



## Book Review

# Aaron Good (2022) *American Exception: Empire and the Deep State*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing

Shane Miller

The University of Utah, United States

ISBN: 9781510769137

*American Exception: Empire and the Deep State* is a historical investigation into the politics of empire. In this book, Aaron Good addresses two questions: What explains the uniformity of US policy across different administrations? And, as American power abroad has declined, why has the rule of law and democracy deteriorated domestically? He argues that the United States has pursued a ‘a grand strategy of imperial hegemony’ (p. 31) throughout the different presidential administrations of the post-World War II period. In a liberal democracy – one with strict adherence to the rule of law – this approach would be untenable. The American pursuit of imperial domination, however, has required violating not only international law, but also domestic law, resulting in an ‘institutional abrogation of the rule of law’ and thus a ‘decline of democratic governance’ (p. 31). Criminology has become institutionalized in the politics of empire.

To flesh out the implications of the criminogenic politics of empire, and to illuminate how power works in the United States, Good posits a tripartite theory of the state that combines three approaches: Michael J. Glennon’s double government; C. Wright Mills’ power elite; and Peter Dale Scott’s deep politics (p. 5). In other words, Good contends that the United States consists of the *public state* – that is, the democratic state – the *security state* and the *deep state*. The *public state* includes the institutions of federal, state and local governments, along with the civil service bureaucracies. The *security state* consists of the entities charged with maintaining international and domestic security, such as the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The *deep state* is composed of ‘the institutions that exercise *undemocratic* power over state and society’ (p. 5, emphasis added). Good argues that the deep state is ‘an outgrowth of the overworld of private wealth’ (p. 5) and is composed of organizations that mediate this overworld with the underworld of organized crime. Each part of the tripartite state possesses some autonomy, but sovereignty lies with the deep state. This makes the United States a country with a deep state system.

Establishing a state of exception, where the normal functioning of the law is suspended, was key to the development of the American tripartite state. Good argues that before World War II the democratic state shared power with a deep state, but after the war the deep state gradually superseded the organs of public government. America’s policy of imperial hegemony entailed fighting a Cold War against the Soviet Union and the establishment of neocolonial relationships with the underdeveloped world. US imperialism required a dizzying array of illegal activities in which international treaties were routinely ignored. The US Constitution was also frequently violated because it holds treaties to be the highest law of the land. This led to a permanent state of exception and established certain US institutions as criminogenic enterprises. Exceptionism thus transformed an imperfect democracy into a tripartite state marked by ‘covert top-down rule’ (p. 6).



Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN: 2202-8005 (Online)

The state of exception that followed World War II has continued right up to the present day. Exceptionism was first legitimized through anti-communism, then the so-called 'war on terror', and today it is being promoted through wars with Russia and China (p. 282). American institutions, particularly those of the national security state, have become criminogenic. The ubiquity of covert action abroad and at home has required confounding public sense-making through the construction of plausible deniability. For Good, this obfuscation has led to today's academic understanding of the state, politics and political science writ large. He writes that the academic mainstream 'does not acknowledge the extent to which militarism, covert/paramilitary violence, state lawlessness in foreign policy, and exploitative international institutions are all of a piece – essential aspects of the US-managed global capitalist system' (p. 20). In fact, a series of taboos have emerged that police the boundaries of acceptable dialogue and thought. Good's work addresses these taboos directly by making capitalism, imperialism and the lawfulness of the state essential components of his analysis.

Good derives methodological inspiration from C Wright Mills, who famously wrote on the question of structure versus agency in the social sciences. Mills presented two ideal types of social science – one in which all of history is seen as 'drift' and one in which it is seen as 'conspiracy' (p. 94). Good agrees with Mills that this is a false dichotomy and, following Michael Parenti, argues for an analysis of both 'class *and* conspiracy' (p. 95, emphasis added). Such an analysis can overcome the 'high crime blindness' of social science (p. 270) and offer an answer to 'the conspiracy theory epithet' levied against scholars who study real, historical conspiracies (p. 271). Good considers the deep state as an expression of both structural power and elite agency. This presents unique challenges because the actors involved actively obscure their activities through falsifying journalistic accounts and the historical record. To address this difficulty, Good uses techniques from 'parapolitical research', where he engages in a critical reading approach – not unlike an intelligence analyst (pp. 42–43).

Good discusses key policy documents and planning projects from elites and elite institutions that shed light on their plans for the American empire. The first planning project he examines is the War and Peace Studies Project undertaken from 1939 to 1945. It was organized by the Council on Foreign Relations, which outlined a plan for the United States to enter World War II, attain victory and create a postwar capitalist world order in which the United States held a hegemonic reign. Good explains how the Council on Foreign Relations was dominated by the Anglophile Wall Street overworld of private wealth that was decisive in creating the CIA and other elements of the national security state bureaucracy. After World War II, the grand strategy of American empire was further articulated in the 1950 National Security Council Paper NSC-68. This document established a state of exception for anti-Soviet measures and US war-making. It insisted that Europe should not be neutral in the coming struggle, but rather should be brought into the American camp. The elite in the United States also produced policy documents to transform domestic politics. For example, the Powell memorandum, 'Attack on the American Free Enterprise System', which was written in 1971 by US Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, is a candid expression of elite antagonism to liberal political institutions and civil society institutions. It argues for exerting the levers of corporate control within the United States more assiduously to preserve the dominance of the wealthy over society. Another key elite policy institution was David Rockefeller's Trilateral Commission, which articulated a policy orientation that would come to dominate the Democratic Party during the Carter, Clinton and Obama administrations. Good argues that the 'trilateral perspective' is, most succinctly, that widespread material prosperity has weakened the governability of the population and is therefore undesirable.

Importantly, Good offers a brief history of the emergence of the national security state following World War II. Security institutions served as a nexus between the overworld of corporate wealth and the underworld of organized crime. This is exemplified by the careers of William Donovan and Alan Dulles, who began as Wall Street lawyers before working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and helping to establish the CIA. Covert actions, such as Operation Underworld, which was launched by the OSS, used the mob's expertise in suppressing radical longshoremen during World War II. The OSS and the CIA were also involved in drug trafficking to finance covert operations. Examples include the CIA's Operation Paper that trafficked opiates in Southeast Asia to finance the Kuomintang, CIA-backed cocaine trafficking used to fund the Contras and the CIA's Operation Cyclone that supported the Mujahadeen through heroin trafficking. To launder the ill-gotten money and prepare it for covert operations, the national security state established a clandestine financial infrastructure. Good discusses shell-companies and banks linked to this infrastructure, which include Civilian Air Transport, Sea Supply Inc., Miami National Bank, Castle Bank, the World Finance Corporation, Nugan Hand and the Bank of Credit and Commerce. The security state has also used the underworld to organize political assassinations, such as a 1955 attempt on Zhou Enlai, countless attempts on Fidel Castro, in all likelihood the assassinations of John F Kennedy (JFK) and Robert F Kennedy, the 1976 assassination of Orlando Letelier and Ronnie Moffit, and other programs of systematic assassinations such as Operation Condor.

The permanent state of exception and licence for covert actions established the national security state organizations as criminogenic institutions. The scope of these crimes began to enter public consciousness in 1975 in the wake of the Watergate scandal. In this so-called 'year of intelligence', President Ford appointed the Rockefeller Commission, which revealed CIA plots to kill Castro, Lumumba, Ngo Dinh Diem, Rafael Trujillo, Sukarno and Duvalier. The Church Committee was formed to

study abuses and found substantial CIA and FBI obstruction during the Warren Commission's investigation into the assassination of JFK. It discovered a host of other abuses such as the political use of the IRS, CIA subversions of Chilean democracy, CIA assassination techniques, domestic spying and the machinations of the NSA. Perhaps the most explosive of these abuses was the FBI's COINTELPRO operations in which American political organizations and civil society groups were infiltrated, disrupted and subjected to FBI organized assassinations. In the 'year of intelligence', the US House of Representatives created the Pike Committee, which established the permanent House Intelligence Committee, prohibited assassination plots and paramilitary operations during peacetime and authorized an end to the CIA's subversion of domestic civil society institutions. The historical record, however, shows that these prohibitions have had little effect. Indeed, despite the public revelations, Good argues that the committees failed to reign in the national security state, and hence deep-state forces, because they misdiagnosed the problem. The real problem was and is 'empire' (p. 164).

Good uses brief presidential histories to convey the struggle between public government and the deep state. He begins with the Truman Administration and continues to the Reagan Administration with a brief reference to the presidents that follow. Good writes that Truman was essential in establishing the institutions of the national security state overseeing the founding of the CIA through the National Security Act of 1947 and the promotion of war hysteria by the Committee on the Present Danger, beginning in 1950, which legitimized a permanent war economy. Despite his farewell address warning of the military-industrial complex, Eisenhower was equally instrumental in establishing the power of the deep state. He appointed Allan Dulles as head of the CIA and his brother John Foster Dulles as secretary of state. The brothers pursued a foreign policy of empire and covert action, infamously overthrowing the democratically elected governments of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 to protect US and British commercial interests. Despite his overt anti-communism, John F Kennedy departed from the imperial consensus, refusing to invade Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion, firing CIA director Allan Dulles and pursuing détente with the Soviet Union. Good argues that this conflict led to his assassination, which was organized by CIA-affiliated elements of the deep state. In the wake of the Kennedy assassination, Johnson attempted to appease the deep state through reversing Kennedy's policy of détente, intensifying the Vietnam War and unleashing the CIA. He also oversaw the Warren Commission's investigation into JFK's assassination.

Good argues that Richard Nixon, like Kennedy, was brought down by the deep state because he deviated from its policy orientation. Despite his reputation today, Nixon was forced to sign liberal reformist policies due to pressures from social movements and he pursued détente in the Cold War, becoming the enemy of two elements of the deep state: war hawks and the corporaterich. Nixon recognized that deep political forces were destroying his presidency so he fought back, firing CIA director Richard Helms. He set up a new director, William Colby, to dig up dirt within the CIA, which became known as 'the family jewels'. (In 2007, these files became public.) In the end, Nixon failed and the deep state bounced back even more resolutely, orchestrating his removal from office. Good devotes substantial attention to the Watergate scandal, arguing that it was ultimately a setup organized by the deep state to get Nixon out of office. Carter's presidency was marked by the consolidation of the deep state and, Good argues, was also undone by the deep state through Reagan's 'October counter-surprise'. In Good's history, Reagan's election marked the point at which the public state was largely vanquished and the US government became a deep state system.

The criminality that lies at the core of the politics of empire has grave consequences for the people of the world. Despite the historical focus of *American Exception: Empire and the Deep State*, the politics of empire is very much still with us today. In the near future, we can expect more war, covert action and ineffectual public government. Good identifies three major crises produced by America's pursuit of global dominance, which the country is incapable of addressing: inequality; ecological destruction; and nuclear omnicide. As long as the capitalist empire and its criminogenic politics persist, these issues will likely remain unaddressed. Good ends his book with a reflection on the role of the public intellectual in our day. The public intellectual must 'bring light to the dark side' rather than run interference for empire. Good's book is surely a significant contribution to the literature of empire, and brings light to the darker realities of the present and recent past.

*Correspondence:* Shane Terence Miller, Marriner S. Eccles Fellow in Political Economy, PhD Candidate, The University of Utah, United States. [shane.miller@soc.utah.edu](mailto:shane.miller@soc.utah.edu)