier thesis, again as it came up in the 1890s, was what happens when we reach the Pacific and there's no more frontier. And, well, at that point it very conveniently coincided with the Spanish-American War of 1898. Then, of course, the U.S. got its colonial possessions, including the Philippines. But it seems like that idea could be important in terms of having this notion of spreading—like Manifest Destiny—spreading civilization. That's something that has also been maintained in its foreign policy. It has this larger objective in the world to, I guess, transform the world just like the U.S. transformed itself in the Revolution. But do you see it being primarily driven by all the regime change? Because you don't see this from other countries. Is it mainly ideology? Economic interests? Security interests? What's a good way of understanding this?

#Stephen Kinzer

For the last hundred years or more, the United States has essentially been a revolutionary power in the world. We're not a status quo power—we want to change things. We think we have a formula that's good for other people, or at least we convince ourselves that's why we're doing it. Today, I think it's very difficult for many Americans to imagine a world the United States does not dominate. Nothing like that is within our living memory, and I think that's one of the reasons we're so unsettled

at this moment. You mentioned economic factors—it's very difficult to separate the economic and the geostrategic ones.

When I look at the coups that happened during the Cold War, I come to the conclusion that the United States doesn't actually intervene to protect the interests of corporations. But corporations play a vital role in attracting interventions. It works something like this: a corporation operating in a foreign country feels it's being mistreated, abused, taxed, or regulated in some way it doesn't like, and it goes to the U.S. government to complain. Then, inside the policy process—inside the White House, if you want to put it that way—the motivation starts to morph, it changes. The attitude became something like this: when we look at a country like Guatemala in 1954, we don't intervene to protect the United Fruit Company.

But the fact that the government in Guatemala is attacking or picking on the United Fruit Company shows us that this government must be an enemy of ours and is probably a tool of our global rivals. Therefore, we're intervening for security reasons—but the country we're intervening in would never have even come on the radar in Washington had it not been for a conflict over economic interests. There's no doubt that the beginnings of American expansion overseas, starting in 1898 with the seizure of the Philippines and other territories, had a deep economic motivation. When you read through the newspapers of that era, the late 19th century, you'll see they're full of this word.

They're talking about excess—what will we do with the surplus? The Americans had mastered the techniques of agricultural production and mass industrial production by this point, and they were producing more than the United States could absorb. This was causing serious economic upheaval. We had a massive panic in 1893, and it became clear, as congressmen from all the producing states were saying, that we needed foreign markets. In those days, you didn't just sail your ship around the world and sell to whoever you wanted, because the European powers all had colonies, and those colonies could only trade with the mother country.

So if you wanted trading partners, you had to seize territory. And that's what the United States did, for example, in the Philippines, as a stepping stone to the China market—which was this great, tempting fata morgana. There were articles about how much meat we could sell to the Chinese if we could get them to eat beef, how much cotton we could sell them if we could get them to make their clothes out of cotton. So all of this fervent effervescence at the end of the 19th century led inevitably to expansion abroad, essentially as a way for us to export our social problems as we also exported our products.

#Glenn

Well, how were they carried out differently? Because initially, when one thinks of regime change and coups, it's very hard not to think of the military—be it Guatemala in '54 or Iran in '53. But in more

modern times, at least after the 1980s, we see more of a shift toward NGOs, that is, more soft power, hijacking civil society to a large extent. And of course, this can work hand in hand with military power. But has there been an evolution in the instruments used to topple governments?

#Stephen Kinzer

Absolutely. And I try to trace that in my book. In the early days, we had what you might call plan A—you just sent the Marines. I mean, when we decided that President Zelaya of Nicaragua was no longer favoring American interests the way he should, we just sent soldiers there. We sent gunships, and he realized he had to step down. That was in 1909. That was the way we used to do it in those days.

#Glenn

Gunboat diplomacy was a very apt phrase for that. Hawaii as well, right?

#Stephen Kinzer

Yeah, Hawaii went through a very interesting process, because it started out with missionaries going there. Then the missionaries—or their sons—began to get interested in making money, and they focused on the sugar industry. They wanted to bring Hawaii into the United States so they wouldn't have to pay tariffs to send their sugar here. So Hawaii was the first time that, with the approval of senior officials in the United States, a foreign government was overthrown. The USS Boston, an American warship, was an active participant in that coup. On the day of the coup, the USS Boston put ashore a couple of hundred bluejackets and Marines, and that was the end of the Hawaiian monarchy.

So that was the way we did it, more or less, up until the Second World War. Then we get into a new period—the CIA era. The 1950s were the glory days of the CIA for coups. We had these two spectacularly successful ones, which turned out to be, in both cases, spectacular disasters over the long run. We overthrew the only democracy Iran ever knew in 1953 because that democratic government had nationalized Iranian oil. Flushed with that success, the CIA turned its attention to Guatemala, where the United Fruit Company had complained about oppressive expropriations from a nationalist government. And in 1954, we overthrew that government. During the same period, we launched a civil war in Indonesia.

We launched a plot to overthrow and assassinate Patrice Lumumba, the prime minister of the Congo. The CIA was very active then, and this became a new way to overthrow governments. President Eisenhower, who was a strong supporter of covert action, actually saw it as a kind of peace project. He'd been deeply affected by sending kids off to war by the thousands in World War II and watching their bodies come home. He saw covert action as a way to avoid war. Eisenhower's security program was called the New Look, and it had two pillars: a smaller standing army and a

bigger nuclear deterrent. But what nobody knew at the time was that there was a third pillar to the New Look—and that was covert action.

So this was the glory time for the CIA—tens of thousands of agents all over the world, usually working out of the top floor of the American embassy. They had a standard operating procedure. The agents, many of them undercover as diplomats, would fan out through society, meet people in government and elsewhere, and then set to work trying to subvert or support the government, depending on U.S. policy. That was the standard. The same thing happened in Chile in 1973. And often you'd get the military to come in and play the key role at the end. But as you pointed out, that changed too during the 1970s. A lot of heavy scandals blackened the image of the CIA, and there was a strong push for reform.

And the CIA itself, particularly under William Casey, realized that the old covert action model had run its course. One reason was that we had used it so often. People in the target countries were aware of our techniques—something leaders like Árbenz in Guatemala and Mossadegh in Iran were not. I mean, I think in Iraq we tried to bomb every place that Saddam had ever eaten a falafel, but we couldn't find it, because by then those people understood how the CIA operated. So then we move into the next phase, and it's, as you put it, the NGO era. During the Reagan administration, Congress created the National Endowment for Democracy. It was a tight vote.

Some people were very much against it because they saw it for what it was—an attempt to interfere in the affairs of other countries. But it did get approved. The National Endowment for Democracy, through its subsidiaries, began distributing tens of millions of dollars in countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, where we wanted to promote certain kinds of change. And there became such an army of these American NGO workers spread across so many countries that I now realize they even got a name in Eastern Europe. They were referred to as the "Sorosites," after George Soros, who was the number one promoter of this project on the private side.

But USAID and a number of American so-called human rights or freedom foundations, which are actually funded by the U.S. government, then set up shop in foreign countries. The people who ran the National Endowment for Democracy were very frank in explaining that we're now doing openly what the CIA used to do covertly. And that was the conceptual leap — that in this new way, you wouldn't have to keep secrets, because there wouldn't be any. You wouldn't have to worry that someone would find out it was actually money from the United States promoting these events. It would be right there on paper.

So that has been the principal way the United States has sought to influence foreign countries—particularly, but not limited to, Eastern Europe. We're in a new phase now, and who knows, with cyber technology and so forth, where we'll go from here. But I think it's fair to say that, based on American tradition, history, and collective psychology, the United States is not anytime soon on the

brink of deciding it shouldn't be trying to affect the way every country in the world goes. We still feel that's our right, that's our duty, and, as we're hearing from our current president, that's the way we're going to get rich.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I guess shifting to the NGOs, as opposed to those covert missions, was a good way to avoid being embarrassed when things were exposed. I mean, the benefit of the NGOs is that they can hide in plain sight. They can say, "Hey, we get 100% of our funding from the government, but we're still a non-governmental organization." Like the National Endowment for Democracy — it's not just about coups; we have them in this country as well. And, you know, they finance local NGOs. So, if you're like me and you've criticized some of NATO's wars, then you have institutions like the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, which is financed by the National Endowment for Democracy and Soros. They'll come out with hit pieces and more or less try to chase you out of the universities.

So they're quite, let's say, unpleasant institutions. But how do you see it now, as we might be heading toward war with Iran again, with unforeseen consequences? This can also be traced back to the original coup you mentioned before, in 1953. What lessons do you think we can take from that coup and how it shaped Iran? What can we learn from it, do you think?

#Stephen Kinzer

When I first went to Iran as a newspaper reporter, I was unprepared because I wasn't supposed to be studying Iran. It was an odd set of circumstances. I was immediately struck by the tremendous difference between, on the one hand, how sophisticated Iranians are and how deep their history and culture run, and on the other hand, how unpleasant their government is—how they were never able to consolidate a democracy. I asked people, why was this? And finally, one kindly gentleman told me something like, "Oh, we had a democracy here once, until you showed up and took it away from us." I had this vague memory that there had been a coup there in 1953. I remember thinking that when I got back home—I was based in Istanbul then—I was going to order a book and find out what happened in that coup he was talking about in 1953. To my surprise, I found that there was no book.

There had never been a book written about that. Now, I'm old enough to remember the hostage crisis, and I remember vividly that one of the main themes was that these Iranians were doing this out of pure nihilism, pure hatred. It was a violation of every law of God and man—they were doing it just to be hateful. And that, I think, has shaped the American image of Iran ever since. In the years since the hostage-taking happened, several of the hostage-takers have written articles or memoirs about that episode, and they all say the same thing. They explain why they did it, and they all take the story back to 1953. So essentially what they write, if I can paraphrase it, is this: in 1953, the people of Iran chased the Shah away.

But the CIA, working from the basement of the U.S. embassy, arranged a coup and brought the Shah back. That gave us twenty-five years of dictatorship. Now here we are in 1979—the Shah has fled again, the same Shah—and we were afraid that CIA agents working in the basement of the American embassy would organize a coup and bring the Shah back. What made us think that might happen? Because exactly that had already happened once. But Americans didn't know there had ever been a coup in Iran. Nobody understood this. When Jimmy Carter was asked about it at a press conference once, he said, "Oh, that's ancient history." So the understanding that Iranians have of U. S.–Iran relations and the understanding that Americans have of U.S.–Iran relations are totally different.

From the American side, U.S.–Iran relations begin and end with the hostage crisis. It's so deeply burned into people's consciousness. We didn't have a relationship before, and we haven't had anything afterward. It was all crystallized in that episode. But Iranians feel very differently. They would say the big thing that happened in Iran that poisoned our relationship was when you overthrew Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953. That derailed our progress toward democracy, and we' ve never gotten back on track. So the 1953 coup was the original sin in Iran. That was the time when it seemed as if an incipient democracy might emerge. But because it was a democracy, its leaders had to respond to the popular will—and the popular will was focused on the great national injustice: our country sitting on an ocean of oil.

But it all belonged to Britain, so we wanted to reclaim it. Just from those few weeks in the summer of 1953, a huge amount of history unfolded. Had the U.S. not overthrown Iranian democracy in 1953, we might have had a thriving and prosperous democracy in the heart of the Muslim Middle East. All these seventy years later, I can hardly wrap my mind around how different that region might be if we hadn't done that. The results of our intervention in Iran are very bad. And right now, I see again a syndrome I notice in many interventions: we have the power to wreak whatever havoc we want, but we don't really think through what's going to happen the next day, or the next week, or the next year. Because as Americans, I think we have this special view that we can handle anything.

You know, America was built on something you sort of indirectly refer to—the can-do mentality. It tells you that if you just want something badly enough and work hard enough, you're going to get it. And that's a wonderful thing. That's what helped us fill up the continent and invent the airplane and a lot of other things. But there's a dark side to the can-do mentality. It tells you that you can charge into foreign countries that have historic traditions very different and much older than our own, and wave a magic wand and transform those countries into what you think they should be. And I think that kind of arrogance, when wedded with the military power the United States has, is a danger to other countries—and at this moment, particularly Iran.

#Glenn

People often complain about the theocracy in Iran—that it's unacceptable to have a government run by religious leaders. But people often forget that after the 1953 coup, when the Shah was established as a dictator to subordinate the country to Western interests, the brutality of the secret police, the SAVAK, co-opted all institutions of society. They eventually suspended political opposition as well. One of the few areas that weren't fully co-opted by the state was the mosques, because that was a sensitive area to move into. So it kind of made sense for political discourse to take place in the mosques. It became, I guess, to some extent, a natural thing to have religious ideas and leaders organize resistance.

I mean, it's not all that different from Poland, where you had the Catholic Church opposing the communists. But anyway, the fact that the revolution took place with religious leaders at the front, giving birth to a theocracy—you can link that to the way the dictatorship in Iran was organized. So often one neglects that these things didn't happen in a vacuum. There's a reason why we're here. But you mentioned this interesting topic of blowback—that interventions often create long-term instability, as well as anti-American sentiment among people who might otherwise have been quite friendly to the United States. Do you see this as a common theme across most or all regime changes?

#Stephen Kinzer

Certainly, over the course of the 1950s, the world's opinion of the United States changed dramatically. I think at the end of World War II, the United States was admired—almost worshipped—by most people around the world. And I can tell you this was definitely true in Iran, where the only Americans who had shown up were missionaries who built hospitals and schools and never tried to be predatory like the British or the Russians. But over the course of the 1950s, American coups shifted public opinion. The coup in Iran sent a message to rising elites in other Middle Eastern countries that the United States preferred dictatorships that would provide oil and wasn't going to be happy with democracies.

It also produced a popular resentment against the United States. In 1954, that certainly happened following the U.S. coup. There were huge protest demonstrations all over Latin America, and this was less than a decade after the Americans had led the world to victory in World War II. Frida Kahlo was lying on her deathbed and told Diego Rivera, "I want to go join the protest rally against the U.S. coup in Guatemala." You can see photographs of her being wheeled in her wheelchair at the front of that giant protest rally by Diego Rivera. It was her last public appearance; she died a few days later.

But that's the extent of the outrage it caused. And of course, the final death knell for America's image as a promoter of freedom and non-interference in the world was the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. I think that was the first time many people in the United States—and around the world—ever heard of the CIA, and that marked the end of the glory days for the agency. John F. Kennedy famously told one of his aides, "I'd like to take that CIA and rip it into a thousand pieces." So, it's definitely true that covert actions produced a very large wave of anti-American resentment around the world.

I would also argue that, in the long run, most of these interventions have produced political results that are not favorable to the United States. When you violently interfere in the politics of another country, you're doing something like releasing a wheel from the top of a hill. You can let it go, but you have very little control over how it bounces and where it ends up. So, in Iran, we had what we thought was the ideal outcome: we got rid of a guy we didn't like, Mossadegh, and we put in another guy, the Shah, who would do everything we wanted. It seemed like the perfect ending—if only history would stop happening.

But unfortunately, history keeps unfolding, and these interventions have consequences. This is something that's difficult to get many Americans to understand because, as I said, we have this sense that we're powerful enough to overcome any effects. Whatever happens, we think we'll be able to control it. But Iran is a perfect example. We're still living with the long-term result of our coup in 1953. We launched those operations to solve an immediate problem. But when you start talking about longer-term implications, you basically lose the interest of people in Washington, because the political system just isn't wired to reward those who think about long-term consequences.

#Glenn

I want to understand, though, the American tendency toward overconfidence. Because often, when there's regime change or a revolution—when you rip up the roots of the former government—the normal outcome is that very brutal forces rise to the top if there's an internal struggle. So, for example, in Syria, it shouldn't surprise us that Jolani and his ISIS henchmen would take power. Also, after coups, there's often a reliance on extreme violence in the absence of other forms of legitimacy. You see this after the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Iranian Revolution—all of them, to a large extent, based on real concerns about human rights and freedoms, but then they result in very brutal repression.

The one exception you have around the world would be the United States. The Americans had a revolution, and instead it resulted in this very liberal constitution—not the kind of brutality you saw in almost every other part of the world. Do you think that's part of the assumption—that the natural condition, if you just yank out a government, would be, you know, people essentially not ruled by anyone, and that it would be peaceful and stable? Because, you know, this idea of small government and all that is also a very key theme in American political thought, right? Or is it just a lack of understanding of the cultural, political, or historical complexities of other countries?

#Stephen Kinzer

Well, we don't do complexities. George Bush famously said, "I don't do nuance." So, I mean, for him, if you had told him about Shia and Sunni in Iraq, he might have said, "I remember a time when two guys were fighting to be the postmaster in Galveston, and I had to make a deal. I can handle

the Sunnis and Shia too." You know, in ancient times, before evolution was understood, there were various theories about how life emerged. One of the most popular ones in ancient Greece was what they called spontaneous generation—that if you just had a lot of mud and some rain and sun, pretty soon a salamander would come out. I think Americans think of world crises that way—that it's spontaneous generation, that they just erupt out of nothing. And that's why the writer Gore Vidal suggested we should change the name of our country to the United States of Amnesia.

You're absolutely right that when the lid is lifted off any institutional state, it's logical that the most violent groups rise to the top. You saw that in the Russian Revolution—a perfect example. If you're willing to kill all your opponents and the other groups are not willing to kill theirs, you're going to triumph. Now, in the United States, this didn't happen, I think in part because the American Revolution was not a real revolution—it was a war of independence. A revolution is one that destroys the existing social structure, and that didn't happen in the United States. That's what happened in Cuba, that's what happened in China, that's what happened in Russia. But ours was more of a war of independence, in which we essentially wanted to preserve the institutions of the mother country.

So I don't think there was that same drive to avenge terrible wrongs, because the wrongs were not as terrible as they were in those other countries. But you mentioned legitimacy. One of the problems that governments have when they come to power as a result of foreign intervention is that they never establish themselves as truly legitimate. The great example of this is the Shah. He was in power for 25 years, but he was always illegitimate. He was always known as the person who came to power as a result of foreign intervention and was maintained in power through lavish relationships with outside powers. This is almost a guarantee that people Americans place in power always have trouble establishing themselves as leaders that others want to follow.

And then, of course, there's the same syndrome. Since people don't want to follow those leaders, they rebel. Then the United States has to intervene again to protect them. And this is a cycle you've seen over and over again, particularly in the Caribbean basin. But it shows you that just installing a leader you like is not the end of history. These are such recurring patterns. You know, I give my students a whole list of definitions of what history is, and one of the ones I really like is from Hegel. He said the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history. And that certainly would be a good slogan for looking over American foreign policy as it is now and comparing it to what has come before.

#Glenn

Well, if we look at another issue in current events with Ukraine—they also had this regime change. Well, actually, they had two of them. The first was in 2004, and it didn't really go that well. I remember Newsweek had a report back in 2009, something along the lines of how, at that time, Yushchenko was the most unpopular leader in the world. He had something like a 2.7% approval rating, which basically meant no competition at all—just the worst in the world. And of course, being seen as managed from abroad was also not ideal. Then, you know, they went back to Yanukovych,

but in 2014 we had the same thing all over again—another regime change. But this time it was coupled with a war with Russia, which made them very dependent on the West. So instead of being the ones who were toppled, they became the defenders, essentially. So how do you see this regime change compared to others?

#Stephen Kinzer

The Ukraine story is truly heartbreaking. When Ukraine emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union, people thought it could become a Central European version of France. It had industries, a highly educated population, a high literacy rate, a great location, good natural resources—it was industrialized. It had it all. And all that was needed to realize that ambition was to maintain some distance from the emerging new Cold War—that is, to turn Ukraine into a bridge between East and West, not a place the two sides fought over. But the United States, in particular, was not prepared to accept that. It takes me back to something that happened in Europe a couple of decades earlier, and that was the Austrian State Treaty in 1955. If you remember, after the Second World War, Russian troops and Western troops occupied Austria.

And the Soviets absolutely refused to pull their troops out unless there was a guarantee of a permanently neutral Austria. Eisenhower hated this idea. He didn't want Austria to be a bridge between East and West—he wanted it to be in the West. He resisted for years until finally breaking down and agreeing to that Austrian State Treaty, which says that no foreign troops can ever be stationed on Austrian soil and that Austria will remain permanently neutral. This was written into the Austrian constitution. That would have been a perfect model for Ukraine. But Americans didn't like it for the same reason Eisenhower didn't like the Austria agreement—it meant we don't get Ukraine. Nobody gets it. And that's not good enough for us.

We didn't want to leave it outside our sphere of influence. It's a big theme in Washington—Biden used to say this all the time—that there's no such thing as spheres of influence anymore. But actually, the United States considers the entire world, other than Russia, China, Iran, and a couple of other places, to be our sphere of influence. We came up with this fatuous argument that every country should be allowed to choose its own security partners. Therefore, if Ukraine wanted to join NATO, become an ally of the U.S., and have U.S. forces on its soil, that was Ukraine's business. Every American understands that we would never tolerate a Chinese military base in Veracruz, Mexico, or a Russian air base in Quebec. We would never tolerate that—nor should we.

So this was a really disingenuous argument. We pushed Ukraine into this confrontation with Russia, and the devastation it's causing is absolutely awful. When you've been in wars, as I have been as a correspondent, you really do realize that war is the worst thing in the world. And this war is threatening to explode and kill more and more people. But it's all about where the border of Donbass is going to be. I feel that Ukraine has been pushed into this position largely by the United States and its NATO allies. And I think it's cynical for the United States to take the view that the Ukraine war is great for us because we're killing Russians and no Americans are dying.

So it shows what a failure the world committed in the wake of the Cold War. You know, George H. W. Bush seemed to be on the way to trying to transcend the divisions of the Cold War. But then, when Clinton came in, he jumped on the idea that NATO should expand. And what happened was, we just took the old dividing line that split Europe during the Cold War and moved it a few hundred miles to the east. The idea that the United States could allow these countries to develop their own relationship with Russia was something that seemed inconceivable in Washington. The anti-Russia feeling there has always been intense—it's anti-Soviet.

It's anti-communist. It all kind of blends together. And the European countries have lost so much strategic creativity that their only conceivable reaction to the threat they perceive from Russia is to arm themselves and prepare for war. The option of trying to create a security architecture in Europe that would also include Russian interests, thereby reducing the risk of war, seems not to occur to them. So I see Europe in the bizarre position of fueling this war effort, even as the United States seems to pull out of it. And it makes me think, as someone who's looked back on history, about Europe's role as essentially the inventor of modern diplomacy.

That's where diplomatic history is—it's in Europe. And those countries have practiced it very intensely. But now Europe doesn't seem able to use diplomacy to resolve its challenges. Whereas East Asia, by contrast, has divisions and hatreds that are far deeper than anything in Europe, they seem to transcend them and manage to get along without fighting, in a way that produces prosperity for everyone. So if you're one of those people who believes that the age of Atlantic power and European power, which emerged over the last 500 years, is ending, that's pretty good evidence for it.

#Glenn

That's always a good point—that modern diplomacy, whether you trace it in Europe to 1648 or 1815, is largely gone now. There's this whole assumption that diplomacy is just sitting in a room with people you already agree with, which I have a hard time understanding. I often make the point that I understand the Ukrainian position, I understand the Russian position, I even understand the American position—but the European one is very, very confusing. Just as a last question, because you mentioned the issue of blowback—unforeseen consequences often being a key issue—what kind of blowback do you think we might face from this regime change in Ukraine, again, twelve years ago now?

#Stephen Kinzer

Well, the worst effect has been the devastation of Ukraine and the deaths of so many tens of thousands of Ukrainians and Russians. I think we've definitely sent a message to Russia that the West doesn't want anything to do with it anymore, and that Russia needs to find other security partners. This is something very damaging—it wasn't necessary. I'd like to think that Ukraine would

make the European countries rethink their approach to their security environment, but there doesn't seem to be any indication of that. It's interesting now that Europe is, more or less, on its own, trying to fill the gap left by the United States.

But I still—maybe I share this with you—I still find it difficult to grasp what some of my friends in, for example, Germany are thinking. They think they need to have a draft, they need to harden the autobahns so tanks can drive on them. And if you suggest that maybe talking to the adversary would be one good way to reduce the possibility of that kind of war, you're seen as an appeasement promoter. In fact, the mention of appeasement is something that triggers a deep reaction in the American strategic mind. I think maybe the greatest one-word stereotype, or Rorschach word, that came out of World War II was "Munich." Madeleine Albright used to use this a lot.

I remember that when one of her aides suggested moderating some of the demands we were making to Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia, she said, "Where do you think we are—Munich?" Munich, referring of course to the decision by Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, to allow Hitler to take part of Czechoslovakia, has become a code word in our collective psychology for appeasement, surrender, and diplomacy. So "Munich" essentially tells you diplomacy is all a lie. Diplomacy is never going to work. Forget about that. That's not a useful instrument of international relations. And if you believe that, then you've essentially destroyed the entire institution of international cooperation.

All of these institutions were created at the end of World War II essentially to serve the interests of the United States. And now, by willfully destroying them, we're opening up the world to challenges that wouldn't be there otherwise. So I think this is one of the real blowback factors—that we've opened up so much space for competing powers. Now, this is not necessarily bad, but it's bad because of the reaction it could trigger for the United States. The great challenge of the future for the United States is to adjust to a world that's more multipolar, one that we don't run. If we're able to do that peacefully, there's some hope for long-term stability in the world.

But there's always the danger that the United States will rebel against this and fight wars in order to prevent its fall from the status of the world's dominant power. But that's the way the world is going. Will the American government and political system accept that and, for the first time in our modern history, transition into being a country that doesn't have to run the whole world in order to live in it and prosper from it? Or are we so caught in that view of ourselves that the emergence of other powers will terrify us and lead us to needless and self-defeating military interventions?

#Glenn

You know, I think this Munich reference is very damaging. First of all, as you said, it assumes that peace requires war—that diplomacy and negotiations will only embolden the adversary. That's very much the language we use now. This is why we can't talk to the Russians, because talking to them is seen as a reward for aggression. That's the logic. But if it were just now, it would be one thing.

Milosevic was another Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi, Assad, the Ayatollah, Putin, Shia—whoever. Whenever we meet an adversary, we always bring up the idea that they're the latest reincarnation of Hitler. And then we end up with this Munich lesson that we can't talk to them because that will just embolden them further. We have to impose a cost. And they're saying this quite openly now: we have to impose a cost. Otherwise, that's the only way they'll stop. Otherwise, any diplomacy is just a reward.

#Stephen Kinzer

Well, negotiations in war are always a result of the position of troops on the ground. The Americans kept having this fantasy that if they waited longer and longer, things would change—that the Russians would change their minds, they would weaken, and we would bludgeon them. Meanwhile, we're not losing any American soldiers. I do see Ukraine, though, as a potential warning sign that other countries could follow that route too. And I'm very worried about Iran right now. I see the possibility of a major conflict inside Iran. So I hope the Americans aren't setting off another round of self-defeating interventions. But if we are, we'd only be acting in line with our long history and tradition.

#Glenn

Well, I understand you have another book coming out, so I hope you can come back on the program later this year when it's out. Thank you very much for taking the time.

#Stephen Kinzer

It's a privilege. I enjoy being with you. Thanks a lot.