

## *Chapter One*

# **The Coup-Free Zone**

As the Watergate crisis escalated in 1973, rumors darted around Washington that President Richard Nixon might call on the military for support.

Admiral Elmo Zumwalt served on the Joint Chiefs of Staff during that time. Many years later, he described an alarming meeting between Nixon and the Joint Chiefs in December 1973.

Nixon launched into a rambling speech about how “the Eastern liberal establishment was out to do us all in.” Nixon’s next suggestion was shocking. “We gentlemen here,” declared the president, “are the last hope, the last chance to resist.”

“I got the impression,” Zumwalt recalled, “he was sort of testing the water with us, to see whether there would be support—any nodding of heads—at some of these things. One could well have come to the conclusion that here was the Commander-in-Chief trying to see what the reaction of the Chiefs might be if he did something unconstitutional. . . . He was trying to find out whether in a crunch there was support to keep him in power.”

The military commanders did not respond, and the moment passed.

After the meeting, a stunned Admiral Zumwalt conferred with the army chief, General Creighton Abrams. General Abrams said he would simply act as though the episode never occurred.<sup>1</sup>

If Zumwalt’s depiction is accurate, President Nixon appears to have floated a trial balloon, to see whether the military brass would support him in some sort of coup d’état, or unconstitutional use of force, against Congress. The balloon popped instantly, and no more was said about the matter.

The following summer, Congress moved toward impeachment. Defense Secretary James Schlesinger secured understandings with military commanders that he personally, under the National Security Act, had to relay any orders emanating from the White House. No one was to take any action, or

execute any orders, unless Secretary Schlesinger authorized it. “I did assure myself,” recalled Schlesinger, “that there would be no question about the proper constitutional and legislative chain of command. And there never was any question.”<sup>2</sup>

During his last six weeks in office, Nixon spent only six days at the White House. The rest of the time, he stayed at his retreat in San Clemente, California, overlooking the Pacific Ocean.<sup>3</sup>

After the silent response of the Joint Chiefs, President Nixon faced his humiliating trial with stoicism, not Machiavellian machinations. In the end, Watergate constitutes our best evidence that no one—not even the president of the United States—can overturn the American constitutional order.

Why has there never been a coup d'état in America? Not only have we never suffered a coup, we have never even seen a coup attempt. Why not?

For that matter, what makes a coup such an outlandish prospect in many affluent democracies? Imagine—tanks roll into Washington, London, Stockholm, Berlin, or Tokyo; troops seize government buildings and arrest civilian leaders; a general, president, or junta appears on television and announces a new regime.

It sounds implausible. But why doesn't it happen here? After all, this scenario unfolds regularly around the world, in capitals like Caracas, Kinshasa, Quito, Katmandu, and Conakry. Moreover, coups used to be pandemic. Turn to almost any page in ancient and medieval history, and you will find violent intrigue and coup d'état after coup d'état.<sup>4</sup>

There is a standard theory of stability: “professional” military officers are so thoroughly steeped in ethics and self-sacrifice, and so fully internalize the values of civilian control and constitutionalism, that they will not lead a coup. This theory has several problems. First, it simply pushes the explanation back one level: Why do some military organizations, but not others, effectively inculcate “professional” values? Second, the standard theory of stability offers no good explanation for the fact that well-educated, highly “professional” officers have recently led coups in various countries (such as Thailand in 2006, Pakistan in 1999, the Soviet Union in 1991, and so forth). Third, this theory lacks credibility because it places enormous weight on the capacity for virtue. Given the stakes—supreme power, riches, and everlasting fame—why haven't any U.S. politicians or military commanders tried to mimic Caesar, Napoleon, or Mussolini?

This book offers a simpler explanation: stability is not about ethics—it is about law. Impartial “rule-of-law” institutions weaken and dissolve personal loyalty relationships within the political-military establishment. This process inhibits the formation of grand criminal conspiracies, up to and including those aiming at a coup d'état.

The attenuation of personal loyalties generates stability because, in the absence of tightly knit factions, cliques, and cabals, the formation of a grand conspiracy to seize state power becomes inordinately difficult. Scholars of corruption have pointed out that “corruption networks” tend to be based on family, clan, tribal, and patronage bonds<sup>5</sup>; similarly, scholars of the coup d’état have noted that coup organizers tend to draw upon the same “strong-tie” links to recruit followers.<sup>6</sup> This is because any criminal endeavor—and especially a coup, which is a complex operation requiring the participation of hundreds of individuals—brings the risk of discovery and criminal punishment. As a result, conspirators turn to people they can trust.

Even in rule-of-law states with weak personal loyalties, of course, some corrupt activities occur within government. For example, politicians, civil servants, and military personnel can be susceptible to the temptations of bribery—a crime that might involve only two people and can remain forever secret. Balancing risks and rewards, it may be individually rational to offer or accept a bribe. But the risk-reward calculations change with respect to a coup d’état, where hundreds of individuals must join a conspiracy in advance and then participate in an operation that becomes public at the moment of execution. In a rule-of-law society, a coup organizer would have to approach hundreds of fellow military officers, bureaucrats, or politicians—with whom he or she would only be connected through “weak ties”—and any one of them could betray the plot, perhaps for personal gain.

In this context, it becomes highly irrational (from an individual’s perspective) to approach even one other person about a coup d’état. In short, the rule of law creates a “collective action problem” that renders coup conspiracies untenable. In mature democracies like the United States, Britain, Sweden, Germany, and Japan, it is the rule of law that inhibits any threat of a coup d’état.

This is why President Nixon could only insinuate, in a way that maintained plausible deniability, the possibility of military-backed resistance to Congress. It is also why the Joint Chiefs pretended to ignore that awkward moment and why such episodes, from all accounts, are exceedingly rare in American politics.

As the maps at the beginning of the book illustrate, the past few centuries have witnessed an expanding “coup-free zone.” On each map, the gray-colored states experienced coups, whereas the black-colored states did not. Each map covers a span of at least fifty years, and a state must pass at least fifty continuous years of stable and independent existence, without a single coup or coup attempt, to be colored black.

As we can see from these maps, coups have long been the norm, and stability is a recent innovation. The black zone unfurled slowly for several centuries but has recently exploded.

On these maps, two main patterns cry out for explanation. First, what explains all the gray? Why has human politics traditionally been a relentless cycle of intrigue, plotting, and violent displacement of leaders? Second, what explains the black? How have certain states escaped the cycle and emerged into long-term tranquility? These questions drive our inquiry.

But first, we should clarify our terms. I define “coup” broadly, as any forceful seizure of central government power. A coup, or coup d’état, is a disorderly, unpredictable transfer of power, accomplished through physical force or intimidation. This includes a coup d’état by military commanders but also encompasses palace intrigue. When one brother kills or imprisons another and assumes his throne, he commits a coup. The definition includes long civil wars for power, like that waged between Marc Antony, Octavian, and the assassins of Julius Caesar, as well as spontaneous street revolutions, like those in Tehran in 1979, Manila in 1986, Bucharest in 1989, Belgrade in 2000, and Tunis and Cairo in 2011. The effort to seize power need not succeed; serious but failed attempts still count. Finally, the term “coup” embraces an “executive coup,” whereby a constitutional leader radically and forcefully extends his scope of power or term of service, as in Chancellor Adolf Hitler’s 1933 hijacking of Germany with Nazi thugs.

Our definition of “coup” must exclude purely secessionist rebellions, where one region simply tries to leave a larger unit. These appear throughout history and include local uprisings against the Roman, Persian, and Chinese empires, the U.S. Civil War, and recent conflicts in Bosnia, East Timor, and Chechnya. Such events, we should note, are fully compatible with central stability. For example, even as imperial Britain faced separatist revolts like the American Revolution, the Sepoy Mutiny in India, Boer rebellions in South Africa, Irish uprisings, and other anticolonial movements, the government in Westminster remained placid, procedural, and nonviolent. Such lawful, orderly politics is the antithesis of coups.

You may wonder why we should care about the coup-free zone. Does it really matter to the citizens of a coup-free state how many other states are coup-free, how they achieved lasting stability, or what the direction of history looks like?

In fact, it does matter. If we look again at the 1961–2010 map, we might notice something about the black-colored states: none of them have violent quarrels with each other. Their leaders may disagree at times, but they never resort to force or even threaten to do so. In a troubled world, plagued by wars, tensions, and terrorism, the coup-free zone is an oasis of peace, negotiation, and compromise. (Currently, every black-colored state is a democracy, so this nonbelligerence is closely related to the observation that “democracies do not fight.” But to remain democratic, a country must be stable, and as we will see, stability gives nations enough time to develop mutual trust.)

From the perspective of both war and terrorism, the coup-free zone matters. Americans fought long, deadly campaigns against coup-prone Germany and Japan, but now that both states are stable and democratic, the idea of another war is outlandish. Americans and Britons—along with the Dutch, Belgians, and Norwegians—created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and faced down the coup-prone Soviet Union for four decades. Today, violent conflicts with gray-colored states like China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, North Korea, and Venezuela are plausible, but wars against fellow coup-free states like Britain, Canada, Mexico, Sweden, Israel, and Australia are almost inconceivable.

Terrorism, likewise, emanates from the least stable sections of the globe. Radical Islamists trace their heritage to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which began as a revolutionary movement against the Egyptian state. During the 1990s, the radicals acquired a base in Afghanistan by helping the like-minded Taliban seize control after decades of civil war. From there, they planned and coordinated the 9/11 attacks, and they continue to press a revolutionary agenda. Ultimately, Muslim radicals hope to topple governments from Morocco to Indonesia and build a revived "caliphate," or Islamic super-state.

The burgeoning coup-free zone is not merely an interesting historical trajectory. As this book will demonstrate, it is also the most crucial force for peace and security in the world today. To promote the interests of the United States and its allies—on security, antiterrorism, economic prosperity, the environment, and other matters—the overarching task is to foster and facilitate the emergence of coup-free states. If we succeed, those states will acquire humane institutions, generate wealth, and become cooperative partners. If we fail, any democratic transitions will prove temporary, and such states will remain brutal, corrupt, surly, and threatening.

The good news is that history is on our side. For the first six centuries, the coup-free zone grew at a glacial pace, encompassing a tiny handful of states. But over the past fifty years, it has proliferated.

The bad news is that some gains may be tenuous and reversible. The past fifty years have harvested low-hanging fruit, and it will be difficult for crucial nations like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt, Nigeria, and Russia to enter into long-term stability any time soon.

As the epilogue contends, we should not expend our national blood and treasure in futile attempts to generate stability on inhospitable terrain, and we should not put much faith in "training" military and police personnel to obey a civilian government. The only way to create lasting stability is to build a systematic and impartial rule of law, and this requires a strong, persistent, and indigenous political movement against corruption, preferably led by a person who embodies what we can call "virtue charisma."

Just because a state is currently colored black does not necessarily insulate it from future instability. Fifty years is obviously an arbitrary cutoff. (To date, however, it appears rare for states to pass fifty years without a single coup event, only to lose their equilibrium and slide back into turmoil.) The states that have disappeared from the coup-free zone on these maps—Venice, Belgium, and the Netherlands—have done so only because of foreign invasion, not internal subversion. But as we will see in chapter 7, it is possible that ancient Sparta and Rome experienced up to a couple of centuries of stability before falling back into chronic civil strife. Today, the likeliest candidates for regression are Mexico, Costa Rica, and South Africa. Mexico and Costa Rica may have experienced coup conspiracies during the past fifty years (but have seen no overt coup attempts); South Africa's black revolutionaries, meanwhile, were never strong enough to topple the white apartheid government.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, these three states have much higher corruption levels than other coup-free states (and chapter 4 explains why that matters). If the Mexican military is corrupted by its use in combating the drug cartels, as many people fear, Mexico's position in the coup-free zone will be tenuous indeed.

Many recent entrants to the coup-free zone were easy or unusual cases. As British control slackened over the early twentieth century, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand gained practical independence, while retaining their basic laws and institutions. When Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Norway emerged from Nazi occupation, they simply resumed their prior stability. In Germany, Austria, and Japan, long and intensive Allied occupations, feelings of deep national shame, historical traditions of constitutionalism, and ethnically homogeneous populations helped build coup-free states. It will be far more difficult, and essentially impossible, for U.S. military forces to build lasting stability in places like Afghanistan.

Still, the coup-free zone is continuing its great expansion, and we should do everything we can—within reason—to help it along. More nations are on the immediate horizon: after France, which joined in 2011, will come Singapore in 2015, Botswana in 2016, and Italy in 2020.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the global coup rate is dropping. The world now sees about six coups and coup attempts per year, which is less than half the rate of the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Because all of today's coup-free states were placid forty years ago, this means that coup-prone states are beginning to stabilize.

To put our hands on history and give it a push in the right direction, we need to understand how it all works. This book proceeds in the following sequence.

The first part explains how states emerge from chronic violence into perpetual stability. We look at the world's first two known coup-free states: Venice and Great Britain. The Venetian Republic stabilized during the late

fourteenth century; Britain followed suit four hundred years later. Both states were renowned for exceptionally tranquil politics, and both states developed a genuine rule of law in that legal institutions resolved disputes fairly and minimized corruption. Chronologically, mature rule-of-law institutions coincided with the onset of stability in each state.

We bring together all proposed explanations as to why certain states appear immune to coup d'état, and as we will see, many writers have expressed surprise or bafflement at this question. In the 1770s, for example, the Swiss-born lawyer Jean-Louis de Lolme described English stability as "mysterious" and "astonishing" and posited a "secret force" ensuring that political controversies never erupted into violence.<sup>10</sup>

Confronted with this question, most people have fallen back upon virtue. According to the contemporary scholarly consensus, "professional" military commanders in mature democracies avoid coups because they internalize the values of civilian rule and constitutional procedure. In other words, they refrain from seizing power because they believe it would be wrong. We examine this theory and find it ultimately implausible. Virtue theory is far too demanding: it requires a system of socialization that negates self-interest, across the entire political establishment, for centuries on end.

We propose a new theory, which is more consistent with basic self-interest. Under the rule of law, military and political elites no longer form secluded personal loyalty cabals but rather create loose, open-ended networks of colleagues and acquaintances. In this environment, high-ranking officials do not trust each other enough to conspire at a coup d'état. In fact, they cannot even suggest a coup in conversation because the other person is more likely to report them than to go along. The rule of law protects people, but it also threatens conspirators with prosecution. The notion of a coup effectively disappears.

This theory tells us how coup-free states, once formed, persist indefinitely. Next we turn to a different question: When a state has the potential for stability, but has not yet established a coup-free structure, what determines whether it will succeed? Before a coup-free structure can exist, after all, individual human beings must build it. This leaves room for accidental factors, such as character, wisdom, and virtue, during the construction process. Specifically, we explore how the United States of America emerged as the world's third coup-free state, in part because of the leadership and temperament of George Washington.

In the middle of the book, we back up for two chapters and look at coups, revolutions, and the emergence of law-based politics from the widest possible angle.

Our first question is whether there is a biological basis for the human tendency to seize power through force. Through primate studies, evolutionary theory, and cross-cultural research, we draw several cautious and well-

supported conclusions. Humans—especially men—evolved to seek social dominance, often by force. They also evolved to cultivate friends and allies; to seize opportunities for power, sex, and material resources; and to hate and fear outsiders. (We can call this heritage our “simian will to power.”) When we put these traits together, we see why history is mostly a saga of factional intrigue, betrayal, and coup d’état.

Our second inquiry turns to the very first steps taken to contain human rapacity within legal boundaries: the emergence of republics. In a republic, leadership positions are shared and rotated in accordance with constitutional rules, unlike in a monarchy, where power is monopolized by one person and usually passed down to an heir. To date, every coup-free state has functioned as a republic.

We find that three ancient republics—Sparta, Athens, and Rome—may have banished violence from their political succession during particular periods and that these stable periods coincided with relatively strong “rule-of-law” conditions. We also discover why, from the ancient world to today, many republics are born in spontaneous mob uprisings. Finally, we examine the notion of “republican virtue” and explore the conditions under which people clearly and unmistakably demonstrate high levels of public-spirited generosity toward their fellows.

The last part of the book returns to the modern coup-free zone but switches from domestic to international politics. Our primary question is, Why do coup-free states get along?

We begin by exploring the impact of coups d’état upon a state’s foreign policy. Specifically, we examine three pathologies that bedevil coup-prone states: the self-interested use of war as a ploy to avoid revolution, the stupidity of dictatorships, and organizational confusion. (These tendencies undermine the “realist,” or *realpolitik*, model of international relations, which asserts that states always pursue their rational interests.) By avoiding these problems, coup-free states have generally thrived in the international arena.

Next, we contrast coup-prone and coup-free states with respect to how they enter international alliances—or refrain from doing so. We begin with a brief overview of “meddling.” Meddling is when the regime of State X supports one faction or side in a violent internal struggle for control of State Y. When a leader comes to power with foreign support, he or she has a system of alliances already in place. Next, we see what happens in the absence of foreign meddling. By definition, coup-free states are immune to meddling by foreign powers. (Of course, they can practice meddling around the world, as Great Britain and the United States have amply demonstrated.) Because leaders of stable nations never come to power through foreign meddling, they have no preordained alliances or obligations, and neutrality becomes a viable policy option.

As we discover, coup-free states have traditionally gravitated toward neutrality, especially when they are small and weak. (There are good reasons for this, because small states have much to lose, and little to gain, by participating in great-power wars.) But as we also learn, many coup-free states have “bent” their neutrality in ways that favor other coup-free states. Often, neutrality remains official policy, even as the state covertly cooperates with coup-free great powers. Over the past century, moreover, the most powerful coup-free states have drifted into a strong, durable military alliance. The “special relationship” between Britain and the United States ran counter to neutral isolationist traditions in both states but has proven a thoroughly rational response to international threats.

This brings us back to our basic question: Why do coup-free states get along? Many politicians, journalists, and foreign policy thinkers have discussed the related concept of a “democratic peace,” or the notion that fellow democracies avoid fighting wars against each other. By combining the evidence for a democratic peace with evidence for a “coup-free peace,” we find that the most amicable and harmonious relationships in world history are between coup-free democracies.

We probe the reasons for this amity and harmony and arrive at a new explanation for the democratic peace. We see that the unique transparency and predictability of democracies—especially coup-free democracies—facilitate cooperation and mutual trust. Democracies air all their fears and security concerns in public, enabling people in other states to understand just whom the democracy considers a threat and what general circumstances might lead it into war. Coup-free democracies are even more transparent and reliable. This is because their foreign policies do not “flip” overnight following foreign-backed coups d’état and because rule-of-law systems minimize or eliminate rogue actions, thereby rendering state actions far more comprehensible, and state leaders far more accountable, to the outside world. Even when disagreements arise between coup-free democracies, each state understands that rational considerations are urging the other side toward compromise, and war appears avoidable. Over time, and especially when states fight together as allies, this mutual trust grows ever more secure. As witnessed in the rise of the Anglo-American special relationship, both populations come to regard the other state as a solid partner in an otherwise treacherous world.

Ultimately, this book uncovers the specific incentive structures that generate stability within coup-free states and peace within the coup-free zone. Just as President Nixon could not straightforwardly propose an unconstitutional adventure to his military commanders, no American presidential contender can remotely suggest that Canada, Britain, Germany, or Japan poses a danger and must be confronted with military force. This would likely be a career-ending gaffe.

By learning how the coup-free zone has been expanding for seven centuries and why international relations within the zone are thoroughly civilized, we can advance our long-term interests in pragmatic and efficient ways. The epilogue explains why we cannot impart stability by inculcating a “professional” military ethos in places like Afghanistan or Iraq, but it also identifies simple and modest strategies for nudging the coup-free zone forward.

The end of history beckons. Our basic interests and our deepest ethical aspirations call us to build a coup-free world.

Or at least, to do what we can on a limited budget.