governments' fears and the opprobrium and attention of the CIA. On the other hand, however, his economic policies were so disastrous that Ghana's development was stunted, perhaps irrevocably.

While the practical results of 'Nkrumaism' in Ghana now tend to be largely forgotten, what remains is a powerful, if somewhat hazy, driving force for many Africans on the political left. In this context, his failures are much less important than the ideas he disseminated.

The name of Kwame Nkrumah will continue to be synonymous both with major political successes and with equally spectacular economic failure. Whether the former outweighs the latter depends on one's own opinion. For better or for worse, he will go down in history both for his lofty ideals and the tawdry corruption and oppression which marked his rule.

The likelihood of coups

Peter Calvert

The Likelihood of Coups

Rosemary H T O'Kane

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The coup represents a particularly difficult problem for social science research. The social sciences, including politics and international relations, depend on statistical analysis to take the place of the experimental method employed in some (but by no means all) of the natural sciences. They are therefore well able to make meaningful statements about the likely behaviour of large populations of individuals or generalise from considerable numbers of events. On the other hand, though the social scientist can predict with reasonable accuracy the probability that a given individual will behave in a certain way in some situations, individual choice and free will ensure that this probability will always fall short of certainty.

How likely, then, are coups? Rosemary O'Kane, who has already several significant statistical articles to her credit, now presents a book-length treatment which, while raising many interesting questions and making perceptive and interesting comments, also points up the impossibility of using statistical analysis alone to arrive at a satisfactory overall theoretical treatment.

A coup is the successful use of force (or the convincing threat of force) by a relatively small group of conspirators to overthrow their government. In practice, the use of force in this way is essentially negative. That is to say, coups

remove 'undesirable' governments; they do not necessarily result in the creation of a new government chosen by the conspirators, and, indeed, their failure to do so is one of the reasons for the later coups of the sequences that are characteristic of this little understood phenomenon. Hence (for example) in the history of Brazil, 1968 (when the military intervened to prevent the succession of the civilian Vice-President on the death of President Costa e Silva and imposed the Fifth Institutional Act—an event overlooked by the work under consideration) is a more significant event than 1964, and neither owes much to the fluctuations of the price of primary products in the world market.

These sequences often include failed coups as well as successful ones, and the confusion between these two leads to totally erroneous ideas about their frequency. 'If the coup is successful, it will be the 190th since Bolivia's independence in 1825—an unofficial world record' said *The Sunday Times* (London) on 1 July 1984. But the historical truth is less exciting—only a fraction of this number have been *successful*, and the problem with coups that are not successful is that we cannot easily say in what sense they ever existed. So though we need to study them to see why some coups succeed and others fail, a purely statistical analysis rests on foundations too insecure to be trustworthy.

There are many circumstances which can be shown to be statistically associated with the occurrence of successful coups. Social cleavages, economic crisis, civil unrest or turmoil and the proximity of elections have each been suggested to be independent variables significantly associated with the occurrence of coups. O'Kane is particularly interested, as are many other students of the Third World, in their association with economic conditions, in particular the terms of world trade and their effect on one-crop economies. Clearly any association of this kind that could form the basis of a predictive model would be of the highest possible interest to political analysts, not to mention investors (or Third World leaders!). The problem with all such associations is that they may well turn out to be spurious unless we can determine the precise intervening variables in the process which translates (say) a fall in the price of cocoa or tin into a coup in Ghana or Bolivia.

O'Kane regards Edward Luttwak[1] as having offered 'the only explicitly general explanation for coups which digs below the surface of institutional and military characteristics' (p 19). But in identifying 'economic backwardness, political independence and organic unity' as preconditions of coups, Luttwak does not, in fact, tell us much, and his suggestion that anyone can mount a coup is at best a Transylvanian joke and at worst a sick foretaste of what the far right were to offer in the 1970s. The fact is that the coup, though undeniably a neutral *strategy*, is a specifically *military* phenomenon. Hence, even if economic backwardness (or recession) is a precondition for coups, and taking into account the politico-institutional and politico-cultural context in which

[1] Edward Luttwak, *Coups d'Etat: A Practical Handbook* (second revised edition), London: Wildwood House, 1979.

economic problems arise, it is among the military as an institution that we must look for the key missing variables.

O'Kane is quite correct when she says: 'The role played by the armed forces in coups is too often exaggerated'; but she in turn is too quick to dismiss them as having less significance than they really have. Military intervention not only takes place more often than not with the collusion of significant civilian elements, but civilians often work for and actively solicit military intervention to secure their own political ends: to annul elections, for example. However if civilians ever *lead* coups, as opposed to legitimate them or benefit from them (which are quite different things), they can hope to do so with success only if they are retired military officers, or in the very rare circumstances when they command significant paramilitary forces and/or the military structure of the state is so weak that the limited power they can deploy is relevant. In other words, military-civilian direction of coups is quite normal, civilian direction almost unheard of, and if civilians take part in interim ruling juntas they do so at the invitation of the military and (unless they are willing figure-heads) are soon forced out.

How then do macro-economic problems, such as economic backwardness, translate into micro-political decisions, the military decision to intervene? This is not an easy theoretical question. The power of the military is so great, after all, that they have a considerable capacity to insulate themselves from the effects of economic recession, at least in the short term. Salaries, resources, pensions, fringe benefits—all can be kept up at the cost of other sectors, and generally are. The most easily cut are the immense sums that the Third World armies spend on very expensive—and in productive terms wholly useless—armaments; but a major reason why they do so is the fear of that social unrest in their own countries to which they are contributing by intervening.

One thing is clear: the key to military politics lies in that small though constantly evolving group we term 'the officer corps'. This is always, as S E Finer[2] reminds us, a powerful lobby; its relation to government limits the possibilities of true social reform, and it is there that the decisions are taken to intervene or not to intervene. Most Latin American military coups are led by the high command, and, incidentally, over three-quarters of them are bloodless. That this is possible is due to the institutional bonds that hold the officer corps together as well as the reluctance of civilian sectors to resist. The institution, in turn, is the link which joins the personal factors motivating individual army officers and the social factors which lead them, despite the technical neutrality of the coup, to use a coup, or the threat of one, almost invariably to pre-empt reform and not to facilitate it. The mere possibility of a reform government may be enough to precipitate intervention (hence the association with elections).

[2] S E Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (second edition), London: Penguin, 1976.

Specific proposals for higher taxes, land reform, nationalisation or a reduction of military budgets are even more likely to do so.

These factors reinforce one another and, in the interplay of military politics, very slight ideological differences are easily subsumed in personalism. The military themselves see their political alignments as support for one or another military leader. Themselves of middle-class origin, they are not part of the old ruling groups, and their new social position often sits uneasily with their social class origins. The civilians with whom they choose to work are bonded to them by a variety of personal links—region, family, childhood education or the vagaries of military postings—rather than by real community of feelings. The major thing which the military expect of government is that it should be competent. It is the ultimate tragedy of the coup that its mere possibility so often fatally weakens civilian government, while the military governments that displace or supplant them are, because of their institutional characteristics, so often even less competent than those they have rejected.

Rosemary O'Kane has made a courageous attempt at establishing a general theory of why coups occur and has included some most interesting material in her bibliography. Possibly her text has been cut for publication; if so, the task as presented here was itself an impossibility. The conjuncture of numerous specific factors can be seen to contribute to individual coups, and seeking one universally applicable causal factor will inevitably fail to explain adequately the phenomenon. Lastly, when all else has been explained, there remains an irreducible element of luck.

The Iran–Contra Affair

Jenny Pearce

The Iran–Contra Connection: Secret Teams and Covert Operations in the Reagan Era

Jonathan Marshall, Peter Dale Scott and Jane Hunter

Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press. 1987. 313pp. $11.00pb

The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board

John Tower, Edmund Muskie and Brent Scowcroft

New York: Bantam Books and Times Books (distributed in the UK by Transworld). 1987. 550pp. £4.95pb