

Interview - Austin Carson

Written by E-International Relations

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Austin Carson is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. His first book, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* analyzes puzzling secrecy patterns that arise when outside powers intervene in foreign wars. The book develops a theory based on conflict escalation dynamics, showing that states use covert intervention and conceal others' covert activity to keep war limited. His second book project, in collaboration with Allison Carnegie (Columbia), analyzes the role of intelligence and other forms of sensitive information in international organizations. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *International Organization*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Security Studies*. He received his PhD from Ohio State in 2013.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

One area of research I find exciting and thought-provoking is the study of leaders and, in particular, research which is beginning to unpack how being embedded in a group influences leader decisions. We are in something of a "golden age" for the study of individuals, with lots of exciting work by Sarah Croco, Elizabeth Saunders, Mike Horowitz, Josh Kertzer, and others (see the current special feature in *Journal of Conflict Resolution*). Much of this work has studied leaders in isolation, treating them as asocial rather than embedded among rivals, advisers, and bureaucracies. Saunders' new work on advisers is an example of new research that is analyzing how those who surround leaders matter, at once shaping, enabling and constraining how they behave. This is a new frontier and addresses some of the weaknesses of studying leaders in isolation.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I worked in the foreign policy think tank world before graduate school. I left Washington D.C. with an intuitive sense that imagery and optics mattered a great deal and that leaders spent inordinate amounts of time shaping how policies were perceived. This view commonly spread throughout the Beltway during the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War. The use of intelligence – keeping some internal; going public with other bits – played a big role in how that crisis played out. I was personally influenced by the Powell speech at the United Nations and found the theatrical nature of that presentation fascinating.

Once in graduate school, Erving Goffman and Thomas Schelling were the authors whose writing seemed to be in tune to this imagery game. I immediately felt Goffman's observations from everyday social interactions had clear parallels in international politics. His writing – often obtuse, full of overlapping terms, but always insightful – resonated deeply with my social experiences and what I found interesting about politics. Schelling, of course, has influenced generations of International Relations scholars. But I was particularly drawn to some of his less well-known passages, places he expressed proto-constructivist insights about manipulating how threats and commitments are perceived. Without really being aware of it, Goffman and Schelling showed me that studying the optics games played in IR was feasible. All of my research since then has followed this basic path.

Your recently published book *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* discusses covert military interventions and collusion between adversarial states to keep secrets from the general public.

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How do you explain this collusion? What are the historical origins of these policies?

Collusion about covert foreign involvement during war was the puzzle that launched my dissertation research. I was eager to understand what the shared logic for secrecy might be. What was something both adversaries cared about enough to tacitly cooperate in concealing conflict events? Forced or unwanted conflict escalation is my answer in the book. I argue that limited war is hard to pull off, even when clear geographic and other thresholds bounding a war exist. By accident or design, limits on war can be transgressed. However, keeping such transgressions hidden and unacknowledged preserves flexibility and political maneuverability. Moreover, the act of keeping them hidden sends a message between the adversaries that both hope to keep a lid on the conflict. I trace the historical origins of this collusion to World War One. Leaders saw how easily a regional war could escalate, and understood the role of miscalculation and domestic hawkish pressure in facilitating that escalation. Covert intervention and collusion about it emerged as a solution to escalation in the modern age.

What are the strategic implications of this covert collusion?

The most obvious strategic implication of collusion is that adversaries often should avoid the temptation to compete for public relations wins by exposing one another. The utility of collusion in limiting war shows that rivals would do well to remember their shared interest in managing the optics of limited war. The final chapter of *Secret Wars* develops some other strategic implications as well. For example, collusion about covert involvement likely creates something of a moral hazard. Collusion reduces the riskiness of involvement. An intervener that is confident its role won't be exposed and consequently prompt escalation may be more likely to intervene in the first place. Of course, other costs besides exposure can be imposed. In other work (co-authored with Keren Yarhi-Milo), I have explored whether covert retaliation can express resolve and impose cost. However, in a vacuum, collusion helps make conflict safe for foreign involvement, which is not without downsides.

How has the United States' "War on Terror", particularly regarding Iran and Iraq, exemplified your theories about collusive secrecy and covert intervention?

There are some ways in which the argument in the book sheds light on American policy in the War on Terror. In the concluding chapter, I review how the American occupation of Iraq gave rise to an Iranian covert intervention and, for a time, collusion by the United States regarding its role. When the War on Terror was used to justify a foreign regime change, it created large-scale escalation problems severe enough to invite these covert dynamics I describe.

Other elements of U.S. policy regarding terrorism lie outside the scope of the book. Examples in which secrecy plays a key role include isolated American Special Operations raids into Pakistan, drone strikes in Yemen, and the American extraordinary rendition program. Yet secrecy in these examples plays a different role, sometimes operational and sometimes driven by domestic political concerns in the "host" state. My book is clear that I hope to understand dynamics arising in limited wars, specifically instances where sustained covert campaigns by external powers take place in a conflict with a plausible risk of larger geopolitical escalation. Secrecy used in other contexts – say, peacetime covert action or for isolated raids where other major powers aren't involved – is often driven by other considerations.

In your book, you state that traditional models of international security would not predict widespread covert collusion between rival states under anarchy. What have other theories and explanations missed? Could your theory of collusive secrecy be applied to other fields, besides interstate conflict?

Given the nature of the collusion phenomenon, the relevant theories are those which make claims about adversaries and information. While old-school realism suggests adversaries are distrustful and competitive in general, it is Fearon's work on the rationalist reasons for war that makes the clearest claim about information. Fearon rightly notes that, for most cases, adversaries have strong incentives to misrepresent their capabilities and resolve to one another. Doing so provides advantages (i.e. conceals a new weapons program) and avoids exploitation of weaknesses (i.e. conceals vulnerable forces in the field). His 1995 article claims one reason inefficient, bloody wars result from disagreements is that mutual interest in deception leads both sides to mistakenly overrate their chances of winning.

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Collusion is therefore hard to understand. If anything, rivals have incentives to expose one another to broadly identify the opponent's weaknesses and accelerate countermeasures.

This perspective overlooks two things: 1) the destructiveness of modern war can shift adversaries to appreciating a mutual interest in limiting war; and, 2) information revelation makes limited war harder. Exposing one another does more than address strategic or tactical advantages. It also surrenders control of a conflict by inviting domestic constraints. Moreover, exposure of activity in war that violates well-known limits sends a message that the exposor doesn't care much about those limits. Collusion flips both dynamics. Staying quiet reduces domestic constraints and shows the other side that protecting the broader perception of a bounded war is important.

This logic is generalizable beyond interstate war. Civil wars are a topic I think the theory could illuminate. Rebels and governments may share an interest in avoiding the bloodiest forms of civil war and might collude to conceal certain events which make that harder to avoid. International trade is another potential application. Two states engaging in trade discrimination might well recognize that publicity can rob them of control over a trade dispute. Mutual silence about certain violations then makes sense as a way to keep a trade dispute controlled and to signal respect for bounded competition to one another. That said, a leader like Trump shows that a preference for bounded competition and a respect for diplomatic restraint is not universal!

You have described war as a “performance” put on by conflicting states. Who are states performing for? How does this relate to your “theatre analogy”?

The theater metaphor is a continuing reference point in the book. I conceptualize limited war as a kind of performance, with its own rules and roles. The frontstage corresponds to activity by the external powers that is visible to all audiences. In my theory, that is primarily domestic hawkish constituents that can be a force for escalation. The backstage corresponds to hidden activities. The adversary – a co-star in the performance of limited war, so to speak – has access to this backstage. They see covert activity during war. However, domestic audiences usually lack access. This creates a bifurcation in the visibility of events during war. When it works well, that split helps the actors put on a coherent and clean performance of limited war.

In your recent article *The Spotlight's Harsh Glare*, you and Dr Allison Carnegie argue that the conventional wisdom, which suggests that the transparent monitoring of a state's activities strengthens the normative legal order, is misplaced. Why is this the case? How does this apply to the U.S. response to nuclear proliferation?

Our claim in “Spotlight” is that more information about violations of international rules can endanger that rule system. Publicizing violations – for example, making intelligence about hidden nuclear programs public – can have two harmful effects. First, it can provide fresh reason for other states to worry that other governments are violating. We call this publicity that inspires compliance pessimism. Second, better information about the violation can sharpen the threat that behavior poses to other governments. The severity of these problems largely depends on whether the violating behavior can be reversed.

Our empirical analysis shows that the U.S. government chooses not to publicize intelligence about some states' nuclear programs as a way to avoid provoking pessimism and sharpening threats. In practice, this manifests as leaders suggesting that exposing a nuclear program will harm the non-proliferation regime by sowing doubts about compliance and triggering reactive proliferation. Israel's program is a classic case: while exposure would improve confidence in monitoring and allow for naming-and-shaming, American leaders have long feared it would be seen as a bellwether of future violations and would prompt reactive proliferation. The latter would potentially undermine the very regime, and so obfuscation has been the better option in their view.

How do unpredictable, outspoken leaders such as U.S. President Donald Trump influence information sharing and signaling between states?

This is the \$64,000 question, right? Trump throws all our theories for a loop. In one sense, his unpredictability makes

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signaling games far more likely to end in misunderstanding. North Korea demonstrates how he quickly he vacillates from threats of fire and fury to obsequious compliments. What about signaling in the covert sphere? We have little way of knowing until records are declassified. But my guess is that adversaries and allies have had to reset the inferences they can draw. Observing a boost in covert aid for Saudi operations in Yemen, for example, could have a range of meanings for Trump and many fewer plausible interpretations for a George W. Bush or Barack Obama.

On information sharing, the Trump effect must surely be reduced confidence in the ability of the United States to keep secrets. The most obvious reasons are the inadvertent exposures by Trump himself early in his first term. The more enduring and broad reason is the likelihood of leaks by dissatisfied policy or intelligence bureaucrats. Clashes with the “deep state” are a recipe for leaks, and those leaks may end up including information shared by allies or partners.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I have two pieces of advice I give to all young scholars of IR. First, the PhD. and academic life is not for everyone. There's the usual reasons: it's hard to get a job, and most jobs underpay people for their qualifications. But I have more pedestrian concerns in mind. Be sure to ask academics what their day-to-day life is like and think seriously about whether you want to sign up for that for the long-term. Many will find it difficult to be happy and succeed with a near total absence of daily structure, rare deadlines, slow turnaround, and a lot of time in an office by yourself. Lots of smart folks are steered into Ph.D. programs before they really know how unglamorous a “life of research and teaching” really is.

Second, take time to foster your own creativity and don't chase methodological or substantive trends. The hardest thing to teach is unusual interests, original ideas, or a unique perspective. Too often aspiring scholars seek to imitate big names and hot new scholarly approaches. That won't get you very far. Great research is, at its core, driven by an insight others haven't had. Read broadly; find other disciplines you think are interesting; play with analogies; talk to non-specialists. All this can help get the gears turning for a new idea.