

How to Seize a Country

DURING the past 23 years, more than half of the world's governments have been overthrown by *coups d'état*. Conspirators are increasingly aware that complex societies are vulnerable to attack. Slash a wire, start a rumor, dump LSD into reservoirs: today any determined guerrilla can stop The System. One man with one bullet can change history. A handful can take over a country.

This knowledge has now been systematized in *Coup d'Etat, A Practical Handbook*, which shows that in practice things are not so easy. Published in the U.S. by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., the book has already been translated into French, Dutch and Italian. It could well become an underground bestseller in nations with a history of toppling regimes, ranging from Peru to Syria, which probably holds the world record in coups—nine attempts since 1949, eight of them successful. Author Edward Luttwak notes that while the number of the world's doctors, teachers and engineers is increasing only slowly, that of army officers is rising sharply. For the benefit of the latter, he offers a blueprint of the steps necessary for taking over the state. In the process, he shows himself to be a cross between Walter Mitty and Niccolò Machiavelli, a dreamer and a schemer combined.

Luttwak brings some impressive credentials, if not empirical expertise, to his task. He is bright, cynical, multilingual and only 26, a vintage revolutionary age. Asked his nationality, he answers, "When?" Son of an orange importer, he was born in 1942 in a Hungarian enclave in what was then Rumanian-ruled Transylvania. He was raised in Italy, polished at the London School of Economics, worked for CBS News in Eastern Europe, later joined what he describes as a "consulting agency," whose chief clients were oil companies. He traveled in the Middle East, evaluating the stability of governments in the area.

Unlike a revolutionary assault from the outside, Luttwak notes, a coup is an inside job, done by a government's own members. It involves minimal manpower and bloodshed. As in judo, the secret is to use leverage and make a state overthrow itself. Bureaucracy facilitates this by severing the loyalties that once personally bound rulers and their servants. A modern bureaucrat follows impersonal orders; if his immediate boss is subverted, the bureaucrat tends to obey orders blindly, even orders designed to topple his own government.

According to Luttwak, a coup requires three preconditions: 1) a highly centralized government with a seizable seat of power, 2) a passive people not likely to

react to a takeover and 3) the assurance that no foreign power will intervene. These prerequisites usually rule out federal nations, healthy democracies and protected client states. Europe, he observes, has had only three successful coups—in Czechoslovakia, Greece and Turkey—during the past 24 years. By contrast, numerous regimes in Africa and Latin America offer what Luttwak calls "gratifying" opportunities. So does South Viet Nam, provided that the U.S. winks at the plotters (as it did when President Ngo Dinh Diem fell in 1963).

Luttwak's how-to manual (complete with 13 tactical diagrams) charts every step of a coup, from plot to power. The average coup—once physically launched—takes about 13 hours. The whole art is to analyze all forces that might squelch the coup and, if possible, "neutralize" them beforehand. To block airborne troops, for example, a single bribed technician can silence a key radio station or airport control tower. Capital cities can be isolated and made safe for coups by parking trucks across the airstrips that link them to the outside.

Nearby army and police units can be dangerous. The best way to disarm them is to find out which secondary commanders have been passed over for promotion. Then the most competent can be cozened (with lofty language and basic career promises) into moving against government forces.

After a coup succeeds, the plotters must demobilize their own forces lest the commanders—a treacherous lot by definition—get ideas about a "coup-within-the-coup." The new group should then "freeze" the situation by raising army pay, promoting fellow plotters, barring any flight of refugees, and flooding the radio with calls for sacrifice to cure the alleged sins of the deposed rulers.

In Ghana, 500 soldiers out of a 10,000-man army overthrew Kwame Nkrumah's regime and hardly fired a shot. In South Korea, a mere 3,500 men in an army of 600,000 put General Park Chung Hee in power. Luttwak's little classic explains how so few can fool so many. By revealing the necessary delicacy of timing—a single miscalculation of hours or minutes can send the plotters to their execution—he also shows how easy it is to prevent a coup. In his appendices Luttwak offers other advice for despots eager to cling to their posts. It resembles that given by one of the tyrants of ancient Greece. Asked how it was that he was never troubled by rivals, the tyrant walked into his garden and, without a word, lopped off the heads of the tallest flowers.

