Olen Steinhauer's *The Middleman*: An American uprising, darkly imagined

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The time for fundamental political and social change is overdue, in America and elsewhere, and the same could be said for novels that explore what such upheaval might look and feel like.

The US, after all, has been engaged continuously in military conflict for more than a quarter-century, and the counter-revolutionary agenda of the ruling class, rolling back social gains won by the working class in the early- and mid-twentieth century, stretches back further still. The idea that these twin processes are approaching some sort of cataclysm is increasingly sensed.

Along these lines, the latest novel by American spy fiction writer Olen Steinhauer (born 1970), *The Middleman*, comes at a propitious moment. Critical reception, though somewhat mixed, has tended towards the laudatory.

"A New Thriller Imagines a Revolt Against the Corporate Order" headlines the *New York Times* (Scott Turow, August 7). The reviewer describes the novel as "smart and entertaining and consistently intriguing, clipping along in brief chapters, somewhat reminiscent of the novels of [blockbuster detective novelist] James Patterson, and often animated by lovely, spare, descriptive writing." While it takes note of a few elements in *The Middleman* that don't withstand critical scrutiny, it essentially gives the story a pass, summarizing it as "a very good trip."

A review of the novel in the *Washington Post* is more critical, largely for its leaving Donald Trump out of much of the story, though the comment concludes, "[*The Middleman*] remains a thought-provoking political thriller, a dark story for dark times."

Is there then something new and remarkable in the somber story?

At the outset of *The Middleman* a group of approximately 400 Americans scattered throughout the country suddenly disappear from their day-to-day lives without telling friends and family. The reader learns that they are part of the "Massive Brigade": a nebulous, vaguely left group with two leaders, Martin Bishop and Ben Mittag. A galvanizing action is being planned, but there is disagreement about what it should be.

Bishop looks for non-violent but provocative acts that will both broadly shake up political consciousness and intimidate the elite. "I'm talking about uniting the right and left," he says, "because we've all got the same enemies." He adds that "we've always known that the only way for the ruling class to serve us is for them to fear us. I'm just trying to find a way to accomplish that without getting anyone killed."

Mittag, on the other hand, is a more unstable personality and an advocate of direct acts of terror against representatives of the state. His conflict with Bishop and interrelated provocations by the FBI and other police agencies create the key drama of the book.

Much of the story is told through the eyes of Rachel Proulx, an FBI agent who began her career with an intensive study of left-wing movements. She and a fellow agent, an African-American man, are the central figures (heroes, in fact) in *The Middleman*.

David and Ingrid Parker also feature prominently. The former is a largely unsuccessful novelist, the latter his wife, who is attracted to the Massive Brigade. David, hell-bent on moneymaking and also a witness to a bombing years earlier in Berlin (attributed to German associates of Bishop), is vehemently opposed to the group.

In the novel's denouement, the Massive Brigade is bloodily suppressed by a corrupt and murderous network of FBI officials, before the latter are exposed and removed from their positions. The police agency is refurbished, in no small part due to the efforts of Special Agent Proulx.

What stands out, however, is not the supposed boldness of *The Middleman*, but the limitations in its actual telling

and its overarching conceptions.

First, it is remarkable that a novel with political terrorism at its center is so thin on *actual* politics. The author usually summarizes arguments taking place, but neglects to actually imagine or portray them in concrete detail. So, for example, we are simply told that one "safe house" for the Massive Brigade, "was rich with emotion, but only the strident emotions of radical debate and sudden paranoia." What was the debate even about? Did it impact what the characters thought (and then did)? One is left simply to wonder.

In its politics, the novel never rises beyond what have come commonplaces today, sprinkled with just enough gesturing in the direction of police violence, inequality, upper-middle-class comfort (for its dwindling numbers), the Flint water crisis (this entirely an aside) to situate the story. These rhetorical gestures feel tacked on and superficial, clumsy rather than subtle. A reference to Leon Trotsky early in the book is entirely for show and unconnected to the actual story.

There is also the author's genuflecting to the supposed verities promoted by identity politics. Hence the almost obligatory, contrived and naturally uncritical references to the "patriarchy" and "rich white men" (as though the ruling class was comprised only of such).

Perhaps worse still is that the writing is pedestrian in syntax, vocabulary—even the less plausible plot "twists" (an FBI assassination attempt of Proulx, the murder of officials for investigating the type of financial crimes that are always whitewashed, Ingrid's turning on a would-be rescuer from a Brigade "safe house") come as little surprise. The novel's development of character is facile and unsatisfying, with the protagonists never rising beyond clichéd types.

The idea that government officials—as well as those with "revolutionary" sentiments who would oppose them—are corrupt is hardly new. Even in the most recent period, we have had the *Hunger Games* series of novels and films, the Bourne film series, etc. The actual history of the FBI—its terrorizing of antiwar and civil rights organizations, including murders of their leaders – offers far more real drama.

The Middleman in fact follows a trajectory that has unfortunately become rather familiar: the book begins by presenting itself as radical, confronting convention and opposing the existing order, only to find refuge in new convention predicated on a refurbishing of that same order. The FBI and CIA are abominable, so … they must be turned over to new, "enlightened" officials. Better still if the new leaders are from "marginalized groups" as conceived of by the proponents of identity politics.

There is also, sadly, the built-in assumption that the working class is largely backward and politically reactionary. Though not overtly set out, this notion is not far from the surface. Rachel Proulx's "Communist" union-organizer father, who savagely beats his wife, forms a key part of the novel's background.

Troubling as well are the curt, almost flippant, descriptions of political violence, complete with heads "exploding" from sniper gunshots. Critical moments that ought to be traumatic come across, through artistic insensitivity, as almost comical, in a manner that tends to foster callousness on the reader's part.

The Middleman belongs, to a certain extent, to the spy genre, with all its limitations. Though these are real enough, and in the post-World War II period were often bolstered by insufficient understanding on the part of the novelist of the historical and social character of the "Cold War," one feels here that a step backward from previous works has been taken. There were writers like Graham Greene, John le Carré and others—writers who were perceptive, amusing, chilling (even if, at times, rather despondent).

Of Greene, for example, the novelist Zadie Smith aptly wrote, in an introduction to his classic work, *The Quiet American* (1955), that in his novels, "as with [Henry] James's, all the vicissitudes of human personality are brought to the table for dissection." It is precisely this richness of human personality, refracted through world-changing events, whose absence is most keenly felt in Steinhauer's work, a limitation that, one hopes, might be overcome in the future, under the impact of a movement more powerful and broad-based than the one he has here imagined.